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Mapping Utopia: Spatial and Temporal Sites of Meaning

John C. Hawley

In classic imaginings of places that are pointedly Not Here (More's Utopia itself, Swift's Gulliver's Travels, Butler's Erewhon, Hilton's Lost Horizon, Hudson's Green Mansions, Barrie's Peter Pan) one could argue that such sites are proposed specifically to provide a unique angle of vision on the society against which they are "placed": their rules for living are offered as implied commentary on the (less acceptable) rules of the author's home land. In such worlds, the critique frequently enough casts the "real" world as a dystopia, one that may or may not be open to improvement. A softer version of the critique might be seen in works such as Thoreau's Walden, Adams's Watership Down, and St. Augustine's The City of God, with their implied suggestion that this better world may, in some sense, be already present in front of our faces, had we but eyes to see. The fault is in ourselves, so the message goes, and we are offered hope that we may gain new eyes through a new way of seeing and, of course, of being.

An observation that links these two spatial envisionings of utopia would be that the effect that visiting such a place on the protagonist is, itself, of major interest to the authors. More often than not, one returns a changed individual, in some sense a better person but less able to accommodate oneself to the world others consider "ordinary": such afflicted individuals are consequently less acceptable to those who never left home. It is a reversal of the worldly adage, "How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm, after they've seen Paree?": after Swift's protagonist visits the Houyhnhnms, the farm (or the stable, at least) doesn't look bad at all.

In various other utopian journeys, though, the trip is as much temporal as it may be spatial. If I may be permitted a neologism, we might more suitably describe this literature as "uchronian" rather than utopian. Think, for example, of Wells's The Time Machine, Asimov's I, Robot, Clarke's Childhood's End, Bellamy's Looking Backward, Woolf's Orlando, various Kurt Vonnegut novels, innumerable Star Trek episodes. Some novels, like Rider Haggard's She,
combine the spatial and temporal defamiliarization apparently to transgress the rules of both (only to fall back into a rather stodgy late Victorian sense of the dangers of a woman not knowing her place): Ayesha ("she who must be obeyed") significantly claims that "[her] empire is of the imagination" (175). It is interesting to observe that the temporal fantasies are arguably, as often as not, dystopic as they look to the future; they are immobilizing as they look to the past, since one dare not disturb the time line—everything connects, everything depends, and in these stories the ethical demands of assassinating a Hitler usually get portrayed much like the hubris of a Faust or a Dr. Frankenstein. The reader learns that the devil one knows may be preferable to the one our intervention could release.

In fact, for all the reforming impulse that one expects in utopian writing, at its heart is often conservative, sometimes paranoid, sometimes a self-indulgent whistling past the graveyard. In some cases, like Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, we may be asked to conclude rather comfortably that "there's no place like home"—and that, for all its fantastic amusement, those strange places that divert us for awhile are really the things of children, phases that one must pass through before seriously grappling with the nitty gritty responsibilities of adulthood—and grimly accepting that Kansas is as good as it's going to get.

On the other hand, a less conservative view shapes stories like Blish's *A Case of Conscience*, where it is the very foreignness of the "other" that frees the reader to reimagine his or her own world with fresh eyes that may require a new ethics to cope with responsibilities that are discernible only from far, far away. Many of these more exploratory utopian books seem reminiscent of Tennyson's account of an aging Ulysses, home at last from Troy but restless, finally leaving the rule to his son Telemachus so that he, aging though he may be, may strike out to the territory ahead, the new frontier. In an optimism that seeks, perhaps, to shout down the terrors of secularization, the loss of a sacred canopy, the rationalization of an empty universe, these works show the essentially romantic underpinnings of both utopias and dystopias—the hope (sometimes disguised as a fear) that there may be some "other" time and place, accessible to few of us, of course, but perhaps available to the individual reading the book. The "unrealistic," even self-indulgent nature of this imagining of the enterprise perhaps provides the underpinning for Judith Shklar's sad observation that "utopia and utopian have mostly come to designate projects that are not just fantasies but also ones that will end in ruin" (41).

And this connects us to the analysis Huntington brings to H. G. Wells. After discussing the mirror relations between utopian and dystopian writing, Huntington defines anti-utopian fiction, by which he means

a type of skeptical imagining that is opposed to the inconsistencies of utopia-dystopia. If the utopian-dystopian form tends to construct single, fool-proof structures which solve social dilemmas, the anti-utopian form discovers problems, raises questions, and doubts. . . . It is a mode of relentless inquisition, of restless skeptical exploration of the very articles of faith on which utopias themselves are built. . . . It is not an attack on reality but a criticism of human desire and expectation. . . . It enjoys the construction of imaginary community, but it does not succumb to the satisfactions of solutions. By the same mechanism the anti-utopia can acknowledge virtues in dystopia even while denouncing it. At the core of the anti-utopia is, not simply an ideal or a nightmare, but an
awareness of conflict, of deeply opposed values that pure utopia and dystopia tend to override. If utopia seeks imaginative solutions, anti-utopia goes beyond to return to the powerful and disturbing ambivalences that come from perceiving simultaneous yet conflicting goods. (Huntington 142-43)

Thus, Huntington’s usage of the term (and my own) are not to be confused with Krishan Kumar’s, which seems roughly to equate it to dystopian writing (Kumar 99-130).

Without detailing Huntington’s reading of Wells’s career, which, in brief, he describes as a movement from “anti-utopian imaginings to utopian prophetic ones” (143)—in other words, as an increasingly conservative movement—I wish to refer to his study principally for this insight into the anti-utopian. Though Huntington does not seem to make the connection between this and postmodernism, they share in common a distrust of endings or of systems; this goes far in explaining some recent science fiction and fantasy that raise more questions than they answer. In Wells’s case, his late fiction loses some of its power because, in trying to become engaged with the problems of the world and therefore trying to offer solutions in his later utopian novels and stories, he is too aware of discrepancies in the world to propose convincing (utopian) solutions. As Huntington notes, “a writer less attuned to the anti-utopian ironies of the world might succeed better at ignoring them” (147). But, grasping at straws to force a solution, the late Wells (as in When the Sleeper Wakes) sometimes “prefers the unambiguous horror of dystopia which, [he] implies, might be transformed to utopia” (148).

Huntington observes that this dilemma is the same for many utopian writers:

the deep structural contradictions cannot be mediated. Either, as in the case of Zamyatin’s We, we commit ourselves to an infinitely dialectical anti-utopianism, or, as in the case of Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four or, in a different spirit, Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 or Huxley’s Brave New World, we quash ironic conflict and replace the puzzle with a single-valued structure, either dystopian or utopian. (148)

In short, Huntington notes that anti-utopia, which resists the wiles of both utopia and, ironically, dystopia, is an unsettling mixture of “yearning and skepticism” (149).

But there is another way of viewing this dynamic, as posed by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. In his Lectures on Ideology and Utopia he joins together much of what Huntington criticizes in utopian and dystopian literature and calls it ideology—the drive toward integration, system, institution, dogma. Utopia, on the other hand, is “the constant ideal, that toward which we are directed but which we never fully attain” (xxi). It “functions to expose the gap between the authority’s claim for and the citizenry’s beliefs in any system of legitimacy” (xxii).

On the other hand, according to Ricoeur utopian writing has a darker side as well, because it can regress into “the completely unrealizable” and become fancy, madness, or escape:

Here utopia eliminates questions about the transmission between the present and the utopian future; it offers no assistance in determining or in proceeding on the difficult path
of action. Further, utopia is escapist not only as to the means of its achievement, but as to the ends to be achieved. In utopia no goals conflict; all ends are compatible. (xxii)

This escape from consequences, Ricoeur calls “the magic of thought.” He therefore pushes for the ethical component possible in utopian writing, noting that “we must try to cure the illnesses of utopias by what is wholesome in ideology . . . and try to cure the rigidity, the petrification, of ideologies by the utopian element” (xxiii).

However, lest Ricoeur suffer criticism from such as Huntington for being naïve, we should note his emphasis on the process, on the “conflict of interpretations,” on the paradigm shifts involved in conflicting metaphors for the ever-newly-coming-into-being of truth (xxix). As he writes, “we wager on a certain set of values and then try to be consistent with them; verification is therefore a question of our whole life. No one can escape this” (xxiii).

I will conclude with a brief example from two recent books that illustrate aspects of the two structures I have alluded to in this paper. One is Ken Grimwood’s 1986 temporal utopia, Replay; the other is Mary Doria Russell’s spatial dystopia, The Sparrow (1996). Russell tells the story of a combined scientific and missionary journey gone very bad. Only one explorer returns to earth, the Jesuit priest Emilio Sandoz. When he had been introduced, finally, to a leader of Rakhat (the target planet) his life had apparently suddenly come into a meaningful focus. Here is his reaction:

And then, suddenly, everything made sense to him, and the joy of the moment took his breath away. He had been brought here, step by step, to meet this man: Hlavin Kitheri, a poet—perhaps even a prophet—who of all his kind might know the God whom Emilio Sandoz served. It was a moment of redemption so profound he almost wept, ashamed that his faith had been so badly eroded by the inchoate fear and the isolation. He tried to pull himself together, wishing he’d been stronger, more durable, a better instrument for his God’s design. And yet he felt purified somehow, stripped of all other purpose. (Russell 390)

But the encounter turns violent. The priest is continuously raped. Hlavin Kitheri then writes poetry rapturously describing the experience. Sandoz suddenly realizes that it was just such poetry, now revealed as pornography, that had reminded his fellow priests of religious music and had lured him to the planet in the first place. In short, his hermeneutical structure, his controlling metaphor, his paradigm of meaning, has been eviscerated. One might say he is experiencing the open-endedness that Huntington describes as anti-utopia, or the conflict of interpretations that Ricoeur posits as the dynamic for an engaged ethics that is both meaningful and non-ideological. But the others around him, and one suspects the author and most readers, as well, insist on bringing closure (and meaning) to the experience. His religious superiors remark:

“He’s the genuine article . . . He is still held fast in the formless stone, but he’s closer to God right now than I have ever been in my whole life.” (400)

“Emilio is not despicable. But God didn’t rape him, even if that’s how Emilio understands it now.” He sat back in the bench and stared at the ancient olive trees defining the edge of the garden. “There’s an old Jewish story that says in the beginning God was everywhere and everything, a totality. But to make creation, God had to remove
Himself from some part of the universe, so something besides Himself could exist. So he breathed in, and in the places where God withdrew, there creation exists.” (401)

Even as they recognize that he is in process (“held fast in the formless stone”) they insist on stepping outside that process themselves and finding a false stasis that seems utopian in the extreme. “I don’t even have the courage to envy him” (400), one priest remarks, failing to acknowledge that his own situation, in stark existential terms, is not that different from his rape victim’s: both are still engaged, and can determine meaning for that process only in a never-to-be-achieved retrospect.

Ken Grimwood’s novel, on the other hand, seems tailor-made as a parable of utopian possibilities that are open-ended, but it issues forth into a rather remarkably ambiguous (postmodern) conclusion. The protagonist, Jeffrey Winston, dies in 1998 but suddenly finds his consciousness back in his 1963 body and circumstances. He brings with him all his knowledge of what is now the future, and he makes choices accordingly—making spectacularly successful bets on the World Series and the stock market. Then he dies again in 1988, and is reborn a bit later than the first time. This happens again and again, with the time before death shortening with each replay. And in each life he makes new choices, finally meeting a woman in similar “replaying” circumstances. A unique love affair ensues (over several half-lifetimes). Finally they both approach what appears to be their final death, but their ordinary lives surprisingly resume and continue forward from 1988.

Comparisons might be made to Bierce’s story, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” and the films Groundhog Day (1993), Forever Young (1992), Sliding Doors (1998), and others. But the most telling comparison, perhaps, might be with the recent film Pleasantville (1998), where the people in black and gray in 1958 are portrayed as neo-fascist in their commitment to a “non-changist view of history, emphasizing continuity.” When they once take a chance, express an uncomfortable emotion, do something out of character, they suddenly take on a bit of color. But their lives, of course, become less predictable, and more dangerous. Along similar lines, and sounding much like Paul Ricoeur, Replay’s protagonist concludes as his life moves into 1989 and beyond:

Each lifetime had been different, as each choice is always different, unpredictable in its outcome or effect. Yet those choices had to be made. . . . And yet, he mused, the years themselves would all be fresh and new [now], an ever-changing panoply of unforeseen events and sensations that had been denied him until now. New films and plays, new technology developments, new music—Christ, how he yearned to hear a song, any song, that he had never heard before! The unfathomable cycle in which he and Pamela had been caught had proved to be a form of confinement, not release. . . . Now everything was different. This wasn’t “next time,” and there would be no more of that; there was only this time, this sole finite time of whose direction and outcome Jeff knew absolutely nothing. He would not waste, or take for granted, a single moment of it...The possibilities, Jeff knew, were endless. (Grimwood 309–310)

This very didactic conclusion may be typical of utopian literature. Perhaps the ending could even be confused with that of The Wizard of Oz—but the focus is
not on “home” but on movement in time. The joy Jeff experiences is not because he has found security: in fact, with the irony typical of anti-utopian writing, he senses the energy and rectitude of the fact that, even though the possibilities are endless, he is not.

Even this bittersweet sense of an ending cannot long dwell in the imaginative invention of that apparent closure. The hand of the clock moves beyond the moment of imaginative surety, and the actual life remains open-ended. This is the sort of contemporary writing that acknowledges, with a hopeful brio, the deconstructive turn of postmodernism. The trick is to avoid paralysis. “Between the presently unrealizable and the impossible in principle lies an intermediary margin” (301), in Ricoeur’s analysis, and it is on that intermediary border that we must tentatively enter utopian thinking. Rather than attempt to step outside time or space “we must let ourselves be drawn into the circle”—and then, in a mystical logic that utopias would applaud, he adds that we “must try to make the circle a spiral” (312).

REFERENCES