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### NEITHER FACT NOR FICTION? THE QUINCENTENARY OF THE LITERARY UTOPIA

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Thomas More's "Utopia" (1516) is unclassifiable except as an example of the genre to which it gave its name. Although it combines fictional dialogue with the description of an imaginary society, it has almost nothing in common with the literary forms of the novel or the romance. It is only in an appendix that we find the authentic note of literary fiction.

The 'utopian novels' written by More's successors are, as Wells and others recognized, examples of a hybrid form composed of apparently incompatible elements. Typically, these novels show a visitor to utopia being given an immensely detailed guided tour. This narrative structure was already breaking down in Wells's time, yet many traces of it survive in twentieth-century dystopias such as "We", "Brave New World" and "Nineteen Eighty-Four". These traces include the presence of one or more mentors or tour-guides, and the insertion of documentary materials within the fictional text. More recent writers, such as Kim Stanley Robinson, have incorporated elements of meta-utopia or Wellsian 'utopography' into their narratives. A credible modern utopia or dystopia remains a literary hybrid.

*Keywords:* utopia, dystopia, genre, literary hybrid, Thomas More, H. G. Wells, Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Kim Stanley Robinson.

«Утопия» Томаса Мора является не поддающимся классификации исключением среди других произведений жанра, которому она дала название. Хотя «Утопия» сочетает в себе художественный диалог с описанием воображаемого общества, она не имеет почти ничего общего с литературной формой романа. И только в приложении мы находим подлинные нотки литературного вымысла. По мнению Уэллса и ряда других литературных деятелей, «утопические романы», написанные последователями Мора, являются примером гибридной формы, состоящей из явно не сочетающихся компонентов. Обычно эти романы изображают посетителя утопии, которому предлагают очень детально разработанную экскурсию. Уже во времена Уэллса эта нарративная структура начала разрушаться, однако её следы можно найти в дистопиях двадцатого века, таких как «Мы», «Дивный новый мир» и «1984». Это предполагает наличие одного или более наставников или экскурсоводов и использование документальных материалов в художественном тексте. Авторы более позднего времени, такие как Ким Стэнли Робинсон, включили элементы мегаутопии или Уэллсовской «утопографии» в своё повествование. Современные литературные дистопия или утопия остаются гибридной литературной формой.

*Ключевые слова:* утопия, дистопия, жанр, гибридная литературная форма, Томас Мор, Герберт Джордж Уэллс, Евгений Замятин, Олдос Хаксли, Джордж Оруэлл, Ким Стэнли Робинсон.

Among the literary centenaries of the year 2016 – including the four-hundredth anniversary of the deaths of William Shakespeare and Miguel de Cervantes – we should not forget the quincentenary of a prose masterpiece that preceded the birth of the modern European novel. Although Thomas More was an English statesman who rose to become Lord Chancellor under King Henry VIII, his "Utopia" is not strictly an English work, nor is it a novel or, wholly, a work of fiction. Written in Latin and published in the city of Leuven in what is now Belgium in 1516, "Utopia"

is unclassifiable except as an example of the genre to which it gave its name. Admittedly, it was not the first work of utopian literature, nor did Thomas More claim that it was. He gave that honour to Plato's "Republic", but he also believed that the Utopia he envisioned was a far better society – that is, a more utopian society – than its famous predecessor.

The original Latin title of "Utopia" begins with the words 'De optimoreipublicaestatu' – 'Concerning the best state of a republic (or commonwealth)'. This sounds like a philosophical tract, a work of political

theory in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle. But “Utopia’s” Latin title goes on to describe it as ‘libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus’ – ‘a book truly beautiful, both pleasing and morally instructive’, precisely the combination of qualities traditionally required of imaginative literature rather than philosophy: qualities summed up in the traditional formula “utile et dulce”. Book I of More’s “Utopia” sometimes resembles a Platonic dialogue, but it also tells a story – of Thomas More’s visit to Antwerp and his meeting there with Raphael Hythloday, a Portuguese sailor – while Book II consists of Hythloday’s description of the island of Utopia, which is, he claims, a real place in the southern hemisphere that was previously unknown to travellers from Europe. Hythloday claims to have seen everything that he describes ‘with (his) own eyes’ – but his very insistence on the ‘factual’ nature of his description tends to confirm his readers’ suspicions that this traveller’s tale is a work not of experience but of imagination [More, p. 78]<sup>1</sup>.

“Utopia” is a product of the great age of Spanish and Portuguese navigation. It was written less than twenty years after Vasco da Gama’s voyage round the Cape of Good Hope to India, when the European discovery of the southern hemisphere was still in its infancy. But, although More’s book includes an imaginary voyage, it is not an example of the literature of exploration since we learn no details whatever about the journey. Nor does Hythloday make any attempt to convey the feeling of his own experiences during his supposed five years’ residence in Utopia. It seems paradoxical, then, that More’s work is often seen as the starting-point for the genre of the ‘utopian novel’, a hybrid combination of fiction and non-fiction which the present-day American writer Kim Stanley Robinson has recently described as ‘a strange project, a bastard form [ . . . ] like saying, “Let’s [ . . . ] throw together architectural blueprints and soap operas”’ [Robinson (2016), p. 6]. For although Hythloday’s description of the island of Utopia is clearly a hypothetical construction, it has almost nothing in common with the literary forms of the novel or the romance. It takes the form of an analytical summary, not a travelogue. We are not given a guided tour of Utopia, since it is not a tour and there is no guide. Nor does any of the citizens of utopia achieve the dignity and status of a fictional character; instead, not one of them is individualised or even named. The Utopians’ anonymity adds to

our impression that what Hythloday describes is not just a communist society, but a society of extraordinary uniformity. All the cities are the same (he tells us), all the houses look the same, every family is the same size, there is no private property, and only their horticulture shows any signs of individuality, leading to ‘a certain strife and contention [ . . . ] between street and street concerning the trimming, husbanding, and furnishing of their gardens’ [More, p. 61].

But if “Utopia” cannot be classified as a novel, it does contain some elements that we would now call novelistic, although these elements are few and far between. In addition to the main text consisting of two books, “Utopia” begins with a prefatory letter (‘Thomas More to Peter Giles’) and ends with three appendices. It is not until we reach the first appendix, a letter written by ‘Peter Giles, Citizen of Antwerp’, that we find a passage vividly recapturing a moment of domestic life, a moment worthy of Tolstoy or Jane Austen. Giles is explaining just why the exact geographical location of Utopia has been left unrecorded. Raphael Hythloday has told his hearers of his voyage through the tropics and ‘under the line equinoctial’ (the Equator), past a region in which ‘All things be hideous, terrible, loathsome, and unpleasant to behold’, into a more temperate zone containing many civilized nations [More, p. 17]. Utopia is one of these nations, and the only knowledge that its inhabitants have of the peoples of the northern hemisphere (whom they call ‘the ultra-equinoctials’) comes from a shipwreck some 1,200 years earlier when ‘[c]ertain Romans and Egyptians were cast on land’ [More, p. 53]. But where exactly is Utopia, and in which of the three great oceans – the Atlantic, the Indian or the Pacific – does it lie? The fact that we do not know this, Peter Giles reports, is due to an unfortunate accident, or rather a series of accidents:

For, as touching the situation of the island, that is to say, in what part of the world Utopia standeth, the ignorance and lack whereof not a little troubleth and grieveth Master More, indeed Raphael left not that unspoken of. Howbeit, with very few words he lightly touched it, incidentally by way of passing it over, as meaning of likelihood to keep and reserve that to another place. And the same, I wot not how, by a certain evil and unlucky chance escaped us both. For when Raphael was speaking thereof, one of Master More’s servants came to him and whispered in his ear. Wherefore, I being then of purpose more earnestly addict to hear, one of the company, by reason of cold taken, I think, a-shipboard, coughed out so loud, that he took from my hearing certain of his words. But I will never stint nor rest until I have got the full and exact knowledge thereof, [ . . . ] if our friend Hythloday be in safety or alive. For we hear very uncertain news of him [ More, pp. 137-8].

So at the crucial moment, not only were Hythloday’s words drowned out by the sailor’s coughing

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from “Utopia” in this paper are from the Everyman’s Library edition, which uses the English translation by Ralph Robinson (1551), but with modernized spelling. More (1951), “Utopia and the Dialogue of Comfort”, p. 78.

fit, but More's servant was whispering in his ear – and, if this were a novel, we should expect to be told just what was the servant's message and why it had to be delivered in such a hurry. Together with Hythloday's subsequent disappearance, we have been given three reasons for More's failure to specify 'the longitude or true meridian of the island, [and] the just latitude thereof', where one alone would have been enough [More, p. 138]. Any practised reader of novels will recognize in this passage the authentic note of literary fiction, a note that can be heard in some ancient novels (such as Apuleius' "The Golden Ass"), but that is otherwise very rarely found in prose fiction before Cervantes.<sup>2</sup> This note is, as we have seen, largely absent from the main text of "Utopia", despite its presence in most of the 'utopian novels' written by More's successors from the seventeenth century to the present day; and these novels remain, in Kim Stanley Robinson's words, 'an amalgam of two genres that are in many respects not at all compatible' [Robinson (2016), p. 6].

In 1905 H. G. Wells published "A Modern Utopia", a title that clearly acknowledges More as its literary predecessor.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the great majority of Wells's fiction, this is a deliberately hybrid work aiming, as he told his readers, at 'a sort of shot-silk texture between philosophical discussion on the one hand and imaginative narrative on the other' [Wells (2005), p. 6]<sup>4</sup>. During the four centuries that intervened between More's "Utopia" and Wells's self-conscious modernization of the form, the importance of the narrative component had steadily grown. Most readers encountered utopian speculations through the media of satire (as in Book IV of Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels"), of romance (as in Edward Bellamy or William Morris),<sup>5</sup> or of a dream-narrative such as the one included in Nikolai Chernyshevsky's "What Is to Be Done?" In the great majority of utopian texts there are just two or three main characters, the visitor and one or more representative utopian citizens who function as hosts, mentors, tour-guides and protectors. These typical utopians (sometimes – as in Bulwer Lytton's "The Coming Race" and Bellamy's

"Looking Backward" – a father and his daughter) outline the structure, history and lifestyle of their society, often at great length and in direct or reported speech. But by the time of Wells, this structure was beginning to break down.

An early indication of this breakdown can be found in Wells's "The Time Machine" (1895), where the Time Traveller struggles to understand the future society of the Eloi and Morlocks without the help of a guide. At first he thinks he has arrived in a communist paradise like those of Chernyshevsky or William Morris, but he is quickly disillusioned, and soon becomes both disorientated and frightened. Instead of the upbeat and even euphoric tone of earlier utopian texts we find ourselves reading a mixture of Gothic thriller and mystery novel, a baffling and frustrating search for clues. "The Time Machine" in this respect anticipates the modern dystopia, where the protagonist is no longer a visitor but a harassed and confused utopian citizen who struggles to understand the reality beneath his society's ideological propaganda, and eventually – if fleetingly – finds his true identity as a dissident intellectual. Such are D-503 in Yevgeny Zamyatin's "We", Bernard Marx in Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" and Winston Smith in George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four". However, in each of these modern dystopias the figure of the mentor and the narrative of the guided tour still survive in a rather different form.

In Zamyatin's "We", D-503 is inducted both into the mysteries of the One State and into rebellion against it by I-330, whose true character and motivation remain hidden: she appears to be his comrade and lover, but is really, perhaps, 'a femme fatale' on a mission to seduce him because of his position as chief rocket engineer. There is a comparable ambivalence about Winston Smith's two mentors, his lover Julia and his torturer O'Brien, in "Nineteen Eighty-Four". In "We", I-330 introduces D-503 to new aspects of his society such as the Ancient House and the world beyond the city's glass wall; and Julia in "Nineteen Eighty-Four" serves a similar function, though more as a companion than guide. But the closest equivalents to the traditional utopian travelogue are found in "Brave New World".

In More's "Utopia", one of the very few technological innovations is that eggs are incubated under factory conditions, in a temperature-controlled hatchery. [More, p. 58]<sup>6</sup> Not only does "Brave New World" extend these factory principles to human reproduction, but it begins with a guided tour for new students around the London Hatchery and Condi-

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Parrinder (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Although Wells subsequently wrote a preface to a 1908 edition of More's "Utopia", his broad intellectual affinities, as set out in his "Experiment in Autobiography" (1934) and elsewhere, are much more clearly with Plato than with More. It is tempting to suppose that he would have called his utopian novel "The New Republic" had that title not already been used for a much-discussed satirical 'roman à clef' by W. H. Mallock (1877).

<sup>4</sup> Wells (2005), "A Modern Utopia", p. 6. For the original 'Note to the Reader' in which this statement appeared, see *ibid.*, p. xxxiii.

<sup>5</sup> On utopian romance see Parrinder (2010).

<sup>6</sup> More (1951), p. 58. Wells picked up on this detail in his 1908 preface to "Utopia". "About Sir Thomas More", in Wells (1914), p. 183-7 (185).

tioning Centre. The students are shown the 'Bokanovsky Process' for cloning human beings, and then the various forms of conditioning (ranging from hypnotic suggestion to torture) that are used to control infant behaviour. (The students themselves must have undergone such conditioning, but their memories of it have been removed.) Later in the novel, Bernard Marx and his friend Helmholtz Watson act as hosts and guides to an actual visitor to the 'New World', John the Savage, who has grown up on a tribal reservation in New Mexico; and the novel reaches its intellectual culmination in the meeting of Bernard, Helmholtz and John with the World Controller Mustapha Mond. Mond is at once a Platonic philosopher-king with intimate knowledge of the thought and literature of the past, and the chief censor who is responsible for keeping this knowledge hidden from everyone else. For all the abuse of power that his regime involves, he remains an attractive character whose candour and mental sophistication clearly fit him for the role of a utopian mentor.

In addition to the mentor and the travelogue, a third narrative device reflecting the generic hybridity of the modern dystopia is the use of a book or set of official documents to reveal the true nature of the society. An early example is the 'Book of the Machines' in Samuel Butler's satirical utopia "Erewhon".<sup>7</sup> The whole text of Zamyatin's "We" is a diary that the protagonist, D-503, starts to keep in response to a government proclamation in the official newspaper, the *One State Gazette*, a proclamation that he copies out word for word in his first diary entry:

The great historic hour when the first "Integral" will soar into cosmic space is drawing near. [ . . . ] In the name of the Benefactor, therefore, we proclaim to all numbers of the One State: Everyone who feels capable of doing so must compose tracts, odes, manifestoes, poems or other works extolling the beauty and the grandeur of the One State. This will be the first cargo to be carried by the "Integral" [Zamyatin, pp. 1-2].

It is only much later that our diarist comes to see that 'instead of a harmonious and strict mathematical poem in honour of the One State, I am producing some sort of a fantastic adventure novel' [Zamyatin, pp. 102-3]. Since George Orwell knew Zamyatin's

<sup>7</sup> Chapters 23, 24 and 25 of Samuel Butler's "Erewhon, or Over the Range" (1872) consist of a transcription of 'The Book of the Machines', a 400-year-old historical document which has persuaded the Erewhonians to abandon all machinery. As many scholars have shown, these chapters draw heavily on three satirical essays, 'Darwin Among the Machines', 'Lucubratio Ebra' and 'The Mechanical Creation', published by Butler himself in 1863-5 while he was resident in New Zealand. For discussion of the issues involved, see for example Sussman (1968), pp. 135-61.

work, it may be no coincidence that "Nineteen Eighty-Four" also shows its protagonist writing a diary; yet Winston Smith's diary, unlike D-503's, is knowingly subversive from the start. A much clearer sign of the hybrid nature of utopian literature is the inclusion in "Nineteen Eighty-Four" of two whole chapters from a fictitious work of political theory, Emmanuel Goldstein's "The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism" – a treatise analysing Big Brother's totalitarian regime that takes up a full 20 pages of a 250-page novel. Winston reads part of this forbidden text aloud to Julia while they are in bed together, and she predictably falls asleep during the reading, making an ironic comment on the chapters of textbook exposition which can be found in virtually every utopian novel. Moreover, "Nineteen Eighty-Four" ends with another slightly mysterious text which is apparently an official document or report written after the fall of Big Brother's regime, the Appendix on 'The Principles of Newspeak'. This reminds us that More's "Utopia" has two comparable linguistic appendices, one consisting of a translation of four Utopian poems and the second commenting on the Utopian alphabet.

Finally, I come back to Wells's idea of 'a kind of shot-silk texture between philosophical discussion on the one hand and imaginative narrative on the other'. In "A Modern Utopia", the philosophical discussion takes the form of a commentary on the utopian society that Wells is constructing, seen in the light of the whole utopian tradition going back to Plato. The result is both a meta-utopia, or self-conscious utopia, and an exercise in what Wells would later call utopography – the surveying, analysis and critique of utopian thought.<sup>8</sup> Wells indeed argued that the proper method of sociology and political theory was to engage in the comparison and critique of utopian visions.<sup>9</sup> A similar belief can be found in what is often regarded as the founding text of European political theory, Aristotle's "Politics" with its pioneering critique of Plato's "Republic". In much late twentieth-century utopian writing we can find equivalents to the Wellsian ideas of meta-utopia and utopography. For example, there are what Tom Moylan has called the 'critical utopias' of American science fiction of the 1960s and 1970s: utopias that challenge both the dominant ideologies of our world and the 'generic institutions' of utopia itself.<sup>10</sup> And there is Kim Stanley Robinson's 1990 novel "Pacific

<sup>8</sup> For analysis of "A Modern Utopia" as meta-utopia, see Parrinder (1995), pp. 96-112.

<sup>9</sup> See 'The So-Called Science of Sociology', in Wells (1914), pp. 192-206. For a recent account of Utopian Studies following Wells's approach, see Levitas (2013).

<sup>10</sup> See Moylan (1986), and Shadurski (2015).

Edge”, where the narrative of life in a utopian community in California in 2065 is interspersed with extracts from the diary of the utopian pioneer Tom Barnard, a diary that was written fifty years earlier. Tom Barnard’s diary is a further example of the utopian ‘book within a book’, and it tells the story of a young activist discovering the tradition of utopian thought, including Wells’s “Modern Utopia”, and realising that a new conception of the perfect society is needed. The main narrative shows us Barnard as an apparently disillusioned old man living in the society he has helped to create [Robinson (1995)].

At the end of Book II of More’s “Utopia”, More himself comments that, though he did not agree with everything that Raphael had said in praise of the island of Utopia, he did find ‘many things [ . . . ] in the Utopian weal-public which in our cities I may rather wish than hope for’ [ More, p. 135]. But if utopian hopes can never be fully realized, neither can dystopian fears be laid to rest. A credible modern utopian novel must be both a critical vision, with elements of utopia and dystopia, and a generic hybrid with elements of pleasure and instruction, of documentation and exposition on the one hand, and imaginative narrative on the other. Utopia is neither ‘fact’ nor ‘fiction’ but a ‘shot-silk’ mixture of both.

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