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Author(s)	Takeuchi, Masami
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A Complete Narrator, Guest:
William Morris' *News from Nowhere*.

Masami Takeuchi

I

In January 1890, *News from Nowhere; or an Epoch of Rest; Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance* (hereafter referred to as *News* in this paper) came out in *Commonweal*, which is the journal of the Socialist League and whose editor had been Morris himself until this work was presented. We can find many problems in *News*, the future utopian story: for example, socialism, aesthetics, architecture, feminism and romance. It has been estimated as his late romance. Most of the criticism generally focuses on dialogues between Guest¹ and Hammond who talks about the utopian history and the social structure in the chapters 9-18. It contains a long history of struggles against capitalism. This part cannot be taken as anything but a propaganda of socialism. That is the reason this work has been classified into the category of political thought. In general, some critics have noticed that the chapters 9-18 are worthy of analysis. Yet the scenes can be regarded as digressions of the narrative line when we read the text from the view of its structure. On the other hand, his contemporaries, Lionel Johnson and Maurice Hewlett praise his poetic description like that of Chaucer². They pay little attention to his socialistic structure. Johnson says, "he [Morris] gives us a dim notion, just a vague glimpse; but so far as his book be meant for more than a beautiful dream, it is here that he is weak" (340). Phillip Henderson also says that this work is not a

socialistic work but “an Arts and Crafts Utopia with very little relation to anything that we know as communism” (328). According to Carol Silver, compared with *Looking Backward*, written by Edward Bellamy, “presenting a structured ‘realistic’ picture of a society”, “Morris envisioned the future as containing what to him were the timeless, universal truths of the genre of romance” (143). These critics emphasize his pastoral world more than his socialistic thought. In my paper, I incline toward their approach to emphasize his romance.

Both of the views, however, have passed over the problem of the narrator because the critics have tried to seek for the author, William Morris' thought. In addition, as Krishan Kumar says, “the utopian writer lives in two worlds. His is correspondingly a double vision” (98), so we can find much ambiguity in this work. The ambiguity is derived from two parts: three assumed narrators and repetition of narrating. I consider these confused situations and define the role of the narrator.

II

According to Gérard Genette's basic type of narrator's status, the narrative mode of *News* seems to be ascribed to the “extradiegetic-heterodiegetic” like Homer: “a narrator in the first degree who tells a story he is absent from” (248). However, the relationship made unclear between the narrator and the narrative in *News* is caused by the effect of the problematic chapter 1. The chapter 1 in *News* occupies the special position and is somewhat independent of the other chapters. The whole narrative is supposed to be at least triply constructed. This can be found only in the first chapter of the text, in which triple layers of the narrative in which three different people who tell the same story are set. They of course can be identified with the author, William Morris. Many critics

have no distinction between Guest and the narrator, and interpret three persons as identified with Morris himself without any special notice. For them, the protagonist of the text is not Guest nor the narrator but William Morris. Although it is one of the ways of reading, I will try to analyze the structure of the narrator.

One of three putative narrators is the narrator "I" who narrates the whole story. The second is the narrator's friend who is mentioned only in the chapter 1. His part is to connect the narrator with another man and it is supposed to have told the story to him. The second person is a buffer, as it were, for avoiding Morris' direct voice. "Says our friend"³, often in parentheses, is used seven times in the chapter 1. Furthermore, another buffer is prepared. This third man is referred to only as "a man". The chapters 2 to 32 are supposed to be "a man"'s experience. The last phrase of the chapter 1 follows:

[H]e [our friend] says, I [the narrator] think it would be better if I told them [the story] in the first person, as if it were myself who had gone through them; which, indeed, will be the easier and more natural to me, since I understand the feelings and desires of the comrade of whom I am telling better than any one else in the world does. (6)

Here, the narrator "I" sets up the structure of the text and seems to mean the finish of his identifying with "a man". After that, he makes the utopians call him "Guest". Contrary to such elaboration, the last scene in the chapter 32 has no explanation about the triplicity. After leaving the utopia, the narrator says, "[o]r indeed was it a dream?" (219). Even if it is a dream it is ambiguous whether the dream starts from the chapter 1, including three putative narrators, or the chapter 2, including only a narrator Guest. We can't see if what "I" refer

to is the whole story or the experience about utopia except the chapter 1. Thus the narrator's situation is undermined and his position remains ambiguous from the first chapter to the last chapter.

As some critics point out that "Guest plays a largely passive role" (Kirchhoff 134) and "he [Morris] allows ambiguity to hang over the narrator"⁴ (Thompson 805), in fact Guest is passive as a character as well as a narrator. He holds his tongue during his conversation with utopians many times and never determines where he wants to go and see. Guest, as his name shows, is a complete outsider and observer. In the end of the text he could not find his seat literally at dinner and "noticed that none of the company looked at" him (218). He, as it were, becomes an invisible man for the utopians, as Dick's remark shows, "you have got the cap of darkness" (161). Guest as a character is always an excluded existence and in fact he disappears out of the utopia unlike Mr. West, a protagonist in *Looking Backward*, who is permitted to have a right of the utopian citizen.

As the story goes on, we gradually tend to forget the truth that a person called Guest is not equal with the narrator "I": Guest is "a man". So the narrator might be separated from Guest in a degree. It is "a man" that experienced the travel about the utopia and told the story to his and the narrator "I"'s friend. However, the detail of three persons is hardly dictated. Although "a man" and his friend are members of Socialist League and Guest tells about his childhood in the travel, the narrator "I" never tells about himself. The narrator's passiveness, receiving his friend's advice easily, seems to correspond with Guest's passiveness.

a man whom he [the narrator's friend] knows very well indeed, sat almost silent at the beginning of the discussion,

but at last got drawn into it, and finished by roaring out very loud, and damning all the rest for fools. (4)

As long as we see the phrases about "a man" with enthusiasm for the Socialist League, it is difficult for us to interpret him as the narrator "I".

For more investigation of the problem of narrator, we will reveal a nature of the utopian world. The scenes Guest sees and tells are like pictures. For example, Ellen appears as "the chief ornament" in the room, and Hammond is "like an artist who has just painted a picture" (103). Ellen herself says, "Look! These [all in the world] are our books in these days" (156)! Guest's explanation about everything is eloquent and he narrates the detail of utopians' clothes and of buildings he sees as if a picture were in front of us. The utopia, as it were, a very peaceful and tranquil world. In *News*, on the other hand, a number of narrations are overflowing. In Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the narrator "I" comes across a strange man and reads his story. A strange man says, "I've got it [the story] all written out, and you can read it if you like" and he "handed me his manuscript" (52). In this case, the main action of the narrator is to read the written manuscript unlike the narrator of *News* telling a told story. The former is showing and the latter is telling. We can say that one is static and the other dynamic. Guest narrates what others have narrated. We can see talkative Guest in only motionless scenes, such as at Bloomsbury where Hammond lives and in narrow water where Guest and Ellen are on a boat, which are digressions from the main course of the journey, as mentioned at the outset of the paper. That they are digressions can be also explained when we see the process of the journey: After the meeting in Bloomsbury, they go back to Hammersmith where he started their trip, and after the

discussion between Guest and Ellen, they *go back* to main stream of Thames. Guest often holds his tongue except these scenes. A narrator Guest in the utopia has less conversation: he is exclusively an audience. He is also calm in disposition as the utopian world. Furthermore, while he stays there no event happens. His emergence into the utopia is only an event, and his action has no importance. On the contrary, we can find two actions, which are opposite to the tranquility in the text. One of them is Guest's travel, the action of going up the Thames. It is a sort of revolution against the Thames, which flows always to the same direction, to the sea. In addition, the end of the journey is Oxford where Guest returns home in the nineteenth century: for Guest the direction of going up the Thames goes backward temporarily unlike the utopians going forward. It means a resistance against the flow of time as well as of Thames. These events contain a challenge and differ from the static condition. The other one that is opposite to the tranquility is repetitions of narrating: utopians begin to tell their story, caused by appearance of Guest. Hammond says to Guest, "ask me questions, ask me questions about anything, ... I *must talk*" (58). Contrary to the remark, Dick says, "our friend[Guest] is greedy of your[utopian] stories." (188). All utopians are storytellers for a reticent Guest. There are not events but stories told by utopians whom Guest comes across during the journey and many other old tales in the text. He sees "the king of the Golden Mountain" and "the Seven Swans" (104), which are ornamented as wall-pictures at Bloomsbury. A narrator Guest is compelled to be a reader and an audience. Dick also says:

"Look, guest, ... doesn't it all look like one of those very stories out Grimm ... ? Here are we two lovers [Dick and Clara] wandering about the world and we have come to a

fairy garden" (160).

Dick tries to insert some tales whose protagonist is himself within the text. Guest also concedes to him, "I hope you [Dick] see that you have left me out of the tale". We can see the relationship clearly in their characters, Guest and Dick. Dick says, "only I can't look upon it as if I were sitting in a theatre seeing the play going on before me, myself taking no part of it" (216).

In *News*, we pay attention to an action of narrating by speech and sequence of narrating. This work has the form of multiple narrators and erases out the medium narrator "I" as the story goes on. This narrative form is equated to "reduced metadiegetic narrator" or "pseudo-diegetic" which is "immediately ousted in favor of the first narrator, which to some extent economizes on one" (Genette 237). In *News*, "the first narrator" is a narrator Guest and only Guest works as a narrator in the utopia. If someone deliver a story to another, the way of telling may be unreliable, especially when there are two media. The narrator is not Guest, on the contrary, which is not exactly true. The original story is reduced to the very experience by "a man" but the told story can change when the narrator told it: a told story in *News* becomes the narrator "I"'s story, too. Guest and "a man" cannot be put asunder completely. The role of the chapter 1 is to give the story a quality of a folktale by orally delivering and poses to avoid Morris' direct voice superficially. A narrator Guest is no doubt a part of the narrator "I". In the chapter 2, a narrator Guest is born afresh. The ambiguous disposition of narrator is foregrounded in the chapter 1, before the main story.

III

Going "up the Thames" is the latter part of the whole story, and the written pages of the four days on the river occupy as long as the former half of all pages, which is almost a scene of Hammond's telling for only a few hours. The shorter part, going up the Thames has a potential power, which can vibrate narrative line. As far as the contents of *News* is concerned, if we divide the text into two parts, the chapter 19 whose title is "The drive back to Hammersmith" is a border and a point of return. As Guest goes up the Thames, the sense of death appears clearly. Repetition of narrating shows dynamics of narrating: it can create and destroy the narrative line.

Hammond tells history of the utopia, the events of the past. During their long conversation (the chapters 9-18), they talk about the past. The same situation occurs in another scene, alone Guest and Ellen on a boat. They talk about the future in addition to the past: she says, "I might impress upon them [her future children] ... some of the essential part of myself" (202). These conversations, in a sense, can stop the time Guest passes in the utopia. The time in their conversation about the past and future is discontinuous to the time they actually have. Although critics discuss the scenes, they are digressions structurally to consider that Guest is going back to the place where he was.

Also *News* has the structure that the whole story has been told many times out of the text, and it has possibility of changing itself unlike a manuscript. Thus, the action of narrating creates dynamism. The dynamism has possibility of distracting the narrative line. The utopian world itself is static but the action of going up the Thames and of narrating stories can resist against the narrative of *News*.

In Hammond's story, he uses pronouns properly. He says in

his beginning to talk, "I am much tied to the past, *my* past" (57), which means the past for Hammond is the future for Guest. This emphasis, a repetition the word "past" shows us that he knows where Guest came from. Guest as a narrator also emphasizes it by italic in writing. In the chapter 11 in *News*, Guest suddenly changes the writing form to dialogic form. Guest has allowed nobody to use the word "I" without quotation marks. In front of each remarking, "H" for Hammond and "I" for Guest are put. Guest's persistence to the first person narrator is obvious. However, in this scene, Hammond uses "I" (Hammond) and "you" (Guest) without quotation marks. Guest coherently has kept his narrative, but here, the dialogue form has possibility of rising narrative anachronies. For example, Guest often says himself, "I remember ...". When he uses "remember", a difference between time in the utopia and time of narrating occurs. "Anacoluthon doubles the story line", Miller says, "and so makes the story probably a lie" (149)⁵. Guest gives "I" to Hammond only once on the text. Hammond also says, "our guest may some day go back to the people he has come from, and may take *a message* from us ..." (140; emphasis added). The confusion of the narrative structure revives: Guest is not the narrator and the narrator's role is to receive the "message". Stories in the told story work as metanarrative and entwine with the narrative line, which has seemed to be a single straight line, and sometimes destroy the narrative line. At the last scene, Guest comes across the strange man:

I came upon a figure ... It was a man who ... was really not much more than fifty ... His clothing was a mixture of dirt and rags long-over familiar to me. As I passed him he touched his hat with some real goodwill and courtesy, and much servility. (219)

The mysterious person who is dirty but courteous is perhaps an image of the nineteenth century and Guest himself, who is mentioned "hard on fifty-six" (19). The scene is explained as Guest comes across his Doppelgänger. This is equated with Guest's death in the utopia symbolically and physically. His disappearance from the utopia implies symbolic death of Guest and the narrative line. His journey around the utopia is over and stops at Oxford. The stop of the movement is death of all.

At Runnymede, Ellen says, "I love life better than death" (163), which is an answer to a question of her father, who loves the nineteenth century and complains about the peaceful utopia, if she loves the utopian world or not. The meaning of "death" in her remark is not so clear. In the context, the word "death" means a "misery" condition of the past period. The description of the world is always bright and gay. Ellen who has "a tanned skin and tawny hair" (154) embodies summer. On the other hand, Guest seems to embody autumn. Before his disappearance from the utopia, Dick says:

"For then the year is beginning to fail, and one cannot help having a feeling behind all the gaiety, of the coming of the dark days, and the shorn fields and empty gardens; and the spring is almost too far off to look forward. It is, then, in the autumn, when one almost believes in death."
(216)

The season of autumn Dick fears is never told in the text. Guest is loaded with the symbolic death because his place is in the nineteenth century and thus he is a complete outsider. He has not only "the depth of a sense of loss" (Thompson 207) in the world as a character but also a sense of death in the text.

Miller thinks narrative line comes to be multiple by various anacoluthons, epigraph, letters, dialogue and so on.

The life line doubled becomes a death line. The narrative line in storytelling, however, is always already doubled. It is measured by death, or it is a measurement to put to death. . . . Analysis of ending always, leads if carried far enough, to the paralysis of this inability to be certain whether a story has reached definitive closure. (Miller 51-56)

The ending in *News* makes readers remember the first situation in the nineteenth century. If his action of going up the Thames is going back to the past, his terminal must be an unborn baby through the mother of river. He repeats his new birth. Death in the narrative bears new life and a start. Not only time but also place turns back to the situation of the beginning. The ending is vague as compared with the chapter 1 as introduction and as prolepsis, which explains the detail process of the narrator's narrating.

The repetition of narrating the whole story exists within and without the text. The actions of narrating raise an idea of dynamism, which threaten the narrative line to be anacoluthon. The anacoluthon can change the narrative line in the utopia, which has been a peaceful world.

News is filled with told stories: not only the narrator but also all of the characters tell. Furthermore, there are many tales: almost all are folk tales, which have their own narrative. From the chapter 1 in the text, we come across triplicity of narrating – the narrator, his friend and “a man”. The main narrator Guest does not act by himself and only narrates. These narratives make the world metanarrative world, as if they help the passive narrator to create the story. In spite of his passiveness, Guest could encourage the utopians to talk and create many stories, which often frightens the narrative line. Guest gives the static world the dynamism. Significantly

it is Guest that death of the narrative line is attributed to. The assumed ending in the narrative line and his disappearance occur simultaneously. Here, we can say that all qualities in the text are reduced to Guest himself and many stories in the text help him.

IV

We could describe two lines: the nineteenth century, Guest's view and the utopian view. They are parallel from the start to the end of the story and never cross each other. Guest can be a bridge between these lines. Furthermore his role is to link the utopian story to readers. He can work as a complete medium to send a message, news from nowhere, as it were, and he accomplishes a unity of these ages. Hammond seems to take the title of narrator by which he uses "I" without quotation marks. However, that scene is a form of dialogue so that exactly the coherent narrative is not destroyed. His first person narrative with persistence is not interrupted.

The problem of narrator in *News* is complicated. The triply assumed narrators and Guest tend to be seen as one person. Though the narrator is so fragile and ambiguous, Guest's role of keeping narrating is unchanged. In addition, his existence evokes the others' narrating their stories. In spite of the dynamic action of going up the Thames and of narrating Guest can keep his role coherently and completely. It is based on the reason that he is a complete outsider in the utopia and an exclusive narrator.

NOTES

- 1 Peter Faulkner, ed., *William Morris: the critical heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) pp.339-353.
- 2 "Guest" is written in small letter, "guest", in the text. But I will use

“Guest”, G in large capital, in order to distinguish from a general word, guest.

- 3 William Morris, *News from Nowhere*. Ed. Krishan Kumar. (Cambridge University Press, 1995) 29. All the subsequent quotations from the text are referred to this edition, and are followed by page number.
- 4 Thompson does not distinguish the narrator from Guest.
- 5 Miller’s use of anacoluthon differs from Genette’s “anachronie” in a part: Miller’s exists in interpolated tales and the shift in narrators, while Genette’s means the various types of discordance between the two ordering of story and narrative. Miller calls his book “a work of ananarratology”.

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