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Themes in Utopian Fiction in English Before Wells*

The utopia (eutopia, dystopia, or utopian satire), defined as a species of prose fiction that describes in some detail a non-existent society located in time and space, has been ill served by scholarship. A large number of studies have been produced, but they have often been flawed by a lack of definitional care and a failure to seriously consider bibliographical problems. As a result, poor scholarship has sometimes become canonized by other scholars who have simply, and incorrectly, assumed the accuracy of past work. On the other hand, of course, some work has been significantly better.

My complaint centers on two points. First, a search of the literature results in a failure to find any serious concern with definitional problems until fairly recently.1 Second, and closely related, most past studies have centered on the “great works” of the genre. Although the latter is a traditional approach to most literature and has produced many significant contributions, it causes many problems unless specifically noted and allowed for. Also, it tends to make definitional problems disappear, since it can be argued that “everyone agrees” that these items belong in the genre. Finally it leads to erroneous or wildly exaggerated generalizations about the genre. For example, “everyone knows” that positive utopias stopped appearing in the twentieth century and were replaced by the dystopia. Not true; there have been one or more positive utopias published in English in every year of this century so far, plus others in other languages. Also, “everyone knows” that utopias were written in greater numbers around depressions. Wildly exaggerated; utopias have been produced in a constant stream and while some relationship to depressions can be shown, it appears to be, at the minimum, a questionable relationship.

These, and other, problems arise because no one has yet done the bibliographic work to establish the basic characteristics of the genre.2 I have recently “completed” reading3 every utopia (eutopia, dystopia, and utopian satire) published in English from 1516 to 1975 and still extant.4 There are about 1500 such works. Therefore, I think that it is now possible to begin a study of the basic characteristics of utopias in English.

Here I wish to indicate what basic themes concerned the utopians before the impact of H.G. Wells. This division is justifiable for a number of reasons. First, Wells’ impact was significant and modified the genre to a great, but as yet undetermined, extent. Second, the production of books multiplied so rapidly in the twentieth century that generalization becomes more difficult. Third, the upheavals of two world wars, the Great Depression, the Cold War, and the war in Vietnam produced major shifts throughout the period, making generalization doubly difficult.5

Of course, there were major changes before Wells, but except for the industrial revolution, they were more slowly manifested in utopian literature. Still, it will be necessary to divide the works loosely by centuries in order to try to capture similar time periods. And, given the tremendous upsurge of utopian writing in response to Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward (1888), it is best to divide the nineteenth century into pre- and post-Bellamy.
Since there were about 400 utopias published in English in the period under consideration, certain methodological problems arise. It would be impossibly lengthy, overly repetitious, and very dull to simply summarize each work. And such an approach rarely produces anything of substance. Identifying major themes sometimes tends to produce articles that have the flavor of statistical analyses, but can also provide more substance since it is possible to show how a number of works fit together.

If one is to describe a genre of literature or a literary tradition, one must move away from the "greats" and deal with the works that compose the bulk of the corpus under study.6 In this essay, then, I shall pass over the few famous works that have been analyzed many times and emphasize the little-known works that have hitherto been all but ignored.7

The 16th Century. Only eight utopias were published in the 16th century in English (and about the same number in other languages). But they established, with More's _Utopia_ (1516; in English 1551), the form the genre was to take for some time; with Sidney's _Arcadia_ (1590) and Stubbes' _The Anatomie of Abuses_ (1583),8 two of the major variants of the genre (the arcadia and the utopian satire using the imaginary-country approach); and, all in all, the basic characteristics that the utopian society was to have for the succeeding centuries.

These characteristics can be neatly summarized as emphasizing authority and religion. This approach is clearly used by four little known utopias of the time.9 In all four the utopia is Christian and hierarchical. The basic attitude is that people are weak and must be constantly supervised and must know their place in order to behave as the author thinks they should.10 There is a particular concern that women in general and wives in particular be obedient,11 but at whomever the specific injunction is directed, it remains essentially the same, a good society will result if each person knows and keeps his or her place. And punishment is right and sure for those who violate the rules.12

The 17th Century. The utopias of the 17th century are, on the whole, well known. They include such famous or near famous works as Hall's _The Discovery of a New World_ (1605), Bacon's _New Atlantis_ (1626), Godwin's _The Man in the Moone_ (1638), Platte's _Macaria_ (1641), Gott's _Nova Solyma_ (1648), Harrington's _Oceana_ (1656) and Neville's _The Isle of Pines_ (1668). Altogether there are about 30 utopias in the seventeenth century. And, as I indicated earlier, the basic characteristics of the works largely follow the model laid down in the previous century, with, of course, some additions and much detail. Works like _Nova Solyma_ are still the standard fare—Christian, hierarchical, basically authoritarian. But a few new considerations do enter. There is slightly less emphasis on punishment as the major means of social control and somewhat more concern with education as a means of avoiding the necessity of punishment.

Also during this period the belief in women's inferiority continued unabated. Richard Brome's _The Antipodes_ (1640)13 is the first utopia in English including a picture of sex-role reversal. In this case the reversal is simply a part of a general reversal of the "natural" order, but the theme is repeated by many later writers, including Edward Howard's _The Six Days Adventure, or the New Utopia_ (1671)14 which, while advocating women's rights argues against going too far and alienating the men. The standard pattern is to have dominant women and submissive men; usually a strong man from the past or a different culture wins the most important woman and the "natural" order is reestablished.15 A third work of the period presents an account of an island completely and successfully ruled by women. Men are allowed on the island for only one month at a time and male children are sent away at an early age.16
Another development in the seventeenth century is found in the first positive statements about democracy. Two such works are *Chaos* (1659) and *The Free State of Noland* (1696). In both books a democratic utopia is presented, but, as if expressing doubt, the democracy is limited and hedged with restrictions. For example, in *Chaos*, while there are annual elections, there is a property qualification for voting, no one suing or being sued by someone else may either vote or be elected, and there are fines for nonattendance in Parliament. Thus, politically the seventeenth century may be seen as the beginning of a transition from more to less authoritarian, centralized forms of government.

The 18th Century. Except for Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), the utopias of the 18th century are not well known. There were something over thirty utopias published in English during the century, and they present a mixed bag of reforms. Some, such as "A description of New Athens in Terra Australis incognita" (1720), continue the tradition of the religious utopia that started with More.

The most constant theme, one that can be found as early as More and that became central in the 18th century, is a distrust of lawyers and the whole system of laws. For example, in one of the better known works, Berington's *The Memoirs of Sigr Gaudentio di Lucca* (1737), the whole social system is based on the dictum "Thou shalt do no wrong to anyone," in large part in order to avoid legal hair-splitting. And in Burgh's *An Account of...the Cessares* (1764) no lawyers are allowed and plain, direct speaking is required at all trials. And, again, in Gentleman's *A Trip to the Moon* simple, understandable laws are the basis of the system. Finally in 1769 two works were published showing England depopulated and America supreme. In one of them the cause for the decline of England was the willingness of the lawyers to place profit before the law.

Another theme of importance in the eighteenth century was the significance of reason. Many works focus on this; one of the most extreme was *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth* (1775) where men disciplined themselves strictly to spend as little time possible on the demands of nature. But there were also attacks on each extreme, such as Laputa in *Gulliver's Travels* and Goldsmith's *Asem, the Man-Hater* (1765), which shows how terrible a life of pure reason would be. This theme, both pro and con, is a major one in the nineteenth century also.

Although we tend to think, perhaps because of More, that all utopias have the institution of common property, or the like, it would be more accurate, at least through most of the eighteenth century, to say that most utopias ignore economic questions altogether or, at most, see them as secondary. But at the end of the eighteenth century, Thomas Spence wrote a number of versions of his utopia advocating a cooperative commonwealth with majority rule and a citizen militia. In doing so Spence provided the most thorough attack on the institutions of English society at the time. His utopias were directed explicitly at the major institutions, economic and political, of the time. In doing so he provided the model of most future utopias.

While it is unlikely that the details of Spence's utopias had any direct impact on writers of later utopias, he was a forerunner of so much that occurred later that it is tempting to see direct influence. Spence was the first utopian to write in direct response to the industrial revolution and his proposals for local control of land and industry sound modern even today. He also invented a new rationalized alphabet and published many of his works in both regular spelling and the new Spencean alphabet.

The nineteenth century was to produce almost three times as many utopias as all previous centuries put together, and the majority of them were concerned with the same problems that Spence considered and many came up with the same solutions.
The 19th Century: Before Bellamy. There were something over 160 utopias published between 1800 and 1887. Obviously it is not possible to say much that covers them all; they touch on almost all conceivable topics. But there are a few statements that can be made.

Three themes, two of them connected, stand out. First, there is a great concern with what constitutes an equitable economic system; normally these works presented some form of socialism or a cooperative system. Second, the communitarian movement attracted considerable attention; most works attack it. These two are obviously linked since most communes were concerned with producing a better life economically. The third theme is the “woman question,” the whole complex of issues centered around the rule of women in society.

The first full American utopia, Equality, or A History of Lithconia (1802),22 is a detailed exposition of a communal economy. There is no money, all land is held in common, and everyone must work until age fifty, at which time they can become part of the government. Equality is also interesting in that it includes an ambivalence toward both urban and rural life that is a major secondary theme throughout the nineteenth century; in Lithconia the problem is solved by having houses spread equally over the entire country with no concentration that would constitute an urban area but without the isolation of rural life either.23

Three major approaches to the economy are proposed by utopias in this period. First, there is complete public control of publicly owned property. Second, there is private ownership with or without public regulation. Third, there are various forms of cooperation that allow owners of private property to band together to provide a sizable corporation that can compete in a free market, usually regulated. Later, mostly in the post-Bellamy period, a fourth economic system is added based on the single tax proposed by Henry George in Progress and Poverty (1877).

The communal movement attracted attention from the earliest part of the nineteenth century, even though communes had been established on the North American continent as early as 1663.24 In 1818 a small book, written by a follower of Spence, entitled Christian Policy in Full Practice Among the People of Harmony, described a communal utopia clearly modeled on Harmony. And as early as 1826 a story by James Kirke Paulding entitled “The Man Machine, or the Pupil of ‘Circumstances’” attacked the ideas of Robert Owen.25 Both positions are repeated constantly throughout the rest of the century.26

The third general theme, the “woman question,” is also treated in Equality (1802). Every individual over fifteen has a separate apartment which they keep after marriage in order to remain independent. Equality is rarely approached in its advocacy of women’s rights until well into the twentieth century.

One of the more interesting works treating this theme is James Lawrence, The Empire of the Nairs: or, The Rights of Women (1811) which while possibly quite honestly attempting to describe a society which gives rights to women, in fact produces a male sexual fantasy:

What awaits our glory abroad, if we are slaves at home? What public liberty, if one half of mankind be slaves to the other? But the children of nature are not the tyrants of beauty. She neither chains nor wears chains—she neither lessens the freedom of others, nor risks her own—she is an attraction; but no tie; allowed to choose and to change, to sue and to reject, she meets a refusal without affronting—she rejects without affronting; she gives to many; and has enough for all; her favours are unconfined; like the sun, she may shine on all mankind. The duration of the amour depends on the temper of a pair; caprice separates those whom inclination united; without blushing, they cease to love, and without complaints, to please. Sure at every hour to find a sympathizing heart, the forsaken lover broods not over his loss, nor bears rancor against him who was preferred. Though all men were rivals, they would all be friends. Nor look the other nymphs with aversion on him, whom a suiter favors, or opposes to favor in his turn. Hence, maternity alone is certain and fixed; the name ‘father’ is unknown.28

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Although much of this sounds like a man's eutopian fantasy of sexual freedom without responsibility, Lawrence says that "This work was designed to show the possibility of a nation's reaching the highest civilization without marriage."^29 And while he clearly sees himself as presenting a utopia of equality and freedom the element of male fantasy reappears regularly.

Lawrence provides a vision of the treatment of male and female as virtually separate species with mutually exclusive, but in this case, equally important social roles. The perception of women and men as radically different species of the same genus might go far to illuminate the whole question of the role and position of women in society during this period. If one defines sets of social conditions for the development of the peculiar characteristics of each sex, based on a belief that the sexes are radically different in the sense of two species with no mixing of characteristics, then it is possible to convince oneself that inferiority is equality and that male sexual fantasy is equality.

There are, of course, many other themes; the most significant subsidiary themes are reason,^30 religion,^31 and science and technology. All are seen as means of bringing about utopia and as capable of producing terrible societies. This is, as was noted in connection with the communal movement, the period of the first anti-utopian novels.

From Bellamy to Wells. There were about the same number of utopias written between 1888 and 1895 as in all the previous eighty-seven years. But although there are many, they do not differ greatly from the earlier ones in the themes they treat. Of course, many are directly concerned, pro or con, with Bellamy's Looking Backward, but these works tend simply to continue the debate on the most equitable economic system that was noted earlier. There are more fairly straight-forward socialist utopias than in the past, but they differ little in content. The related issue of the communal movement has, on the whole, disappeared.

The "woman question" still exercises many writers, but they had little to add to the debate. And the other themes of the earlier period, reason, religion, science and technology, also continue. The only significant addition to the patterns involved is in the numbers of anti-utopian novels that are produced. Almost all were directed against Bellamy.

I have noted only the major themes and subthemes of the utopias under consideration. There were many other points that could have been mentioned. The attitude to law, ranging from those, such as More, who banish all lawyers to those who provide detailed legal systems as the basis of their utopias is an important theme. The attitude toward the family is another. And, of course, the attitude toward education is yet another. All of these themes could have been treated at length, but they are subsidiary to the ones discussed here.

What happens to the utopia after Wells? No one really knows. The twentieth century utopia is the least studied of all, the bibliography is the most difficult to establish, and the books are, surprisingly, often very hard to locate. But it can be said that at least prior to World War II, the utopian novel in the twentieth century was as much a response to the dominating position of Wells as it was to Bellamy after 1888. But that impact has yet to be examined.

NOTES

*Research for this project has been partially supported through grants from the Office of Research Administration, University of Missouri-St. Louis.

2. There are, of course, a number of bibliographies and studies, but very few of the general
generations ever address the definitional question seriously. For example, two of the better recent
studies of American utopias get muddled by not dealing adequately with the problem of
definition: Kenneth Roemer, The Obsolete Necessity: America in Utopian Writings, 1888-
1900 (Kent State University Press, 1976), and Charles J. Rooney, “Utopian Literature as a
Reflection of Social Forces in America, 1865-1917” (doct. diss., George Washington University,
1968). Also, most of the works on American utopias have originated as doctoral dissertations
that never even came close to surveying the literature; for example: Vernon Louis Parry, Jr.,
American Dreams: A Study of American Utopias (2nd edn US 1964); Robert L. Shurter,
The Utopian Novel in America, 1865-1900 (US 1974); Margaret Thal-Larsen, “Political
and Economic Ideas of American Utopian Fiction” (doct. diss., UC Berkeley, 1941). Other Dis-
sertations: Donald C. Burt, “Utopia and the Agrarian Tradition in America, 1885-1900”
(University of New Mexico, 1973); Joe Mellin Nydahl, “Utopia Americana: Early American
Utopian Fiction, 1790-1864” (University of Michigan, 1974); Frederick Earl Pratter, “The
Uses of Utopia: An Analysis of American Speculative Fiction 1880-1960” (University of Iowa,
1973); Ellene Ransom, “Utopus Discovers America or Critical Realism in American Utopian
Fiction, 1798-1900” (Vanderbilt University, 1946); A. James Stupple, “Utopian Humanism in
America, 1885-1900” (Northwestern University, 1971).

The studies of English utopias, while better, suffer from similar problems: Robert de
Maria, “From Bulwer-Lytton to George Orwell: The Utopian Novel in England 1870-1950”
(doct. diss. Columbia University, 1959); V. Dupont, L’Utopie et le roman utopique dans la
littérature anglaise (Paris 1941); Richard Gerber, Utopian Fantasy: A Study of English
Utopian Fiction since the End of the Nineteenth Century (UK 1955); A.L. Morton, The English
Utopia (UK 1952); Angele Botros Samaan, “The Novel of Utopianism and Prophecy. From
Lytton (1871) to Orwell (1949). With Special Reference to its Reception” (doct. diss., University
of London, 1962). There are dozens of purportedly general studies of utopianism, but they
are all worse, both definitionally and bibliographically, than the national studies.

3. Of course no study of this sort is ever actually completed, for there is always that
one more reference to run down. By “reading” I mean that I have taken notes on the following
topics whenever they appear in the work: time, place, human nature, degree of perfection,
conformity and non-conformity, emotions and irrationality, value system, equality, socializa-
tion system, educational system, family system, sexual relations, illness, death, crime
and punishment, science and technology, war and military, recreation and entertainment, art
and aesthetics, economic system, rural/urban ratio, political system, change to and within the
society.

4. A preliminary bibliography, much dated now, has been circulated. An annotated
version is in progress. There is desperate need for more work on bibliographies of utopia in
other languages.

5. For partial studies of the work published after World War II, see Lyman Tower Sargent,
“Utopia and Dystopia in Contemporary Science Fiction,” The Futurist 6(June 1972):93-98,
and “Images of the Future in Science Fiction,” a paper presented to the 1974 Annual Meeting
of the American Political Science Association.

6. In political thought there has been a significant recent literature on this matter: e.g.,
Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” History and Theory
1971).

7. For the less-known works listed in the following notes I have provided either the
standard library location symbol for the copy I read (C = Cambridge University Library;
CSmH = Huntington Library; DLC = Library of Congress; L = British Museum (now British
Library); LLL = London Library; LUG = London University, Goldsmith’s Library; NcD = Duke
University Library; NN = New York Public Library; WHHi = Wisconsin Historical Society) or
a volume-item reference to Lyle H. Wright, American Fiction (3 vols. UL 1965-69), e.g. W2:
1290 = Wright 1851-1875, Item 1290. Unless indicated otherwise, the city of publication is
London.

8. Phillip Stubs [Stubbes], The Anatomie of Abuses (1585 L); see also Stubbes, The
Second Part of the Anatomie of Abuses (1582 L).

CSmH); The second part of the painfull Jorney of the poore Pilgryme into Asia (1579 CSmH);
[Thomas Lupton], Siuquilla. Too Good, to be true (1580 L); and Lupton, The Second part and
Knitting up of the Boke entituled Too good to be true (1581 L).


12. Of course it should be remembered that at about this time Rabelais established his utopian Abbaye de Thélème on the basis of “Do What Thou Wilt.”


15. To 1895 there are only four: Timothy Savage (pseud.), The Amazonian Republic (New York 1842 W2:2315); Annie Denton Cridge, Man’s Rights; or, How Would You Like It? (Boston 1870 W2:658); Sir Walter Besant, The Revolt of Man (1882 L); and Walter Browne, “2894” or, the Fossil Man (New York 1894; not available in any library; two copies are known to be in private collections).

16. J.S., A Discovery of Fonseca in a Voyage to Surranam (1682 L).

17. Chaos: or, A Discourse, Wherewith Is presented to the view of the Magistrate, and all others who shall peruse the same, a Frame of Government by way of a Republique (1659 L); The Free State of Noland (1696 L).

18. “A Description of New Athens in Terra Australis incognita,” signed Maurice William, in Miscellanea Aurea: or the Golden Medley, attributed to Thomas Killigrew (1720 DLC), pp 80-81. Another item in this collection is sometimes labeled utopian: “A voyage to the Mountains of the Moon Under the Equator,” signed Carlo Amotesocia, pp 1-34.

19. Private Letters from an American in England to his Friends in America (1769 L), 1781 edn as Anticipation, or The Voyage of an American to England in the Year 1899 (L); Rationales (pseud.), “Remarks which are supposed will be made in this Kingdom, by two North American travellers in the year one thousand nine hundred and forty-four,” The Literary Register or Weekly Miscellany (Newcastle) 1(1769):98-99 (L, NeD).

20 A Voyage to the World in the Center of the Earth (1755 DLC).


22. Originally pbd as a serial in The Temple of Reason (Philadelphia); pbd as book, Philadelphia 1837, rpt Philadelphia 1847, with attribution to James Reynolds. The earliest use of the imaginary-country theme in America seems to have been almost a century earlier in Joseph Morgan, The History of the Kingdom of Basurah (1715). Some consider “An Allegorical Description of a certain Island and its Inhabitants,” The Massachusetts Magazine (1790), an allegory using utopian imagery, to be the first American utopia. A better candidate is An Account of Count D’Artois and his Friend’s Passage to the Moon [1785?], which does include some utopian elements.

23. The best known advocate of this position is Henry Olerich, who wrote three utopias on this theme: A Cityless and Countryless World (Holstein 1893), Modern Paradise (Omaha 1915), and The Story of the World a Thousand Years Hence (Omaha 1923).

24. The commune was based on the ideas of Pieter Plockhoy, who as Peter Cornelius van Zurich-Zee wrote A Way propounded to Make the poor in these and other Nations happy ([1659] L). There are, of course, those who argue that the Plymouth Colony, etc., should be called communitarian experiments.

25. [Thomas Evans?], Christian Policy in Full Practice (1818 LUG).


27. These works include Louis Anastasia Tarascon, Louis Anastasia Tarascon to his fellow citizens of the United States of America (New York 1837 NN); Samuel Bower, A Sequel to the Peopling of Utopia (Bradford 1838 L); Robert Cooper, A Contrast between the new moral world and the old immoral world (Manchester 1838 L); The Island of Liberty; or, Equality and Community (1848 L); James S. Buckingham, National Evils and Practical Remedies ([1849] L, DLC); [Granville Murry], “Franklin Bacon’s Republic: Diary of an Inventor,” Cornhill Magazine 27(1873):562-80; Marie Howland, Papa’s Own Girl (New York 1874 W2:1290); and Alexander Longley, What is Communism? (St. Louis 1890 WHi).

George Wells

Wells in Three Volumes? A Sketch of British Publishing in the 19th Century

It is impossible within the scope of this brief article to explore every tributary of 19th-century British publishing which may have provided an occasional outlet for science fiction. I have concentrated instead on a few of the main streams in order to assess their relative importance to the development of the genre.

Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein was first issued in 1818 in three volumes, at the tail-end of the “gothic novel” phase of English fiction. The gothic had flourished for some 20 years, and was circulated in the main to people who borrowed rather than bought their reading matter. Most of the novels were issued in more than one volume (the lender thus being able to extract several borrowing fees for a single story), and multi-volume fiction carried merrily on after tales of terror went out of fashion. Lending books became really big business in the 1840s with the growth of Mudie’s circulating library and other chains. The hey-day of the multi-volume novel was probably in the 1870s and 1880s, when science fiction was finding a small but significant place in literature. The influence of the libraries was so strong that serious novelists (i.e. those who aspired to something more permanent than the parts-issue working-man’s literature) were obliged to comply with the three-decker length of 700 to 1000 pages, which, although printed in large type, more often than not required considerable padding-out. It required a writer of considerable skill to