

'ART AND THE BEAUTY OF THE EARTH': THE RECEPTION OF NEWS FROM NOWHERE IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

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[English version of: 'Nieuws uit Nergensoord. Natuursymboliek en de receptie van William Morris in Nederland en België', *De Negentiende Eeuw* 25 (2001), 233-251]

This study will present the reception of *News from Nowhere* in Holland and Belgium in connection with ideas on the evolution of art and society. Notwithstanding the fact that the Belgian state was (and still is) bilingual, avant-garde artists of these two countries at the north-western coast of Europe were communicating intensively at the end of the 19th century. Reviews and translations of *News from Nowhere* and other texts by William Morris, written in the French as well as the Dutch language, were read and quoted from by both sides.

Though his name was briefly mentioned in an educational survey of English literature as early as 1874 and 1882¹, until the many memorials published in 1896 Morris was hardly known in Holland and Belgium beyond a limited circle of some intellectual anarchists and artists. In 1897 however, a Dutch translation of *News from Nowhere* was published and welcomed with enthusiasm in political as well as cultural circles and had a long-lasting influence. What made it gain ground so quickly ?

Writings on art by William Morris were introduced in the Low Countries in the early 1890's. Some years before, discussion on the revival of the applied arts had started - in Belgium somewhat earlier than in Holland. In several Dutch and Belgian publications in the 1890s, the state of the arts was described in metaphorical terms: Art developed like trees, flowers and plants in a process of growth, flowering and decay. The current period was described mostly in terms of degeneration and barrenness. Avant-garde artists, eager to disqualify what they saw as obsolete and artificial bourgeois culture, propagated a fresh, 'natural' art as an alternative, an art developing like, and in harmony with, unspoiled nature. The writings of Morris fitted in with this line of thought. Reciprocally, they were influential and stimulating.

In 1894 for instance, the Belgian magazine *La Société Nouvelle* published an important lecture by Henry van de Velde [1863-1959], one of the founders of the Art Nouveau-style. In this lecture, 'Déblaiement d'art' ('Clearing away with Art'), Van de Velde proclaimed the end of Easel Painting, it being the decadent art form of a demoralized and socially doomed bourgeoisie. Bourgeois capitalist society had turned everything into ugliness; art could no longer develop and flourish.

To symbolize the state of the art, he frequently made use of metaphorical language: firstly, the metaphor of the 'Tree of Art'. For four centuries, he said, ever since the accomplishment of gothic art, this Tree once proudly growing in our countries had been dying. In another essay he described Art as a withered flower or as a trunk fallen down, lying in the

middle of dead and broken branches and roots, scattered all over. The crashing of the tree was caused by a steady gnawing of worms creeping from the dark depths of human soul. The dead tree was a sinister sign: out of the barren ground it was not possible for a new art to spring again, and nothing would help to lift the drooping stem of the withered flower. It was to perish at last [Van de Velde, *Déblaiement*, p.444, 449; id., *Prédication*, p.54].

Along with the image of the 'Tree of Art', Van de Velde compared the situation of the applied arts to that of fields: they were worn out, bare-laying and divided (a reference to the separation of the various disciplines of art). The farmlands of Art extend over a wide area, he said, but at the time only the lands at the front are ploughed and sowed: the arts of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. Meanwhile, the more distant fields are desolate, unweeded and left to rampant growth. Oblivion is lingering there, with her gloomy graveyard plants; buried there are the arts of making Pottery, Tiles, Glassware, Embroidery, Tapestry, Furniture and other artefacts [Van de Velde, *Variatiën*, p.60].

One more image employed by Van de Velde was the one of a river: a stream, imprisoned between her dikes, like a painting enclosed and clasped by gilded ornamental frames, preventing Art from merging with her environment. Gilded frames themselves were also symptomatic of an evil society: they associated Art with the atmosphere of 'grands cafés', of concert and amusement halls. Art had to free itself from what he called 'the exhausted and scrofulous forms of picture and statue'. The Art of Painting had to overflow like the waters of the Nile, to break through her dikes, the golden frames, and to fertilize everything around [Van de Velde, *Déblaiement*, p.453; id., *Les XX*, pp.20-21]. Van de Velde made this statement in the cultural and literary magazine *Van Nu en Straks* ('On Present and Future'); the cover of the very issue - designed by Van de Velde himself - shows (a picture of) a river overflowing the picture-frame [Fig.1].



Fig.1

The metaphor of the river was also used in an opposite sense, in the theme of the artist canalizing the flood and so fertilizing a pestilential swamp. The artist had to model his duties after the humble toil of the digger, slowly and continuously carrying clods to restore the broken dike and to make the course of the river deep and magnificent as before [Van de Velde, *Première Prédication*, p.27].

In his publications Van de Velde often makes allusions to the writings and works of William Morris, Walter Crane and other artists of the Arts & Crafts-Movement. He presents their activities as hopeful signs of change. More than once he quotes Morris, especially in his statements on the relation of art and society. And, thanks to Morris, the metaphors of trees, flowers, fields and rivers to depict the situation of art are not always used in a pessimistic way. For instance, in *l'Art Moderne* - a leading weekly art magazine - avant-gardist literature was compared with delicate roses, sweet-smelling jasmine and other more spicy flowers.² Van de Velde himself declared the revival of the decorative arts a 'fait accompli' in the 1896 issue of *l'Avenir Social*, the cultural and scholarly magazine of the Parti Ouvrier belge. We can observe it growing, he said, like a young tree, rooted in good ground, fertilized, and sprinkled by rains in due time. The good ground, in his words, stood for the new society that was also to generate many renewals in other aspects of life; the good fertilizer was composed of the debris of the old world, and the generous rain symbolized the enthusiasm of the community [Van de Velde, *Les Arts d'industrie*, p.47].

Van de Velde finished his 'Déblaiement d'art' by picturing a hopeful dream with cosmic overtones: a dream guiding the artists from the old world into new lands, where the earth could still bring forth flowers. 'We'll follow the track of the orbit of the sun, a golden stream, glittering over the wide waters of the sea', he said. 'A stream that will guide us to the immensely purifying glow of the sunset, a wall of fire Art has to cross to be purified and cleansed of all the dirt soiling her now'. The end of his speech was like an apocalyptic vision: at the horizon would appear 'a royal child, in virginal nudity'; all lies would be revealed, mankind would first admit to its mistakes and then rejoice. And then the artists would turn to their work - 'Et les artistes se mettront à l'oeuvre' [Van de Velde, *Déblaiement*, p.456].

This kind of metaphorical idiom was also used in the visual arts. For instance, the aforementioned periodical *l'Art Moderne* opened the 1891 issue with an ornamental heading designed by Georges Lemmen [1865-1916], showing a combination of some of the motives mentioned above. A nude person (explained as: 'une figure rustique'), is ploughing a stone- and thorn-covered field; behind her, new plants are rising, nourished by sunshine and water [Fig.2]. The sun rising over flooding waters is shown on the cover of the catalogue of the 1891 exhibition of the avant-gardist 'Groupe des XX' [Fig.3], also designed by Lemmen.



Fig.2



Fig.3

The use of organic and cosmic symbols implied a break off with hitherto prevailing warlike terminology of the avant-garde, like army units and camps, bastions to conquer, defended grimly by the bourgeois enemy, and battles and victories. The shift to a 'natural' vocabulary occurred about the 1890's. The cover of a catalogue by Jan Toorop [1858-1928], dated 1892, looks like a transitional solution: it shows elements of both clusters of metaphors [Fig.4].



Fig.4

By adopting organic imagery of Art, fin-de-siècle artists fell back upon an old tradition: Romanticist reaction against the fixed canons and allegorical representations of Neo-Classical art. According to the Romanticists, the use of classical forms and themes had led to rhetorical abstraction in literature and sterile academism in the visual arts. Authentic, pure means of expression had to be found, not artificially constructed but arising from the bottom of the soul of the artist like plants [Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, pp.69, 266-269, 285].

The representations of the development of Art like a plant or a tree growing on a bare-laying field, or like seeds sprouting by the beneficial effects of sunshine and rain, consuming water, earth and sunlight but basically unfolding from its own inner self, are related to this concept. But the ground had to be cultivated, and the water to be canalized in order to support the work of art's growth: it was the duty of the artist, patiently and thoughtfully like a craftsman, to help the work of art to come to its full, clear and pure expression. Also related is the frequent use in the 1890's of archaic stylization, decorative ornaments or themes from folk ballads and legends, borrowed from the arts of primitive societies, not yet spoiled by modern civilisation. Fairy-tales, folksongs, primitive and medieval art and architecture were seen as close to the essence of existence, closer than worn-out classicist allegories. By using those authentic images one could return to an original, natural order of society, as opposed to mechanical, artificial and unnatural contemporary civilisation.

Such concepts of the natural growth of Art correspond with the idea of society evolving, and renewing itself, in accordance with the laws of nature, and not by systematic planning or political intervention. Several Dutch and Belgian fin-de-siècle authors wrote in this sense on the

organic development of both art and society, describing changes in both as outbursts of nature, as the results of similar processes of evolution. For instance, the abovementioned ornament of *l'Art Moderne* [Fig.2] was explained as: 'L'art évolue de lui-même comme toutes les grandes forces naturelles' - Art did not need teachers and critics to grow ! [Lemonnier, p.1]. The Belgian writer August Vermeyleen [1872-1945] declared in *Van Nu en Straks*: 'A really great and strong Art can only be born out of the unconscious vital forces of Nature'. According to him, the artist had to surrender completely to the internal laws of Nature; he should share the simple life of the people, to feel rejuvenating forces sprouting from the earth continually - 'and beautiful works of art will rise like trees' [Vermeyleen p.6]. In the same magazine, Jacques Mesnil [1872-1940], an anarchist art critic and art historian, expressed his belief that '... Art is developing continually, and her everlasting essence can only be found by exploration of the human soul, not by decrees of academies'. This also formed his argument to claim that state academies and national competitions were an obstruction rather than a stimulant to intellectual and artistic well-being; consequently, he found reason to discuss state machinery as such [Mesnil pp.246-247].

Another anarchist, the French theorist Jean Grave [1854-1939] - whose works were well-known in Belgium and Holland -, compared gradual shifts in social customs, traditions and opinions to the flowing of a river: the movements are slow and hardly perceptible, the surface seeming smooth. Ideas and attitudes change in a comparably invisible way; people don't notice it during their brief span of life. But in the long run, the alteration of opinions and attitudes makes them inconsistent with immovable social institutions - and a struggle flares up. In the same way, he said,

'... la rivière s'étale librement, et voilà qu'au bout de la plaine, là-bas, ses rives s'élèvent, se rétrécissant tout à coup, et forcent, sans transition, la rivière à reserrer ses flots, à canaliser son cours. Ce lac, auparavant uni, calme, d'apparence immobile, accélère son cours, ses flots grondent contre les obstacles qui obstruent son lit, se brisent contre les rocs qui arrêtent leur marche, entament les rives qui les emprisonnent, arrachant les matériaux qui leur serviront à assaillir d'autres obstacles plus solides. Et la rivière tranquille et inoffensive devient le torrent tumultueux qui aplanit tout sur son passage'.

In Grave's words, development of society could no more be stopped than streaming waters. Neither could it be directed efficiently: political measures never got a lasting grip on it: '... les révolutions politiques n'en sont que des épisodes. Qu'elles réussissent ou qu'elles échouent cela n'influe en aucune façon sur le résultat final' [Grave pp.3-4].³ Social revolution was the offspring of evolution:

'... la Révolution suit l'Évolution. En effet, il n'y a pas de hiatus entre hier et aujourd'hui, demain est le fils de la veille; la société que nous désirons ne pourra donc s'établir dans une seule pièce, Elle ne pourra être que ce que les événements antérieures auront préparé' [Grave p.71].

Images of growing shoots, trees and rivers were also used to symbolize the growing labour movement. The memories of the poetress Henriëtte Roland Holst [1869-1952] of the founding conference of the Dutch Labour Party, in the spring of 1897, are representative. In her description, daisies and buttercups, singing birds and a delicate haze of green join the feelings of hope, expectation and happiness brought about by the newly won political convictions. 'Never before', she said,

'had we experienced and enjoyed the feeling of awakening nature so intensely [...]. For the first time in our lives we sensed a sparkle of the great uprising of the disinherited against poverty and oppression, a sparkle of the great companionship of the insurgents' [Roland Holst, *Het vuur*, p.100; id., Herman Gorter, p.31].

Metaphors of nature were also associated with the next annual conference of the Dutch Labour Party. In *De Arbeid* ('Labour'), a political and cultural monthly magazine, the young party was pictured as a narrow row of early twigs. Misfortunes and disagreements blew through it like cutting winds, but were unable to harm the forces of life or to stop the forthbursting spring. And while bourgeois government tried to collect the dry and rotten leaves of her worn-out politics, many of the young intellectuals and artists were attracted by the party of the class-conscious labourers; a party that looked 'green in relation to the overripe wisdom of others, but also green as a promise of life' [Saks, p.86].

Likewise, symbolization of the growth of the socialist movement by vegetable life can be found in the visual arts, sometimes in connection with the imagery of the First of May. Henry van de Velde, for instance, designed the flowered heading of the anarchist journal *Ontwaking* ['Awakening'] [Fig.5]. And what about the flowers decorating the cover of *Hoe de maatschappij is, hoe zij behoorde te zijn* (a translation of *True and False Society* by William Morris) [Fig.6] ? Are they merely ornaments or can they also be understood as references to forces of natural growth ? Flower ornaments also adorn the cover of *De Socialistische maatschappij*, a Dutch adaption of *The Co-operative Commonwealth* (1886) by Laurence Gronlund. As formulated in the introduction of the latter work, this book indeed was meant to give a view of 'a fully natural evolution of a new social order'.



Fig.5



Fig.6

Such concepts of both artistic and social rebirth merged with the old tradition of an organic, cyclical vision of history. A specific feature of the late 19th century, however, was the sense of standing at the eve of an eruption of a new era of growth - a sense in some cases alternating with feelings of crisis and desintegration of civilisation. The fresh revival of the applied arts heralded the dawning of a new golden age. In *La Société Nouvelle*, in a French translation of 'Hopes and Fears for Art' by William Morris ('Espérances et craintes pour l'art'), the same idea was

formulated: where art had died, society was also to die; but both were to revive:

'Jamais il n'eu été autrement: d'abord vient la naissance et l'espérance à peine consciente d'elle-même; puis la fleur et le fruit de la maîtrise avec l'espérance plus que suffisamment consciente, passant bientôt à l'insolence, comme la chute suit la maturité, et ensuite, la nouvelle naissance de nouveau'.⁴

A new element in this old organic view on history was the 'scientific socialist' conviction that mankind had now discovered the laws of evolution, and thus would be able to act in accordance with those laws. For even if society were considered as an organism, this did not mean it developed precisely like plants and animals. Social progress required deliberate effort and mutual collaboration. On the other hand, the new society should not be an artificial intellectual construction. In the Dutch version of *The Co-operative Commonwealth* the editor contrasted early utopian socialists like Saint-Simon and Fourier with socialists of recent times: the latter did not perceive themselves as 'architects of a new order'. According to this author, the French Utopionists were 'architects and inventors', expecting people to accept their ready-made systems just like changing into clean clothes. Their ambitions shattered because of their lack of consideration for existing conditions of living. On the contrary, modern socialists '... have no intention to destroy the current state of affairs like pulling down an old building, and then force humanity to erect a new building fully corresponding to their design. [...] they know society is not at all a construction but an organism, and people don't make designs for the growth of a dog or a rose-bush' [Gronlund, p.59].

These critical remarks in the Dutch version of *The Co-operative Commonwealth* might have referred to the few utopian novels hitherto known in The Netherlands. These indeed, had their origins in a mechanistic world view. Most of them have a pessimistic ending; some are parodies of utopian thinking. A writing by Jan Holland called *Darwinia* describes a social experiment, in combination with eugenetics, of dividing the population into functional categories. The results were bloodiness, immorality, alcoholism and dictatorship. Another story, *Eene Sociaal-democratische Republiek* ('A Social-Democratic Republic') by one 'Eric', reports the outcome of state-regulated production and consumption: impoverishment and demoralization. A counter-text with the same title and partly the same content shows the beneficial effect of collectivization.

An adapted version of a German utopian writing (Jhr. Rochussen, *Tafereelen uit de Sociaal-democratische Toekomst*, or 'Scenes of a Social-Democratic Future') turns socialist society into dystopia: total abolition of private property, central regulation of labour in state enterprises, without respect of persons. Private houses and belongings are confiscated; children and patients are cared for in public institutions. In the end people have lost their pleasure of working; the family of the main character of the story has been broken up and his wife and children grow mad or languish away in public lodgings. On the contrary, in an anonymous work

called *Anno 1999* people are living easily but - to the contemporary reader - in a rather lethargic way. The expression 'cosy' (in Dutch: 'gezellig', an untranslatable term) is used frequently. Before cosily breakfasting in the communal dining-hall, the main character and his wife are busy making their beds, brushing their coats and polishing their shoes. As for the brushing, in a footnote useful information is added: 'All brushes are provided with small tanks to collect the dust' [Anno 1999, p.11]. One cannot help remembering the much more poetic descriptions of housekeeping and domestic utensils by Morris.

Apparently, these not very cheerful Dutch utopian writings did not receive much appraisal. They were hardly mentioned in reviews. An exception was made for *In het Jaar 2000*, the Dutch translation of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* by Frank van der Goes [1859-1939], literator, art critic and one of the founders of the socialist movement in Holland; it was published in 1890. Generally spoken, the work of Bellamy did not find much appreciation in Holland; critics called it lacking in political vision and artistically of no interest [Tibbe, Roland Holst, pp.101-104]. In some book reviews *Looking Backward* and *News from Nowhere* are compared; in these reviews the essential difference between 'mechanistic' and 'natural' forms a topic:

Reason is the driving power of the mechanical world of *Looking Backward*; inventions of modern time are developed fantastically: a combination of ingenuity and science has brought more convenience virtually without labour. Big cities, a lot of electricity: mankind at old age in a rocking-chair. Morris, on the contrary, throws all our so-called progress onto the dunghill [...] . The Future in his dreams does not entail the spreading and intensifying of the products of our culture. He pictures a more simple and pure way of living [...] and more robust people, walking without the crutches of false civilisation' [Simons, p.133].

Another critic - Henri Polak [1868-1943], chairman of the Diamond Workers Union and one of the first translators of *News from Nowhere* - said *Looking Backward* had converted him into a socialist who did not really understand Socialism. *Looking Backward* had opened his eyes to the injustice and absurdity of market capitalism and had showed him an alternative and fair way of production and distribution, based on rational principles. After some time however, Polak confessed, he felt his aversion to the regularized society in *Looking Backward* growing. Fortunately *News from Nowhere* caught his eye. In this book he found what he was longing for: not a perfectionist, meticulous design of an industrial state where production and distribution were organized with mathematical precision, not a rational blueprint of a possible solution, but a prophetic and poetical vision of excellent artistic quality; an enchanting tale written like an old legend, and yet lively and powerful [Polak, William Morris, p.133; id., Boeken en boekjes, n.p.].

In *La Société Nouvelle* of 1891 a review of *News from Nowhere* also emphasized the 'natural way' social life in 'Nowhere' had developed (this time without reference to other works).

No reorganizations of formal rules, laws and precepts, but a mental shift. This new society was not an artificial intellectual construction, like the models of the French Utopians [Merlino, p.451]. 'Nowhere' could be realized only by violent struggle and destruction of the old world, but that struggle had been the inevitable result of a line of development. It was followed by a spontaneous renaissance:

'The art or work-pleasure [...] sprung up almost spontaneously, it seems, from a kind of instinct amongst people, no longer driven desperately to painful and terrible overwork, to do the best they could with the work in hand - to make it excellent of its kind; and when that had gone on for a little, a craving for beauty seemed to awaken in men's minds, and they began rudely and awkwardly to ornament the wares which they made; and when they had once set to work at that, it soon began to grow' [Morris, Collected Works XVI, 134].

Moreover, once the new world was there, everything had its 'natural' course. The fields were green, the rivers clear, the people healthy and industrious. Joyful digging and harvesting alternated with the fabrication of daily utensils that were useful and beautiful but without 'unnatural' luxury. The unspoiled, uncomplicated state of this community comes close to the essence of being where, according to Romanticist art theory, the origins of Art were to be found.

It was the 'natural charm' of *News from Nowhere* that made it gain ground in Holland and Belgium: the combination of artistic form, symbolic content and the vision on social evolution as according to the laws of nature. Its content was like a continuation and elaboration of the metaphors of Art, Nature and Society used so frequently since the 1890's. On the other hand, the opposition of 'natural' to 'artificial' or 'mechanical' makes a fundamental difference between *News from Nowhere* and existing Dutch utopian writings, which were artistically and ideologically not very satisfying. *News from Nowhere* offered a welcome alternative perspective.

News from Nowhere was introduced in Belgium and The Netherlands shortly after its publication. Following the book review mentioned above, *La Société Nouvelle* provided a French translation in serial publications in the 1892 issues, 'Nouvelles de nulle part ou une époque de répit'. This French translation ends with Chapter X. Summer 1891 a first Dutch translation started: a serial publication in the periodical *Recht voor Allen* ('Justice for All'), the newsletter of the (anarchistic) Sociaal Democratische Bond (Social Democratic Federation) or SDB. Translator was, again, Frank van der Goes. December 1891 a last fragment was published; thereafter, the series was suspended. A second translation was tried at the beginning of 1893 in *De Diamantbewerker* ('The Diamond Worker'), the newsmagazine of the Diamond Workers Union. This translation was made by chairman Henri Polak. Four issues were published; then this series was also stopped.

Frank van der Goes in the long run did not agree to the anti-parliamentarianism and

violent campaigns of the SDB. After being expelled from this Federation in 1891 he felt inclined more and more towards democratic socialism. However, as for *News from Nowhere* Frank van der Goes did not lose his interest. A complete translated version by his hand was published in 1897: *Nieuws uit Nergensoord of Een Tijd van rust*.

Probably due to the first introduction of the ideas of William Morris by anarchist circles, his name in Holland thereafter was either associated with anarchism, or, otherwise, his political position was not clear. As for its emphasis on moral and social evolution instead of political action, *News from Nowhere* was in line with the nineteenth-century British tradition of social utopism. In Holland and Belgium however, this was associated with the anarchist line of thought of authors like Grave. The association with anarchism was the cause of a difference in reception of Morris in Belgian and Dutch socialist circles.

In Belgium, French tradition of anarchism had had a long-lasting influence on the socialist movement and was incorporated in the Parti Ouvrier belge. Anarchist sympathies were often attributed to Morris approvingly, and his 'Nowhere' (or 'Nulle Part') was appreciated as an anarchist community of individuals all free and equal. 'William Morris décrit la courbe qui va du Socialisme démocratique à l'Anarchie', Henry van de Velde wrote; according to him, Kropotkin himself had called *News from Nowhere* 'the most anarchistic dream of the future ever written' [Van de Velde, William Morris, pp.173-174]. The anarchistic reputation of Morris was confirmed by translations of several of his essays in the somewhat anarchistic *La Société Nouvelle*: 'Nouvelles de Nulle Part' (1892), 'Espérances et craintes pour l'Art' (1893), 'l'Art du Peuple' (1894) and 'l'Esthétique de la Vie' (1896). Likewise, *Van Nu en Straks*, mentioned before as the site of publications by Van de Velde and Mesnil, had an anarchistic reputation. Not much later however, in 1898, an official party organ like *l'Avenir Social* opened its columns to an essay on Morris by Van de Velde.

In The Netherlands, on the other hand, anarchist tendencies in the labour movement soon gave way to an orientation to German, especially Kautskyan, socialism and parlementarism. The anarchist reputation of William Morris worked against him in social-democratic circles. For instance, the poetress Henriëtte Roland Holst, who became a prominent Labour Party leader, collaborated in the translation of *A Dream of John Ball* (1898), but afterwards declared the utopism of Morris not to be a solid foundation of a sound labour movement [Roland Holst, *Het vuur*, p.97]. Thereafter, some political texts by Morris were printed as pamphlets, mostly by marginal anarchist publishers. In the Twenties, the anarchistic 'Red Library' edited a reprint - actually an illegal one - of the Dutch version of *News from Nowhere*, entitled *Toekomstdroom* ('Dream of the Future').

As for the artistic field, especially the applied arts, the approval of William Morris was quite different. Belgian Art Nouveau evolved into a rather luxurious style, characterized by expressive undulant forms hardly in accordance with the artistic principles of Morris. Dutch artists and

artisans therefore considered themselves to be the true heirs of the legacy of William Morris, of his simplicity and thoroughness, as opposed to the frivolous and superficial mentality of their French and Belgian colleagues. In reality they were hardly ever able to see products made by the Morris Company in Holland, except for a few Kelmscott books and some fabrics and wallpapers. They mainly adopted the artistic principles of Morris and found their own practical solutions. The typical Dutch variant of Art Nouveau can be defined as straight-lined, frugal, scarcely decorated and accentuating construction. Not until 1903 were some of Morris' writings on art translated and assembled as *Kunst en Maatschappij* ('Art and Society'). Due to a rather late start of the process of industrialization in Holland, production according more or less to traditional methods in small-scale enterprises was still a realistic option for Dutch artists around 1900; they maintained this until the late Twenties or even later. And so the generation of artists influenced by Morris at the end of the 19th century continued to propagate his ideas.

Buildings, interior decorations and furniture described by Morris in *News from Nowhere* have often inspired Dutch artists and artisans, among them the architect Hendrik Pieter Berlage [1856-1934]. Architecture, decoration and interior design of his famous Stock Exchange Building in Amsterdam recall the descriptions of communal buildings in 'Nowhere', for instance the Guest House at Hammersmith:

'... a longish building [...] very handsomely built of red brick with a lead roof; and high up above the windows there ran a frieze of figure subjects in baked clay, very well executed, and designed with a force and directness which I had never noticed in modern work before...!'

Hammersmith Market may have been another example:

'... a range of buildings and courts, low, but very handsomely built and ornamented, [...] above this lower building rose the steep lead-covered roof and the buttresses and higher part of the wall of a great hall, of a splendid and exuberant style of architecture, of which one can say little more than that it seemed to me to embrace the best qualities of the Gothic of northern Europe with those of the Saracenic and Byzantine, though there was no copying of any of these styles. [...] This whole mass of architecture which we had come upon so suddenly from amidst the pleasant fields was not only exquisitely beautiful in itself, but it bore upon it the expression of such generosity and abundance of life that I was exhilarated to a pitch that I had never yet reached ...' [Morris, *Collected Works* XVI, 13 and 24].

While building his Stock Exchange, Berlage was surely thinking of 'Nowhere'. One of the former employees of Berlage, the decorative artist Jac. van den Bosch [1868-1948] recalls in his autobiography a discussion between Berlage and himself, sitting in a shed on the building site of the Stock Exchange, on an evening in the spring of 1897. He tells: 'A shimmering golden, deep

violet twilight was all around; our silhouettes were hardly discernible. Our thoughts were lingering in a better order of society with greater prospects. We dwelled in the world of Bellamy's remarkable book about the year 2000, and in the world of William Morris in his *News from Nowhere...*. Berlage expressed his expectations about his new Exchange Building: in a new society it could serve as a House for the Community. He confessed to having it always cherished, dreamed and planned like that. According to Van den Bosch there must have been many discussions like this one, about humanity living carefree in an ideal society, a truly communal life of brotherhood [Van den Bosch, n.p].

At the same time, Berlage was erecting another large building, this one a real Community House: the Building of the Amalgated Society of Diamond Workers, also in Amsterdam. Chairman Henri Polak stated why the Diamond Workers Union needed such a beautiful office: 'The building of a union of workmen had to come as close as possible to the ideal home; it had to harbour the workers, giving them the beautiful living area which, due to capitalist society, they were deprived of in their own housing conditions' To support the workers in their struggle for moral, intellectual and material emancipation, the walls of this building should be adorned with an 'Epic of their Strife' [Polak, Muurschilderingen, n.p.]. This recalls the description of the wall-pictures of Bloomsbury Market in 'Nowhere': '... their subjects [...] taken from queer old-world myths and imaginations'.

This epic of class-struggle was executed by the artist Richard Roland Holst [1868-1938] in a series of wall paintings; to evoke the atmosphere of an old legend he made use of archaic, stylized forms and simple images. The character of a primeval epic is reinforced by lines of poetry composed by his wife, Henriëtte Roland Holst; in spite of her objections to Morris, they show the influence of his poetry. Here once again a logical social development is represented: departing from an era in which poverty (an old woman) sits down dispiritedly going through a period of solidary struggle towards a glorious future. Everything here is symbolized by human figures; there are no growing trees and plants or overflowing rivers. Only the rising sun is represented, albeit indirectly, in the underline of a utopian image of the future [Fig.7]:

'Once the dawning day shall find labour and beauty united'.

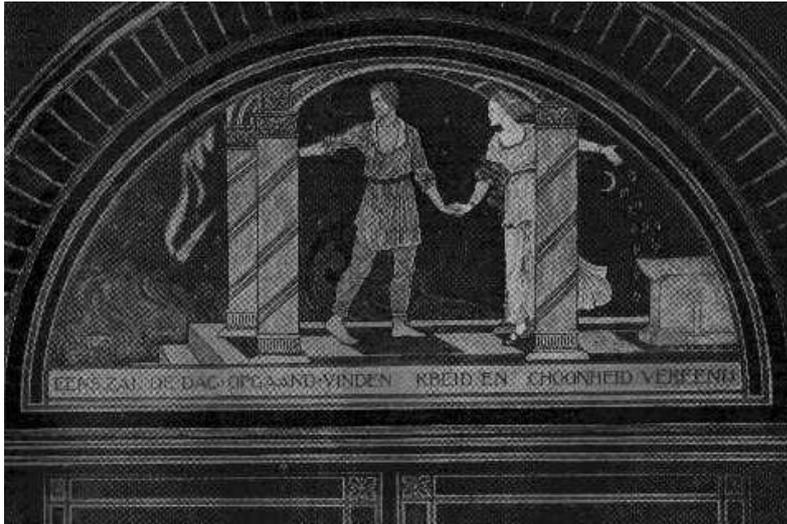


Fig.7

Henri Polak, translator and propagator of *News from Nowhere*, patron of the utopistic Diamond Workers Union building and its wall paintings, became a life-long admirer of William Morris. In 1934, he celebrated Morris' centennial birthday in the socialist newspaper *Het Volk* ('The People'). Looking back upon the euphorial expectations at the end of the previous century, he concluded that though Morris' utopian ideal had not been fulfilled, it was still shining in the works of many artists and artisans:

'Whenever, in our times, architecture is honest, respectful of materials and constructionally clear - when our houses are worthy of living in and furnished and decorated finely - when our books are printed beautifully, composed with care and bound neatly- when our daily utensils are pleasurable things - when we, unlike in former days, are not surrounded by ugliness - when our lives are not devoid of every charm - then we have to honour this fine and versatile artist [...]. Gloriously his life unified and personified every promise of Socialism as the ultimate destination of all mankind' [Polak, Kroniek, n.p.].

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Notes

1. 'William Morris', in: T.H. de Beer, *The Literary Reader. A Reading-book for the higher classes in schools and for home teaching. Part II. The nineteenth century*, Arnhem 1874, 294; 'The Neo-Romantic or Pre-Raphaelite School' and 'Neo-Romantic and Composite Poetry', in: Taco H. de Beer and Elisabeth Jane Irving, *The Literary Reader. Handbook for the higher classes in schools and for home teaching. Part II. The nineteenth century. Second edition, entirely rewritten by - , Kuilenberg 1882*, 252 and 430-431.
2. Quoted in: *Les Vingt en de avant-garde in België. Prenten, tekeningen en boeken ca. 1890*, Gent 1992, 73.
3. This part of Grave's *La Société future* (the first chapter, 'Le lendemain de la Révolution'), was published in Holland as a political pamphlet: *Na de revolutie. Vertaald door B.P. van der Voo*, Amsterdam n.d. [ca. 1895].
4. In the original English version:
'This was the growth of art: like all growth, it was good and fruitful for awhile; like all fruitful growth, it grew into decay; like all decay of what was once fruitful, it will grow into something new' (William Morris, 'The Lesser Arts', *Hopes and Fears for Art*, London 1911, 10).