
The Medium Against the Message: The Dilemma of Utopian Narration

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“We are men, not automata; we eat meat, not ideas; we drink wine, not syllogisms; we make love to people of the opposite sex, not to dialectics.”

Alberto Moravia, *Man as an End*

In 1866 Frederic Harrison, a follower of Auguste Comte and true believer in his grand scheme for a utopian sociocracy, sent a letter to George Eliot urging her to write a great fictive tableau depicting the realization of the ideal Comtean society. Indeed, the correspondent declared that to undertake such a task was Eliot’s “destiny.” What the world needed to be shown, he argued, “is the possibility in real life of healthy moral control over societies.” Perhaps it is testimony to the verisimilitude of George Eliot’s art that this correspondent should mistake it for real life, but one sees his point: to persuade the widest audience, Comte’s grand abstract design required translation into the sort of living and true-to-life—that is, novelistic—picture at which Eliot excelled. She replied to this importuning with a tactful but decisive denial of the possibility of conveying the utopist’s design through the novelist’s art—a denial, that is, of the possibility of a utopian novel. You cannot imagine, she wrote,

the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in

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the flesh and not in the spirit. I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic—if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram—it becomes the most offensive of all teaching. Avowed Utopias are not offensive, because they are understood to have a scientific and expository character: they do not pretend to work on the emotions, or couldn't do it if they did pretend . . . [C]onsider the sort of agonizing labour to an English-fed imagination to make art a sufficiently real background, for the desired picture, to get breathing, individual forms, and group them into the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience—will . . . “flash” conviction on the world by means of aroused sympathy. (IV, 300-301)

Eliot's distinction between diagram and picture—between the abstraction of the utopia and the concreteness of the novel—and her conviction of their incompatibility provide the crux of what I call here the dilemma of utopian narration: that the medium works against the message.

Let me establish, first, a fact about the affect of utopias: that for most contemporary readers the putatively ideal worlds they project usually appear less attractive than the real world that they criticize and are meant to transcend. Anyone who has taught a work of utopian literature will, I warrant, attest to this affect; the prevailing view, at all events, is that expressed by the novelist Martin Amis in his review of Anthony Burgess's *1985*: “no one writes utopias anymore; even the utopias of the past look like dystopias to us” (3). Why this should be so—why the best intentions should elicit such negative response, antipathy if not outright hostility—is a complex question, to which no simple answer will suffice. Historical experience, for one thing, soured the twentieth century on millennial expectations and inclined us to credit dystopian visions over utopian ones: by mid-century Orwell had replaced Wells as the prophetic voice of the age. But I want to suggest that one source of the failure of utopias to persuade us to their vision lies in the narrative technique itself—in the inability to convert diagram into picture. The medium of utopian fiction works against, and finally subverts, its message.

The medium of utopian fiction subverts its message.

The message, to begin with that, posits that in the reconstructed world of utopia humanity has achieved, at last usually forever, true happiness, the good life, eudemonia, social

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salvation—call it what you will. Institutions and practices differ from work to work, details, of course, vary: but this essential *donnee* remains constant and provides the *genus* for defining the whole range of utopian literature. The narrative mode of the utopists, too, remains remarkably constant. Of the narratives can be said what Sir Thomas More says of the cities of his prototypical imaginary island: when you have seen one, you will have seen them all, so alike are they to one another (63). For this reason, a generalized summary of the “plot” of utopia can serve to describe the genre as a whole, with little violence to individual variations. There is an outsider who happens into a strange new land and a cicerone who conveniently explains its workings to him (and thereby, of course, to the reader): the narrative consists, then, of a guided tour of the millennium, with all the salient features—and some not so salient—of the new order dutifully noted and justified. In a delightful parody of the genre, “The New Utopia,” the Edwardian humorist Jerome K. Jerome has a nineteenth century sleeper wake in the twenty-ninth century, on display in a glass box. Familiar with the genre he appears in, the sleeper calls for the cicerone who immediately appears to let him out of the box. The cicerone, too, knows his utopias:

“I take it you are going to do the usual thing,” said the old gentleman to me . . . “You’ll want me to walk around the city with you, and explain all the changes to you, while you ask questions and make silly remarks?”

“Yes,” I replied, “I suppose that’s what we ought to do.”

“I suppose so,” he muttered. “Come on, and let’s get it over.” (265)

A perfect example of the tale as guided tour is Johann Valentin Andreae’s Renaissance utopia, *Christianopolis*, somewhat more rigorously topographical than most, but not atypical. His visitor and cicerone start at the outskirts of a perfectly square city and move systematically along its geometrically arranged streets toward the center. A glance at the table of contents reveals the nature of the narrative: VII, Description of the City; VIII, Agriculture and Animal Husbandry; IX, Mills and Bakeries; X, The Meat Shop and the Supply House; XI, Metals and Minerals; XII, Dwellings—and so on for one hundred chapters, each neatly labeled. When the tour is over, the tale is done, except for the customary conversion of the visitor and

the peroration where the superiority of the utopian society to the author's own is reiterated one last time. This narrative strategy serves, with minor adaptations, *The City of the Sun* and *The New Atlantis*, *Historie des Sevarambes* and *La Terre australe connue*, *Looking Backward* and *News From Nowhere*, *Voyage to Icaria* and *Through the Eye of the Needle*, *A Modern Utopia* and *Walden Two*.

While such a *mythos* makes, obviously, for severely limited action and little variety, it does allow ample scope for the development of ideas—political, economic, psychological, pedagogical, and so on—and in its ideological or didactic capacity resides the appeal of utopia as a genre. But that appeal is—in Eliot's terms—diagrammatic not pictorial, abstract not concrete. From this observation follows my contention that the narrative structures of utopia subvert the argument that here, in these fictive brave new worlds, is imaged ultimate happiness: the subversion occurs, in short, because what we are shown does not validate what we are told. The inhabitants of utopia, their creators insist, are happy, usually blissfully so, but their lives are depicted as so relentlessly public, so entirely ordered and uneventful, so much a matter of unvarying routine, that their posited felicity is not something that many readers would willingly share. When Milton concludes the action of *Samson Agonistes* with “calm of mind, all action spent” (593), that state seems the proper grace note after so stressful a chain of events, but when the phrase describes the total existence of an entire population, every hour of every day, now and forever more, world without end, one suspects that it would soon become boring to any real-world visitor. The suspicion is not, of course, a new one: in *Rasselas*, Samuel Johnson has his prince, inhabitant of the utopian Happy Valley, exclaim: “That I want nothing . . . is the cause of my complaint . . . Possessing all that I can want, I find one day and one hour exactly like another, except that the latter is still more tedious than the former . . . I have already enjoyed too much; give me something to desire” (7). Utopians themselves, needless to say, seldom if ever feel bored with their routines: save for Rasselas and his sister, the inhabitants of Happy Valley “lived only to know the soft vicissitudes of pleasure and repose” and “rose in the morning and lay down at night, pleased with each other

The typical utopian narrative allows ample scope for the development of ideas but little room for action or variety.

and with themselves" (7). In this respect, they rehearse the *amor prope* that constitutes so pronounced a feature of every Happy Valley, Island, Planet, and Promontory limned in the genre. But while never bored with themselves, utopians do bore others—and bore them precisely by being always happy and always happy in the same collective way.

No meaningful differences exist among the denizens of utopia—none can.

In his satirical dystopia, *We*, Yevgeny Zamyatin has his heroine argue that "only differences—in temperature, only thermic contrasts make for life. And if all over the world there are evenly warm or evenly cold bodies, they must be pushed off!" (163).¹ This stress on contrast as the principle of life, on energy as the escape from the dead hand of entropy, goes to the heart of my argument. The narrative technique common to utopias denies the contrast that makes for life and thus figures forth only bland, entropic characters. No really meaningful differences exist among the denizens of utopia—none can—and therefore no distinguishable individuals: people are merely functions of their institutions. Denominate them how you will, every utopian is really a John or Jane Doe, representative, average, typical—"seraphically free," as E. M. Forster's Machine in "The Machine Stops" would have his charges, "From taint of personality" (65). As with the cities of More's Utopia, when we have encountered one utopian, we know them all—so alike are they to one another. And the rare deviant from the norm that does appear is dismissed as the odd anachronism whose like will not recur under the new dispensation.² The unique individual, that is, represents a mistake to be rectified, not a treasure to be prized.

Wells himself foresaw the pitfalls involved in translating utopian abstraction into a convincing fiction, offering at the outset of *A Modern Utopia* a perceptive prospectus of the difficulties involved.

In almost every Utopia, one sees handsome but characterless

¹ This opposition of energy and entropy (as he construes it) is central to Zamyatin's thinking. See his best known essay "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy and Other Matters."

² See, e.g., the old grumbler in William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1891) who longs for the old romantic world of Thackeray's novels, or Lychnis, the sorrowing Rachael of H. G. Wells's *Men Like Gods* (1923), who cannot escape the tragic sense of life. For more on this point, see my "Cultural Primitivism as Norm in the Dystopian Novel."

buildings, symmetrical and perfect cultivations, and a multitude of people, healthy, happy, beautifully dressed, but without any personal distinction whatever. Too often the prospect resembles the key to one of those large pictures of coronations, royal weddings, parliaments, conferences and gatherings so popular in Victorian times, in which, instead of a face, each figure bears a neat oval with its index number legibly inscribed. This burthens us with an incurable effect of unreality, and I do not see how it is altogether to be escaped. (9-10)

Certainly Wells does not escape it in his own text, which mercilessly derides the unique or the individual wherever vestiges persist: here, too, one finds uniform (indeed, uniformed) people, again housed in handsome but characterless buildings who endlessly repeat the standard social rituals. If, then, a utopist as aware of the narrative dilemma as was Wells still cannot escape its horns, then the difficulty appears to inhere in the very nature of the genre.

Form and content are, of course, not discrete subjects; in fact, the message of utopia largely dictates the medium: that is to say, the ideological elevation of the whole over its parts, the group over the individual, inevitably necessitates a characterization of uniform types engaged in collective activities.³ It is difficult to see how anything other than the Cook's Tour narrative formula would serve. The utopist's ideological commitment to the person-as-idea-yet-average-type—we might recall here Trotsky's quaint claim that under Communism "the average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx" (256)—can be demonstrated by recourse to a comment of the Marxist writer Alvah Bessie. Reviewing *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in *The New Masses*, Bessie complained that "Hemingway has treated [the Spanish Civil War] exactly as he treated the First World War in *A Farewell to Arms*. . . . [There is] a morbid concentration upon the meaning of *individual* death, *personal* happiness, *personal* misery The author of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* does not convince us, in the novel, that 'any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind'" (92-94). Leaving aside the accuracy of Bessie's claim concerning the affect of this work, one can perceive

³ For a provocative, if unnecessarily arcane discussion of this feature of utopias, see Judith Schlanger, "Power and Weakness of the Utopian Imagination."

in his criticism the sort of novel that he would have written about the Spanish Civil War: something along the lines of a Socialist Realism potboiler wherein pure-hearted and indomitable Loyalists meet heroic ends battling Fascist tanks with bare hands, with the words of La Pasionaria on their lips and secure in the knowledge that the dialectic of history would turn their deaths to account. If Hemingway's characters had been anonymous enough, stereotypical enough—and, of course, good Stalinists—then Bessie would, one assumes, have welcomed them as representative of Mankind. The fate of a single, unique individual cannot signify for him, for only the fate of the masses has meaning; no single man matters, only Man. Therefore, every character in a politically orthodox fiction must be an easily recognizable synecdoche for his class, moment, and milieu, impersonal and unambiguous. This stance accords precisely, it seems to me, with the ideological—and consequently the narrative—assumptions of utopists.

The truly unique characters in art are, at the same time, the most universal.

Committed to an ideology and an aesthetic that reject the unique and celebrate the type, utopists founder on a familiar paradox of literary criticism: that the truly unique, the most vividly individualized characters in art, are, at the same time, the most archetypal, the most universal. They are, in W. K. Wimsatt's term, "concrete universals"—"figures, like Falstaff and Cleopatra, of infinite variety, who have no class names, only their own proper names, yet are structures of such precise . . . centrality that each demands a special interpretation in the realm of human values" (79). Achilles and Oedipus, Don Quixote and Hamlet, Faust and Huck Finn, Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina engross us all—or some part of us all, at some level—not because they are typical, average, representative (they are none of these) but because they are so wholly themselves, of voice and carriage unmistakable. Yet in them man's fate, paradoxically, is more truly and purely reflected than ever it is in the flat, didactic types of social allegory. To employ *For Whom the Bell Tolls* once more: there could be nothing in Bessie's agitprop version of the Spanish tragedy as moving as the death of the young peasant guerilla, Joaquin. Joaquin is a minor character in the novel, one whose *individual* death Bessie, presumably, found insufficient to represent Mankind. And yet the scene—of one particular boy, terrified yet tena-

ciously brave, incanting first his Marxist slogans, then, as the bombs fall on his position, switching to the Catholic prayers of his childhood—that scene of this death tells us more about the contingency and confusion and pathos and bravery of war than could any work bent on pushing an ideological party line. Bessie, then, could not be more wrong: precisely because Joaquin’s death is personal, unique, insignificant, it has universal resonance. His bell tolls for us all.

In one of his essays, Thoreau asserts: “We must first succeed alone, that we may enjoy our success together” (42). This assertion encapsulates the failure of the utopian medium to convince us of the utopian message. Utopian happiness appears implausible because there is nothing palpable, nothing personal about it: utopias render their characters so interchangeable that none ever enjoys a success alone—nor, for that matter, even a failure of his own. And the latter is not less significant than the former. The contrast—or alteration—between the two, success and failure, joy and pain, defines its opposite and gives it meaning: light means most when we are surrounded by darkness, silence is most golden when we are bombarded by noise, joy is most intense when following sorrow, and success is counted sweetest, if Emily Dickinson is right, by those who ne’er succeed: “To comprehend a nectar / Requires sorest need” (35).

Utopian happiness appears implausible because there is nothing palpable about it.

There is, no doubt, a danger in this view when posed extremely, as it is, say, by Dostoevsky in *Notes from Underground*, of clinging to the pains of life as a positive good. The eighteenth century Optimists, for instance, made a fetish of the *felix dolor* and were soundly and sensibly rebuked by Dr. Johnson. When Soame Jenyns claimed “that there is something in the abstract nature of pain conducive to pleasure; that the sufferings of individuals are absolutely necessary to universal happiness” (Willey, 51)—a view parroted by Voltaire’s Pangloss—the good doctor drenched him in well-deserved scorn:

Many a merry bout have these frolick beings at the vicissitudes of an ague, and good sport it is to see a man tumble with an epilepsy, and revive and tumble again, and all this he knows not why. As they are wiser and more powerful than we, they have more exquisite diversions, for we have no way of procuring any sport so brisk and lasting, as the paroxysms of the gout and stone, which undoubtedly must make high mirth,

especially if the play be a little diversified with the blunders and puzzles of the blind and deaf. (Willey, 53)

Some of this scorn might legitimately spill over onto such anti-utopian agonists as Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* and John Savage in *Brave New World*; yet Johnson, who suffered far more than his share of life's ills, was never tempted to the other, the utopian extreme. The remedy for suffering, he believed, was palliative not radical; and the passage already cited from *Rasselas* attests to his conviction that a life of unflinching felicity, untempered by adversity, would result in an enervating ennui. To be ever, endlessly happy—never to know sorrow—would be tantamount to never knowing happiness at all. If, says Shakespeare's Prince Hal,

all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work;
But when they seldom come, they wish'd for come,
And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.

(1 *Henry IV*. I.ii. 227-230)

By projecting life in their fictive worlds as a perpetual holiday—usually a very sober sort of holiday, to be sure—utopists neutralize the attraction that holidays have in our workaday world, for their “sport” appears somehow more tedious than our quotidian toil, from which we can at least, upon occasion, expect relief.

The narrative technique of utopias, I have wanted to suggest, is inherently contradictory of its message: utopists cannot persuade us that we would be happier taking up residence in any of these Happy Valleys because in the very process of displaying so total, so institutionalized, so placid a form of happiness as their ideology demands that their creatures enjoy, they violate our sense of what makes our individual lives valuable to us. Utopians have no interiors, no depths, nothing beneath their uniforms except the stick figures of the diagram. For all the guarantee of security from cradle to grave, few of us would be tempted to emigrate to utopia.

The psychological dislocation entailed in imagining ourselves transported to *any* fictive milieu different from our own—Jane Austen's Hertfordshire, say, or Balzac's Paris—might seem to mitigate against the *Gedankenversuch* suggested here: choosing, that is, between life in a utopia and our real-

world existence. Yet the strategy of utopian fiction seeks to force just such a theoretical choice upon us. If we accept the standard definition of a utopia as an imaginary society significantly better than our own, then it follows that we ought to prefer it to our own. If we don't—if we settle for our problematic here and now over the ideal there and then—then the utopist has failed of his purpose. And it seems that he usually does fail, at least in large part, because the diagrammatic nature of the genre denies the possibility of creating flesh-and-blood beings sufficiently real to persuade us that we would want to share their happiness. Even the blissful and beautiful pre-Raphaelite figures of *News From Nowhere*, perhaps the most tempting of all utopian visions, seem enervated by their static ideality, rather like Dresden dolls. Perverse as it seems to say so, one longs for an Iago or a Hedda Gabler or a Stavrogin to crop up in their midst, to challenge their fugitive and cloistered virtue, to tempt them to evil—or at least to folly. One longs for that mingled yarn of motive and passion that is the stuff of real novels, real dramas—and of real life—for conflict, for struggle. The Reverend Mr. Barton in Bellamy's *Looking Backward* confesses that "I have often thought that I would fain exchange my share in this serene and golden day for a place in that stormy epoch of transition" (190). Only a passing comment in the minister's lengthy homiletic celebration of that serene and golden day, still his aside points up the utopist's dilemma. Since the nature of the genre is such that no true conflict can ever arise, the narratives are necessarily reduced to guided tours of paradise.

*Utopian
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