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# Utopia unlimited: reassessing American literary utopias

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*University of Iowa*

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UTOPIA UNLIMITED:  
REASSESSING AMERICAN LITERARY UTOPIAS

by  
Angela Marie Warfield

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree  
in English in  
the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2009

Thesis Supervisors: Professor Tom Lutz  
Associate Professor Rob Latham

## ABSTRACT

This project argues that American literary utopias of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) and William Dean Howells' *Altrurian Romances* (1907) to Aldous Huxley's *Island* and Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), offer a unique narrative site to approach the ethical and political concerns of postmodernity. Literary utopias are conventionally read as either dogmatic and totalitarian schemes or impractical and fanciful dreams; they are interpreted as representations of an archetypal ideology. I contend that these conventional interpretations overlay and belie an essentially post-ideological irony and ambivalence inherent in the neologism "utopia"—the "good place" (*eu-topos*) that is simultaneously "no place" (*ou-topos*). Utopian narratives remain unfinished projects whose political and ethical potential resides in the suspension of utopia's realization, a notion discussed in Jacques Derrida's exploration of the irony and ultimate ethical significance of an idea that cannot be fully presented or realized (*différance*), a space that cannot be traversed (*a-poria*), and of a community-to-come engendered by these notions. Accordingly, my readings of American literary utopias disclose narrative characteristics, from temporal instability to radical shifts in points of view, to show that the value of utopian literature lies in its exploration of alternative possibilities without prescribing finite and present solutions.

Abstract Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

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Graduate College  
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Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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To Paige

Utopia's much too big for one small head  
I'll float it as a Company Limited!

Gilbert & Sullivan, *Utopia Limited*



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## INTRODUCTION

Everybody is ready to say, if not apt to think, something about a possible new social administration. To affirm that Plato and Aristotle began it would be wrong; but they did carry on a discussion which had its origin, we may suppose, in the events consequent upon the Fall of Adam.<sup>1</sup>

Julian Hawthorne, “A Popular Topic”

[I]t is certainly the fate of all Utopias to be more or less misread.<sup>2</sup>

H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*

In *Utopia and its Enemies* (1987), George Kateb rhetorically asks: “Can there be anything more commonplace than the pronouncement that, in the twentieth century, utopia is dead—and dead beyond any hope of resurrection?”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Kateb is right, especially when we consider the twentieth century decline in utopian literary production and the failure of various utopian political projects. Indeed, the word “utopian” is almost entirely used pejoratively and those who subscribe to the notion have been deemed “out to lunch or out to kill.”<sup>4</sup> With some renewed attention to utopian scholarship at the latest millennial mark, utopia is often roundly denounced by many cultural critics from disparate camps—Francis Fukuyama, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jürgen Habermas, to

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Hawthorne, “A Popular Topic.” *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* (June 1890): 883.

<sup>2</sup> H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1967) 99.

<sup>3</sup> Kateb 3.

<sup>4</sup> Jacoby, *The End of Utopia* xi.

name a few—and it struggles to escape from its association with totalitarian impulses.<sup>5</sup> Aside from pocket flirtations with utopia in the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and some feminist utopian literature of the 1970s, we no longer see the kinds of utopian literary production generated at the previous turn-of-the-century. Because of the critique of utopia since World War II and its primary association with authoritarian regimes, utopian literature is maligned for its prescriptive blueprints of perfect worlds and our ability to appreciate the full impact of this discourse is compromised.

The boom of utopian literature and intentional communities in America throughout the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries has never been matched before or since. In fact, from 1865 to 1917, an estimated 362 utopian works, by at least 100 authors, were published in America and the majority of them appeared before the turn-of-the-century with more than 100 produced between 1886 and 1896 alone.<sup>6</sup> This outpouring of utopian literature waned in the twentieth century with the rise of literary realism and modernism, the advancement of industry and science, and the advent of two World Wars. In his influential and widely cited essay, “Varieties of Literary Utopias,” Northrop Frye writes: “The popular view of the utopia, and the one which in practice is accepted by many if not most utopia-writers, is that a utopia is an ideal or flawless state, not only logically consistent in its structure but permitting as much freedom and

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<sup>5</sup> In this project, I use the word “utopia” to refer to a hopeful vision of an alternative future. “Utopian,” therefore, refers to projects—political, social, or literary—that largely embody this hopeful vision.

<sup>6</sup> See Charles J. Rooney Jr., *Dreams and Visions: A Study of American Utopias 1865-1917* (London: Greenwood P, 1985) and Jean Pfaelzer, *The Utopian Novel in America 1886-1896* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1984).

happiness for its inhabitants as is possible in human life.”<sup>7</sup> Too many critics perpetuate this understanding and promote utopia and utopian literature’s synonymy with the achievement of a perfect society. This understanding dismisses a wide range of utopian texts and fails to recognize that many literary utopias do not present totalizing visions. The widely accepted connection between utopia and perfection does not effectively address the full import of utopian texts and a richer treatment of their incorporation of irony and impossibility shows that their relevancy should not be easily dismissed.

Historically, the prevalence of the literary utopia in America is aligned with the popularity of the romance genre. As Walter Fuller Taylor writes in *The Story of American Letters* (1956), “[R]omanticism means simply creating a vision or interpretation of life as we should like to have it, could our human wishes be fulfilled.”<sup>8</sup> The romantic tradition in American letters with stories of idealized heroes and adventure, informed by the democratic ideals of freedom and humanity, was not far removed from the common literary utopian formula of heroic travelers and their idealized lands. Romanticism, arguably the prevailing literary genre of the nineteenth century, sought to escape the confines of the novel proper and revel in an arena fueled by fantasy and imagination, unencumbered by verisimilitude. However, the years following the Civil War witnessed a palpable shift in the American literary climate where tales of fantasy were slowly replaced with stories of fidelity. According to Carl van Doren, after the Civil War, “[C]riticism came therefore to demand the Great American Novel, not so

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<sup>7</sup> Northrop Frye, “Varieties of Literary Utopias,” *Utopias and Utopian Thought* ed. Frank Manuel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966) 25-49, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Fuller Taylor, *The Story of American Letters* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1956) 69.

much to enshrine the national past as to reflect the national present on a scale commensurate with the new consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> With this call for a national literature that reflected the contemporary moment, fictions that idealized other times and other places—specifically utopian literature—seemed grossly out of place. The rise of realism’s call for more fact in fiction did not bode well for utopian literature. By the early twentieth century, the rose-colored glasses went out of fashion as writers desired to present more realistic visions of American life.

The early twentieth century ushered in scientific and technological developments from the automobile and airplane to Einstein’s theory of relativity and showed that the wishful thinking encouraged by the literary utopia could hardly compete with such real world advancements. As one critic of the late nineteenth century observes: “Science has reached a point where she seems to hesitate with her hand upon the door whose opening shall disclose the very secret of life.”<sup>10</sup> Amidst this cultural revolution, literature needed to reflect the changing times, not escape them. Rather than perpetuate the optimistic, out-of-touch narratives of the romancers, the realists sought to document the realities of American life. Naturalists, too, urged literature to reflect a philosophy of determinism in which characters, far from the free heroes and heroines of the romantics, reckoned with their limitations. The stories of those dislocated and disenfranchised by tremendous social shifts needed to be told, and the novels of William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and others rose to the challenge. After World War I, realism and

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<sup>9</sup> Carl van Doren, *The American Novel, 1789-1939* (New York: Macmillan, 1940) 115.

<sup>10</sup> Julian Hawthorne 883.

naturalism informed and gave way to modernism, and utopian literature was nearly altogether erased from the literary landscape.

Modernism and the Aesthetic Movement, too, questioned the literary value of utopian literature. The “art for art’s sake” slogan of the Aesthetic Movement expressed the view that art did not need utilitarian or moral justification. In the late nineteenth century, critics decried any role of instruction in works of art and since utopian literature was deemed too didactic, overtly political, and prescriptive, critics considered it anti-aesthetic and anti-literary. For modernists, an author should leave the work of judgment and evaluation to the reader and refrain from editorializing and social commentary. Modernism’s more aesthetically scientific approach marginalized utopian literature’s ethical import. Though both the romantic and realist traditions shared an emphasis on individual freedom and human potential, slowly but surely, realist novels supplanted the romance in American literary history and utopian literary production waned. Utopian dreams were not entirely abandoned, however, as some authors stubbornly refused to give up their visions of a better America. But these efforts were singularly few after 1917 and the hopeful visions of the future that informed literary utopias of previous decades found a more welcome home in the fields of architecture and urban planning.

Such famed planners as Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier married utopian hope with pragmatic action as they capitalized on technological innovations and advancements in science to design solutions to America’s urban plight. As Robert Fishman explains in *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century* (1977), “Many people dream of a better world; Howard, Wright, and Le Corbusier each went a step

further and planned one.”<sup>11</sup> Far from the impossible visions of their literary predecessors, these men proposed real solutions to real problems and such architectural engineering persists today as planned communities continue to sprout across the country.<sup>12</sup> Howard, Wright, and Le Corbusier were certainly not the first, or last, to put their mark on cities of the future. Utopian socialists of the earlier nineteenth century made similar, if more modest, plans—Brook Farm (1841-47) and Oneida (1848-79), for example. But the science and industry of the twentieth century made possible larger efforts of architectural and social engineering. Unfortunately, some visions of the future have had disastrous consequences as some ideologues moved beyond infrastructural engineering and sought the mass extermination of others in an effort to achieve their socio-political utopias. Post World War II critics like Karl Popper and F. A. Hayek argue fervidly that utopianism’s uncompromising reconstructions of society can only result in despotic regimes. According to Popper, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1950), “[T]he Utopian method must lead to a dangerous and dogmatic attachment to a blueprint for which countless sacrifices have been made,”<sup>13</sup> and similar statements can be found in F. A. Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) and Jacob Talmon’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1952). It is difficult to argue with these assertions when we consider socio-political utopian endeavors from Nazi Germany to Stalinist Russia and Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. These developments sounded a virtual death knell for utopian projects

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) 3.

<sup>12</sup> See also Robert Fishman’s *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1950) 156.



and aside from the isolated ecological experiments and alternative communes of the 1960s, it has never fully recovered.

Krishan Kumar addresses the waning of utopian thought and practice in “The End of Socialism? The End of Utopia? The End of History?,” an essay in his co-edited collection with Stephen Bann titled *Utopias and the Millennium* (1993). In his introduction, Kumar explains the unique nature of the second millennium:

Millennial endings, even more than centurial ones, give rise to millennial imaginings. But there is a profound difference between the millennial thoughts of our time and those of earlier ages [that] marked a radically new beginning. [...] What was contemplated was not simply an end but a renewal, a new dispensation based on radically different principles. For our thinkers, on the contrary, the ‘end of history’ brings nothing new. Quite the opposite. It announces the final victory of the old. [...] There is no need to imagine anything new. We already live in the millennial new age, the last age.<sup>14</sup>

Having defined the relative resignation and hopelessness of some, and the complacency of others in the new millennium, Kumar traces the decline of utopian thought in the twentieth century through a discussion of this century’s more prevalent form—the dystopia (Zamyatin’s *We* and George Orwell’s *1984*, for specifically)—and the inability for utopianism to find a comfortable home in an age of apathy, discontent, and suspicion: “History is littered with failed utopian experiments, many of them unappealing in their lifetime and bloody in their end. But the attack has taken on a heightened urgency in the twentieth century, largely because of a presumed connection between utopian thought and the totalitarian regimes of this century.”<sup>15</sup> Twentieth-century critics like Popper have

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<sup>14</sup> Krishan Kumar, “The End of Socialism? The End of Utopia? The End of History” in *Utopias and the Millennium* eds. Krishan Kumar and Stephen Bann (London: Reaktion Books, 1993) 63.

<sup>15</sup> Kumar 65.

accuse utopianism of laying claims to perfect, total, and uncompromising reconstructions of society and conclude that the end result of such social planning is a despotic regime. In defense of utopianism, Kumar responds to these critics by explaining that utopia “has performed many functions in its long history, and systematic thinking about the future of society is only one of them.”<sup>16</sup> Kumar also warns against the conflation of literary utopias with social experiments undertaken in utopia’s name and the attribution of totalitarian results to all utopian endeavors: “While it is important to see that utopia does receive specific embodiments at different periods of its history, that is quite a different matter from identifying it with any of those embodiments.”<sup>17</sup>

Building on Kumar’s depiction of our millennial condition, Russell Jacoby describes what he views as a “cultural retreat” in *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (1999). Unlike Kumar, Jacoby’s title does not include the question mark that hints at hope or uncertainty; rather Jacoby is acerbic and confident in his reproach of politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: “We have entered the era of acquiescence, in which we build our lives, families, and careers with little expectation the future will diverge from the present...A utopian spirit—a sense that the future could transcend the present—has vanished...[R]adicals have lost their bite and liberals their backbone.”<sup>18</sup> Jacoby, like Kumar, cites the events of 1989 as a catalyst in the decline of utopianism: “The events of 1989 mark a decisive shift in the Zeitgeist: History has zigged or zagged.

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<sup>16</sup> Kumar 69.

<sup>17</sup> Kumar 71-72.

<sup>18</sup> Jacoby, *The End of Utopia* 1.

No simple lesson follows, but it is clear that radicalism and the utopian spirit that sustains it have ceased to be major political or even intellectual forces.”<sup>19</sup> The majority of Jacoby’s text is devoted to discussions of what he considers sideways and backward steps by liberals and radicals alike as he critiques the complacency and contentment of contemporary politics. Ultimately, Jacoby offers a call to arms for utopia’s recuperation, though it seems as though he is trying to convince himself to stay his post: “What is to be done?...Nothing is to be done. Yet that does not mean nothing is to be thought or imagined or dreamed. On the contrary. The effort to envision other possibilities of life and society remains urgent and constitutes the essential precondition for doing something.”<sup>20</sup> Though the tone of his text is most often despondent and frustrated, Jacoby’s somewhat hopeful conclusion hints at the possibility of utopian redemption, a possibility he explores later in *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (2005). This study, along with Fredric Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), marks a twenty-first century resurrection of utopian discourse and both are explored further in the conclusion of my project.

Concerned specifically with the conflation of ideology and utopia in the twentieth century, utopian theorist Leonidas Donskis responds to critics like Popper and Mumford, supporting the idea of utopianism and interpreting such aberrations as Fascism and National Socialism, not as the ultimate flaw of utopian thought, but as the result of utopian stagnation and the growth of ideology. In *The End of Ideology and Utopia: Moral Imagination and Cultural Criticism in the Twentieth Century* (2000), Donskis sees

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<sup>19</sup> Jacoby, *The End of Utopia* 7.

<sup>20</sup> Jacoby, *The End of Utopia* 181.

utopia as a mirror of ideology inasmuch as it is “the locus at which various ideas and values of a culture are tested, and where their consequences are considered,” and utopian thinking without transgression can affirm the status quo, like ideology, or utopianism can resist a totalizing tendency and offer a perpetual critique of ideology.<sup>21</sup> According to Donskis, “Tracing utopias inevitably requires making a sharp distinction between theoretical or scientific manifestations of utopian consciousness, on the one hand, and the free play of artistic imagination which is at the core of the so-called literary utopias, on the other.”<sup>22</sup> Most critics, like Donskis, focus on the former rather than the latter and rarely engage the status of utopian literary production in America. In the current millennium, if and when utopia is discussed at all, the focus is on either utopian architecture or the evils of utopian planning.<sup>23</sup> As Eric D. Weitz explains in *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (2003), with regard to infamous authoritarian regimes, “In each case, the leaders were animated by powerful visions of the future and sought to create utopia in the here and now...[T]hese revolutionary regimes with vast utopian ambitions...might, in some form, serve as guides to other cases and warning

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<sup>21</sup> Leonidas Donskis *The End of Ideology and Utopia: Moral Imagination and Cultural Criticism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000) 48.

<sup>22</sup> Donskis 37.

<sup>23</sup> See Martin van Schaik and Otakar Macel, *Exit Utopia: Architectural Provocations, 1956-1976* (Munich: Prestel, 2004), Matthias Schirren, *Bruno Taut: A Utopia* (Munich: Prestel, 2004), Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003), Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2000), and Henri Vogt, *Between Utopia and Disillusionment: A Narrative of the Political Transformation in Eastern Europe* (Oxford, Bershahn Books, 2004).

signs for the future.”<sup>24</sup> If the study of utopia has any use value now, it is only to serve as an illustration of “what not to do.”

Much of this discrediting of utopia in the last fifty years can be attributed to the discourse’s synonymy with idealism, perfection, and place, and Northrop Frye’s pronouncement that the predominant understanding of utopia is “an ideal or flawless state...a final or definitive social ideal...[and] a static society,”<sup>25</sup> remains relatively accepted and uncomplicated. This conception of utopia leads to its critique by anti-utopians and most postmodern theorists. As Robert Elliot writes, “Utopia is a bad word today not because we despair of being able to achieve it but because we fear it.”<sup>26</sup> For Fredric Jameson, central to the anti-utopians’ position is the perceived connection between utopianism and metaphysics, consequently “the social or collective illusion of Utopia, or of a radically different society, is flawed first and foremost because it is invested with a personal or existential illusion that is itself flawed from the outset.”<sup>27</sup> As Jameson states, “At this point, then, anti-Utopianism meets postmodernism, or at least the implacable postmodern critique of high modernism itself as repressive, totalizing, phallogentric, authoritarian,”<sup>28</sup> and the crucial point of contention and site of critique for anti-utopian discourse is precisely the *topos* of utopia—its place and presence. Since postmodern theory effectively complicates the possibility of presence, utopia is no longer

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<sup>24</sup> Weitz 15-16.

<sup>25</sup> Frye 31.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Elliot, *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970) 89.

<sup>27</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 335.

<sup>28</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (Columbia, New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 53.

considered a tenable discourse. Utopia's critics choose to focus on the conventional *good place* association and reject it on the basis of idealism and totality, but, although utopia certainly contains these components, it also embodies the complication of the same. The *no place* aspect of utopianism points us in a direction that complicates critiques and advances toward a more intricate and productive examination of utopia's potential.

Some of the earliest tales of idyllic places include Hesiod's *The Golden Age*, the Garden of Eden, Jerusalem as the Promised Land, Plato's *Republic*, the Land of Cockaigne, and many other variations and versions of the above. But, it was not until Sir Thomas More's publication of *Utopia* in 1516 that these visions were given a name. Since More's text, all such representations are considered utopias, but More's text not only bestows a moniker on idealized illustrations—it foregrounds, more than any of its predecessors, the concept of irony. The term *irony* was first introduced in Plato's *Republic* as “eiron,” and More further developed the concept of irony and its ambiguity in utopia. Portraits of the ideal society existed long before Thomas More's tale, but what makes *Utopia* unique is that as the touchstone for all ensuing utopian works it alludes to a way of articulating the inarticulability of an ideal society. Though elements of idealism are certainly present in More's work, from the beginning his reliance on irony reveals a preoccupation with, and acknowledgement of, the impossibility of this vision.

It is generally accepted by virtually every scholar of utopia that the title of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) is an intentional pun merging two Greek terms: *ού-τόπος* (non place) and *ευ-τοπος* (good place). Yet, as David Wootton points out in his introduction to More's text: “[I]t was only at the last moment, it seems, that the island acquired its Greek name and the book its title. In correspondence prior to November 15

[1516] it is always referred to as *Nusquama*—‘Nowheria’ in Latin, not Greek.”<sup>29</sup> More’s subsequent use of Greek rather than Latin was intended to communicate to a more educated readership the characteristic absurdity and unfeasibility of the land in his fictional account. In fact, More was so frustrated many readers of the first edition supposed *Utopia* to be a true account of a newly discovered land that he was compelled to include a letter from himself to Peter Giles in his second edition highlighting this misreading<sup>30</sup>:

Dearest Peter, I was tremendously pleased by the criticism of that very intelligent person whom you know...But when he expresses uncertainty as to whether my account is factual or imaginary, then I begin to have doubts about his good judgment...I would certainly have managed my narrative in such a way that, while I might actually have intended the unsophisticated to be misled by their own ignorance, I would have left for the more educated some clues that would have made it easy for them to make sense of our undertaking. Thus I would have needed only to give such names to the ruler, the river, the city, and the island as would alert the more expert reader to the fact that the island was nowhere, the city a chimera, the river without water, and the ruler without subjects.<sup>31</sup>

This letter attests that More’s readers were invested in the actuality of what was being described, whereas More’s ironic names and descriptions all but preclude these appraisals and cannot portend or represent any possible future ideal state as the thought, for instance, of a “river without water” or a “ruler without subjects” undercuts its reality. To be sure, if More’s narrative was simply meant as a critique of the current social climate so as to spur the faithful to bring about his vision, he very well may not have been so

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, Ed. and Trans. David Wootton (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1999) 5.

<sup>30</sup> Both Thomas More and Peter Giles were real historical figures who also appeared as prominent figures in More’s fiction. The letter referred to here is part of the actual narrative.

<sup>31</sup> More 166-7.

caustic to them in this letter. The initial title of *Utopia* as well as the subject-matter and tone of More's letter strongly suggest a thematic of impossibility which casts an apocryphal light on the notion that utopia has always been, and can only be, about the attainment of a perfect society. Furthermore, More uses several Greek names to suggest impossibility in *Utopia*; for example, as More's letter suggests, the principle river is Anyder, from the Greek *ανυδρος*, which means "waterless." We need only examine the work's full title to recognize the self-subverting ambiguity in More's tale, originally published as *On the Best Form of a Commonwealth and on the New Island of Utopia: A Truly Precious Book No Less Profitable than Delightful by the Most Distinguished and Learned Gentleman Thomas More, Citizen and Undersheriff of the Illustrious City of London*. The placement of the conjunction *and* between *On the Best Form of a Commonwealth* and *on the New Island of Utopia*, raises uncertainty: Are the *Best Form of a Commonwealth* and *the New Island of Utopia* synonymous or distinct? If they are synonymous, as most critics attest, then the interpretation that More's tale describes the best possible world of Utopia holds. But, perhaps the *and*, rather than forging an irrefutable connection, gestures toward an ambiguity where Utopia's relationship to idealism is undecidable, a concern that is one of the very integral points of utopia. If there is at least some discrepancy surrounding the connection, then this opens questions as to whether Utopia is fully understood as the achievement of an ideal state.

Interestingly, Thomas More is credited with the first English use of the word *ambiguous* in 1528. Both the etymology of *utopia* and the full title of the narrative offer up for question the equation of the island and idealism and disrupt the notions of attainability



and realization. The dismissal of this questioning leads to many misreadings, or, rather incomplete readings, of important utopian texts and the very idea of utopia itself.

Because such questioning is overlooked, and utopia is seen as a static and totalizing enterprise, utopian literature is often dismissed as having little, if any, literary value. As W. Warren Wagar asserts: “Once a perfect or best possible social order has been established, nothing is left, either to the imagination or to the free play of politics.”<sup>32</sup> Utopian texts are neither literarily or politically valuable because they preclude conflict by tying narratives up so neatly that there remains nothing left to do, either for the literary critic or the politically motivated reader. However, utopian texts are hardly the neat and tidy discourse their critics and detractors portray. A closer examination of these texts shows that they contain ambiguities and inconsistencies that are integral parts of their project and ultimately defend them from charges of literary insignificance. When critics do recognize such gaps, they dismiss them as simply errant characteristics that compromise the text, rather than acknowledge them as necessary and indispensable features of utopia. Rather than deformities or detracting aberrations, these aspects of utopian literature embody the force behind the utopian enterprise.

My study, *Utopia Unlimited: Reassessing American Literary Utopias* is not a survey of utopian literature, nor is it an exegesis on the history of utopian thought. It offers, rather, an examination of the ways in which seminal utopian texts are read as static idealizations, and a series of counter readings that reveal the irony and ambiguity imbedded within each text. My project addresses irony on two levels, both Cleanth

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<sup>32</sup> W. Warren Wagar, “Dreams of Reason: Bellamy, Wells, and the Positive Utopia,” *Looking Backward 1988-1888: Essays on Edward Bellamy* (Amherst, MA: U Massachusetts P, 1988) 106-125, 106.

Brooks' definition of irony as "the most general term we have for the sort of limitations placed upon the elements of a context by the context,"<sup>33</sup> as well as its embodiment of both playfulness and seriousness. I argue that literary utopias remain always unfinished projects, projects whose very condition of possibility is an essential and productive impossibility. Literary utopias do not take perfection and totality as their aim, but instead offer sustained engagements with the relevance of the impossible. Not only is the realization of utopia impossible by definition, but the representation of utopia, too, is impossible.

Though some critics might address the notions of impossibility, inconsistency, and indeterminacy, their treatments often reinvoke many of the same problems they seek to address and they rarely, if ever, engage literary utopias. In a few recent examinations, a consideration of the utopian tradition with an eye toward contingency is ventured by scholars, but they often conclude with a "utopian" investment in idealized social transformation, essentially placing utopia in the service of other theoretical agendas.<sup>34</sup> Some notable studies in this vein are endowed with a certain explanatory power by utopian scholars as offering an alternative view of utopia that rescues it from the clutches of anti-utopian critique, namely Erin McKenna's *The Task of Utopia* (2001), the work of Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson, and Louis Marin's *Utopiques: Spatial Play* (1984). Each of these discussions seeks to liberate utopia from the tethers of totality and transcendence, but, when examined closely, they are unable to sufficiently sever them.

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<sup>33</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1975) 209.

<sup>34</sup> See Lucy Sargisson's *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (1996), Rajani Kannepalli Kanth's *Breaking with the Enlightenment: The Twilight of History and the Rediscovery of Utopia* (1997), and Ralph Pordzik's *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia* (2001).

In *The Task of Utopia*, Erin McKenna recognizes that goal-centered utopias have fallen out of favor and she wants to reinvigorate the idea of utopia with a new tack utilizing the philosophy of John Dewey: “Those who call for (or lament) the end of utopia have a limited vision of what utopia can entail. They tend to fall back on an end-state model of utopia. Pragmatism can keep utopia alive without falling back on the end-state model of utopia.”<sup>35</sup> McKenna believes that Dewey’s notion of a democracy populated by critically informed citizens, who continuously test their beliefs and principles empirically and scientifically to refine the most attractive and correct ones, is a befitting model for a process-centered, rather than goal-centered utopia. While McKenna’s goal to revivify utopia is a refreshing and laudable task amidst anti-utopia rhetoric, her argument falls short of achieving its aims because she overlooks Dewey’s philosophical shortcomings. Dewey’s entire system of ongoing process and investigation is premised on a realm of “brute and unconditional ‘isness’,”<sup>36</sup> whose existence and character structures and forms the goal of all practices. These practices of what Dewey calls “accurate discovery” are refined until, as McKenna explains, “we learn to engage the world we are in, unmake what is problematic, and make it the world we want it to be.”<sup>37</sup> Dewey’s notion of process as refinement is therefore made possible only with the employment of an asymptotic goal. For Dewey, we may never reach perfectibility, or Truth, but that is beside the point because his philosophy is under-girded by the

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<sup>35</sup> Erin McKenna, *The Task of Utopia* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001) 2-3.

<sup>36</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court, 1925) 74.

<sup>37</sup> McKenna 12.

assumption that there is a Truth to be reached. When McKenna applies Dewey's thought to utopia she inherits his mistake.

Dewey's early training was Hegelian and, though he rejected it and moved toward a more scientific approach, if we read him closely his Hegelian influences come to light and his "ongoing process" is very much a dialectal one, retaining many Hegelian vestiges by merely substituting the function of the Absolute with a more materialist apparatus. This same Hegelian influence can be seen in the Frankfurt School's treatment of utopia, especially the work of Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, and Leo Lowenthal. Marxist critical theory addresses utopia's radical ability to inspire counterpoints to prevailing social standards. The Frankfurt School was conventionally utopian in its desire for socio-political change, but it was also critical and cynical of utopia's role in such transformation. Positing that the belief in utopia is an essential component of transformative politics, the Frankfurt School contended that earnest constructions of models of a better future are necessary to sustain a belief in viable alternatives to present conditions. But, as Russell Jacoby explains in *Picture Imperfect* (2005), many prominent Frankfurt School members' cultural roots in Messianic Judaism prevented them from picturing these models with any detail. According to Jacoby, this iconoclastic approach is particular to Jewish intellectuals like Ernst Bloch.

Perhaps the Marxist utopian tradition finds its fullest expression in the work of Ernst Bloch. Bloch's opus, *Principles of Hope* (1938-1947), was originally titled *Dreams for a Better Life* and articulates his "not-yet" philosophy of utopianism. For Ernst Bloch, history is driven by the goal of a possible future totalization and he explains utopia's connection to what he calls "the metaphysical total theme of history" in *The Spirit of*

*Utopia* (1918). These two works, along with essays collected in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* (1988), articulate Bloch's vision of utopia as the transformation of the totality: "Whatever utopia is, whatever can be imagined as utopia, this is the transformation of the totality. It seems to me that what people have lost subjectively in regard to consciousness is very simply the capability to imagine the totality as something that could be completely different."<sup>38</sup> For Bloch, "the world is full of propensity towards something, tendency towards something, latency of something" and his "not-yet" theoretical framework addresses the "unfinished-ness of the material world."<sup>39</sup> Bloch's privileging of the spiritual over the material leads some critics to argue that his work on utopia eclipses that of other Marxist philosophers. But, Bloch places his "not yet" philosophy of hope in the service of totality. In the third volume of *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch writes: "This specific venturing beyond, the more mature religions become, proves to be that of the most powerful hope of all, namely that of the *Totum of a hope which puts the whole world into rapport with total perfection.*"<sup>40</sup> Bloch's "utopian Totum" is the "not yet" realized future present that is the goal of all utopian aspiration. This investment in totality leaves Bloch vulnerable to critique. As Tom Moylan argues in his edited essay collection, *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* (1997): "The major methodological difficulty in Bloch's philosophy of hope lies in his overemphasis of the

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<sup>38</sup> Bloch, Ernst, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing (1964)." *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. Trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg. (Boston: MIT P, 1988) 3-4.

<sup>39</sup> Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope*. Volume 1. Trans. Nevill Plaiice, et. al. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 18, 66.

<sup>40</sup> Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope*. Volume 3. Trans. Nevill Plaiice, et. al. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 1192, original emphasis.

traditional Western category of the telos, the apparently powerful omega point at the end of history that pulls human emancipation forward.”<sup>41</sup> Yet, Moylan and his co-editor are equally invested in totalizing visions: “We hold that [the work of Ernst Bloch] still suggests strategies for imagining ‘the totality’ as a viable alternative to the seemingly ubiquitous ‘new world order.’”<sup>42</sup> For Bloch, the principle of hope is what opens up future possibilities, but the possibility of an ultimately transgressive and totalizing future moment looms in his work.

Herbert Marcuse, who was more admittedly Marxist and dialectical, explained in his *An Essay on Liberation* (1969) that “what is denounced as ‘utopian’ is not longer that which has ‘no-place’ and cannot have any place in the historical universe, but rather that which is blocked from coming about by the established societies.”<sup>43</sup> Marcuse and other Frankfurt School theorists followed Ernst Bloch’s hope for the transformation of society toward utopia based on individual liberation and social justice: “A utopian conception? It has been the great, real, transcending force, the *idée neuve*, in the first powerful rebellion against the whole of the existing society, the rebellion for the total transvaluation of values, for qualitatively different ways of life...The new sensibility has become a political force.”<sup>44</sup> Later, Marcuse would argue that technology, if created and

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<sup>41</sup> Daniel, Jamie Owen and Tom Moylan, eds. *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*. (London: Verso P, 1997) 112.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel and Moylan viii.

<sup>43</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon P, 1969) 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Marcuse 22.

organized properly, held the promise for the realization of utopia.<sup>45</sup> Building on the Hegelian and Marxist traditions, Fredric Jameson discusses utopia at length, and though some critics credit him with offering a discourse that exceeds the goal-centered utopia, his work is still very much invested in the concepts of totality and realization.<sup>46</sup>

Fredric Jameson's adherence to Marxism is sustained, in part, by his parsing of the concepts *antinomy* and *contradiction* where ideologies such as postmodernism (inasmuch as we can call postmodernism an ideology) exist within the representable binarism of the antinomy such that any conceptual productivity is halted—what Jameson calls an “arrested dialectic.” The contradiction, on the other hand, cannot be represented and it is here that there is room for reconceptualizing contemporary society. In fact, the representability of postmodernism's antinomies are so transparently articulable that Jameson claims postmodernism's description of widespread and global difference — identity politics, etc.—is the mimetic reflection of identity. Jameson rhetorically asks in the last sentence of *Seeds of Time* (1994): “Is Global Difference the same today as Global Identity?”<sup>47</sup> Difference and identity end up representing each other so well that they become the same and, for Jameson, they have nothing productive to offer in terms of social critique because they arrest the dialectic.

By means of its antinomic obsession, postmodernism's replete fragmentation, according to Jameson, turns into stultified sameness, the theoretical byproduct of late

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<sup>45</sup> See the discussion of Marcuse's “Das Ende der Utopie” in Frank and Fritz Manuel's *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge: The Belknap P, 1979).

<sup>46</sup> See the work of Peter Fitting and Kenneth M. Roemer.

<sup>47</sup> Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* 205.

capitalism. Consequently, postmodernism cannot generate alternatives to our social reality, but, for Jameson, more totalizing notions such as utopian narrative can: “I have already suggested that the thinking of totality itself—the urgent feeling of the presence all around us of some overarching system that we can at least *name*—has the palpable benefit of forcing us to conceive of at least the possibility of alternate systems, something we can now identify as our old friend utopian thinking.”<sup>48</sup> For Jameson, the notion of totality is not subsumed under the metaphysical shortcomings associated with postmodern critique which occur at an existential, rather than social, stage. As Jameson explains in *Postmodernism. Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991):

[I]t is the power of the philosophical critique of existential metaphysics which is pressed into service in the project to dismantle political visions of social change (or in other words *Utopias*). But there is no reason to think that these two levels have anything in common ... [T]he utopian ideal of a fully human and immensely more complex society than this one need not be invested with any of the longings and illusions unmasked by the existential critique.<sup>49</sup>

Because Jameson believes that the operations at one level of social scale do not necessarily translate to another, he believes that a certain amount of totality or totalization, a concept that is unfairly maligned in his eyes, is necessary for a discussion of politics and social reality: “It has not escaped anyone’s attention that my approach to postmodernism is a ‘totalizing’ one. The interesting question today is then not why I adopt this perspective, but why so many people are scandalized (or have learned to be

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<sup>48</sup> Jameson, *Seeds of Time* 70.

<sup>49</sup> Jameson *Postmodernism* 340.



scandalized) by it.”<sup>50</sup> But, how is totality separate from representation? For Jameson, one is valuable and the other is not and this seems problematic. If, as Jameson asserts, the idea of totality allows for contradiction and the positing of alternatives, then utopia is just such a contradiction and, according to Jameson, it escapes metaphysical criticism. Here, Jameson follows Louis Marin, whose work he refers to often, in arguing that utopia works through fictionalization rather than representation. When examined further, we can see that this view falls short of liberating utopian discourse from equation with representation and metaphysics, and ultimately only reaffirms such a connection.

Jameson turns to Louis Marin’s *Utopiques* (1984) to help articulate the issue of representation: “Marin’s book will then have as one of its fundamental tasks to convince us that it is possible to understand the utopian text as a determinate type of *praxis*, rather than as a specific mode of representation.”<sup>51</sup> But, throughout *Utopiques*, Marin explains that he wants to relegate utopia to the realm of fiction and purely fantastical representation: “[Utopia] is fiction, fable-construction...and pictorial representation: these are all of its nature. It is one of the regions of discourse centered on the imaginary, and no matter how forceful or precise, how correct or coherent, are its theses, utopia will never become a concept. It will always stay wrapped in fiction and fable-making.”<sup>52</sup> In its role of fiction and fable-making, utopia “stages the fiction of reconciliation and offers

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<sup>50</sup> Jameson *Postmodernism* 400.

<sup>51</sup> Jameson *The Ideologies of Theory Essays 1971-1986 Volume 2 Syntax of Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988) 81.

<sup>52</sup> Louis Marin *Utopiques: Spatial Play* Trans. Robert A. Vollrath (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities P, 1984) 8.

it up for view in the text.”<sup>53</sup> For Marin, this reconciliation seems to hearken to the conventional view of utopia as “aim[ing] toward the future of human society, toward the parousia of a perfect reconciliation between man and the world.”<sup>54</sup> In his effort to restore utopia to the realm of fantasy and to endow it with the ability to reconcile the world, Marin privileges utopia as fictionalization and in so doing he elevates it to a transcendental position: “Through the fictionalization process the characteristics and signs have been de-differentiated, neutralized, and placed outside a logical system in which they could have been judged according to a true-false system. Fiction also makes it possible to give to this complex totality of neutral differences the density, force, and ‘presence’ of a transcendent object or part of reality.”<sup>55</sup> In attempting to resist the traditional conception of utopia as pure representation, Marin only reinvokes it. By invoking perfection, transcendence, and totality in his description of utopia as fiction, Marin’s utopia escapes reality, history, the problems of language, etc. As Marin explains:

The idea of utopic description as a harmonious totality comes directly from the representation’s textual form: it is because descriptive discourse constructs a representation in Utopia that is exhaustive and lacks any residue...by articulating it in the form of a structure of harmonious and immobile equilibrium. By its pure representability it totalizes the differences that the narrative of history develops dynamically.<sup>56</sup>

Utopia is able to accomplish this because of its fictional form, which raises the question:

What differentiates utopian fiction from any other fictional form? Both Marin and

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<sup>53</sup> Marin 11.

<sup>54</sup> Marin xxiii.

<sup>55</sup> Marin 54.

<sup>56</sup> Marin 53, 61.

Jameson want to posit a notion of utopia that functions on a level apart from our everyday lived experience. This, too, is problematic because they ignore the contingency of language; a contingency that I argue is the key to understanding the project of utopia in general and utopian literature specifically.

The work of these contemporary scholars, while refreshingly not anti-utopian, per se, is very much invested in the transparency of language (Dewey) and the transcendent ability of utopia to critique and resolve conflict and tension (Jameson and Marin), and consequently does little to escape utopia's much maligned synonymy with totality and representation. That is, these works fail to recognize the irony, ambiguity, and incommensurability embedded within, and indispensable to, all utopias. While both utopia's detractors and supporters have defamed or championed it on the basis of idealism and claims to presentability, critics have not thoroughly accounted for its complication of both. The reading of utopian politics and literature as the program for social perfection persists and these utopias continue to be evaluated in terms of their realizability. This understanding of utopia leaves it vulnerable to dismissal in a postmodern era where grand narratives of any kind are sufficiently complicated. But the irony inherent in utopia shows it to be anything but inimical toward, and incommensurate with, postmodern discourse.

Using the conceptual framework of Jacques Derrida, I reframe the relation between literary utopias and postmodernism to reveal productive connections among them. Given utopia's undoing by its relationship to modernist precepts, it seems that Derrida's work would further undermine the discourse, but a close examination reveals that not only does Derrida's work not dismiss utopianism, it invigorates it. Furthermore,

a Derridean treatment of utopian literature shows that the genre is far from impotent and rather than prematurely dismissing the discourse, we need to rearticulate the very idea of utopianism proper. Derrida's work with the aporia, specifically, furthers an appreciation for the irony and ambiguity in utopian literature. Derrida argues the undecidability—both as condition of possibility and impossibility—of the aporia, not its perspicuity and solution in a dialectical reconciliation, as one more instance of the present, of what is decidable, foreseeable and possible. For him, “deconstruction is explicitly defined as a certain aporetic experience of the impossible, the ‘nondialectizable contradiction.’”<sup>57</sup> Deconstruction is aporetic, which is characterized—qua time—as undecidable. Presentable notions are disrupted in their transparency, and to this degree, cannot be maintained as such. The aporia reveals the indeterminacy of a utopian destination of perfection: “As for the dream of a unity, or finally of a place...this dream is forever destined to disappointment; this unity remains inaccessible.”<sup>58</sup> But, the crucial point for Derrida is that the aporia necessitates a response—it calls for responsibility rather than nihilistic apathy: “[T]here is in fact no philosophy and no philosophy of philosophy that could be called deconstruction and that would deduce from itself a ‘moral’ component. But that does not mean that deconstructive experience is not a responsibility, even an ethico-political responsibility”<sup>59</sup> Critics of Derrida accuse his work of being dangerous, nihilistic, and devoid of any ethico-political import since, it is argued, without recourse to normative categories we are merely left in a stasis of indecision. Similarly, utopianism is

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<sup>57</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*. Trans. Thomas Dutoit. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 1993) 15.

<sup>58</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Points*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf, et. al. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 1992) 136.

<sup>59</sup> Derrida, *Points* 364.

criticized for the same reasons. But, Derrida's work, like utopianism, makes considerable room for movement, action, ethics, and politics—indeterminacy, the aporia, and the no-place constitute the conditions for responsibility.

Since the early twentieth century, utopian discourse finds its most comfortable home in the fields of sociology, politics, urban planning, and architecture, but since utopia is first and foremost a narrative, looking to literature is the best place to consider a rethinking of the genre. It is precisely the relationship between literature and utopia that fails to capture the attention of contemporary critics in the same way as utopian theory and politics. The most recent scholarship on the subject is Thomas Peyser's *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism* (1998), but rather than examining the relationship between utopian theory and literature, this text is concerned more with what Peyser identifies as a paradigm shift at the turn of the twentieth century: "[T]he shift by which the nation is replaced with the globe as the fundamental unit of human association."<sup>60</sup> This global consolidation is what Peyser interprets as the overarching theme in turn-of-the-century American utopian texts as well as other writings.

Through a discussion of the three major utopian writers of the time—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edward Bellamy, and William Dean Howells—as well as Henry James for his emphasis on “international amalgamation,” Peyser concludes that the emergence of a global perspective and the nostalgia for national identity were the uniting and

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas Peyser *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998) x.

predominant features of these texts.<sup>61</sup> Peyser offers an interesting perspective on the relationship between realism and utopia, arguing that the two genres are joined in their efforts to historicize the present and ultimately co-dependent forms: “Without utopian distance, the realist critique of society founders on its inextricability from society; without realist attention to fact, utopia floats away into the realm of mere escapist fantasy.”<sup>62</sup> But, Peyser, rather than complicating or interrogating utopian theory, relies on the well-worn and falsifiable idea of utopia as laying claim to absolute truth, complete objectivity, and perfectibility. Though Peyser’s claims concerning the emerging discourse of globalization at the turn-of-the-century are well taken, he ultimately does little to illuminate the relationship of literary utopias to discussions of utopian theory.

*Utopia Unlimited* explores the narrative techniques of literary utopias that reveal the impossibility and ambiguity of utopian discourse. Because of the sheer volume of utopian texts published worldwide since Sir Thomas More’s inaugural *Utopia*, the scope of fiction discussed in this study is inevitably limited. I choose to focus specifically on American utopian texts because of the significant number of utopias published in this country at the turn of the last century and the representation of America as the horizon of many utopian aspirations. In his message to Congress on December 1, 1862, Abraham Lincoln called the United States the “last, best hope of earth,” and Raymond Gram Swing wrote: “In the heart of nearly all unweaned Americans lies the waiting Utopian.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Peyser viii.

<sup>62</sup> Peyser 12.

<sup>63</sup> Raymond Gram Swing, *Forerunners of American Fascism* (New York: Montauk Bookbinding, 1935) 122.

America has long symbolized the “promised land” whose shores have welcomed countless dreamers, and, as the embodiment of a promise, America stands as a universal beacon of hopes, dreams, and the utopian spirit. It is hardly a coincidence that More’s narrative was published concurrently with unprecedented explorations of the West, the discovery of America among them. In fact, More points out that the interlocutor of his text, Raphael Hythloday, “eager to see the world, signed up with Amerigo Vespucci [and] went everywhere with him throughout the last three of his four voyages—the ones that everyone is now reading about.”<sup>64</sup> From Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence to Manifest Destiny and the U. S. Constitution’s call for “a more perfect union,” America has always articulated a forward thinking, forward moving ideology founded on the independence and freedom of her citizenry.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, when the promises of American democracy are unfulfilled, America proves a fruitful ground for the flowering of alternative societies. In fact, at the end of the nineteenth century, more than one hundred experimental communities operated across the country.<sup>66</sup> Even utopian dreamers from other countries came to America to try their social experiments—Etienne Cabet and his Icarian communities and Robert Owen with New Harmony, for example. The historic receptivity of America to utopian aspirations, its tradition of political and social reform, and its commitment to innovation and the “new,” makes this country’s

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<sup>64</sup> More 58.

<sup>65</sup> See Robert H. Walker, *Reform in America: The Continuing Frontier* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1985), Robert S. Fogarty, *American Utopianism* (Itasca, IL: Peacock, 1972), Ernest L. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968), and Vernon Parrington, *American Dreams: A Study of American Utopias* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964).

<sup>66</sup> Frederick A. Bushee, “Communitic Societies in the United States,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 20 (1905): 625.

utopian literature particularly significant. Alfonso Reyas wrote, “America is a Utopia...It is the name of a human hope,” and since the first pilgrims reached her shores, America has been home to utopian dreamers.<sup>67</sup> In spite of this hopeful tendency, there is an equally strong tradition of realism and practicality and this tension structures the history of utopianism in America. Each of the chapters that follow examines different authors’ representations of this brave New World. The novels under examination here are commercially or critically successful, or both, and command the most attention from scholars of utopia in recent decades.

Among the most significant, and successful, utopian novels ever published, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888) stands as arguably the most famous utopian work since More, Bacon, and Campanella. Chapter One, “Edward Bellamy’s Utopic Dreams,” discusses *Looking Backward* and its sequel, *Equality* (1897), and their influence upon both the tradition of utopian fiction and the persistence of utopia proper. Chapter Two, “Hope in Doubt,” examines the utopian novels of Bellamy’s contemporary, William Dean Howells. Both a critic and supporter of Bellamy’s work, Howells endeavored to write his own utopian fiction and his Altrurian romances were admittedly influenced by Bellamy. *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894) and its sequel, *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907) not only follow the publication of Bellamy’s seminal texts, respectively, but they are deeply indebted to the issues Bellamy brought to the fore. Because much of the cultural and literary work that utopia inspires includes its adversary—the dystopia— Chapter Three, “Brave New Worlds,” discusses Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and *Brave New World Revisited* (1958). Because this

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<sup>67</sup> Qtd. in Vernon Parrington, *American Dreams: A Study of American Utopias* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964) vii.



study is less concerned with the particularities of the dystopian genre—in fact, the conclusions drawn here may warrant a reconsideration of dystopia proper—this chapter takes as its focus Huxley’s move from dystopia to his utopian novel, *Island* (1962). The production of utopian literature in America decreased significantly after World War I and World War II, and the genre reemerged in the 1970s invigorated by the counterculture of the preceding decade. Chapter Four, “There’s ‘No Place’ Like Home,” explores the work of Ursula K. Le Guin, one of the most influential utopian writers of this era, and her utopian novels *The Dispossessed* (1974) and *Always Coming Home* (1985). Since Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, no other utopian text has captured as much attention from utopian scholars and the Afterword addresses current utopian scholarship with a discussion of the future of utopian work in the new millennium.

In *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (2004), Marianne DeKoven argues that we live in a postmodern present and that “the current postmodern, post-utopian moment seems definitive.”<sup>68</sup> My project asserts that we are not in a post-utopian moment through the exploration of the oft overlooked aspects of utopian discourse that lead to a very different understanding and appreciation of its potential. Furthermore, this project shows that though utopianism is criticized and dismissed in the name of postmodern thought, it is precisely in the name of postmodernism that utopianism cannot be rejected. To this end, a close examination of the work of Jacques Derrida supports the need to rethink utopia and pardon it from charges of impotence. Without an emphasis on the impossible nature of utopian work, critics cannot begin to defend utopianism from the charges of futility, fancy, and Fascism.

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<sup>68</sup> Marianne DeKoven *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004) 272.

Since utopian texts are judged or feared on the basis of their realizability, if utopianism is to have a future at all, we need to read utopian work as an enterprise that remains open to possibility without laying claim to what that possibility holds.

## CHAPTER I

## EDWARD BELLAMY'S UTOPIC DREAMS:

IRONIC IMPOSSIBILITY IN *LOOKING BACKWARD* AND *EQUALITY*

The characters maunder much about progress, and hug themselves that they belong to the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup>

Nineteenth century utopian literature review

Now, 'Looking Backward' in its conception is as strong as anything [Bellamy] ever wrote. I was much amused, however, at the way the book was received. It was first regarded as a beautiful fancy. But then I do not think fancy is a bad thing. Fancy and dreams ought to be.<sup>2</sup>

William Dean Howells, "Tributes to Edward Bellamy"

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked the heyday of utopian literary production in America, and despite its immense popular success, critics then, as now, dismissed it merely as a "crowd of books of the good time coming."<sup>3</sup> This crowd consisted of more than 300 works written between 1865 and 1917 and few, if any, have received as much critical attention as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888). Though a few sympathetic reviewers find these literary utopias to be quaint and imaginative, many declare them laughable, sub-literary tales of fantasy, and Bellamy's novel is no exception. Reviewers who take *Looking Backward* more seriously are

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<sup>1</sup> "Recent Fiction I," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 27.102 (June 1891): 658.

<sup>2</sup> "Tributes to Edward Bellamy." *New York Times* (June 8, 1898): 7.

<sup>3</sup> "Some Recent Fiction," *Overland Monthly and Our West Magazine* 28.106 (Oct 1891): 439.

incredulous as to the practicality of Bellamy's predictions, pointing out the impossibility of his claims, while others are troubled by the totalizing, paternalistic nation-state of the year 2000. Whether they point out the inconsistencies of Bellamy's text as evidence of its impracticability or see his future vision as ultimately authoritarian and static, critics of *Looking Backward* dismiss it as either not utopian enough, or too utopian for comfort. But, literary utopias are discourses of irony and ambiguity; replete with tensions and gaps, these novels illustrate the very impossibility of articulating a coherent and perfectible time and place. Critics have too often discounted Bellamy's utopian novels because they fail to measure up to certain literary expectations. But, to read Bellamy's work well is to embrace its inherent irony and skepticism and to resist systematizing and rigid interpretations. A close reading of *Looking Backward*, as well as its sequel, *Equality* (1897), shows that the inconsistencies in these texts are a necessary aspect of utopian fiction and that, far from static portraits of a perfect society, Bellamy leaves a legacy of revision and dialogue. Furthermore, the widespread influence of Bellamy's novels—the founding of the Nationalist Party, the launch of several periodicals, and the publication of a number of *Looking Backward* sequels and imitations—offers more evidence of utopia's dynamism. Utopia is ultimately a critical, not normative, discourse, and Bellamy's legacy bears this out.

According to one reviewer in 1888, "In *Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy, having gone in advance of the rest of the world to the year 2000, looks back on us laggards, and says many things about us, some pleasant, some unpleasant."<sup>4</sup> *Looking Backward* is the tale of a privileged nineteenth-century Bostonian, Julian West, who

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<sup>4</sup> "Recent Fiction," *A Monthly Journal Devoted to Art in the Household* 19.3 (Aug 1888): 72.

awakens after a sleep of one hundred and thirteen years to find himself in the year 2000. Plagued with insomnia, West sought the aid of a mesmerist to help him sleep and he took his rest in a secret, underground chamber. West's servant, Sawyer, was trained to awaken him each day, but, we learn later, a fire destroyed West's home one night and though he remained unharmed and asleep in his private quarters, his friends and family presumed him dead. He remained in a preserved and undisturbed state until awakened by the Leete family of twenty-first century Boston to face a socialistic society of cooperation, equality, and prosperity. Julian West tells his own story in this first-person narrative and Dr. Leete serves as his guide to this new world. The text centers around the dialogue between West and Dr. Leete, though an interesting plot twist finds Dr. Leete's daughter, Edith, to be the great-granddaughter of West's fiancé of the nineteenth century, Edith Bartlett, and a love story resulting in the engagement of Edith Leete and West is woven throughout the tale. At the novel's conclusion, West has a nightmare that finds him returning to the nineteenth century to confront his friends and family with what he has learned from the future. Unfortunately, his social network is not receptive to his teachings and Julian finds himself rejected and ridiculed. He reawakens in the twenty-first century to find, much to his relief, that his travel to the future was not a dream after all.

As fanciful as the premise of the narrative is, most critics forego objecting to the practicality of the time-travel motif, or the plausibility of the heredity secret revealed, and instead question Bellamy's portrayal of the twenty-first century and his explanation, or lack thereof, of the steps to achieve such a social transformation. An obituary for Bellamy in the *New York Times* remarked on the "serious, conservative men, who wrote

to show that ‘Bellamy’s Utopia’ could not exist; or if ever reached, would mark a rapid decline in culture.”<sup>5</sup> This statement is indicative of the majority of responses to Bellamy’s utopian novels. In fact, with the exception of a recent tribute to the legacy of Bellamy and his literary contributions, most treatments of his work pronounce it a literary letdown for its flat, static characters and lack of plot and conflict.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, critics see *Looking Backward*’s political import compromised by Bellamy’s failure to articulate a plan for achieving social change. Henry George, the famed economist whose *Progress and Poverty* (1879) influenced a great many utopian authors, remarked that “‘Looking Backward’ is a castle in the air, with clouds for its foundation... a popular presentation of the dream of state socialism, [failing] to indicate any way of ‘getting there.’”<sup>7</sup> Another nineteenth century reviewer declared *Looking Backward* a failure whose remedy for social evil “must be adjudged defective.” The reviewer further states: “Of Mr. Bellamy’s generous optimism the writer will only say that he fears that if any person should attempt to put in practice such beliefs for one twelve month upon any community of a thousand souls with which he is acquainted... such person would return from his experiment a chastened and less hopeful man.”<sup>8</sup> In 1889, another reviewer remarked that Bellamy provided “a look into a future of mankind as desirable as it has hitherto been

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<sup>5</sup> “Edward Bellamy Dead” *New York Times* May 23, 1898: 7.

<sup>6</sup> See *Revisiting the Legacy of Edward Bellamy (1850-1898), American Author and Social Reformer* eds. Toby Widdicombe and Herman S. Preiser (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen P, 2002) for a sympathetic tribute to Bellamy’s many contributions to social reform.

<sup>7</sup> Henry George, “Untitled,” *The Standard* (31 Aug 1889): 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> William Higgs, “Some Objections to Mr. Bellamy’s Utopia,” *New Englander and Yale Review* 16 (Mar. 1890): 230-240, 231.

pronounced inaccessible and impossible by all the wise men of the present age.”<sup>9</sup> By and large these critiques stem from the belief that capitalism will never be usurped by socialism, that humanity’s need for competition will never bow to a cooperative commonwealth, and though the rosy picture Bellamy paints is charming and seductive, such a social transformation could not exist but for the complete renouncement of American individualism. Furthermore, Bellamy’s illustration, however attractive, cannot possibly compete with the promises of American democracy and individual freedom. As one nineteenth century critic of Bellamy observed: “[In America] our people are the freest, most contented, and prosperous people on the face of the earth.”<sup>10</sup> Objections to Bellamy’s utopia and utopian literature in general, assert that the depiction of an end-state model of social felicity offers a static culture that forecloses on change, freedom, innovation, evolution, or revolution. Critics then, as now, contend that this stasis is inevitably boring at best and totalitarian at worst.

In *The Utopian Novel in America, 1886-1896: The Politics of Form* (1984), Jean Pfaelzer explains that “utopian novels of the late nineteenth century similarly lack antagonism, contradiction, and process, and therefore they leave the reader to search elsewhere for the motor of America’s development. Lacking change, utopias seem to mark the end of history.”<sup>11</sup> Because utopian narratives seemingly tie up all loose ends and culminate in perfect snapshots of the good life, they leave little room for

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<sup>9</sup> “Review I,” *Current Literature* 3.2 (Aug 1889): 93.

<sup>10</sup> George A. Sanders, *Reality, or Law and Order vs. Anarchy and Socialism* (Cleveland: Burrows Bros, 1898) 69.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Pfaelzer, *The Utopian Novel in America, 1886-1896: The Politics of Form* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1984) 17.

interpretation and even less for political action. Literary critics are frustrated by utopian literature's apparent lack of hermeneutical complexity and social reformers are aggravated by the roseate visions that detract from real political work. Still other critics point to an "inescapably totalitarian" trend in utopian literature.<sup>12</sup> In his widely influential *The Story of Utopias* (1922), Lewis Mumford asserts that in *Looking Backward*, Bellamy "has invented a high-powered engine of repression."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in *Authoritarian Socialism in America: Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement* (1982), Arthur Lipow reads the description of the Industrial Army, renouncement of the individual, and rampant technocracy in *Looking Backward* as a proposal for authoritarian socialism. According to Lipow, "The fundamental assumption [in *Looking Backward*], and the one that makes Bellamy's thought at one with the older utopian tradition, is the idea that a better social order can be created only by the action of an agency outside of society and the operation of its laws, upon the mass of mankind."<sup>14</sup> Though it may appear that *Looking Backward* and *Equality* present totalitarian futures, each text contains a number of inconsistencies and enough ambiguity to render totalitarian readings incomplete. Even though Bellamy's novels lack substantial character development and contain fewer plot twists than the average bestseller, critics overlook the substantial contradictions and fissures in the text that point to an open-ended invitation for engagement. In fact, round characters and complicated plot devices would distract from

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<sup>12</sup> Gordon Beauchamp, "The Anti-Politics of Utopia," *Alternative Futures: The Journal of Utopian Studies*. 2.1 (1979): 49-59, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922) 167.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Lipow, *Authoritarian Socialism in America: Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982) 52.



the larger social picture. Literary critics hold Bellamy accountable to certain expectations and criteria that do not necessarily serve the purpose of a utopian novelist and his texts should not be dismissed as a result.

The so-called literary faults of *Looking Backward* can be attributed, in part, to Bellamy's attempt to bridge the latitude of romance and the demands of realism as well as the necessary inconsistencies and ambiguities endemic in utopian literature. In fact, this attempt is what creates the conditions for the emergence of the literary utopia; the tension between the genres results in an uneasy and fractured utopian space where the failure of language becomes readily apparent. Utopian literature is neither wholly romantic nor entirely realistic; it is contingent upon these genres, but irreducible to them as it occupies an unstable and tenuous no-place. The mixture of both romance and realism in *Looking Backward* is not surprising when we consider Bellamy's literary background. After abandoning a career as a lawyer after his first case involved evicting a widow for the non-payment of rent, Bellamy began his literary career as a newspaper journalist, book reviewer, and editorial writer. Bellamy's non-fiction work on woman's suffrage, worker's rights, and education was soon followed by a series of short stories and novels in the romantic tradition, but Bellamy continued to contribute to newspapers throughout his lifetime, particularly on topics related to social welfare. Though Bellamy published several novels before *Looking Backward*, including *The Duke of Stockbridge* (1879), *Dr. Heidenhoff's Process* (1880), and *Miss Ludington's Sister* (1884), his utopian novels remain his most famous. Written at a time when the romantic tradition was giving way to more realist and naturalist fiction, *Looking Backward* exhibits elements of both and the marriage is hardly without tension. In his personal notebooks, under the heading

“Ideas for LB,” Bellamy wrote: “Tell tale of love and marriage...make it as realistic as possible.”<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, Bellamy explained: “In undertaking to write ‘Looking Backward’ I had, at the outset, no idea of attempting a serious contribution to the movement of social reform. The idea was of a mere literary fantasy, a fairy tale of social felicity. There was no thought of contriving a house which practical men might live in, but merely of hanging in mid-air, far out of reach of the sordid and material world of the present, a cloud-place for an ideal humanity.”<sup>16</sup> In the same article, Bellamy shares his original plan for the novel: “In order to secure plenty of elbow room for the fancy and prevent awkward collisions between the ideal structure and the hard facts of the real world, I fixed the date of the story in the year A. D. 3000...In its present form the story is a romance of the ideal nation.”<sup>17</sup> Later, however, Bellamy would amend his discussion of this “fancy sketch” to address his more realistic aspirations for the novel. In an 1894 *Ladies Home Journal* essay, “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward’,” Bellamy describes the impetus for his novel: “According to my best recollection it was in the fall or winter of 1886 that I sat down to my desk with a definite purpose of trying to reason out a method of economic organization by which the republic might guarantee the livelihood and material welfare of its citizens on a basis of equality corresponding to and supplementing their political equality.”<sup>18</sup> Throughout the novel, Bellamy intertwines ancestral mystery, mesmerism, and a love story with long treatises on education, justice, and the economy.

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<sup>15</sup> Edward Bellamy, “Excerpts from the Notebooks,” Houghton Library bMS Am 1181.10.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Bellamy, “Why I Wrote ‘Looking Backward’,” *The Nationalist* (May 1890): 199.

<sup>17</sup> Bellamy, “Why I Wrote ‘Looking Backward,’ 200. *Looking Backward* was originally set in the year 3000 A. D., but Bellamy later shifted the setting to 2000 A. D.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Bellamy, “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward,’ *Ladies Home Journal* (April 1894): 223.

The juxtaposition of these romantic and realist elements in *Looking Backward* prompted mixed responses from contemporary reviewers who seemed divided on the merits of the novel.

Bellamy's good friend and strong supporter, William Dean Howells, often championed Bellamy's literary talent claiming that "in Edward Bellamy we were rich in a romantic imagination surpassed only by that of Hawthorne."<sup>19</sup> Coincidentally, Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of Bellamy's favorite authors and Hawthorne's remarks in the Preface to his utopian novel, *The Blithedale Romance* (1859) illustrate how the literary utopia finds its home betwixt romance and realism: "[*The Blithedale Romance* is] essentially a day-dream, and yet a fact,--and thus offering an available foothold between fiction and reality."<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, Hawthorne explained, "When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel."<sup>21</sup> Bellamy certainly incorporated romantic elements in his utopian fiction, but his narratives never drifted too far from lived experience. In fact, Howells remarked that Bellamy had an "intensely democratic" imagination that "never put the simplest and plainest reader to shame."<sup>22</sup> In an article published shortly after Bellamy's death in 1898, Howells wrote of *Looking Backward*: "The art employed to accomplish its effect was the art which Bellamy had in degree so singular that one might

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<sup>19</sup> William Dean Howells, "Edward Bellamy," *Atlantic Monthly* 82 (Aut, 1898): 256.

<sup>20</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1859) v.

<sup>21</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1851) i.

<sup>22</sup> Howells, "Edward Bellamy" 254.

call it supremely his. He does not so much transmute our every-day reality to the substance of romance as make the airy stuff of dreams one in quality with veritable experience.”<sup>23</sup> Howells seemed particularly impressed with Bellamy’s ability to deftly incorporate elements of both genres in *Looking Backward*. Referring to the characterization in the novel—a feature that many critics pan for being underdeveloped and static—Howells explains: “[Bellamy] deals with types rather than with characters; for it is one of the prime conditions of the romancer that he shall do this. His people are less objectively than subjectively present; their import is greater in what happens to them than in what they are. But he never falsifies them or their circumstance.”<sup>24</sup> Not all critics appreciated Bellamy’s blending of both romantic and realist elements in his utopian novel and several found the combination compromised the literariness of his effort.

This tension was seized upon by several contemporary readers of *Looking Backward* and one reviewer wrote:

That Mr. Edward Bellamy had something to say when he wrote *Looking Backward* we cannot doubt, for he has said a good deal of it...But to some readers of the book it is very plain that Mr. Bellamy does *not* know what he pretends to expound...*Looking Backward* is a book wrought out by a practical master of literary effect, and with its generous intentions we all sympathize, but...[a] romance of the future cannot be exempted from the need of a solid basis in knowledge of the existing order...Mr. Bellamy’s book does not comply with this condition of solid literary performance.<sup>25</sup>

For this reviewer, and others, Bellamy fails to properly balance the generic elements of the text—for some, *Looking Backward* contains too little fact, and for others, not enough

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<sup>23</sup> Howells, “Edward Bellamy” 254.

<sup>24</sup> Howells, “Edward Bellamy” 255.

<sup>25</sup> “Philanthropic Fiction,” *A Monthly Review of Current Literature* 20.11 (May 25, 1889): 176.

fancy. In an article published after Bellamy's death in 1898, one critic remarks: "The high literary promise of Mr. Bellamy's earlier work has been obscured in public estimation through the attention devoted to his social and economic expositions. But if Mr. Bellamy had occupied himself solely with purely imaginative literature, he would undoubtedly have held high rank among the fiction writers of the day."<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, for Bellamy, this kind of tension, far from compromising the literariness of a work, is essential. In *Looking Backward*, Edith Leete gives Julian West a book of the twenty-first century stating, "[Y]ou might be interested in looking over this story by Berrian. It is considered his masterpiece, and will at least give you an idea of what the stories nowadays are like." Julian's evaluation of Berrian's story follows:

I sat up in my room that night reading 'Penthesilia' till it grew gray in the east, and did not lay it down till I had finished it. And yet let no admirer of the great romancer of the twenty-first century resent my saying that at the first reading what most impressed me was not so much what was in the book as what was left out of it. The story-writers of my day would have deemed the making of bricks without straw a light task compared with the construction of a romance from which should be excluded all effects drawn from the contrasts of wealth and poverty, education and ignorance, coarseness and refinement, high and low, all motives drawn from social pride and ambition, the desire of being richer or the fear of being poorer, together with sordid anxieties of any sort for one's self or others....The reading of "Penthesilia" was of more value than almost any amount of explanation would have been in giving me something like a general impression of the social aspect of the twenty-first century.<sup>27</sup>

Curiously, Berrian's novel is an absent text; Julian never quotes directly from the book and we are only left with his impressions. For Julian, the lack of conflict in Berrian's

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<sup>26</sup> "The Late Edward Bellamy," *New York Times* May 28, 1898: BR 358.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887* ed. Alex MacDonald (Ontario, Canada: Broadview P, 2003) 144-145.

novel is remarkable and Bellamy leaves the reader to doubt if satisfying stories can even be told in a society seemingly devoid of tension. In fact, Boston of 2000 is not without its inconsistencies and contradictions, and, despite popular readings of *Looking Backward*, Bellamy's narrative falls short of depicting a perfect world. In his Preface to *Looking Backward*, Bellamy writes, "That this volume may be so fortunate as to find readers whose interest in the subject shall incline them to overlook the deficiencies of the treatment is the hope in which the author steps aside and leaves Mr. Julian West to speak for himself."<sup>28</sup> Here, Bellamy forecasts the inconsistencies and gaps in his rendering of Boston in the year 2000 and hopes that the reader will follow West's narrative in spite of them.

Bellamy's novel is replete with ambiguity and irony. One of the most glaring examples in the text is the ubiquity of private spaces and lack of social interaction in a place where community and solidarity are presumed to be the foundation of society. In fact, in Boston 2000, where every citizen "is a member of a vast industrial partnership" necessitating mutual dependence and support, there are curiously few examples of social interaction; Julian West meets places, not people.<sup>29</sup> In fact, when Dr. Leete and his daughter, Edith, chaperone West about the city, they rarely, if ever, encounter other people. For example, when Edith takes West to the large all purpose mercantile in their district, neither of them engage anyone else save the clerk, who remains anonymous. Similarly, when West accompanies the Leetes to their private dining quarters at the dining house where "[e]very family in the ward has a room set apart in this great building

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<sup>28</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 46.

<sup>29</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 121.

for its permanent and exclusive use,” the meal follows with a tour of the building and its architecture rather than mingling among other diners: “After dinner my entertainers conducted me about the building, of which the extent, the magnificent architecture and richness of embellishment, astonished me.”<sup>30</sup> This scene immediately follows Dr.

Leete’s famous “common umbrella” illustration. On their way to the dining hall after a rainstorm, West observes a continuous canopy that envelops the streets and sidewalks and Dr. Leete explains: “[T]he difference between the age of individualism and that of concert was well characterized by the fact that, in the nineteenth century, when it rained, the people of Boston put up three hundred thousand umbrellas over as many heads, and in the twentieth century they put up one umbrella over all the heads.”<sup>31</sup> After dinner, Dr. Leete goes on to gush about the “splendor” of a public life that “is ornate and luxurious beyond anything the world ever knew before,” yet other people seem to be missing from the landscape.<sup>32</sup> This irony is further highlighted by Dr. Leete’s assertion that Boston 2000 has advanced because of a commitment to human solidarity. In one of the many dialogues that structure the narrative, Dr. Leete explains to West: “If I were to give you, in one sentence, a key to what may seem the mysteries of our civilization as compared with that of your age, I should say that it is the fact that the solidarity of the race and the brotherhood of man, which to you were but fine phrases, are, to our thinking and feeling, ties as real and as vital as physical fraternity.”<sup>33</sup> Granted, Dr. Leete goes to great lengths

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<sup>30</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 134, 137.

<sup>31</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 134.

<sup>32</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 137-8.

<sup>33</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 122.

to explain the economic system of the twenty-first century and its reliance on the cooperation of the entire citizenry, and perhaps everyone is so busy working that they simply do not have time to socialize. Yet, Dr. Leete also describes the vast amounts of leisure activity available to Boston's citizens—in fact, workers in *Looking Backward* retire at age forty-five so that they can devote their lives to the cultivation of mind and body. But, even these leisure activities can be solitary, as is the case with entertainment and worship.

Alone at the Leete residence, Edith asks West if he is fond of music and, after he assures her that he is, she shows him to a private room and hands him a music program: “The card bore the date ‘September 12, 2000,’ and contained the longest programme of music I had ever seen. It was as various as it was long, including a most extraordinary range of vocal and instrumental solos, duets, quartettes, and various orchestral combinations.”<sup>34</sup> After choosing an organ piece from the program, West is asked to be seated as Edith operates a precursor to the modern radio: “[S]o far as I could see, [she] merely touched one or two screws, and at once the room was filled with the music.”<sup>35</sup> Edith and West are both enjoying a live performance, but rather than attending the concerts in person with other appreciating listeners, citizens in Boston tune in the music they want to hear while tuning out the rest of the world. As Edith explains: “There are a number of music rooms in the city, perfectly adapted acoustically to the different sorts of music. These halls are connected by telephone with all the houses of the city whose

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<sup>34</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 109.

<sup>35</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 109.



people care to pay the small fee, and there are none, you may be sure, who do not.”<sup>36</sup>

After West expresses his amazement at the invention, Edith touts the democratization of the whole process as fine musical performances are no longer reserved for the elite, but are widely available to the masses. Yet, this increase in availability seems to also increase the withdrawal of the citizenry. Clearly drawing on Bell’s invention of the telephone in 1876 and foreshadowing Marconi’s radio in 1901, Bellamy’s incorporation of this device also extends to the experience of religious worship.

One of the strongest examples of irony concerning increased individuation and privatization in the socialist Boston of 2000 is the one-way telephonic experience of worship. The communion generally associated with religious observance is eschewed by most citizens in favor of radio broadcasts received in private homes. When West inquires as to whether they “still have Sundays and sermons,” Dr. Leete explains that the new social administration certainly allows for religious observation and that West can “either go to a church to hear it or stay at home.” West responds by asking how he is to hear the sermon if he remains at the Leete residence and Dr. Leete replies: “Simply by accompanying us to the music room at the proper hour and selecting an easy chair. There are some who still prefer to hear sermons in church, but most of our preaching, like our musical performances, is not in the public...I really don’t believe you are likely to hear anywhere a better discourse than you will at home.” Later, West listens to a sermon by the famed Mr. Barton who “preaches only by telephone, and to audiences often reaching 150,000.”<sup>37</sup> It would seem that given Julian West’s lack of circulation in society that he

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<sup>36</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 109-110.

<sup>37</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 205.

would be the Leete's "little secret," but, as Mr. Barton's sermon makes clear, word of West's visit spread widely. Mr. Barton acknowledges West when he says, "We have had among us, during the past week, a critic from the nineteenth century," and his sermon addresses the differences between West's Boston and the Boston of 2000. Like Dr. Leete's earlier speeches, Mr. Barton makes clear the crucial difference between the two: the philosophy of brotherhood and solidarity: "[T]he idea of the vital unity of the family of mankind, the reality of human brotherhood, was very far from being apprehended by them as the moral axiom it seems to us... In a word, they believed—even those who longed to believe otherwise—the exact reverse of what seems to us self-evident; they believed, that is, that the anti-social qualities of men, and not their social qualities, were what furnished the cohesive force of society."<sup>38</sup> Both Dr. Leete and Mr. Barton repeatedly chastise the nineteenth century for paying lip service to the principles of brotherhood and solidarity by making them "phrases merely," rather than "the real conviction and practical principle of action."<sup>39</sup> Ironically, these principles seem just as vapid in Boston 2000. *Looking Backward* is full of smaller ambiguities that, combined, work against a reading of the novel as a totalizing representation of perfectability and stasis.

Further inconsistencies are revealed as *Looking Backward* advances through a series of discussions between Dr. Leete and Julian West concerning issues of social administration, particularly the economy and legislation. Given the rise in class conflict

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<sup>38</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 206, 210, 211.

<sup>39</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 137.

and the prevalence of labor strikes, most infamously the Haymarket Riots of 1886, when Bellamy was in the middle of writing *Looking Backward*, it is not surprising that the “labor question” is the most common topic of conversation in the novel. Shortly after reviving West, Dr. Leete asks: ““The Bostonians of your day had the reputation of being great askers of questions, and I am going to show my descent by asking you one to begin with. What should you name as the most prominent feature of the labor troubles of your day?,”” to which West replies, ““Why, the strikes, of course.””<sup>40</sup> So begins Dr. Leete’s Socratic instruction of the economic and legislative operations of socialist Boston in the year 2000. Both West and the reader learn about the evolution that resulted in the development of the Industrial Army and the particularities of life under “The Great Trust” of government-controlled industry and commerce. As Dr. Leete explains:

“Early in the last century the evolution was completed by the final consolidation of the entire capital of the nation. The industry and commerce of the country, ceasing to be conducted by a set of irresponsible corporations and syndicates of private persons at their caprice and for their profit, were entrusted to a single syndicate representing the people, to be conducted in the common interest for the common profit. The nation, that is to say, organized as the one great business corporation in which all other corporations were absorbed.”<sup>41</sup>

This apparently seamless transition occurred with “absolutely no violence,” as Dr. Leete is quick to point out, because “[p]ublic opinion had become fully ripe for it, and the whole mass of the people was behind it.”<sup>42</sup> According to Dr. Leete, the citizens had eagerly anticipated the shift and were completely in favor of a cooperative

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<sup>40</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 73.

<sup>41</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 76.

<sup>42</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 77.

commonwealth. As he continues to inform West of the specific changes brought about under “The Great Trust”—education, legislation, employment, etc.—Dr. Leete often contradicts himself and the seemingly faultless system becomes fissured. Ironically, Dr. Leete exists, in part, to smooth out the contradictions in the text—to fill in the gaps and help West make sense of his new environs—yet he only creates more variance and disjunction. The clearest inconsistencies occur when the topic of labor and its compensation are broached. In Boston 2000, each citizen is expected to serve in the Industrial Army according to his or her capacity until the age of forty-five. After completing a course of education, young men and women are required to serve as unclassified laborers for three years, then, depending on their aptitude and preferences, they can choose a particular trade. Each worker is given the same annual salary regardless of the type of labor performed, but compensation in terms of reduced hours is given to those who perform less desired tasks, such as sanitation. When West inquires as to the adequacy of the annual credit for each citizen, Dr. Leete explains: “The provision is so ample that we are more likely not to spend it all...But if extraordinary expenses should exhaust it, we can obtain a limited advance on the next year’s credit, though this practice is not encouraged, and a heavy discount is charged to check it. Of course if a man showed himself a reckless spendthrift he would receive his allowance monthly or weekly instead of yearly, or if necessary not be permitted to handle it at all.”<sup>43</sup> But, when West remarks that “[s]uch a system does not encourage saving habits on the part of citizens,” Dr. Leete replies, “It is not intended to...[t]he nation is rich and does not wish

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<sup>43</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 95.

the people to deprive themselves of any good thing.”<sup>44</sup> Dr. Leete later confesses that his own daughter “is an indefatigable shopper.”<sup>45</sup> There exists a definite tension between the infinite ability of “The Great Trust” to provide for every need of the citizenry and limitations on the citizen’s ability to meet those needs. The case of the “reckless spendthrift” belies Dr. Leete’s assurance that “[n]o man any more has any care for the morrow, either for himself or his children, for the nation guarantees the nurture, education, and comfortable maintenance of every citizen from the cradle to the grave.”<sup>46</sup> Similar inconsistencies arise when Dr. Leete describes the nature of labor and its compensation.

When West seems incredulous as to how the citizenry can be motivated to labor for the nation when monetary rewards are eliminated, Dr. Leete explains that laborers in the Industrial Army are motivated by the same factors as soldiers in a traditional army: “Not higher wages, but honor and the hope of men’s gratitude, patriotism and the inspiration of duty...The coarser motives, which no longer move us, have been replaced by higher motives...Now that industry of whatever sort is no longer self-service, but service of the nation, patriotism, passion for humanity, impel the worker as in your day they did the soldier.”<sup>47</sup> Yet, when West presses as to the unlikelihood that humankind would perform without the inducement of material rewards, Dr. Leete admits that it “is still so constituted that special incentives in the form of prizes, advantages to be gained,

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<sup>44</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 96.

<sup>45</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 101.

<sup>46</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 96.

<sup>47</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 100.

are requisite to call out the best endeavors of the average man in any direction.”<sup>48</sup> Of course, in a society where everyone is expected, even compelled by their very nature, to do their best for the greater good, prizes and incentives would hardly be necessary. Furthermore, if all needs are always, already met, the very idea of enticements seems absurd. During the same exchange, Dr. Leete tells West that the “value of a man’s services to society fixes his rank in it,” yet elsewhere Dr. Leete sings the praises of equality in the classless society: “It is the worst thing about any system which divides men, or allows them to be divided, into classes and castes, that it weakens the sense of a common humanity...The equal wealth and equal opportunities of culture which all persons now enjoy have simply made us all members of one class.”<sup>49</sup> But, in a later discussion of the ranking and classifying of members of the Industrial Army, Dr. Leete explains that there exists a grading system that divides laborers into different classes where inducements are given to keep “constantly before every man’s mind the great desirability of attaining the grade next above his own.”<sup>50</sup> Incentives designed to inspire competition and reward individual achievement seem out of place in a socialist system. Similarly, when discussing those individuals who refuse to serve, Dr. Leete makes clear that: “As for actual neglect of work, positively bad work, or other overt remises on the part of men incapable of generous motives, the discipline of the Industrial Army is far too strict to allow anything whatever of the sort. A man able to do duty, and persistently

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<sup>48</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 99-100.

<sup>49</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 101, 136.

<sup>50</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 118.

refusing, is sentenced to solitary imprisonment on bread and water till he consents.”<sup>51</sup> Not only is this statement itself contradictory, since the system is “far too strict to allow” any shirking of duty, yet it clearly has a program of “solitary imprisonment” in place should it be necessary, but also, if everyone’s needs are met, what dissatisfaction could inspire such insubordination? If human nature seeks honor through all labor, all citizens are “strongly impelled to do their best,” and the Industrial Army succeeds by offering everyone the conditions to fulfill their nature, how then can there exist those who refuse to labor?<sup>52</sup> The very idea of “solitary imprisonment” is ironic considering that in Boston 2000 West notes “the total disappearance of the old state prison” and Dr. Leete declares, “We have no jails nowadays.”<sup>53</sup> But, Dr. Leete later contradicts this when he states that in spite of the removal of the seed of all crime—the desire for money—and his assertion that “such atrocities are scarcely ever heard of,” there still exist trials and jailers.<sup>54</sup> This, along with the appointment of a Supreme Court, judges, and magistrates, is inconsistent with Dr. Leete’s avowal: “We have no legislation...If you will consider a moment, Mr. West, you will see that we have nothing to make laws about. The fundamental principles on which our society is founded settle for all time the strifes and misunderstandings which in your day called for legislation.”<sup>55</sup> Clearly, in Boston 2000, society has evolved

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<sup>51</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 118.

<sup>52</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 119.

<sup>53</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 161.

<sup>54</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 163.

<sup>55</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 167.

to such a degree as to have eliminated the conditions for crime and rebellion, but provisions exist to deal with those citizens who wander from the flock.

Throughout *Looking Backward*, labor in Boston 2000 is cherished for its propensity to bring honor, and working for the greater good is the supreme value of the citizenry. Given this, Dr. Leete's discourse on the joys of retirement seems particularly ironic:

We look upon [labor] as a necessary duty to be discharged before we can fully devote ourselves to the higher exercise of our faculties, the intellectual and spiritual enjoyments and pursuits which alone mean life...it is not our labor, but the higher and larger activities which the performance of our task will leave us free to enter upon, that are considered the main business of existence...we all agree in looking forward to the date of our discharge as the time when we shall first enter upon the full enjoyment of our birth-right.<sup>56</sup>

All of the tensions, contradictions, and inconsistencies in *Looking Backward*, too many, in fact, to enumerate here, are what make Bellamy's novel such an interesting dissertation on the very possibility of a utopian society. Bellamy's text undercuts itself at every turn and far from a static portrayal of an ideal state, *Looking Backward* illustrates the very impossibility of such an achievement. Every moment of apparent perfection in the novel is undermined elsewhere in the narrative and the viability of a system without difference is put into question. These plot tensions in *Looking Backward* are made all the more significant when we consider the tensions that animated its production and influenced Bellamy himself.

A series of disparate events and competing influences comprised Edward Bellamy's life and undoubtedly influenced his literary efforts. In fact, the ambiguity and

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<sup>56</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 159-160.



ambivalence that characterized much of Bellamy's personal and intellectual development prepared him to experiment with disparate genres and ultimately find his niche in the literary utopia. Edward Bellamy's great-grandson, John Stark Bellamy II, wrote:

The author of *Looking Backward*, like some of his descendents, was a creature of jarring paradox and stunning irony...A lawyer who took the trouble to pass the bar, Edward Bellamy practiced no more than a day of law...A political economist who clearly believed in long-range economic planning, Edward Bellamy lived a virtually hand-to-mouth existence...And, perhaps the greatest irony of all, Edward Bellamy, who celebrated physical well-being so rhapsodically in his two utopian novels, died well before his time because he had never taken the most elemental care of his body.<sup>57</sup>

Edward Bellamy grew up in a middle-class area of Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts, between the larger homes of factory owners and not far from the tenements of factory workers. The son of a compassionate Baptist minister father and a more conservative Calvinist mother, Edward Bellamy was raised in a deeply religious home with an emphasis on personal development and compassion toward humanity. A religious late-bloomer, Bellamy was fascinated by religion throughout his life:

Edward became the cause of special prayers by the family; for, when he reached the age of discretion, he had not yet had a religious experience. Finally, however, at fourteen he had a coming of the light, and was baptized on 13 April 1864...[Later] Bellamy delved so deeply into religious literature and so studied the Bible that he knew it thoroughly...[and] frequently quoted the Bible in his written work.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> John Stark Bellamy II, "Edward Bellamy Through the Eyes of a Great Grandson," *Revisiting the Legacy of Edward Bellamy (1850-1898), American Author and Social Reformer*. Eds. Toby Widdicombe and Herman S. Preiser (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen P, 2002) 327.

<sup>58</sup> Sylvia E. Bowman *Edward Bellamy* (Twayne: Boston, 1986) 3,4.

His early social surroundings and religious indoctrination formed the backbone of his journalistic work and later novels, but it was not until he spent a year abroad in Europe between 1868 and 1869 that he began to fully form his economic and social philosophy. In “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward’,” Bellamy explains, “I visited Europe and spent a year there in travel and study. It was in the great cities of England, Europe, and among the hovels of the peasantry that my eyes were first fully opened to the extent and consequences of man’s inhumanity to man.”<sup>59</sup> Admittedly influenced by German socialism, Bellamy became dedicated to “the possibility of finding some great remedy for poverty, some plan for equalizing human conditions,” but was reluctant to identify his work as socialist and had a complex relationship with the term.<sup>60</sup> Shortly after his return from Europe, Bellamy gave a series of Lyceum Talks where he publicly discussed socialism for the first time. During the second of these talks in 1871, Bellamy asked, “Why has the name Socialist by which is designated a believer in this renovation of Society, who denies that the world ought to be administered any longer in the interests of darkness and chaos, become a byword and a name of reproach?”<sup>61</sup> Bellamy subscribed to an undeniably socialist philosophy, yet its negative reception in America caused him to eschew association with the term. Recalling an interview with Bellamy, one reviewer wrote, “When I asked him if he imbibed his Socialistic ideas in Germany he laughed, and with a roguish twinkle in his eye declared that the only thing he learned to imbibe in

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<sup>59</sup> Bellamy, “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward’” 220.

<sup>60</sup> Bellamy, “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward’” 220.

<sup>61</sup> Edward Bellamy, “Second Lyceum Talk,” (1871). Quoted in Sylvia Bowman’s *Edward Bellamy* (Twayne: Boston, 1986) 9.

Germany was beer!”<sup>62</sup> Two years earlier, in a letter to William Dean Howells, Bellamy remarked, “I may seem to outsocialize the socialists, yet the word socialist is one I could never stomach. It smells to the average American of petroleum, suggests the red flag and all manner of sexual novelties, and an abusive tone about God and religion.”<sup>63</sup>

Bellamy’s contentious relationship with socialism, and politics in general, made him a reluctant reformer. Ironically, though he did not originally intend for his work to spur widespread political action, *Looking Backward* ultimately thrust him into the political arena.

As discussed earlier, *Looking Backward* is the product of a tension between romance and realism, and Bellamy was constantly negotiating these two genres, both in his fiction and his personal life. As William Lloyd Garrison confirms, “When Edward Bellamy wrote his work of fiction he little dreamed that it was to be taken seriously as the gospel of a new dispensation...The gentle blast of the author’s bugle startled him with a thousand unexpected reverberations and the novelist, in spite of himself, was forced to assume the role of a reformer.”<sup>64</sup> Bellamy’s reluctance to subscribe to a political agenda and refusal to be a mouthpiece for wide-ranging social reform could not sustain itself as “many persons took Mr. Bellamy’s romance seriously, and, after a while he was forced to do so himself.”<sup>65</sup> When Bellamy began writing *Looking Backward*, he referred to it as a “fancy sketch,” a piece of speculative fiction: “There was no doubt in my mind that the

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<sup>62</sup> “No Title,” *Current Literature* 4.3 (March 1890): 185.

<sup>63</sup> Edward Bellamy to William Dean Howells. Letter (June 17, 1888) Bellamy Papers. Houghton Library BMS Am 1181.10.

<sup>64</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, “The Mask of Tyranny,” *Arena* 1 (April, 1890): 553.

<sup>65</sup> “Edward Bellamy Dead,” *New York Times* May 23, 1898: 7.

proposed study should be in the form of a story....In adventuring in any new and difficult field of speculation, I believe that the student often cannot do better than to use the literary form of fiction.”<sup>66</sup> Later, however, Bellamy began to realize the full political implications of his story and recognize his endeavor as the examination of social questions that plagued him ever since his trip to Europe. Several years after the publication of *Looking Backward*, Bellamy recalled: “When I first undertook to work out [*Looking Backward*], I believed indeed, it might be possible on this line to make some valuable suggestions upon the social problem.”<sup>67</sup> Bellamy’s remarks on the inspiration for, and production of, *Looking Backward* are filled with words of hope, promise, and the belief in the viability of his political vision. Yet, Bellamy was also quite the skeptic concerning definite schemes and final solutions to social problems. Though Bellamy believed that his ideas were valuable and viable, he also believed that there were always better plans to come. Bellamy declared that “[*Looking Backward*], although in form a fanciful romance, [was] intended, in all seriousness as a forecast,” but he also said, “I do not insist on any detail in *Looking Backward*.”<sup>68</sup> In his second lyceum talk of 1871, Bellamy adamantly explained that he never intended to offer a blueprint for a perfect world: “If you expect from me...a theory of Socialism, if you expect a minute description of that new world whose peace and liberty and happiness I have told you, you will be disappointed. It is an undiscovered country, no community of men ever assayed

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<sup>66</sup> Bellamy, “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward’” 223.

<sup>67</sup> Bellamy, “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward’” 226.

<sup>68</sup> Edward Bellamy, “Excerpts from the Notebooks,” in *Revisiting the Legacy of Edward Bellamy (1850-1898), American Author and Social Reformer*. Eds. Toby Widdicombe and Herman S. Preiser (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen P, 2002) 276, 264.

its elysian climes, no human footstep has ever trod its shores.”<sup>69</sup> Throughout his life and his writing, Edward Bellamy was “plagued infinitely by a sense of the insecurity of foundations,” unable and reluctant to offer concrete prescriptions for social betterment.<sup>70</sup> This theme is evident in *Looking Backward* and nearly all of Bellamy’s fiction.

In *Apparitions of Things to Come: Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (1990), Franklin Rosemont offers a compilation of Bellamy’s short stories, some reprints from earlier collections and some published for the first time, and highlights the playfulness in Bellamy’s work. According to Rosemont, “Each tale challenges conventional, reified notions of reality, behavior, society or human nature.”<sup>71</sup> Irony, ambiguity, and instability are prominent features of Bellamy’s shorter fiction, as well as his utopian novels. Throughout his career, Bellamy explored such themes as “the deception of appearances...double vision...ambiguities of personal identity, enigmas of the familiar...and all manner of disturbing reversals of common-sense assumptions,”<sup>72</sup> and two of the most important subjects for Bellamy were identity and time. For example, in “The Old Folk’s Party” (1876), a social club decides to host an event and Henry Long suggests guests dress as they expect they will look fifty years in the future. At the suggestion of this party theme, one club member says, “You mean a sort of ghost party...ghosts of the future, instead of ghosts of the past,” to which Long replies, “That’s

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<sup>69</sup> Bellamy, “Second Lyceum Talk” 9.

<sup>70</sup> Bellamy, “Excerpts from the Notebooks” 252.

<sup>71</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Apparitions of Things to Come: Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. Ed. Franklin Rosemont (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr P, 1990) 5.

<sup>72</sup> Franklin Rosemont, “Introduction.” Edward Bellamy, *Apparitions of Things to Come: Tales of Mystery and Imagination*.

it exactly...Ghosts of the future are the only sort worth heeding. Apparitions of things past are a very unpractical sort of demonology, in my opinion, compared with apparitions of things to come.”<sup>73</sup> As the club members begin to discuss the idea of shifting identities, their relationship to their future selves, and the contemporary elders in their community, they begin to experience a crisis of language:

“I’m all tangled up in my mind,” said Nellie, with an air of perplexity, “between these old people you are talking about and ourselves. Which is which? It seems odd to talk of them in the third person, and of ourselves in the first. Aren’t they ourselves too?”

“If they are, then certainly we are not,” replied Henry. “You may take your choice.”

“The fact is,” he added, as she looked still more puzzled, “there are half a dozen of each one of us, or a dozen if you please, one in fact for each epoch of life, and each slightly or almost wholly different from the others...So that the different periods of life are to all intents and purposes different persons, and the first person of grammar ought to be used only with the present tense. What we were, or shall be, or do, belongs strictly to the third person.”

“You would make sad work of grammar with that notion,” said Jessie, smiling.

“Grammar needs mending just there,” replied Henry. “The three persons of grammar are really not enough. A fourth is needed to distinguish the ego of the past and future from the present ego, which is the only true one.”

“Oh, you’re getting altogether too deep for me,” said Jessie.<sup>74</sup>

This passage suggests the inadequacy of language to account for future identities, a characteristic of literary utopias that informed nearly all of Bellamy’s fiction. The

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<sup>73</sup> Edward Bellamy, “The Old Folk’s Party,” in *Apparitions of Things to Come: Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. Ed. Franklin Rosemont (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr P, 1990) 47.

<sup>74</sup> Edward Bellamy, “The Old Folk’s Party” 49.

inability to effectively articulate future realities lies at the heart of literary utopias and Bellamy's own belief that the future itself is inarticulable belies critics' assertions that Bellamy offered concrete forecasts of the time to come. According to an editorial appearing in *The Arena* after Bellamy's death, "[Bellamy] perceived clearly that there is no finality in the human evolution, but only an ongoing and new development for ever and ever."<sup>75</sup> In fact, Bellamy once wrote, "Revolutions do not follow prearranged plans,"<sup>76</sup> and in *Looking Backward* he explained that the "idea of indefinite progress in a right line was a chimera of the imagination."<sup>77</sup> Bellamy, always troubled by the insufficiency of accepted truths, spent much of his life searching for something more; never satisfied, he remained nevertheless hopeful in his quest. In his 1871 notebooks, Bellamy wrote: "For a while, indeed, the young man may remain satisfied with the ideals of truth and duty in which he was bred. Then seeing, or fancying that he sees their insufficiency, he casts them aside and with soul wide open goes through dry places seeking everywhere to find God."<sup>78</sup> Questions concerning the instability of time, identity, and language left Bellamy with conflicting feelings of hope and homelessness and this tension structures much of *Looking Backward*.

Bellamy was a thoughtful man who, like his narrator in *Looking Backward*, often felt at sea in the world. When Julian West awakens in Boston 2000 he observes: "In my mind, all had broken loose, habits of feeling, associations of thought, ideas of persons and

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<sup>75</sup> John Clark Ridpath, "Is the Prophet Dead?" *The Arena* (August 1898): 245.

<sup>76</sup> W. D. P. Bliss, *Encyclopedia of Social Reform* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1910) 811.

<sup>77</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 54.

<sup>78</sup> Edward Bellamy, "Personal Notebooks" (1871). Quoted in Sylvia Bowman's *Edward Bellamy* (Twayne: Boston, 1986) 9.

things, all had dissolved and lost coherence and were seething together in apparently irretrievable chaos. There were no rallying points, nothing was left stable.”<sup>79</sup> West’s feelings of homelessness are described throughout the novel, but Bellamy devotes an entire chapter to trying, vainly, to convey West’s predicament. West is not only troubled by his dislocation but his inability to articulate his feelings: “There are no words for the mental torture I endured during this helpless, eyeless groping for myself in a boundless void...The anguish of those moments, during which my brain seemed melting, or the abjectness of my sense of helplessness, how can I describe?”<sup>80</sup> This crisis of language, similar to the one presented in “The Old Folk’s Party,” occurs toward the end of the novel when Julian explains to Edith: “Has it never occurred to you that my position is so much more utterly alone than any human being’s ever was before that a new word is really needed to describe it?”<sup>81</sup> Not coincidentally, language fails Julian when he tries to articulate his feelings in the future-present in relation to his past, and he begins to feel all the more homeless in his surroundings: “The past was dead, crushed beneath a century’s weight, and from the present I was shut out. There was no place for me anywhere. I was neither dead nor properly alive.”<sup>82</sup> Bellamy once wrote, “Time daily recreates our individuality,” and Julian’s narrative certainly bears this out when at every turn he questions who he is and where he belongs.<sup>83</sup> The conclusion of *Looking Backward*

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<sup>79</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 89.

<sup>80</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 88, 91.

<sup>81</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 219.

<sup>82</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 219.

<sup>83</sup> Bellamy, “Excerpts from the Notebooks.” Houghton Library bMS Am 1181.10.



emphasizes the function of time in the narrative as Bellamy has Julian return to the nineteenth century in a dream, only to awaken to the reality of the twentieth century: “I realized that my return to the nineteenth century had been the dream and my presence in the twentieth was the reality.”<sup>84</sup> Rather than returning the traveler-narrator home to the nineteenth century, Bellamy reverses reader expectations and allows Julian to remain in the twentieth century with Edith. But, for Julian to reconcile the past with the future he must merge the Edith of the nineteenth century with the Edith of twentieth: “My love, whom I had dreamed lost, had been reembodied for my consolation. When at last, in an ecstasy of gratitude and tenderness, I folded the lovely girl in my arms, the two Ediths were blended in my thought, nor have they ever since been clearly distinguished.”<sup>85</sup> This tension between, and conflation of, the past, present, and future is characteristic of many of Bellamy’s writings, but it manifests most pointedly in his utopian work. Among several story ideas chronicled in his personal notebooks, Bellamy wrote: “Time-Buying Business: A man starts an agency for buying up odds and ends of time cheap and selling them dear...Show how time is made in long strips, variously colored, very elastic in parts and in others tough and thick, etc.”<sup>86</sup> Bellamy, far from being dogmatically attached to a linear and divisible conception of time, was very much invested in the fluidity of time and the idea of a world always to come. Ironically, Bellamy tempered his hope with a dose of cynicism, remarking that hope is “necessary only to support men under the

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<sup>84</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 240.

<sup>85</sup> Bellamy *Looking Backward* 223.

<sup>86</sup> Bellamy, “Excerpts from the Notebooks.” Houghton Library bMS Am 1181.10.

suspense of uncertainty” and “the pleasing side of doubt as fear is its unpleasant.”<sup>87</sup>

Bellamy seemed at times to be both liberated and burdened by uncertainty, and always fascinated with questions, thought experiments, paradoxes, and the contingency of all things. Edward Bellamy’s daughter, Marion Bellamy Earnshaw, quoted her father as saying, “All writers are fishermen in the sea of their own minds, as it were, sitting by the current of their own thoughts and angling therein. All’s fish that comes to my net and I shall not reject any sort. It is not a question which side of a subject is the true side, all are true. None can be fully urged without qualifications by the others.”<sup>88</sup> Far from a dogmatic allegiance to a future vision, Bellamy often revised his own work and courted debate from others. In fact, though Bellamy was very reserved and unassuming, he actively engaged in the public discourse surrounding *Looking Backward* and his commitment to revision and openness to dialogue finds clear expression in his second utopian effort, *Equality* (1897).

By all accounts, Edward Bellamy was a quiet, private, and modest man who left unforgettable impressions of wisdom, kindness, and grace on nearly everyone he met. Bellamy was a homebody who, according to one reporter, spent “most of his leisure hours sorting and labeling his collection of rare sea shells.”<sup>89</sup> This reserved constitution explains his early reluctance to court the public: “When fame came to him, he refused to be lionized. He would not go to the lecture platform, would not attend dinners in his

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<sup>87</sup> Edward Bellamy, “Bellamy’s Notebooks.” Quoted in Toby Widdicombe and Herman S. Preiser’s *Revisiting the Legacy of Edward Bellamy* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen P, 2002) 243.

<sup>88</sup> Marion Bellamy Earnshaw, “The Light of Other Days.” Quoted in Toby Widdicombe and Herman S. Preiser’s *Revisiting the Legacy of Edward Bellamy* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen P, 2002) 322.

<sup>89</sup> “No Title,” *Current Literature* 3.5 (Nov 1889): 441.

honor, [and] skillfully avoided receptions, teas, meetings.”<sup>90</sup> Bellamy’s daughter, Marion, recalls that her father “was so simple...that the first intimation I ever had that he was different from other children’s fathers was when I was in the second grade in school. The superintendent of the school appeared in my room with two strangers, and the teacher called me forward, whereupon the men asked if I was Edward Bellamy’s daughter, and shook hands with me. When I told the incident at home that day, my father appeared to be very much annoyed.”<sup>91</sup> Bellamy’s modesty extended to his publishing affairs as well. When Benjamin Ticknor wrote to Bellamy prior to publishing *Looking Backward*, he suggested that Bellamy take a publicity photo for the book, to which Bellamy replied, “Boon me mighty gently...very respectfully yours, but a little shy on this photograph.”<sup>92</sup> Bellamy’s humility belies any suggestion that he was a dogmatic, insistent, and myopic reformer who viewed his projections in *Looking Backward* and *Equality* as final solutions. In fact, Bellamy always remained open to criticism and debate and, according to William Dean Howells, “wore himself out in thinking and feeling about [his work].”<sup>93</sup>

In “‘Looking Backward’ Again,” appearing in *The North American Review* in March, 1890, two years after the publication of *Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy responded to the praise and criticism he received concerning his vision of the future:

I don’t mind admitting that I have greatly enjoyed the pleasant things which have been said about ‘Looking Backward,’ and am much obliged to

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<sup>90</sup> Arthur E. Morgan, *The Philosophy of Edward Bellam*. (New York: Greenwood, 1979) 150.

<sup>91</sup> Morgan 144.

<sup>92</sup> Bellamy, “Excerpts from the Notebooks” 275.

<sup>93</sup> Howells, “Edward Bellamy” 256.

those who have found it consistent with their consciences to say them. At the same time, I have read such serious criticisms of the book and its plan of industrial reform as have come to my notice with greater interest, if not greater pleasure, than the congratulatory notices....Though I advance in 'Looking Backward' a series of details of such an organization, which seems to me not unreasonable, I have been far from considering them as necessarily the best devices possible, and have accordingly been on the lookout for valuable criticism and suggestions.<sup>94</sup>

The responses to *Looking Backward* were numerous and varied, including critiques from such high profile figures as Eugene V. Debs, Henry George, William Morris, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman who found fault with Bellamy's novel for its paternalism, lack of a definite schema for achievement, privileging of industry, and treatment of women, respectively. In response to his critics, Bellamy began in earnest to address these concerns and his efforts resulted in the publication of *Equality* (1897). This sequel to *Looking Backward* attempts to fill in the gaps left by its predecessor to offer a clearer, more complete, vision of the future. In his Preface to *Equality*, Bellamy explains: "Looking Backward was a small book, and I was not able to get into it all I wished to say on the subject. Since it was published what was left out of it has loomed up as so much more important than what it contained that I have been constrained to write another book. I have taken the date of *Looking Backward*, the year 2000, as that of *Equality*, and have utilized the framework of the former story as a starting point for this which I now offer."<sup>95</sup> Ironically, at the same time *Equality* attempts to complete the fractured schema set forth in *Looking Backward*, it only succeeds in creating even more gaps and ambiguity.

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<sup>94</sup> Edward Bellamy, "'Looking Backward' Again," *The North American Review* (Mar. 1890): 179-80.

<sup>95</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Equality*. New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1937, vii.

Hoping that Bellamy's sequel would provide direction and answer questions left by *Looking Backward*, both supporters and detractors eagerly anticipated the publication of *Equality*. Unfortunately, Bellamy's second utopian novel received a lukewarm response and many contemporary reviewers felt that it produced more questions than answers. In fact, very few favorable reviews were given to *Equality*, save one by B. O. Flower, disciple of Henry George and Edward Bellamy and founder of *The Arena*, who wrote: "In *Equality* Mr. Bellamy has elucidated the new political economy of socialism under the guise of fiction and in a popular yet clear and comprehensive manner."<sup>96</sup> Most responses to Bellamy's sequel are characterized by disappointment, with one of Bellamy's closest friends, William Dean Howells, being one of the harshest critics. In an article written shortly after Bellamy's death, Howells remarked: "[*Equality*] disappointed me, to be frank. I thought it artistically inferior to anything else he had done. I thought it was a mistake to have any story at all in it, or not to have vastly more. I felt that it was not enough to clothe the dry bones of its sociology with paper garments out of *Looking Backward*...there was no thrill or throb in the book."<sup>97</sup> Later critics find the sequel similarly lacking in literary merit, but relatively successful in continuing the thesis of its predecessor. In her biography of Edward Bellamy, Sylvia E. Bowman writes: "*Equality* is clear and informative, but also somewhat boring."<sup>98</sup> Likewise, Vernon L. Parrington, a pioneer of American utopian studies, observes in *American Dreams: A Study of American Utopias* (1964) that *Equality* "came as an anti-climax, the result of Bellamy's...attempts

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<sup>96</sup> B. O. Flower, "The Latest Social Vision," 18.95. *The Arena* (Oct. 1897): 518-519.

<sup>97</sup> Howells, "Edward Bellamy" 255.

<sup>98</sup> Bowman 25.

to defend the thesis of *Looking Backward*. It is a continuation of *Looking Backward*, an exposition in more detailed fashion of matters of economic arrangement. *Equality* is not a very good novel.”<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Ida Tarbell, one of the leading muckrakers of the early twentieth century, notes that *Equality* lacked *Looking Backward*’s “fresh, imaginative quality [and] its charm of narrative,” but that Bellamy also “[took] care of the criticism he had aroused and shows in detail how his state would function.”<sup>100</sup> For the most part, critics agree that what Bellamy’s second utopian novel lacks in literary value, it makes up for in increased socio-economic detail. However, though Bellamy answers his critics in *Equality*, he does not offer a cohesive, consistent portrait of a future state. On the contrary, rather than offer a definitive illustration, Bellamy delivers a more ambiguous and open-ended narrative and shows that even as the novel purports to fill gaps and remedy inconsistencies, it cannot succeed in its task as the ironic nature of utopia undermines the very attempt.

True to reviewers’ assertions, Bellamy does answer his critics in *Equality*. In response to William Morris’s remarks concerning the privileging of the urban and the devaluation of nature in *Looking Backward*, Bellamy makes Boston a much smaller city and he places more of an emphasis on ecology. For example, when Julian remarks to Dr. Leete, ““When I was last in the world of living people...the city was fast devouring the country. Has that process gone on, or has it possibly been reversed?,”” Dr. Leete replies:

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<sup>99</sup> Vernon L. Parrington, *American Dreams: A Study of American Utopias* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964) 94-95.

<sup>100</sup> Ida M. Tarbell, “New Dealers of the ‘Seventies: Henry George and Edward Bellamy,” *Forum* 92.3 (Sept. 1934): 137-145, 139.

“Decidedly the latter.”<sup>101</sup> Bellamy also describes reforestation, the recycling of sea water, and the harnessing of tides, winds, and waterfalls for natural energy. Similarly, where Henry George found fault with a lack of detail concerning the Great Revolution, Bellamy explains more clearly “the steps by which the transition from the old to the new order was effected without disastrous confusion.”<sup>102</sup> Another obvious departure from *Looking Backward* is Bellamy’s emphasis on the equality of women, a revision undoubtedly influenced by the feminist converts to Bellamy’s Nationalist movement, Charlotte Perkins Gilman among them. An admirer of, and advocate for, Bellamy’s politics, Gilman was impressed by Bellamy’s “largeness of thought,” “daring imagination,” and the “immense human love” in his work.<sup>103</sup> With the increased participation of feminist supporters, Bellamy made certain to adjust his treatment of women in *Equality* and he devotes one of the longest chapters of the book, “What the Revolution Did For Women,” exclusively to the subject, making clear that “[e]quality is the only moral relation between human beings.”<sup>104</sup> But, for all of his amendments, Bellamy is unable to create a consistently clear picture and some of the same incongruities that plagued *Looking Backward* return again in *Equality*.

As in *Looking Backward*, one of the chief examples of inconsistency in *Equality* is the predominance of private space in a socialist state. When Julian encounters Mr.

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<sup>101</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 291.

<sup>102</sup> Edward Bellamy, “Unused Preface to *Equality*,” qtd. in Sylvia E. Bowman *Edward Bellamy* (Boston: Twayne, 1986) 43.

<sup>103</sup> Mary A. Hill, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1980) 171.

<sup>104</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 133.

Barton, the preacher from *Looking Backward* reappears in the sequel, for a discussion of religion, we find that the twentieth century has no need for churches and there still exists a lack of social interaction. In response to Julian's query concerning churches, Mr. Barton rationalizes this incongruity explaining:

“[W]e have little or no use for churches at all...when we assemble now we need no longer bring our bodies with us. It is a curious paradox that while the telephone and electroscope, by abolishing distance as a hindrance to sight and hearing, have brought mankind into a closeness of sympathetic and intellectual rapport never before imagined, they have at the same time enabled individuals, although keeping in closest touch with everything going on in the world, to enjoy, if they choose, a physical privacy, such as one had to be a hermit to command in your day. Our advantages in this respect have so far spoiled us that being in a crowd, which was the matter-of-course penalty you had to pay for seeing or hearing anything interesting, would seem too dear a price to pay for almost any enjoyment.”<sup>105</sup>

The electroscope allows for the viewer to both see and hear events around the world.

When Dr. Leete first introduces Julian to the invention, he tells him that “[t]hey don't see or hear us, though we both see and hear them so well.”<sup>106</sup> Clearly, the communication of information is one-sided and unilateral and there exists no real communion or intellectual rapport at all. In a socialist society, it is a particularly remarkable contradiction that privacy is privileged and most communal events are eliminated. This tension is similarly noted in a passage where Bellamy describes the elimination of animal foods in 2000 and their replacement by the innovations brought about by a community of imaginative persons. According to Dr. Leete, this transformation could not have transpired if the

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<sup>105</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 255.

<sup>106</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 157.



citizens of 2000 were isolated like their nineteenth century brethren: “Now, it must remain very doubtful how immediately successful the revolt against animal food would have proved if the average family cook, whether wife or hireling, had been left each for herself in her private kitchen to grapple with the problem of providing for the table a satisfactory substitute for flesh.”<sup>107</sup> Dr. Leete further explains that in the new millennium, food preparation responsibility left the domestic sphere and became a community public service effort, implying that isolation breeds conservatism and community breeds creativity, leaving the reader to wonder as to the implications of the increased privacy in the twenty-first century and the decrease of communal opportunities.

This tension between the individual and community extends from Boston 2000 to Bellamy’s illustration of a “world union” and the elimination of national allegiances in favor of global solidarity. Though Bellamy touches on the global vs. local discussion in *Looking Backward* when Dr. Leete tells Julian that “we all look forward to an eventual unification of the world as one nation [that] will be the ultimate form of society,” he gives it decidedly more attention in *Equality*.<sup>108</sup> Curiously, however, as Bellamy describes this new union he also emphasizes the importance of national patriotism, a concept that seems contradictory. At one point, Dr. Leete explains to Julian that nations are “scarcely more than delimitations of territory for administrative convenience, like the State lines in the American Union.” But, directly after this exchange, Dr. Leete asserts that the “American, as he now lifts his eyes to the ensign of the nation...recall[s] rather

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<sup>107</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 288.

<sup>108</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 128. See Thomas Peyser’s *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998) for a discussion of the world economy in Bellamy’s work.

the compact of brotherhood in which he stands pledged with all his countrymen mutually to safeguard the equal dignity and welfare of each by the might of all.”<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, while Dr. Leete champions the organization of a world union, he also underscores the importance of national solidarity and national preservation. Dr. Leete’s male-centered rhetoric in this chapter is also curious considering Boston 2000 has presumably eliminated such customs. Of course, language, too, is addressed with concern for national and global identification when Mr. Barton explains to Julian the development of a universal language in accordance with the newly achieved global unity: “Of course, everybody talks the language of his own country with his countrymen, but with the rest of the world he talks the general language—that is to say, we have nowadays to acquire but two languages to talk to all peoples—our own, and the universal...A number of the smaller nations have wholly abandoned their national tongue and talk only the general language.”<sup>110</sup> This discussion highlights the tension embodied in a utopian cosmopolitan ideal and the question of the coexistence of individual identities and communal customs in a framework of global union and universality.

*Equality* is filled with as many contradictions as *Looking Backward*, further highlighting the very impossibility of representing a perfect world. For instance, Dr. Leete simultaneously asserts that the “centralized discipline of the national industrial army, depend[s] for its enforcement not so much on force as on the inability of any one to subsist outside of the system,” but that “some isolated communities, however,

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<sup>109</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 279.

<sup>110</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 257.

remained.”<sup>111</sup> Elsewhere, Dr. Leete explains: “If an adult, being neither criminal nor insane, should deliberately and fixedly refuse to render his quota of service in any way, either in a chosen occupation or, on failure to choose, in an assigned one, he would be furnished with such a collection of seeds and tools as he might choose and turned loose on a reservation expressly prepared for such persons.”<sup>112</sup> The contradictions of this statement are twofold: Firstly, in a system that purports to have evolved so rapidly, there still exist citizens who are criminal or insane, and secondly, even though presumably no one can exist outside of the system, the system clearly accounts for citizens who do. Like *Looking Backward* such conflicts are present throughout the novel, yet what distinguishes *Equality* from its predecessor is the increased emphasis on dialogue, discussion, and openness, elements that not only figure prominently in Bellamy’s sequel, but also characterize his other writings and social activism.

The recognition of irony and impossibility in utopian literature allows for the appreciation of the contradictions in these texts and the prevalence of dialogue and debate. Rather than tying their narratives up in neat packages, utopian authors, like Bellamy, invite discussion and resist closure with open-ended discourse. *Equality* both begins and ends with an emphasis on questioning and deliberation; the first and last chapters, “A Sharp Cross-Examiner” and “The Book of the Blind,” respectively, highlight the dialogue that structures the majority of the narrative. The opening chapter consists mainly of Edith Leete questioning Julian West on life in the nineteenth century, examining the ideas of freedom, equality, and liberty, in particular. Through this

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<sup>111</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 364-365, 361.

<sup>112</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 41.

exchange, the hypocrisy of nineteenth century political rhetoric is revealed as Edith remarks: “[I]t seems that the reason I could not understand the so-called popular system of government in your day is that I was trying to find out what part the people had in it, and it appears that they had no part at all,” to which Julian replies: “You are a merciless cross-examiner.”<sup>113</sup> Later, Julian remarks to Dr. Leete: “Your daughter...has been proving herself a mistress of the Socratic method. Under a plausible pretext of gross ignorance, she has been asking me a series of easy questions, with the result that I see as I never imagined it before the colossal sham of our pretended popular government in America.”<sup>114</sup> This opening discussion serves to reveal the inadequacy of nineteenth century social systems, rather than insist on the perfection of twenty-first century Boston. Initial conversations underscore the importance of dialogue throughout the novel and prepare the reader to expect a series of revealed contradictions, as Julian admits to Dr. Leete: “I ought by this time to be used to finding that everything goes by contraries in these days.”<sup>115</sup> Though it is Edith that initiates the exchange at the novel’s opening, Dr. Leete’s conversations with Julian more clearly reveal the anti-dogmatic nature of Bellamy’s text.

Far from the doctrinaire and autocratic figure traditionally associated with representatives of utopian states, Dr. Leete displays a broadminded interest in different points of view and a concern for personal and social betterment, declaring: “If our system can not stand on its merits as the best possible arrangement for promoting the

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<sup>113</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 13.

<sup>114</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 14.

<sup>115</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 24.

highest welfare of all, let it fall... We think we have the best possible social system, but if there is a better [sic] we want to know it, so that we may adopt it. We encourage the spirit of experiment.”<sup>116</sup> Not only is Dr. Leete open to new ideas, he is not content to wait for them to present themselves as he makes a point of doing his own research and investigation. After a long discussion with Julian, Dr. Leete admits that the “conversation this morning has indicated lines of research with will keep me busy in the library the rest of the day.”<sup>117</sup> Similarly, Dr. Leete does not just pay lip service to the idea of experiment and reconsideration, nor does he treat his debates with Julian as purely private intellectual exercises. At one point, in a conversation concerning property rights, Julian suggests that he confront the judicial system of Boston 2000 and ask how it would address the issue of the security papers in his lockbox from the nineteenth century.

Rather than dogmatically dismiss the legitimacy of Julian’s claim, Dr. Leete replies:

“[I]t would be an excellent idea if you were to do just what you have suggested—that is, bring formal suit against the nation for reinstatement in your former property. It would arouse the liveliest popular interest and stimulate a discussion of the ethical basis of our economic equality that would be of great educational value to the community...It would be a good thing for the people to have their minds stirred up on the subject and be compelled to do some fundamental thinking...The judges, you may be sure, would treat you with the greatest consideration. They would at once...have the whole question of wealth distribution and the rights of property reopened from the beginning, and be ready to discuss it in the broadest spirit.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 41.

<sup>117</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 42.

<sup>118</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 71-72.

As a civic leader, Dr. Leete is clearly invested in the betterment of his community and the strength of their laws and values, even if that means questioning the very foundations of their ethos. Contrary to the assertions of Bellamy's critics, who declared that in *Equality* "Bellamy wanted to convince everyone that [Nationalism] was not just one way to bring about reform, but *the way*," this chapter clearly indicates that the society Bellamy envisions is not one that rigidly stifles discussion, but rather welcomes and encourages innovation, experiment, and opposition.<sup>119</sup> In fact, Boston 2000 is clearly not the "heaven on earth" ideal that utopia's critics lampoon; when Julian playfully asks Dr. Leete if they have "abolished death," Dr. Leete laughs and replies: "I assure you...that if perchance anyone should find out the secret of that, the people would mob him and burn up his formula. Do you suppose we want to be shut up here forever?"<sup>120</sup>

The concluding chapter of *Equality*, "The Book of the Blind," offers the best evidence as to Bellamy's anti-conservatism and commitment to debate. As one reviewer wrote in 1898, "Bellamy has not forgotten the objectors, and their objections have been carefully collected and preserved in what is called, not inappropriately, 'The Book of the Blind'."<sup>121</sup> This chapter describes Boston 2000's historical archive: "The Book of the Blind is nearly a hundred years old, having been compiled soon after the triumph of the Revolution. Everybody was happy, and the people in their joy were willing to forgive and forget the bitter opposition of the capitalists and the learned class,

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<sup>119</sup> Vernon L. Parrington, *American Dreams: A Study of American Utopias* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964) 94.

<sup>120</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 284.

<sup>121</sup> W. Fleming Phillips, "Edward Bellamy: Prophet of Nationalism," *The Westminster Review* 150.5 (Nov 1898): 498-504, 502.

which had so long held back the blessed change...But [one historian], moved by a certain crabbed sense of justice, was bound that they should not be forgotten.”<sup>122</sup> A collection of all of the historical evidence supporting the time before the Great Revolution, this compilation was undertaken to insure that posterity would have proof of the barbarism of earlier times. This book serves to chronicle earlier objections to the Great Revolution, but it also functions to encourage debate and discussion concerning the viability of the new system. This chapter examines several historical objections to the tenets of the Great Revolution, including “The Pulpit Objection,” “The Lack of Incentive Objection,” and the “Objection that Equality Would End the Competitive System,” among others. The last objection addressed, “The Malthusian Objection,” argues that with all of the benefits realized by the Great Revolution would come a “much faster increase of population than ever before known, and ultimately an overcrowding of the earth.”<sup>123</sup> Dr. Leete debates this objection with Julian and argues that because of the increased options for women in a system of equality, “while we may be sure that the maternal instinct will forever prevent the race from dying out, the world will be equally little in danger of being recklessly overcrowded.”<sup>124</sup> These are the final words of the text and Bellamy’s abrupt conclusion to his novel seems rather odd as the reader surely expects Julian to have the last word. Either Bellamy never finished the book or he intentionally left the conversation between Dr. Leete and Julian, and, by extension, between himself and the reader, open-ended. Historical record favors the latter. Although Bellamy was dying of tuberculosis while

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<sup>122</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 382.

<sup>123</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 410.

<sup>124</sup> Bellamy, *Equality* 412.

writing *Equality*, the novel was published in 1897 and Bellamy died, at home in Chicopee Falls, in 1898. Bellamy relished the opportunity to respond to the numerous criticisms to *Looking Backward*, and *Equality* was intended, by all accounts, to be Bellamy's opus. Bellamy's decision to leave the text open and to invite further response and critique is noteworthy and clearly indicative of utopia's resistance to closure.

Bellamy's utopian novels advance through a series of dialogues and mediations. Julian, as narrator and guide, is the mediator between the reader and the worlds in the texts, just as Dr. Leete and Edith serve as his guides in the narratives. In *Looking Backward*, Julian admits that he has developed the "habit of looking to [Edith] as the mediator between me and the world" and the exchanges that transpire in *Looking Backward* and *Equality* both answer and provoke questions about nineteenth century America and Boston 2000.<sup>125</sup> Bellamy's affinity for discussion and debate extended beyond his utopian novels and characterized the majority of his written work and public relations. In fact, Bellamy's penchant for dialogic discourse is evident from his first foray into journalism when he and his brother, Charles, published a tri-weekly newspaper, "The Springfield Penny News." Later renamed the "Daily News," Edward Bellamy contributed a feature column to this paper that chronicled a series of discussions with a fictional character named Isaac that addressed new theories, concepts, and ideas, as well as social problems of the day.<sup>126</sup> Bellamy was quite fond of incorporating dialogue in his writing and the form can be found throughout his earlier fiction, but is

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<sup>125</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 218.

<sup>126</sup> See Bowman's *Edward Bellamy* 16-17.



used most extensively in his utopian work. In fact, the debates that figured so prominently in *Looking Backward* and *Equality* carried over into a very public discourse.

In *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (1894), Henry Demarest Lloyd remarked that *Looking Backward* was “[d]ebated by all down to the bootblack on the curbstones” and the novel influenced the organization of Bellamy Clubs, the formation of the Nationalist Party, and the publication of several periodicals and sequels.<sup>127</sup> In its first year, *Looking Backward* posted modest sales of ten thousand copies, but by 1889 the novel sold over 2,000 copies a week and by 1891 it was translated into four major languages with over half a million copies in circulation. *Looking Backward* was the second novel to ever sell more than one million copies—Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was the first—and it was eventually translated into more than twenty languages. In fact, the novel is still in circulation today with a new edition released in 2003, refuting one nineteenth century critic’s assertion that “a man of the year 2000 A. D. will consider its wide sale one of the curiously interesting but transitory phenomena of the last quarter of the nineteenth century.”<sup>128</sup> Though *Looking Backward* was not a critical success, it was certainly a popular one, both domestically and abroad, and in 1890, Bellamy remarked that the reason the novel was so well-received was because it greeted a public ready to accept the “necessity and possibility of radical social reform.”<sup>129</sup> The late nineteenth century was certainly ripe for the reception of Bellamy’s text as its last decades marked a dramatic increase in social reforms. At a time when both political parties seemed too

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<sup>127</sup> Henry Demarest Lloyd, *Wealth Against Commonwealth*. (New York: Harper, 1894) 528.

<sup>128</sup> “Philanthropic Fiction,” *A Monthly Review of Current Literature* 20.11 (May 1889): 176.

<sup>129</sup> Bellamy, “‘Looking Backward’ Again” 180.

closely aligned with the Great Trusts, Americans' faith in democracy was shaky to say the least. This instability along with rapid technological and industrial expansion, the Panic of 1873, the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, and the Haymarket Square Riot of 1886, among other developments, prompted the emergence of unprecedented collective action. The organization of the farmer's movement, women's movement, and labor movement marked the appearance of widespread activism for social change. The formation of such associations as the American Equal Rights Association (1866), National Women's Suffrage Association (1869), Women's Christian Temperance Union (1874), Farmer's Alliance (1877), and the American Federation of Labor (1886), increased awareness of America's social problems and contributed to a climate eager to discuss directions for social betterment. *Looking Backward* appeared at the cusp of these developments and the public quickly absorbed Bellamy's message. As the famed investigative journalist Ida Tarbell notes, "Edward Bellamy, set his imagination to work on the materials he saw men about him using...It was a beautiful, orderly, peaceful state which Bellamy pictured and it came as an escape at a moment of tumult and uncertainty."<sup>130</sup> The direction Bellamy provided inspired the development of more than 150 Bellamy Clubs in America and around the world, including Australia, England, Germany, Holland, Indonesia, South Africa, and New Zealand.<sup>131</sup> After receiving separate proposals in 1888 from journalists Sylvester Baxter (*The Boston Globe*) and Cyrus Willard (*The Boston Globe*) suggesting that a club be formed for the discussion

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<sup>130</sup> Ida M. Tarbell, "New Dealers of the 'Seventies: Henry George and Edward Bellamy." *Forum* 92.3 (Sep 1934): 133, 138.

<sup>131</sup> See Sylvia E. Bowman, *Edward Bellamy Abroad: An American Prophet's Influence* (New York: Twayne P, 1962).

and dissemination of the ideas in *Looking Backward*, Bellamy recommended that the two gentleman form such an organization.<sup>132</sup> The inaugural Bellamy Club of Boston held its first meeting on January 8, 1889 with fifty members in attendance. At its second anniversary meeting, more than two thousand people attended to hear Bellamy speak. After April 1889, clubs were organized throughout America, in New York, Washington D. C., Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Louis, and several other large cities with sixty-two clubs formed in California alone. The widespread formation of Bellamy Clubs was only the beginning of a phenomenon that soon spawned periodicals, *Looking Backward* sequels, and the formation of a political party.

Nineteenth century critics declared the widespread influence of Bellamy's utopian novel merely a passing fancy. In August 1889, one critic proclaimed:

One of the most interesting features of the month is the development of the spectacle of the educated Bostonese enrolling themselves under the Socialistic gonfalon of Bellamy's work of fiction—*Looking Backward*. This quick move for social salvation is Boston's latest literary fad. Bellamy has been made an apostle. Such men of intelligence and public prominence as Col. T. W. Higginson, Rev. Minor J. Savage, Wm. D. Howells, and the Rev. Edward Everett Hale are in the front rank of the enthusiasts. A magazine has been established—the *Nationalist*... Nationalist clubs are forming in every direction, and there is a decided clamour to march straight back in barbarism—modern barbarism—where these conditions are to exist: No man to be better than his neighbor.<sup>133</sup>

But, Bellamy's influence was hardly a fleeting fad as by December 1889 over fifty newspapers and magazines across the country, including *The Altruist* in St. Louis, *The True Commonwealth* in Washington D. C., and *The Pacific Monthly* in San Francisco,

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<sup>132</sup> Bowman, *Edward Bellamy* 24.

<sup>133</sup> "Review I—No Title," *Current Literature* 3.2 (Aug 1889): 93.

promoted the ideas in *Looking Backward* and Bellamy's Nationalism philosophy.<sup>134</sup> By April 1890, William Lloyd Garrison declared that the "Nationalist movement with its rapid increase of numbers and extending literature is one that, whether deserving it or not, commands public attention."<sup>135</sup> Bellamy's influence was also acknowledged in an 1890 *North American Review* article that stated Nationalism was one of the strongest currents of discussion in America, along with the woman question and electric lighting.<sup>136</sup> The Bellamy Clubs eventually gave way to Nationalist Clubs which, in turn, evolved into the formation of the Nationalist Party. The *Nationalist* periodical appeared in 1889 and Bellamy eventually lent his own voice to the party platform with the *New Nation*, a weekly paper with over 8,000 subscribers, in 1891. Bellamy contributed a regular column to the *New Nation* called "Talks on Nationalism," where he returned to his familiar dialogic style, using the pen name Mr. Smith, and would later use the material in *Equality*. After the publication of the *New Nation* and his endorsement of Nationalist politics, Bellamy eschewed his relatively low profile and emerged as a strong political voice. The Nationalist agenda extended the ideas Bellamy set forth in *Looking Backward* and its "Declaration of Principles" advocated the renouncement of competition, the solidarity of humanity, and the equality of conditions for all. The party achieved such prominence that Nationalist representatives were invited to a May 1891 convention for the formation of an official Third Party. The success of the Nationalists, like the success of *Looking Backward*, prompted further reaction from critics and Bellamy responded.

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<sup>134</sup> Bowman, *Edward Bellamy* 112.

<sup>135</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, "The Mask of Tyranny," *Arena* (April 1890): 554.

<sup>136</sup> "Notes and Comments," *North American Review* 151.409 (Dec 1890): 720-779.

Many criticisms of Bellamy appeared after the publication of *Looking Backward* including a mocking editorial blurb featured in the *Buffalo News* and later reprinted in the *New York Times* stating: “Edward Bellamy is running for Mayor at Chicopee, Mass. It may be that after election he will be ‘looking backward’ for the votes he didn’t get.”<sup>137</sup> But, one critic in particular, General Francis A. Walker, provoked a public debate and a direct response from Bellamy. One of the more critical reactions to Bellamy’s novel and the Nationalist agenda, Walker’s “Mr. Bellamy and the New Nationalist Party” appeared in the February 1890 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Walker begins by ostensibly praising Bellamy’s efforts stating: “I have, in truth, no spirit of hostility toward those who are undertaking this propaganda. The more attention is turned upon questions of economic and social organization, the better I like it...I regard the phenomena with satisfaction.”<sup>138</sup> After Walker’s pleasing introduction, he begins to summarize *Looking Backward* and enumerate what he views as false promises and insufficient projections. Specifically, Walker objects to the model of the Industrial Army and the ease and rapidity with which the revolution is affected. Walker’s criticisms inspired a response from Bellamy and the public debate received much attention, with multiple advertisements appearing in the *New York Times*: “Are the ideas in ‘Looking Backward’ likely to be realized? Gen. Francis A. Walker thinks not. Edward Bellamy takes the opposite view, however, and presents it with great cogency and ingenuity in *The North American Review*

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<sup>137</sup> “Editorial Article 9—No Title” *New York Times* Aug 31, 1890: 4.

<sup>138</sup> Francis A. Walker, “Mr. Bellamy and the New Nationalist Party,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 65.388 (Feb 1890): 249.

for March.”<sup>139</sup> Bellamy’s response, “‘Looking Backward’ Again,” takes Walker’s reading to task:

I must correct a serious misstatement made by General Walker. He says in a footnote to his article: ‘While the hero of the book goes to sleep in 1887 and wakes in 2000 the new state has been in perfect operation for a long time. The great change is spoken of as having taken place instantaneously, through the simple formation of the industrial army.’ This statement is wholly without foundation. In the sermon of Dr. Barton the change is described as having been effected ‘in the time of one generation’...There is nowhere in the book the slightest foundation for General Walker’s declaration.<sup>140</sup>

It is altogether likely that misreadings, like Walker’s, contributed to the assumption that Bellamy’s text proposed a radical regime arising from nowhere, taking over, and establishing a despotic, authoritarian system. Lewis Mumford would later repeat Walker’s mistake in his *The Story of Utopias* (1922). In fact, several readers of *Looking Backward* were persuaded by such readings and some went as far as publishing their own sequels to Bellamy’s novel to assuage such a disturbing message.

*Looking Backward* incited several responses in the form of utopian sequels, some critical and some supportive, that critiqued, opposed, echoed, or elaborated Bellamy’s ideas. With titles like *Looking Forward*, *Looking Beyond*, *Looking Ahead*, *Looking Within*, *Looking Further Forward*, and *Looking Further Backward*, most of these sequels took Bellamy’s original text to task and provided their own rebuttals, often responding to each other as much as to *Looking Backward* itself. The first of these, Richard Michaelis’ *Looking Further Forward*, appeared in 1890 and the frontispiece to the text reads:

“LOOKING FURTHER FORWARD by Richard Michaelis, Editor Chicago ‘Freie

<sup>139</sup> “No Title,” *New York Times* Mar 8, 1890: 2.

<sup>140</sup> Bellamy, “‘Looking Backward’ Again” 195.

Presse’—AN ANSWER TO LOOKING BACKWARD by Edward Bellamy.”<sup>141</sup>

Michaelis’ criticisms of Bellamy are familiar and in the Preface to his sequel he writes:

Mr. Edward Bellamy’s book: ‘Looking Backward,’ is an effort to improve the lot of mankind and therefore commendable, but his reform proposition, stripped of its fine coloring, is nothing but communism, a state of society, which has proved a failure...in defending the fundamental principles of American institutions against these theories...I became quite familiar with them as well as with the notions and peculiarities of social reformers, who imagine themselves in possession of an infallible receipt to perfect not only all human institutions but also human nature...[Bellamy] overlooks all difficulties in the introduction of his proposed changes, he really believes his socialistic air-castles must spring into existence very soon and without obstruction, and he populates his fairy palaces with angelic human beings, who would never by any possibility do anything wrong.<sup>142</sup>

These characterizations of Bellamy and his novel are certainly faulty given Bellamy’s own assertions to the contrary. Michaelis continues by declaring: “*I will now look forward!*...I intend to demonstrate, that under the regime, proposed by Mr. Bellamy, favoritism and corruption would be very potent factors in public life...I do not deny that our society stands in need of many desirable reforms; but I am not prepared to follow blindly Mr. Bellamy...or anybody else, who pretends that he is ready to deliver humanity from all evils on short notice.” Michaelis attributes a God-complex to Bellamy that is undeserved and he further dismisses him by suggesting “[t]here are many thousands of acres of good government lands left, where Mr. Bellamy and his friends may settle and show the world what they can do!”<sup>143</sup> Michaelis’ *Looking Further Forward* failed to make a splash with the critics or the reading public and one reviewer wrote: “The first

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<sup>141</sup> Richard Michaelis *Looking Further Forward* (Chicago: Rand, McNally, and Co., 1890) i.

<sup>142</sup> Richard Michaelis *Looking Further Forward* iii-iv.

<sup>143</sup> Michaelis vi.

answer to ‘Looking Backward’ in the form of a story has been written by Mr. Richard Michaelis...It is brief—having only a hundred and twenty-five pages—and its narrative is as slight in proportion to the whole as in Mr. Bellamy’s book.”<sup>144</sup> Michaelis’ sequel was quickly followed by another effort aimed at answering both *Looking Backward* and *Looking Further Forward*. In 1891, Ludwig Geissler published *Looking Beyond* and the frontispiece to his sequel reads: “Looking Beyond—A Sequel to ‘Looking Backward,’ by Edward Bellamy and An Answer to ‘Looking Further Forward,’ by Richard Michaelis.”<sup>145</sup> In the Preface to his sequel, Geissler defends Bellamy and criticizes Michaelis for myopically maligning him:

It is and always was one of the tactics of conservative minds tauntingly to challenge social reformers: ‘If you have so much to say about the evils of our present system, show us how the system you advocate would work!’ This, in his book, ‘Looking Backward,’ Mr. Bellamy very ably has done. Of course, the author of that book never made pretension of being a prophet or a dictator, decreeing laws for future generations...Since then a book appeared, ‘Looking Further Forward,’ by R. Michaelis, in which the author, continuing the thread of the story where Mr. Bellamy left off, attempts to show that the system advocated in ‘Looking Backward’ would lead to the utter ruin of humanity and civilization...In these attempts the author’s style of argumentation is decidedly unfair.<sup>146</sup>

After delineating the numerous ways Michaelis’ “argumentation is weak and shallow,” and showing how Michaelis misreads and abuses Bellamy’s text for his own purposes, Geissler states: “In ‘Looking Beyond’ I mean to show the fallacies of Mr. Michaelis’s arguments. I shall use the same form as Mr. Bellamy and Mr. Michaelis, treating

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<sup>144</sup> “Looking Further Forward,” *A Monthly Review of Current Literature* 21.18 (Aug 30, 1890): 283.

<sup>145</sup> Ludwig A. Geissler *Looking Beyond* (Norbury Crescent, UK: New Temple P, 1891) i.

<sup>146</sup> Geissler *Looking Beyond* 3-4.



‘Looking Further Forward’ as a continuation of ‘Looking Backward,’ and shall resume the thread of the narrative accordingly.”<sup>147</sup> Unlike Geissler, the majority of sequel writers followed Michaelis in condemning Bellamy’s work and as Nationalism’s influence increased, so too did the critiques. Arthur Dudley Vinton, in *Looking Further Backward* (1890), for example, declares: “I have endeavored in the following story, to point out wherein the Bellamy Nationalism would prove disastrously weak.”<sup>148</sup> Similarly, in *Looking Within* (1893), subtitled “The Misleading Tendencies of ‘Looking Backward’ Made Manifest,” J. W. Roberts does not hold back his objections to Bellamy’s work: “‘Looking Backward’ has been the bane of this nation...Its Utopian notions have taken root in many minds. Multitudes who never saw the book have received its teachings second-hand, and been poisoned by them. It is like the fabled basilisk: its very presence is death...It is the river Styx in this beloved land, and bears death upon its polluted waters.”<sup>149</sup> Like Michaelis, Vinton, and others, Roberts seeks to “warn fellow-citizens of the danger that threatens them from the alluring delusion which...is leading them along the slippery path of ruin, and prevent any such catastrophe ever overtaking our beloved country in the future.”<sup>150</sup> Numerous utopian novels appeared after the publication of *Looking Backward* and at least a dozen were sequels directly referencing Bellamy’s text, including a Bellamy-inspired pornographic utopia, *Love Me Tomorrow* (1975), by Robert Rimmer wherein the main character, Newton

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<sup>147</sup> Geissler *Looking Beyond* 4.

<sup>148</sup> Arthur Dudley Vinton *Looking Further Backward* (Albany: Albany Book Co., 1890) 6.

<sup>149</sup> J. W. Roberts, *Looking Within* (New York: A. J. Barnes and Co., 1893) 64.

<sup>150</sup> Roberts iii.

Morrow, thinks himself a reincarnation of Bellamy himself. Bellamy's influence extends beyond the circles of budding authors and political sympathizers, not only affecting a literary genre and national ideology, but also directly and indirectly inspiring some of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century.

In 1935, the *Atlantic Monthly* published a list of the twenty-five most influential books published since 1885. John Dewey and Charles Beard were asked to aid the editor of the magazine in creating the list and each of the men, independently, ranked *Looking Backward* as the second most influential book next to Marx's *Das Kapital*. Winston Churchill, Ignatius Donnelly, William Dean Howells, Jack London, Mark Twain, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Thorsten Veblen, and Frank Lloyd Wright are but a few among those significant figures who admit to being inspired by Bellamy's work. The utopian novels of Edward Bellamy punctuated a century of social reform literature and the incorporation of irony and hope initiated a utopian dialogue for the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER II

## HOPE IN DOUBT:

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS' *ALTRURIAN ROMANCES*

If we like a man's dream, we call him a reformer;  
If we don't like his dream, we call him a crank.

W. D. Howells

Optimist: Person who travels on nothing from nowhere to happiness.

Mark Twain

The late nineteenth century witnessed a marked change in the socio-economic landscape of American culture—a change accompanied by a number of utopian literary efforts. Among the literary chroniclers of such social shifts, perhaps none is more famous than William Dean Howells. Widely recognized as the preeminent literary critic of American culture at the turn of the century, Howells is most well known for his literary realism tinged with romance and his critical observations chronicled in *Harpers' "The Easy Chair"* and "Editor's Study." Later in his career, Howells' interests shifted, as indicated in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton in 1892: "I doubt if I shall ever write another story in which mating and marrying plays an important part. I am too old for it, and it does not interest me."<sup>1</sup> The "Dean of American Letters" subsequently offered his own contributions to the utopian literature boom. Between 1889 and 1894, Howells' fiction

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<sup>1</sup> W. D. Howells to Charles Eliot Norton, Dec. 11, 1892, *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells, Vol. II*, ed. Mildred Howells (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 29.

and non-fiction took a politically charged turn and focused more on economic inequality than any of his previous efforts. Novels like *Annie Kilburn* (1889) and *The World of Chance* (1893) addressed such socio-political issues in more acceptably literary ways, but unsatisfied by these endeavors Howells turned to utopianism and produced two of the genre's seminal examples: *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894) and *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907).<sup>2</sup>

The public reception of these novels differed as many readers were generous in their praise and several critics felt betrayed by such a distinguished literary figure. As one reviewer summarized in 1907:

[S]ome of Mr. Howells' admirers have been in a divided mind as to the fine and kindly socialistic spirit that has colored the work of his later years. They appreciate the sincerity of his motives [...] but they almost wish [...] that the passion for reform had fallen upon a less admirable artist. 'Good reformers,' the *Springfield Republican* remarks, in its review of the book, 'are by no means so rare as good novelists, and a novelist committed to a cause is as good as lost to art.' [Howells] has sacrificed something of his art to a broader humanity.<sup>3</sup>

Howells made reference to utopian characters in earlier works—Lord Rainford in *A Woman's Reason* (1883) and David Hughes in *The World of Chance* (1893), for example—but his *Altrurian Romances* signaled an uneasy shift for critics. Many Howells biographers offer only cursory discussions of his utopian work, preferring instead to focus on his literary realism. Even in the most recent Howells biography, *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life* (2005), Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson devote barely three pages of their five hundred page study to *A Traveler from Altruria*

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<sup>2</sup> In Howells' personal correspondence and the original serial publication in *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, "Traveler" is always spelled: "Traveller."

<sup>3</sup> "Through the Eye of the Needle," *Current Literature* 53.1 (Jul 1907): 108.

and *Through the Eye of the Needle*, emphasizing the texts' publishing history rather than their content. Thomas Peyser goes further in his treatment of Howells' utopian novels in *Utopia and Cosmopolis* (1998), but a good portion of his chapter on Howells is devoted to exploring his departure from realism. According to Peyser, realism and utopia are "joined in their effort to historicize the present," and his study seeks to link the two genres to an "emerging consciousness of globality."<sup>4</sup> Though Peyser's efforts to situate Howells' utopian texts vis à vis his realist efforts surpasses other treatments of the *Altrurian Romances*, little attention is given to the study of these novels on their own terms. Peyser's study focuses on authors' attempts to "grasp the world as a whole," and though he acknowledges the irresolution in Howells' utopian novels, he attributes Howells' inability to articulate a comprehensive vision of utopia to his ambivalence regarding such an enterprise—"Howells' refusal of finality probably reflects a political hopelessness"—rather than to the nature of utopia itself.<sup>5</sup> Rather than affirm the possibility of a perfect society and emphasize its realization, the *Altrurian Romances* underscore the "no-place" of utopia and highlight questions of its representation. The question in Howells' utopian novels is not "Does Altruria exist?," but rather, "Can Altruria be described?"—the latter arguably constituting the former. This narrative difficulty mirrors the chimerical no-place of utopia; just as utopia remains undefined and ambiguous, so too does any literary representation of it. All literature contains a certain level of ambiguity, but this narrative equivocality is all the more pronounced in utopian

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Peyser, *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998) 10, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Peyser ix, 126.

literature. An exploration of the dialogic and epistolary forms in Howells' utopian novels illustrates a resistance to closure and openness to perpetual exchange. For Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is a passion for open-ended hope and a faith in the impossible, "the essence of faith *par excellence*, which can only ever believe in the unbelievable."<sup>6</sup> Derridean hope is affirmation in the face of uncertainty and Howells' personal faith and utopian novels epitomize the spirit of Derridean deconstruction. Far from apathetic and hopeless, Howells held an abiding faith in the future and an examination of utopian influences in Howells' life shows that his move to utopian fiction, though objectionable to some and perhaps unexpected, was nevertheless inevitable.

William Dean Howells' father, William Cooper Howells, a newspaperman, was an idealist and indefatigable dreamer who bestowed the capacity to hope on his son at an early age. According to Van Wyck Brooks, "the elder Howells told one of his friends that William was a continuation of his own efforts and aspirations."<sup>7</sup> The senior Howells had inherited his optimistic, if quixotic, spirit from his father, Joseph Howells, who left a prosperous wool business in Wales to strike out to America only to see his fortune dwindle and never recover. William Cooper, likewise, remained true to his convictions despite several disappointments. A former Quaker, ardent abolitionist, and Swedenborgian, the senior Howells lost many subscribers to his newspaper when he insisted on supporting free-soil and anti-slavery movements in print. Frustrated, William Cooper established a utopian settlement near Xenia, Ohio, but after eighteen months it could not financially sustain itself. Though William Dean received little formal

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) 143.

<sup>7</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *Howells: His Life and World* (New York: Dutton, 1959) 1.

educational training, his father instilled in him a love of learning and a capacity to dream. William Cooper often read to his children and introduced his son to *Don Quixote* at the age of ten—the novel would remain William’s favorite throughout his lifetime and would animate father and son discussions for many years. The senior Howells encouraged his son’s literary interests and William Dean apprenticed under his father in the newspaper business, setting type at the early age of six. Young William soon graduated to penning articles for the *Ohio State Journal* in his teen years and publishing poetry in his twenties. In 1860, his campaign biography, *Life and Speeches of Lincoln*, captured the attention of officials in Washington and the young Howells was subsequently offered a consulate position in Venice. This appointment would relieve Howells from Civil War service and mark his departure from Ohio and his family, though he would remain especially close to his father and maintain weekly correspondence with him. William Cooper instilled a seed of utopian hope and optimism in William Dean that would be cultivated throughout his lifetime. Howells married Elinor Mead in 1862, adding yet another utopian influence to his life—Miss Mead’s uncle was John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida utopian community. When Howells returned from Venice and took residences in Boston and New York, his literary production and reception increased and in the coming years he encountered a number of social reformers who would prove highly influential.

In the later decades of the nineteenth century, Howells grew more and more concerned with the social inequities he witnessed in America’s cities and while in Boston he became associated with the Christian Socialist group, the Church of the Carpenter, and the Nationalist Club. Deeply influenced by the writings of Leo Tolstoy, who Howells credits with giving him “heart to hope,” Howells eagerly searched for like-minded liberal

intellectuals with whom to discuss his observations.<sup>8</sup> Among these groups' members, Howells cultivated friendships with Edward Bellamy, Hamlin Garland, Edward Everett Hale, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Sylvester Baxter. Howells strongly supported utopian writers, particularly Edward Bellamy, reviewing *Looking Backward* (1888) for *Harpers*, writing the prefatory sketch for Bellamy's *The Blindman's World and Other Stories* (1898), and later proposing a stage production of *Looking Backward* to aid Bellamy's widow. He reviewed Laurence Gronlund's *The Cooperative Commonwealth* (1884) and was responsible for the publication of Henry Lloyd's *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (1894) when all publishers rejected it until Howells offered to take it to *Harpers*. His friend and neighbor Henry George, author of the socialistic treatise *Progress and Poverty* (1880), was a fan of Howells' fiction and Howells referenced George's work in *The World of Chance* (1893). Immersed in this culture of social reformers, Howells' work took on a decidedly socio-political flavor. After assuming the editorship of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1871, a post he would hold for ten years, Howells turned his attention to addressing modern-day political and social concerns. According to Robert Hough, "Beginning in 1877, the year of the great railroad strike [...] instead of one article a month on contemporary problems there were often two, bearing such titles as 'The Abolition of Poverty,' 'Equality,' 'Socialism in Germany,' and 'Children's Labor: A Problem.'"<sup>9</sup> The more Howells addressed these issues in his writing, the more he was forced to cope with the socio-economic tensions in his own life and he became increasingly troubled by the incongruities of his lived experience.

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<sup>8</sup> William Dean Howells, *My Literary Passions* (New York: Harper, 1895) 250-1.

<sup>9</sup> Robert L. Hough, *The Quiet Rebel: William Dean Howells* (New York: Archon P, 1968) 23.



Howells rarely felt at home, literally and figuratively. After leaving Ohio, he seldom settled anywhere for long and his theoretical proclivities never seemed to be commensurate with his practical circumstances. This sense of instability and homelessness would later inform his utopian novels and depictions of the enigmatic, chimerical, and elusive land of Altruria. In fact, according to Howells, “*A Traveller from Altruria* was written, with intervals of summer hotel sojourn, in the large apartment-house in West Fifty-Ninth Street, where I lived, off and on, with my family for some fifteen years. Off and on, I say, for twice we left it and twice we came back to it after a stay elsewhere of a year or so. Our inconstant allegiance became the amusement [of friends].”<sup>10</sup> Not only were Howells’ living conditions in a constant state of flux, but he became increasingly aware of tensions in his personal life. In a letter to his father, Howells writes: “[Mark Twain] and his wife and Elinor and I are all of accord in our way of thinking: that is, we are theoretical socialists, and practical aristocrats. But it is a comfort to be right theoretically, and to be ashamed of one’s self practically.”<sup>11</sup> A few years earlier, Howells writes to his sister, Annie, explaining his desires to live as simply as possible: “[Elinor and I] no longer care for the world’s life, and would like to be settled somewhere very humbly and simply, where we could be socially identified with the principles of progress and sympathy for the struggling mass.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, in a letter to Henry James, Howells explained the conflict between these theoretical pronouncements

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<sup>10</sup> William Dean Howells, “Bibliographical.” Edwin H. Cady, ed. *The Altrurian Romances* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1968) 3.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from W. D. H. to William Cooper Howells, Feb. 2, 1890. Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* vol. II (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 1.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from W. D. H. to Annie Howells, Nov. 1887 in John W. Crowley *The Dean of American Letters* (Amherst: U of Mass P, 1999) 11.

and the practicalities of his lifestyle: “Meantime, I wear a fur-lined overcoat, and live in all the luxury my money can buy. [America seems] the most grotesquely illogical thing under the sun.”<sup>13</sup> Howells often lamented America’s specious logic and inability to keep the promise of the Declaration of Independence to her citizens, and his writings pointed out the basic inequity between the haves and have-nots in American society. Greatly troubled by his complicity in this aspect of American life, Howells never felt completely at home in America, or anywhere else.

In a letter to his brother Joseph, dated March 13, 1907, Howells writes: “I don’t know how you feel in your age, but perhaps from our scrambling and impermanent life, things do not seem so settled.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout his childhood, Howells’ family moved around Ohio following William Cooper’s journalistic work and business ventures and Howells continued the traveling life into adulthood, never really settling anywhere for a significant length of time. As he writes in *Familiar Spanish Travels* (1913), “I had lived five or six years in Italy; I had been several months in Germany; and a fortnight in Holland; I had sojourned often in Paris; I had come and gone a dozen times in England and lingered long each time.”<sup>15</sup> Aside from various trips throughout the United States to attend speaking engagements, Howells divided his time between New England and Europe. He and Elinor maintained residences in Boston and New York, summered frequently on the New England coast, and enjoyed frequent visits across the Atlantic.

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from W. D. H. to Henry James, Oct. 10, 1888. Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* vol. I (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 417.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from W. D. H. to Joseph A. Howells, Mar. 13, 1907. Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* vol. II (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 240.

<sup>15</sup> William Dean Howells, *Familiar Spanish Travels* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1913) 6.

But, despite an affinity for life abroad, Howells was always pulled back to the States by a sense of patriotism that married responsibility with a hope that America could live up to its promises. As Van Wyck Brooks explains in *Howells: His Life and World* (1959), “Howells never lost the feeling for Italy that was to bring him back again, many years later, in 1908, but he felt more than ever implicated now in ‘the problems of the vast, tumultuous American life...After all, *we* have the country of the present and the future’.”<sup>16</sup> Howells seemed increasingly haunted by America’s inability to live up to its potential. In an interview concerning his impressions of the 1893 Chicago Columbian World Exhibition and Fair, Howells declared:

I never saw anything like it and I never expect to see anything like it again [...] it is indescribably beautiful. I enjoyed every moment that I spent there. And yet the sight of so much beauty was saddening, too. It made me realize how much finer our lives might be, how much more we could put into them, if we only walked in the right direction. But we are too absorbed in our terrible struggle for money to give any suitable thought to making our surroundings beautiful. And what a foolish, what an utterly mistaken struggle it all is in the end.<sup>17</sup>

Howells’ friend, Charles Eliot Norton, called the Chicago World’s Fair “a promise of the future [that] in spite of its amazing incongruities, and its immense ‘border’ of vulgarities, was on the whole a great promise, even a great pledge [that] at least, forbids despair.”<sup>18</sup> It is this utopian hope in the face of uncertainty that “forbids despair.” Though Howells was troubled by the inequity of social conditions in America, and often overcome with doubt and frustration, he continued to be hopeful both personally and professionally.

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<sup>16</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *Howells: His Life and World* (New York: Dutton, 1959) 149, original emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> John D. Barry, “New York Notes” *The Literary World* (Nov. 4 1893): 36.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Charles Eliot Norton to Henry B. Fuller, Oct. 13, 1893. M. A. Dewolfe Howe, Charles Eliot Norton, and Sara Norton, *The Letters of Charles Eliot Norton* vol I (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913) 218.

Increasingly troubled by rapid industrialization and growing economic inequity in America, Howells confided to Henry James in a letter dated October 10, 1888: "I'm not in a very good humor with 'America' myself [...] I should hardly like to trust pen and ink with all the audacity of my social ideas; but after fifty years of optimistic content with 'civilization' and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality."<sup>19</sup>

Inspired by his peers in Boston and New York and heavily influenced by the work of Leo Tolstoy, who Howells explains in *My Literary Passions* (1895), "has not influenced me in aesthetics only, but in ethics too," Howells' directed his literary efforts toward social issues of the day.<sup>20</sup> According to Howells biographer Robert Hough: "After 1885, not a single year went by until Howells' death in 1920 without his having some significant comment on American economic and social conditions."<sup>21</sup> But, the editorial freedom Howells enjoyed at the *Atlantic Monthly* did not continue when he joined the staff of *Harpers* in 1886. The publishing house printed Howells' social novels, but as far as the magazine was concerned, Howells was discouraged from engaging social questions. Howells' editor, Henry Mills Alden, explained: "[T]he unwritten law of this Magazine, in every part of it, [is] to avoid the discussion of what are known as 'burning questions,' and of themes that divide sects in religion, parties in politics, and classes in society."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Letter from W. D. H. to Henry James, October 10, 1888. Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* vol. I (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 417.

<sup>20</sup> Howells, *My Literary Passions* 250.

<sup>21</sup> Hough, *The Quiet Rebel* 29.

<sup>22</sup> William Dean Howells, *The Altrurian Romances*, ed. Edwin H. Cady (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1968) xxii.

Unable to express his views in the magazine, Howells' fiction became the vehicle for articulating his social concerns with the publication of *Annie Kilburn* (1889) and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890). According to Amy Kaplan, "*Hazard* both fulfills and exhausts the project of realism," and after the publication of this text, Howells' focus shifts to utopian fiction.<sup>23</sup> If the conclusion to *Hazard* is any indication, it would seem that Howells lost faith in "America's ability to come out all right in the end." Toward the end of the novel, the old German, Lindau, proclaims, "Dere iss no Ameriga anymore! You start here free and brafe, and you glaim for efery man de right to life, liperty, and de bursuit of habbiness. And where haf you entedt?" Later, both Lindau and Conrad Dryfoos are violently murdered at a workers' strike. Despite this dark conclusion, Howells' optimism would ultimately trump his pessimism with the appearance of *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894).

Howells' oscillation between hope and cynicism provided material for much of the correspondence and discussions with his peers. In a letter to Howard Pyle, the famous illustrator who illustrated many poems by Howells for *Harpers Monthly*, Howells writes: "I tell you honestly that for the greater part of the time I believe in nothing, though I am afraid of everything."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in a letter to his father, Howells "lament[s] an incompleteness and uncertainty in [his] life."<sup>25</sup> But, for all of these misgivings, Howells maintained an abiding faith described as "hope-in-doubt" and this

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<sup>23</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 63.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from W. D. H. to Howard Pyle, December 22, 1890. Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* vol. II (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 10.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from W. D. H. to William Cooper Howells, February 2, 1890. Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* vol. II (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 1.

utopian ethos—affirmation in the face of uncertainty—finds expression in his utopian novels.<sup>26</sup>

Even in his darkest times, Howells' stubborn hopefulness, inherited from his father and nurtured by his contemporaries, remained. In "Living Critics," an 1897 review of Howells and his works, author Harry Thurston Peck offers the following appraisal:

The trouble with Mr. Howells is that he is a pessimist who has as yet learned only the alphabet of pessimism. His eyes are opened to the truth, yet he still hopes on, and hence is torn with endless doubts. [...] But there can really be no permanent halting place between optimism and pessimism; and he who, like Mr. Howells, is pessimistic only up to a certain point lives in an inferno of his own creation, for he sees the evil of existence and is yet tormented by a hope.<sup>27</sup>

During one of the most difficult times in his life, his daughter Winnie's prolonged battle with a mysterious illness, Howells expressed his belief in a better world to come. As Hamlin Garland recalls in a 1929 article for *The Bookman*:

[Howells] was deeply moved by the social injustice of which we were all aware, and sometimes as we walked he spoke of Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and the growing contrasts between the rich and the poor. [...] His voice was sad, poignantly sad, when reviewing the sorrow and injustice of the world, and yet he always had himself in hand. [...] I recall visiting him at Little Nahant in 1886 and spending several hours out on the sunny slope of a hill which fronted the sea, dreaming out an ideal world in which poverty would be unknown, and he said to me many of the things which he afterward recorded in *The Traveler from Altruria* [...] and yet at the moment the illness of his eldest daughter was filling his heart with almost intolerable anxiety.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *Howells: His Life and World* (New York: Dutton, 1959) 61.

<sup>27</sup> Harry Thurston Peck, "Living Critics," *The Bookman* (Feb. 1897, 4.6): 23.

<sup>28</sup> Hamlin Garland, "Roadside Meetings of a Literary Nomad," *The Bookman* (Nov. 1929, 70.3) 24.

Troubled by the events surrounding the Haymarket Riot—Howells publicly protested the conviction of the anarchists—and the advent of the Spanish-American War, as well as the death of his daughter in 1889, Howells' abiding hope did not falter but rather found expression in a series of letters that would become the utopian novel *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894) and its sequel, *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907).<sup>29</sup>

In 1891, Howells assumed the editorship of *The Cosmopolitan* and capitalized on his editorial license to offer “Letters from an Altrurian Traveller,” published serially from November 1892 to October 1893. These Altrurian sketches consist of encounters in dialogue form between Aristides Homos, a traveler from the utopian land of Altruria, and a succession of representative Americans including a banker, an economics professor, a retired manufacturer and his wife, a doctor, a lawyer, a minister, and Mr. Homos' host, a romance novelist named Mr. Twelvemough. Most critics agree that aspects of Howells' own character are represented in both Mr. Twelvemough and Mr. Homos and it seems clear that Howells used these letters as a cathartic venue for his own ideological conflicts. One nineteenth-century reviewer describes this work as “the imaginary conversations of William Dean Howells with himself, or to say better, between the several conflicting

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<sup>29</sup> Howells' *Altrurian Romances* endured a complicated publishing history. According to Clara and Rudolf Kirk, in their “Introduction” to the 1968 edition of Howells' texts, “[Howells] observed that the two Altrurian Romances were ‘of one blood,’ though so divided by the lapse of time that ‘they might seem mother and daughter rather than sisters’”. He might have said that *A Traveler from Altruria* was the grandmother of *Through the Eye of the Needle*, for the actual daughter of the first Altrurian Romance was ‘Letters of an Altrurian Traveller.’ These ‘Letters’ appeared in eleven installments in the *Cosmopolitan Magazine* (November 1893 through September 1894) and followed ‘A Traveller from Altruria,’ published in the same magazine (November 1892 through October 1893). ‘A Traveller from Altruria’ was brought out in book form by Harper and Brothers in May 1894, under the same title. ‘Letters of an Altrurian Traveller,’ however, was never republished by Harper as a book. The last six ‘Letters,’ with many omissions, interpolations, and alterations, became the twenty-seven chapters of Part I of *Through the Eye of the Needle* when, in 1907, Howells was ready to publish in book form a second Altrurian Romance” (xi-xii).

elements in Mr. Howells' character."<sup>30</sup> In these conversations, Howells was able to indirectly confront his own conflicts and insecurities, but the tensions in Howells' mind persist in the text and resist resolution. The dialogues between these interlocutors purposely illustrate socio-economic and political inconsistencies in America, but they also highlight the inconsistencies and gaps in narrative itself. Far from a representation of an ideal society and a resolution of conflicting ideologies, Howells' utopia reveals the impossibility of such a depiction and result. In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton, Howells expressed this tension: "I have given my own dream of Utopia, which I fancy your not liking, unless for all its confessions of imperfections even in Utopia."<sup>31</sup> Howells' *A Traveler from Altruria* does not offer a blueprint for social perfection; rather, it illustrates the tensions inherent in such representations and offers a hopeful discourse in spite of them. As Howells' traveler systematically undermines America's achievement of an ideal state "with liberty and justice for all," he also fails to offer an account of his seemingly ideal life in Altruria, making Howells' commentary on utopian realization and representation twofold. But, for all of his critiques, Howells' narrative remains light-hearted and open-ended, never descending into apathetic nihilism or foreclosing on hope. Howells' disposition differed from contemporaries like Mark Twain who famously remarked that "the man who isn't a pessimist is a damned fool" and Ambrose Bierce, whose famous *Devil's Dictionary* (1911) defines an optimist as "a proponent of the

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<sup>30</sup> "New Publications: Mr. Howells in Various Moods," *The New York Times* (Jun 4, 1894): 3.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from W. D. H. to Charles Eliot Norton, April 14, 1907. Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* vol. II (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 242.



doctrine that black is white” with “scarecrow hope” and an “unsightly smile.”<sup>32</sup> Rather than succumbing to cynicism, Howells maintained a faith in the future and infused his utopian fiction with a playfulness that prevents despair.

*A Traveler from Altruria* chronicles Aristides Homos’ efforts to understand American civilization and when he first arrives in New England, his disarming countenance, charm, and humility belie a sharp wit and catechistic intellect. Like the narrator and unsuspecting host, Mr. Twelvemough, who remarks that he “could not look upon his face without feeling a glow of kindness for him,” the reader is seduced by Mr. Homos’ affability and equally unprepared for the succession of Socratic examinations that follow.<sup>33</sup> The Altrurian systematically dismantles American “logic” and reveals her hypocrisy through a series of conversations with her citizenry on wide-ranging topics including the labor question and strikes, the function of servants, the value of money, deforestation, and the status of women. Mr. Homos’ seemingly innocent questions expose the essential inequality that underlies the socio-economic and political landscape of American culture. From the opening pages when Mr. Homos speaks glowingly of the Declaration of Independence and Mr. Twelvemough responds with “of course we don’t take that in its closest literality,” Howells’ critique of American civilization begins in earnest.<sup>34</sup> But, rather than a coarse, bitter dismantling of the nation’s people and institutions, Howells fashions his assessment with an abundance of wit and irony and a savvy Socratic method. Like his utopian predecessor Sir Thomas More, Howells

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<sup>32</sup> Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 104, 116.

<sup>33</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 7.

<sup>34</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 13.

incorporates an ironic sensibility in his tale that further emphasizes the playfulness in utopian discourse. Far from caustic critics, Howells and Mr. Homos are good-humored gentlemen committed to exposing American myths of equality without submitting to nihilism and hopelessness.

Playful exchange and witty banter are important features of Howells' utopian novels that prevent the narratives from descending into dogmatic and dry polemical treatises. According to Hamlin Garland, Howells had "a delightful humor, swift wit and exquisite use of words," and these qualities are clearly present in Howells' affable inquisitor, Mr. Homos.<sup>35</sup> Despite his confessions to the contrary—"I've never been much of a humorist myself"—Mr. Homos admits that Altrurians "encourage joking and the friendly give and take of witty encounters" and there is little shortage of witty repartee in the debates between him and Mr. Twelvemough.<sup>36</sup> Shortly after Mr. Homos' arrival, Mr. Twelvemough escorts him to a summer hotel and gives him a tour of the grounds where Mr. Homos is troubled by the deforestation of a neighboring landscape. When Mr. Homos expresses his displeasure with such an act of destruction, Mr. Twelvemough agrees that "it does seem too bad," but assures his guest that in America a man "may do anything with his own" and insists that "the law is careful not to meddle with a man's private affairs, and we don't attempt to legislate personal virtue."<sup>37</sup> Far from satisfied with Mr. Twelvemough's explanation, Mr. Homos continues his query, "[W]hy do you say that you have not legislated personal virtue in America? You have laws, I believe

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<sup>35</sup> Garland 24.

<sup>36</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 25, 166.

<sup>37</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 21-22.

against theft and murder and slander and incest and perjury and drunkenness,?” and Mr. Twelvemough replies, ““Why, certainly.”” Mr. Homos continues, ““Then it appears to me that you have legislated honesty, regard for human life, regard for character, abhorrence of unnatural vice, good faith, and sobriety,?”” to which Mr. Twelvemough concedes, ““I will own that you have the best of me on those points. I must say you’ve trapped me very neatly, too; I can enjoy a thing of that kind when it’s well done, and I frankly knock under.””<sup>38</sup> Seeing that he has neatly trapped his host, the Altrurian eases his interrogation and before Mr. Twelvemough can reply, Mr. Homos declares, “[T]he difference between your civilization and ours is only one of degree [...] America and Altruria are really one at heart.” Mr. Twelvemough feels Mr. Homos’ compliment “a bit hyperbolic,” but nonetheless honest and the two continue their tour of the hotel.<sup>39</sup> Mr. Twelvemough describes this summer hotel as a “sort of microcosm of the American republic” and the majority of the narrative follows Mr. Homos’ interactions with the hotel patrons and staff.<sup>40</sup> When Mr. Twelvemough explains the logic of the summer resort— “We discovered that, if we continued to kill ourselves with hard work, there would be no Americans pretty soon”—Mr. Homos seizes the opportunity to expose class inequity:

[Mr. Homos] said, “Then to begin with, I understand that these gentlemen are here because they are all overworked.”

“Of course. You can have no conception of how hard our business men and our professional men work. [...] But, as I said before, we are beginning to find that we cannot burn the candle at both ends and have it last long. So we put one end out for a little while every summer [...].”

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<sup>38</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 22-23.

<sup>39</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 23.

<sup>40</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 28.

“I am glad,” [replied the Altrurian], “that your business men and professional men are beginning to realize the folly and wickedness of overwork. Shall I find some of your other weary workers here, too?”

“What other weary workers?” I asked in turn, for I imagined I had gone over pretty much the whole list.

“Why,” said the Altrurian, “your mechanics and day laborers, your iron moulders and glass blowers, your miners and farmers, your printers and mill operatives, your trainmen and quarry hands. Or do they prefer to go to resorts of their own?”<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the text, Mr. Homos continues his astute observations of American culture and reveals its hypocrisies. For example, as Mr. Twelvemough asserts, “if America means anything at all it means the honor of work and the recognition of personal worth everywhere,” then why are servants and their work degraded? If, as Mr. Twelvemough concedes, women are better schooled, more cultivated, and more thoughtful, then why have they no part in public affairs? Mr. Twelvemough’s response to most of Mr. Homos’ inquiries is that he feels somehow manipulated by the unassuming Altrurian—“My first thought was that of course he was trying a bit of cheap irony on me”—but, nonetheless, obliged to be hospitable toward the visitor: “I could not blink the fact that although I had openly disagreed with him on every point of ethics and economics, I was still responsible for him as a guest.”<sup>42</sup> As Mr. Twelvemough begins to absorb his guest’s critiques of American society, he attempts to absolve himself of any complicity by claiming that his occupation as a romance writer distances him from such concerns: “I am a writer of romantic fiction, and my time is so fully occupied in manipulating the destinies of the good old-fashioned hero and heroine, and trying always to make them end in a happy

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<sup>41</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 29.

<sup>42</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 71-2.

marriage, that I have hardly had a chance to look much into the lives of agriculturists or artisans.”<sup>43</sup> One cannot help but hear Howells’ voice here and the tension he felt between his literary profession and civic responsibilities.

At every turn, Mr. Twelvemough’s defense of American civilization, and his role in it, is met with astute observations from the Altrurian that ultimately unmask America’s claims to perfectibility. When faced with Mr. Homos’ questions, Mr. Twelvemough consistently affirms and defends the practices of American society: “[T]he system is perfect. We regard [the conditions in America] as final, and as indestructibly based in human nature itself. [...] I consider it a very perfect system [...] the best in the best of all possible worlds.”<sup>44</sup> As Mr. Homos systematically reveals the inconsistencies, contradictions, and flaws in America’s purportedly democratic affairs, the achievement of a perfect society is put into question. Once Mr. Twelvemough introduces Mr. Homos to a cast of “thoroughly American” characters at the hotel, including a banker, minister, lawyer, doctor, professor of political economy, and a retired manufacturer, we begin to learn more of the visitor’s homeland and find that even this supposedly utopian country of Altruria is far from perfect. Relieved to pass on the burden of his visitor’s interrogation, Mr. Twelvemough introduces the Altrurian to the other hotel guests: “Mr. Homos is from Altruria. He is visiting our country for the first time, and is greatly interested in the working of our institutions. He has been asking me some rather hard questions about certain phases of our civilization; and the fact is that I have launched him

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<sup>43</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 30.

<sup>44</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 10, 16, 21, 64.

upon you because I don't feel quite able to cope with him."<sup>45</sup> But, rather than field questions from the Altrurian about American life, the hotel guests take the offensive and interrogate Mr. Homos about life in Altruria. The dialogic form of this novel showcases an agonistic give-and-take that emphasizes resistance to closure and an affirmation of utopia's open-endedness.

The concept of agonism is important to understanding the function of the dialogic reciprocity in *A Traveler from Altruria*. Agonism is a struggle, not a struggle for dominance, but rather an engagement of tensions, and the agonal relationships between Mr. Homos, Mr. Twelvemough, and the other New England residents advance Howells' utopian narrative. Michel Foucault's reading of the Nietzschean concept of agonism asserts that an objective of agonistic struggle is not a final achievement of liberation or dominance, but the continued capacity for struggle and the reproduction of conditions that make struggle possible. In *Foucault and the Political* (1995), Jon Simons explains that "agonal subjects delight in the liberty of struggle, rather than seeking a world without power."<sup>46</sup> Howells' use of dialogue in the novel serves to showcase the open-endedness of utopia and the agonistic struggles that Mr. Homos initiates invite continued discussion.

The hotel guests are incredulous as to the very existence of Altruria and the sincerity of Mr. Homos and through their conversations Howells establishes the "no place" of utopia. The minister remarks that "it is perfectly astonishing that an island so large as Altruria should have been lost to the knowledge of the rest of the world ever since the beginning of our era" and the professor accuses the Altrurian of fabricating

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<sup>45</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 31.

<sup>46</sup> Jon Simons, *Foucault and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1995) 100.

Altruria's existence: "With all those imaginary commonwealths to draw upon from Plato, through More, Bacon, and Campanella, down to Bellamy and Morris, he has constructed the shakiest effigy ever made of old clothes stuffed with straw."<sup>47</sup> The Altrurian deftly evades these insinuations and redirects the conversation:

"I hope you will excuse me. Sometime I shall be glad to talk of Altruria as long as you like. [...] But I am in America to learn, not to teach, and I hope you will have patience with my ignorance. I begin to be afraid that it is so great as to seem a little incredible. I have fancied in my friend [Mr. Twelvemough] here a suspicion that I was not entirely single in some of the inquiries I have made, but that I had some ulterior motive, some wish to censure or satirize. [...] I am not only a foreigner, but I am so alien to you in all the traditions and habitudes that I find it very difficult to get upon common ground with you. Of course I know theoretically what you are, but to realize it practically is another thing. I had read so much about America and understood so little that I could not rest without coming to see for myself. Some of the apparent contradictions were so colossal."<sup>48</sup>

To this charge, the banker, aptly named Mr. Bullion, arrogantly replies, "We have everything on a large scale here [...] and we rather pride ourselves on the size of our inconsistencies even."<sup>49</sup> The confession of ignorance by Mr. Homos forestalls the guests from further assaults on his character and the debates concerning America's large inconsistencies continue. Eventually the Americans tire of the Altrurian's astute observations and try in vain to ascertain specifics about Mr. Homos' homeland. After their encounters with Mr. Homos, the townspeople and hotel guests deem Altruria "too good to be true" and at one point, Mrs. Makely, the retired manufacturer's wife, lightheartedly accuses Mr. Twelvemough and Mr. Homos of an elaborate hoax: "I

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<sup>47</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 32, 176.

<sup>48</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 33.

<sup>49</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 33.

couldn't believe there *was* any such place as Altruria; and if it were not for Mr.

Twelvemough here—who has to keep all his inventions for his novels, as a mere matter of business routine,—I might really suspect him and Mr. Homos of—well, *working* us, as my husband calls it.”<sup>50</sup> Mrs. Makely declares that ““Mr. Homos is so dreadfully reticent about his own country, and I am so curious to hear of it at first hand, that I consider it justifiable to use any means to make him open up about it.””<sup>51</sup> The guests at the hotel and the surrounding townsfolk are just as curious and they eventually convince the Altrurian to give a public address on life in his homeland. When Mr. Homos agrees, Mrs. Makely effuses, ““Oh, I'm *so* glad! You *have* been so slippery about Altruria,”” but rather than an enlightening lecture on contemporary Altrurian life, the audience is treated to a further critique of their own social practices.<sup>52</sup>

Mr. Homos begins his talk by declaring, ““I could not give you a clear account of the present state of things in my country [...] without first telling you something of our conditions before the time of our Evolution.””<sup>53</sup> Mr. Homos relates a history of alienation, corruption, and oppression before the citizenry evolved into a selfless, humane, and altruistic society. His descriptions of Altruria's past closely mirror America's present and the audience becomes frustrated: ““Look here!” a sharp nasal voice snarled across the rich, full pipe of the Altrurian. ‘When are you goin’ to git to Altrury? We know all about Ameriky. [...] It's like this: I paid my dolla’ to hear about a

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<sup>50</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 91.

<sup>51</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 92.

<sup>52</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 137.

<sup>53</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 145.



country where there wa'n't no co'perations, nor no monop'lies, nor no buyin' up cou'ts; and I ain't agoin' to have no allegory shoved down my throat.'" The Altrurian, in a typical show of false modesty, replies, "I should be very sorry [...] to have anyone believe that I have not been giving you a bona fide account of conditions in my country before the Evolution. [...] As for offering you any allegory or travesty of your own conditions, I will simply say that I do not know them well enough to do so intelligently.'" <sup>54</sup> After a lengthy description of life in Altruria before the Evolution, Mr. Homos laments: "I wish I had time to go into a study of some of the curious phases of the transformation from a civility in which the people lived *upon* each other to one in which they lived *for* each other.'" <sup>55</sup> Like his friend Edward Bellamy, whose utopian novels fail to account for the detailed processes of social transformation, William Dean Howells does not provide for an explanation of the Evolution. Rather than offer a blueprint for the realization of Utopia, Howells exposes the impossibility of such an achievement as even the Altrurian admits, "I don't pretend that we have immunity from error. [...] We are still far from thinking our civilization perfect.'" <sup>56</sup> It is not until the end of his address that the Altrurian begins to discuss contemporary Altrurian life, and he does so only briefly: "But now, after this preamble, which has been so much longer than I meant it to be, how shall I give you a sufficiently just conception of the existing Altruria, the actual state from which I come?" Mr. Homos begins by saying, "I will tell you, as well as I can, what Altruria is like, but, in the first place, you will have to cast out

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<sup>54</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 150, 151.

<sup>55</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 154.

<sup>56</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 112, 175.

of your minds all images of civilization with which your experience has filled them,” further complicating the possibility of thoroughly representing utopia. Mr. Homos is interrupted by a series of questions from the audience and our narrator has a difficult time relating the speech when he, too, is interrupted: “Here I lost some words, for the professor leaned over and whispered to me: ‘He has got *that* out of William Morris. Depend upon it, the man is a humbug.’ [...] ‘Isn’t this the greatest rehash of Utopia, New Atlantis, and City of the Sun, that you ever imagined?’”<sup>57</sup> This scene is reminiscent of a similar narrative difficulty in Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* when the narrator is distracted by someone coughing and consequently unable to hear Raphael Hythloday’s account of the titular island. Mr. Twelvemough is often distracted during the Altrurian’s address and the description of Altruria remains incomplete. But, for Mr. Homos to offer a complete account of his life and country would be to foreclose on further discussion. Mr. Homos asks questions to agonistically perpetuate conversation, the hotel guests ask questions to arrive at an answer. There is no end-game in utopia and Mr. Homos is a frustration for the hotel guests.

The Altrurian relates some details of life in his homeland, but overall his address is sketchy and the audience remains unconvinced. Mr. Homos describes a social system where the entire citizenry partakes in tasks for the good of the whole (obligatories) and recreational activities for self-fulfillment (voluntaries). He also explains that the country takes advantage of electricity for all of its energy needs and is self-sufficient: “[W]e have within our borders the materials of every comfort and the resources of every

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<sup>57</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 157.

need.”<sup>58</sup> But, the Altrurian’s account remains relatively vague as he often interrupts his descriptions with equivocating explanations: “I can only touch upon this feature and that of our system, as I chance to think of it. [...] As to our social life, I cannot describe it in detail, but I can give you some notion of its spirit.”<sup>59</sup> Mr. Twelvemough only confirms the inadequacy of Mr. Homos’ account by confessing, “It is impossible to follow closely the course of the Altrurian’s account of his country, which grew more and more incredible as he went on.”<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, Mr. Twelvemough and the rest of the audience remain unconvinced of Altruria’s reality, though they do not doubt Mr. Homos’ sincerity, and the novel concludes with the hotel guests debating Altruria’s existence: “‘Well, did you ever hear a more disgusting rigmarole?’ asked Mrs. Makely, as our little group halted indecisively about her. [...] ‘The difficulty with me is,’ continued the banker, ‘that he has rendered Altruria incredible. I have no doubt that he is an Altrurian, but I doubt very much if he comes from anywhere in particular.’”<sup>61</sup> Later, another member of the audience asks Mr. Homos how he can reach Altruria and Mr. Homos replies that “it’s a far sea voyage” to which the gentleman answers, “Well, I shouldn’t mind working my passage, if you think they’d let me stay after I got there.” Mr. Homos curiously responds by declaring, “Ah, you mustn’t go to Altruria! You must let Altruria come to *you*.”<sup>62</sup> Again, the existence of utopia is put into question and Mr. Homos himself seems to doubt

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<sup>58</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 163.

<sup>59</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 162, 174.

<sup>60</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 168-9.

<sup>61</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 176.

<sup>62</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 177.

its reality when he laments: “[N]ow that I am away from it all, and in conditions so different, I sometimes had to ask myself, as I went on, if my whole life had not hitherto been a dream, and Altruria were not some blessed vision of the night.”<sup>63</sup> The novel concludes with Mr. Twelvemough relating that Mr. Homos eventually left for New York and though some of his acquaintances, namely those of the working class, nurtured a faith in Altruria’s existence, most of those who met him remained incredulous.

Far from affirming the possibility of a perfect society and emphasizing its realization, Howells’ utopian novels underscore the “no-place” of utopia and bring to light questions of its representation. After *A Traveler from Altruria*, Howells continued to resist painting pictures of utopia and further frustrated reader expectations with his second utopian novel, *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907). One of Howells’ biographers argues that both of his utopian novels are “equally disappointing” and the sequel “falls apart after Mr. Homos goes back to Altruria, because of the author’s inability to summon up any interesting ideas of what Utopia might be like.”<sup>64</sup> In his sequel, an epistolary novel, Howells further explores difficulties in representation. Howells’ “Introduction” to *Through the Eye of the Needle* begins as an apology for the nineteenth-century conditions that Mr. Homos chronicled and criticized in *A Traveler from Altruria* as he describes how American conditions have improved in the ten years since the Altrurian’s visit. Howells attributes these improvements to the victory in the Spanish-American War and the resulting prosperity in the country, but, given Howells’ opinions of the war, he seems a bit tongue-in-cheek in his descriptions of America’s

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<sup>63</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 178.

<sup>64</sup> Kenneth S. Lynn, *William Dean Howells: An American Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 319.

social “progress.” In a letter to his sister Aurelia, Howells expresses his concern regarding the war: “I hope you will not be surprised to hear that I think we are wickedly wrong. [...] At the very best we propose to do evil that good may come. [...] After war will come the piling up of big fortunes again; the craze for wealth will fill all brains, and every good cause will be set back [...] and the chains of capitalism will be welded on the nation more firmly than ever.”<sup>65</sup> In the opening pages of *Through the Eye of the Needle*, Howells gives testimony of a post-war American progress, but then juxtaposes his brief history of this progress with the seemingly ideal life in Altruria, ultimately admitting that even in Altruria, life is not perfect.

In this sequel, Mr. Homos meets and marries an American woman, Eveleth Strange, and they settle in Altruria where we are treated to an epistolary exchange between Mrs. Homos and an American acquaintance. In his “Introduction,” Howells informs readers that this account of Altrurian life will be given by someone other than Mr. Homos—“the story continued by another hand”—and he confesses an anxiety concerning the reliability of this narrative. This notice to the reader is revealing as to the inconsistency and incompleteness inherent in literary utopias and is worth quoting in full:

Perhaps, however, we are not to trust this other hand at all times, since it is a woman’s hand, and is not to be credited with the firm and unerring touch of a man’s. The story, as she completes it, is the story of the Altrurian’s love for an American woman, and will be primarily interesting for that reason. Like the Altrurian’s narrative, it is here compiled from a succession of letters, which in her case were written to a friend in America, as his were written to a friend in Altruria. It is at best the record of desultory and imperfect glimpses of a civilization fundamentally alien to her own, such as would attract an enthusiastic nature, but would leave it

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<sup>65</sup> Letter from W. D. H. to Aurelia Howells, April 3, 1898. Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* vol. II (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 90.

finally in a sort of misgiving as to the reality of the things seen and heard. Some such misgivings attended the inquiries of those who met the Altrurian during his sojourn with us, but it is a pity that a more absolute conclusion should not have been the effect of this lively lady's knowledge of the ideal country of her adoption. It is, however, an interesting psychological result, and it continues the tradition of all the observers of ideal conditions from Sir Thomas More down to William Morris."<sup>66</sup>

Howells firmly places his work in the utopian tradition of More and Morris, recognizing that such literary utopias result in "a sort of misgiving as to the reality of things seen and heard." Of course, Howells admits that the already inadequate representation is further compromised by "a woman's hand," and thus the reader should be doubly dubious.

Howells' admission that the record offered by Mrs. Homos is "desultory and imperfect" and his choice of narrators for the *Altrurian Romances* complicates the reliability of the narratives. In *A Traveler from Altruria*, we are guided by a romance novelist, Mr.

Twelvemough, who insists that he is not entirely convinced by the Altrurian's story and has difficulty relating it in full. In his "Letters of an Altrurian Traveller," Howells allows Mr. Homos to "speak" for himself in a series of epistolary exchanges, but these, too, are incomplete. Rather than recuperate his utopian texts into more complete, consistent narratives, Howells chooses a female voice for his sequel—a narrator made all the more unreliable for being a woman. This narrative strategy successfully reveals the inadequacy of language to fully account for an idealized, unmitigated utopia and exposes the no-place of Altruria.

The epistolary form of both the "Letters of an Altrurian Traveller" and *Through the Eye of the Needle* make this discontinuity and impossibility of representation even more pronounced. According to Anne Bower in *Epistolary Responses* (1997), "[W]ith its

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<sup>66</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 273.

emphasis on the act of writing and writing as act, the letter permits exploration of postmodernist questions. The back and forth of letters, their desire for reply, their incomplete ownership of information, their concomitant play on ideas of absence and presence, and their apparently personal and private nature, model an interactive openness.<sup>67</sup> The textual give-and-take between letter writer and letter reader, as well as Howells and his readers, creates an environment replete with narrative gaps resulting in incomplete understanding. The epistolary form of the novel highlights this narrative difficulty because it brings to the fore issues of absence and presence in language and is consequently an apt literary mode for utopian works—Both Sir Thomas More and Francis Bacon used letters in their utopian novels and, even when letters are not explicitly used, many literary utopias take a “Dear Reader” narrative approach that implicitly evokes epistolary issues. The inclusion of letters in utopian fiction emphasizes the difficulty of representing utopia. As Jacques Derrida explains in *The Post Card* (1987): “What happens when acts and performances (discourse or writing, analysis or description, etc.) are part of the objects they designate? When they can be given as examples of precisely that of which they speak or write? Certainly, one does not gain auto-reflective transparency, on the contrary. A reckoning is no longer possible, nor is an account, and the borders of the set are then neither closed nor open.”<sup>68</sup> In “Letters of an Altrurian Traveller,” which after many revisions became Part I of *Through the Eye of the Needle*, Mr. Homos attempts to relate his experiences in America to an Altrurian friend

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<sup>67</sup> Anne Bower, *Epistolary Responses: The Letter in Twentieth Century American Fiction and Criticism* (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 1997) 3.

<sup>68</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987) 391.

through a series of letters in which he laments an inability to fully articulate his experiences and acknowledges the inadequacy of the written word: “My Dear Cyril, In my last I tried to give you some notion of the form and structure of this strange city [New York], but I am afraid that I did it very vaguely and insufficiently. I do not suppose that I could ever do it fully, and perhaps the attempt was foolish. [...] I can only set down what I at least seem to see, and trust you to accept it, if you cannot understand it.”<sup>69</sup> Mr.

Homos’ letters comprise only a small part of *Through the Eye of the Needle* and they serve primarily to relate his brief courtship of Eveleth Strange, whose correspondence with an American friend, Dorothea Makely, comprises the rest of the novel.

In Mr. Homos’ section of the novel we are once again acquainted with Mr. and Mrs. Makely, two of the hotel guests featured in *A Traveler from Altruria*, who arrange for his introduction to Eveleth Strange. Mr. Homos spends a great deal of time with the Makelys and their friends and when faced with their inquiries concerning Altrurian life, Mr. Homos remains characteristically reticent:

They all began to ask me questions, but with a courteous incredulity, which I could feel well enough, and some of my answers made them laugh, all but my hostess, who received them with a gravity that finally prevailed. But I was not disposed to go on talking of Altruria then, though they all protested a real interest, and murmured against the hardship of being cut off with so brief an account of our country as I had given them.<sup>70</sup>

This same taciturnity is even more pronounced in Mr. Homos’ conversations with his admirer, Eveleth Strange. Mrs. Strange is the rather young widow of Mr. Bellington Strange, a wealthy, self-made man many years Eveleth’s senior. Eveleth devotes much

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<sup>69</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 248, 291.

<sup>70</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 333.



of her time and money to various social causes since her husband's passing and this charitable sensibility is what prompts Mrs. Makely to introduce her to the Altrurian:

“[Mrs. Strange] is a kind of Altrurian herself, you know. She was my dearest friend at school, and it almost broke my heart when she married Mr. Strange, so much older, and her inferior in every way. But she's got his money now, and oh, the good she does do with it! I know you'll like each other, Mr. Homos.”<sup>71</sup> Mrs. Makely arranges for the two to meet at a dinner party and Mr. Homos is quickly smitten: “I must confess that all I had seen and heard of this lady interested me in her more and more.”<sup>72</sup> After dinner, as the other guests depart, Eveleth beseeches Mr. Homos to stay and tell her and her mother about life in Altruria. She begins by confessing that she is “rather unusual in everything” and when the Altrurian returns home he can report that he “found at least one woman in America, whom fortune had smiled upon in every way, and who hated her smiling fortune almost as much as she hated herself.”<sup>73</sup> Mrs. Strange is troubled by the same American hypocrisies that perplex Mr. Homos and her disillusionment has led to utter hopelessness:

“Ever since I heard you were in New York, I have wished to see you and to talk with you about Altruria. [...] I have come to the end of my tether. I have tried, as truly as I believe any woman ever did, to do my share, with money and with work, to help make life better for those whose life is bad, and though one mustn't boast of good works, I may say that I have been pretty thorough, and if I've given up, it's because I see, in our state of things, *no* hope of curing the evil.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 290.

<sup>72</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 334.

<sup>73</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 335.

<sup>74</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 336.

Eveleth may see in American life a hopeless cause, but she projects a sense of hopefulness onto Mr. Homos and is attracted to the ideals of Altrurian life. Mr. Homos explains in a letter to Cyril that Altruria appeared “neither incredible nor preposterous to her” and he is increasingly smitten with her eager and optimistic embrace of his country. Though Eveleth had “lost the strength to affirm anything,” she expresses a childlike belief in Altruria and this animates Mr. Homos’ infatuation: “Do you think it so wonderful, then, that in the joy I felt at the hope, the solace which my story of our life seemed to give her, she should become more and more precious to me? [...] [T]hat she should identify me with that hope, that solace, and should suffer herself to lean upon me, in a reliance infinitely sweet and endearing. But what a fantastic dream it now appears!”<sup>75</sup> Eveleth seems to embody Howells’ “hope in doubt” faith as she affirms Altruria’s promises despite lacking conventional proof of its existence. Eveleth may be smitten by the Altrurian, but her mother, Mrs. Gray, is not as easily persuaded and she poses more rigorous questions to her daughter’s suitor.

Mrs. Gray’s skepticism is not as caustic as that of the hotel visitors Mr. Homos encounters in *A Traveler from Altruria*, but she is nevertheless incredulous and her disbelief serves to highlight the no-place of utopia. As Mr. Homos and Mrs. Gray discuss Altruria, the utopian land appears increasingly chimerical: “The good old lady had an insatiable curiosity about Altruria, and, though, I do not think she ever quite believed in our reality, she at least always treated me kindly, as if I were the victim of an illusion that

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<sup>75</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 345-6.

was thoroughly benign.”<sup>76</sup> Mrs. Gray does not find his illusion so benign, especially when it concerns her daughter. Worried that her daughter may be blinded by her infatuation with the Altrurian and unable to parse fact from fiction, Mrs. Gray shares her misgivings with Mr. Homos and confesses her inability to believe in Altruria’s existence. During one of Mr. Homos’ visits to her home, Mrs. Gray openly questions Altruria’s legitimacy: “The first night when you talked about Altruria, here, and showed us how you had come, by way of England, and the place where Altruria ought to be on our maps, I looked them over, after you were gone, and I could make nothing of it. I have often looked at the map since, but I could never find Altruria; it was no use.” Mr. Homos offers to take the atlas and show Mrs. Gray a second time, but she declines saying, “It would be the same again, as soon as you went away.”<sup>77</sup> For Mrs. Gray, the Altrurian’s presence is the only guarantor of Altruria’s existence: “It’s merely that—that when you are not here with us, I lose my grasp on Altruria; and—and I begin to doubt.”<sup>78</sup> Troubled by Mrs. Gray’s incredulity, Mr. Homos exasperatedly replies, “But what proof shall I give you that there is such a land as Altruria! If the darkness implies the day, America must imply Altruria.”<sup>79</sup> This pivotal scene underscores the no-place of utopia on several levels. Firstly, the Altrurian is unable to place his country and convince Mrs. Gray of its existence. Secondly, the agonistic dialogue between the two resists closure and, lastly, all of this is related in a letter to Cyril that necessarily creates more representative

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<sup>76</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 344.

<sup>77</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 348.

<sup>78</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 347.

<sup>79</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 348.

tension—the absence/presence dichotomy that is so integral to epistolary narrative is further highlighted by the absence/presence crisis that Mrs. Gray feels concerning Mr. Homos and the mapping of Altruria. Mr. Homos’ invocation of the law of opposites and appeal to Mrs. Gray’s reason offer little consolation and, without concrete evidence of his claims, Mr. Homos fails to persuade her.

Despite Mrs. Gray’s request that Mr. Homos refrain from further courting her daughter, the Altrurian and Eveleth grow closer and make plans to marry. Unfortunately, Eveleth assumes that they will reside in New York while Mr. Homos makes clear that he intends to return to Altruria. Faced with the thought of leaving behind all she has ever known, Eveleth rejects the Altrurian’s proposal in a letter:

The next day, I came for her decision, or rather for her confirmation of it. The man who opened the door to me, met me with a look of concern and embarrassment. He said Mrs. Strange was not at all well, and had told him he was to give me the letter he handed me. [...] I was impatient to read my letter, and I made I know not what vague reply, and I found myself, I know not how, on the pavement, with the letter open in my hand. It began abruptly without date or address.<sup>80</sup>

Eveleth’s hastily penned correspondence is rather brief as she informs Mr. Homos of her decision and requests that she not be forgotten. She concludes with the words—“There is no use writing”—and the reader is left with a sense of doubt as to her fate.<sup>81</sup> In an effort to come to terms with Eveleth’s decision, Mr. Homos explains to Cyril: “I believe that she was pure and lofty in soul as she appeared; but that her life was warped to such a form by the false conditions of this sad world, that, when she came to look at herself

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<sup>80</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 360.

<sup>81</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 361.

again, after she had been confronted with the sacrifice before her, she feared that she could not make it without in a manner ceasing to be. She— But I shall soon see you again; and, until then, farewell.”<sup>82</sup> Preferring to speak his account, rather than write it, Mr. Homos suggests the absence/presence tension of the epistolary form; as Mr. Homos abruptly ends his letter, Howells just as abruptly concludes Part I of his utopian sequel. The two letters showcased at the end of Part I—from Eveleth to Aristides Homos and from Aristides to Cyril—highlight the tension between the written and spoken word. While Eveleth chooses to avoid Mr. Homos’ presence by writing her rejection in a letter, Mr. Homos prefers to suspend his written correspondence in favor of continuing his story in the presence of Cyril. Both letters foreground representation and illustrate the distance—both comfortable and uncomfortable—that the letter provides:

The letter writer’s power always exists within this condition of the absent other. Indeed, letter fictions and letter criticism face absence as a central issue. Letters highlight the gap (physical space, time, emotional difference, slippage between sign and signifier, aporia—it takes so many forms) between correspondents. In letters we confront our ever-present awareness of that gap, and, while at times using distance to protect ourselves, we usually struggle to overcome it.<sup>83</sup>

This gap provides a safe solace for Eveleth while it poses an inconvenience to Mr. Homos. The juxtaposition of these two letters at the end of Part I serves to highlight the gaps throughout the narrative and foreshadow those to come in Part II. Mr. Homos’ letters to his friend Cyril illustrate the crisis of linguistic representation, not only the Altrurian’s inability to communicate his experiences effectively, but also the inability to

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<sup>82</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 361.

<sup>83</sup> Bower 6.

describe the utopian no-place of Altruria, and the letters in Part II offer further evidence of this difficulty.

Part II of *Through the Eye of the Needle* opens with the first of a series of letters from Eveleth Strange to Dorothea Makely. Through these letters we learn that though Eveleth initially had misgivings about marrying Aristides Homos, she eventually changed her mind and, along with her mother, moved to Altruria. Epitomizing Howells' "hope in doubt" philosophy, Mrs. Gray and her daughter venture to a land whose very existence is questionable. Eveleth thanks Mr. and Mrs. Makely for agreeing to manage her property and financial holdings in her absence and she apologizes for not writing sooner. These are the letters "continued by another hand" that Howells cautions us to suspect in his Introductory notes and Eveleth's letters home illustrate all the more pointedly the impossibility of rendering, much less realizing, utopia. After apologizing to Mrs. Makely for the delay in correspondence, Eveleth explains: "I always feel that the difference between Altruria and America is so immense that it is altogether beyond me to describe it [...] and this happiness of mine here is like a dream which I cannot trust."<sup>84</sup> Like Mr. Homos, Eveleth finds it difficult to represent Altruria and phrases like "I wish I could give you some notion" appear often to highlight this frustration.<sup>85</sup> But, unlike Mr. Homos' letters to Cyril in Part I, Eveleth, in her correspondence with Mrs. Makely, is more self-reflexively aware of the limitations of the written word in general, and the epistolary form in particular. According to Anne Bower in *Epistolary Responses* (1997), "More than other narrative forms, letters, with their grounding in the ups and downs, ins

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<sup>84</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 363.

<sup>85</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 368.

and out of people's daily lives, emphasize how written responses are enacted in pieces, with revisions, discontinuously. [...] The epistolary *represents* what is already a *representation*."<sup>86</sup> Eveleth seems not only keenly aware of her inability to adequately represent Altruria to Mrs. Makely, but she is also conscious of the particular difficulties that the letter form can present: "Heaven knows when I shall have another chance of getting letters to you. But I shall live in hopes, and I shall set down my experiences here for your benefit, not perhaps as I meet them, but as I think of them, and you must not mind having a rather cluttered narrative. [...] I don't expect to send you a continuous narrative of our adventures."<sup>87</sup> Eveleth is well aware that her correspondence is a *representation* that will be filled with gaps and discontinuity and she makes clear this realization to Mrs. Makely.

Eveleth is not only frustrated by her inadequate representations and inability to create a coherent narrative for Mrs. Makely, but she is equally troubled by the particular difficulties of the postal process itself. As Bower explains, "Even the nonverbal aspects of letters play with absence and presence," and the quality and type of ink and paper used, the legibility of the hand, the time taken to write the letter, and the duration of delivery can all affect the representation.<sup>88</sup> According to Sunka Simon in *Mail-Orders: The Fiction of Letters in Postmodern Culture* (2002), "A letter, real or metaphorical, is a dispatch, its very existence as a letter presupposes a detachment from its originating

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<sup>86</sup> Bower 2,5.

<sup>87</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 380.

<sup>88</sup> Bower 17.

environment (writer, sender, place, time) but also its arrival at another time elsewhere.”<sup>89</sup>

The time between writing and sending, receiving and responding, and the memory of the writer influence written representation considerably. As Eveleth writes to Mrs. Makely:

I suppose you are anxious, if these letters which are piling up and piling up should ever reach you, or even start to do so. [...] I have to jot things down as they come into my mind, and I am afraid I forget some of the most important. [...] I must send you some of this, if I ever get my bundle of letters off to you. [...] If they reach you, and you read them at random, why that is very much the way I write them.<sup>90</sup>

The marked equivocation in Eveleth’s prose is indicative of the unreliability of written correspondence. Not only is Eveleth unsure of whether or not her rendering of experience is adequate, but she also doubts her ability to organize her thoughts and the reliability of the post to deliver them. As Derrida explains, “epistolary fictions multiply when there arrives a new crisis of destination,” and the correspondence between Eveleth and Mrs. Makely is made all the more complicated by the absence of a postal office in Altruria.<sup>91</sup> According to Mr. Homos, “[I]n our present passive attitude toward the world outside, we had as yet no postal relations with other countries, and, as all our communication at home was by electricity, we had no letter post of our own.”<sup>92</sup> Eveleth must wait for the occasional ship to happen upon Altruria for her letters to have any hope of reaching America. Of course, once the crews of the wayward vessels experience

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<sup>89</sup> Sunka Simon, *Mail-Orders: The Fiction of Letters in Postmodern Culture* (Albany, NY: SUNY P, 2002) xii.

<sup>90</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 400, 403, 404.

<sup>91</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card* 232.

<sup>92</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 345.



Altrurian life, they may elect not to proceed to their destination and rather stay in Altruria indefinitely. As Eveleth explains:

They are mostly trading-ships or whalers, and they come a great deal oftener than you suppose; you do not hear of them afterwards, because their crews are poor, ignorant people, whose stories of their adventures are always distrusted, and who know they would be laughed at if they told the stories they could of a country like Altruria. [...] I shall have time to write you a longer letter than you will care to read; the ship does not sail for a week yet, because it is so hard to get her crew together.<sup>93</sup>

The efficacy of Eveleth's epistolary efforts depends upon the frequency of errant ships and their crews' desires to stay aboard. Howells further complicates the representation of Altruria by casting doubt on the reliability of those who witness it; not only are Eveleth and Mr. Homos' words unreliable, but the testimony of ship crews is deemed suspect as well. Because Howells does not include correspondence from Mrs. Makey, it is as if Eveleth's letters exist for her own benefit; she does not seek a reply, but writes to parse her own experiences, to substantiate them and make them real. During one conversation with a crewmember of a strayed ship, Eveleth expresses her bewilderment: "We need fresh proofs from time to time. There was a ship that sailed from here something over a year ago, and the captain promised his crew to let them bring her back, but at times I'm afraid that was part of the dream, too, and that we're all something I am dreaming about."<sup>94</sup> Eveleth's difficulty articulating, describing, and believing in Altruria is highlighted by Howells' incorporation of the epistolary form.

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<sup>93</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 405.

<sup>94</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 441.

The gaps, discontinuity, and inconsistencies inherent in the letters of *Through the Eye of the Needle* and the agonistic resistance to closure and resolution in *A Traveler from Altruria* mirror the same dissonance in utopia. The unrepresentable “no place” of utopia is highlighted in the absences and dislocation of epistolary discourse and the irresolution of agonistic dialogue. Though Howells explicitly advises us to mistrust the letters in Part II of *Through the Eye of the Needle*, Mr. Homos’ correspondence in Part I is equally unreliable. By casting this utopian tale in the form of an epistolary novel, Howells makes clear the difficulty of narrating utopia and toward the end of his Introduction, Howells concludes: “Either we have no terms for conditions so unlike our own that they cannot be reported to us with absolute intelligence, or else there is in every experience of them an essential vagueness and uncertainty.”<sup>95</sup> Eveleth offers many observations in her letters, but they all fall short of grasping Altrurian life in its totality. The inability of Altruria to be made present in the letters of Eveleth and Aristides Homos, or in the novels of William Dean Howells, is indicative of utopia’s unrepresentability. The failure to fix utopia as a place is evidence of its dynamism and transformative power. Though popular parlance prefers to depict utopia as a static, absolute, and totalizing enterprise, Howells’ texts explore its elusivity, playfulness, openness, and perpetual reinvention.

Like Boston 2000 of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, Altruria is fraught with contradictions that open spaces for questioning and dialogue and offer evidence of utopia’s mutability. To be sure, Altruria is a land where “nothing but work or love has any value” and where capital and interest remain things of the past, but the society is far

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<sup>95</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 273.

from perfect.<sup>96</sup> In a civilization founded on the principles of peace, equality, and freedom, murders still occur, parents can be deemed unfit, citizens may object to their work assignments, shopping privileges may be withheld, and Aristides recognizes that there are some things that escape systematization altogether: “[W]e have not yet [...] reasoned the passions, even in Altruria.”<sup>97</sup> Howells juxtaposes the apparently flawed utopian effort of Altruria with the purportedly realized utopia of America. Throughout *A Traveler from Altruria*, Howells portrays Aristides as a humble observer and the hotel guests as boastful, complacent Americans who feel their nation to be a veritable heaven on earth. Howells makes this same comparison in *Through the Eye of the Needle* as Eveleth attempts to defend the idiosyncrasies of Altruria to her American friend, Mrs. Makely: “I know that you do not want to live differently, that you are proud of your economic and social illogicality, and that you think America is the best country under the sun!”<sup>98</sup> For Howells, it is as if the country that purports to have achieved perfection, as Mr. Twelvemough declares, “I consider it a very perfect system [...] the best in the best of all possible worlds,”<sup>99</sup> is the country that fails miserably. As Eveleth writes to Mrs. Makely, “Do you still keep murdering and divorcing, and drowning, and burning, and mommicking, and maiming people by sea and land? Has there been any war since I left? Is the financial panic as great as ever, and is there much hunger and cold? [...] [S]o many

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<sup>96</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 423.

<sup>97</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 344.

<sup>98</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 429.

<sup>99</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 10, 16, 21, 64.

things in America seem bad dreams.”<sup>100</sup> Howells makes a point of exposing the ironies at the heart of American society so as to undermine its claims to perfection. One reviewer describes *A Traveler from Altruria* as “knife-edged sarcasm against the faults and follies, the selfishness and inconsistency of what we are pleased to call Christian civilization.”<sup>101</sup> The inconsistencies and incongruities in Howells’ *Altrurian Romances* are integral components of utopia that work against the common reading of perfectability and stasis.

Howells seemed to recognize and appreciate the import of irony and play to utopian narratives, though some of his critics did not. As one dissatisfied reviewer wrote:

[*A Traveler from Altruria*] is clever, but it is not likely either to make converts to Socialism or to deeply impress any mind with a sense of the injustice or inadequacy of the present civilization. Mr. Howells lacks the magnetism, the emotional force, the fire of eloquence that makes converts. He is always cold, satirical, given to word-hunting and phrase-making, and never above the suspicion of playing with his readers.<sup>102</sup>

Several reviewers felt that Howells’ utopian endeavors compromised his reputation as a literary artist and in writing *A Traveler from Altruria* and *Through the Eye of the Needle*, one critic remarked that “all that [Howells] will have accomplished will be the transformation of a great literary artist into a gloomy and ineffectual Bellamy.”<sup>103</sup>

Though Howells’ playfulness may have been off-putting to some, many readers enjoyed the “delightful whimsicality” of his *Altrurian Romances* and appreciated Howells’ “keen

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<sup>100</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 430, 431.

<sup>101</sup> “New Novels,” *The New York Times* Nov 11, 1899: BR756.

<sup>102</sup> “New Publications: Mr. Howells in Various Moods,” *The New York Times* Jun. 4, 1894: 3.

<sup>103</sup> Peck, “Living Critics,” 29.

shafts of irony” and “lightness of touch.”<sup>104</sup> The critical camp seems divided on the issue of utopian literary value; on one hand, utopian novels are too polemical to be literary, and on the other hand they can feature enough irony, ambiguity, and word-play as to be undeniably literary. In an 1893 article, one critic remarks that Howells’ Altrurian papers “have already attracted wide interest. [...] The other day I heard an author of this city hazard the prediction that ‘A Traveler from Altruria’ would prove to be the nearest approach to the classic form of literature that Mr. Howells has thus far made.”<sup>105</sup>

Another reviewer observes that in Howells’ earlier work, “his selection of incidents was happier, his wit was more spontaneous, his mockery was not so caustic, he told a merrier tale,” but in his later fiction, “his hold upon that excellently sharpened instrument, his intelligence, seemed somewhat to loosen, and he let it wander in a most erratic fashion from the limits of his first design. [...] It gradually overweighted the humor and grace of the style it invaded and catastrophe seemed imminent. The culmination was reached in the curious romance entitled ‘A Traveler from Altruria’.”<sup>106</sup> Not unlike the debates in his utopian novels, the critical debates concerning the literary merit of Howells’ *Altrurian Romances* remained unresolved.

Given his immersion in, and tremendous influence upon, the literary scene, Howells was no doubt aware of the criticism his shift in fictional tenor would receive. Howells seems to respond to his critics in the following dinner party scene from *Through the Eye of the Needle*:

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<sup>104</sup> M. Gordon Pryor Rice, “Homos of Altruria,” *The New York Times* May 11, 1907: BR 297.

<sup>105</sup> “New York Notes,” *The Literary World: A Monthly Review of Current Literature* (Jan 14, 1893): 11.

<sup>106</sup> “Mr. Howells’ Ragged Lady,” *The New York Times* Mar 18, 1899: 18.

As Mr. Twelvemough sat quite at the other end of the table, the lady on my right could easily ask me whether I liked his books. She said, tentatively, people liked them because they felt sure when they took up one of his novels they had not got hold of a tract on political economy in disguise [...] and several people began to extol them for being fiction pure and simple, and not dealing with anything but loves of young people. Mr. Twelvemough sat looking as modest as he could under the praise, and one of the ladies said that in a novel she had lately read there was a description of a surgical operation, that made her feel as if she had been present at the clinic. Then the author said that he had read that passage, too, and found it extremely well done. It was fascinating, but it was not art.

The painter asked, “Why was it not art?”

The author answered, “Well, if such a thing as that was art, then anything that a man chose to do in a work of imagination was art.”

“Precisely,” said the painter, “art *is* choice.”

“On that ground,” the banker interposed, “you could say that political economy was a fit subject for art, if an artist chose to treat it.”<sup>107</sup>

Given the critical consensus that Howells identified with both the romance novelist and the Altrurian, it is not surprising that the subject of literary value would manifest here as Howells worked to negotiate his roles as literary realist and social dreamer. Clearly Howells is offering a rebuttal to those critics who would deem his artistic expression sub-literary. According to David Ketterer, “the literary value of utopian fiction depends largely on its satiric potential,” and Howells’ utopian novels are nothing if not satiric.<sup>108</sup> As one reviewer surmises: “Mr. Howells takes neither himself nor his subject too seriously. He is writing, not a thesis on the future economics of the world at large, but a

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<sup>107</sup> Howells, *The Altrurian Romances* 330-1.

<sup>108</sup> David Ketterer, *New Worlds for Old* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1974) 101.

kindly satire, a sort of twentieth-century parable.”<sup>109</sup> Despite critics’ lamentations on Howells’ artistic atrophy, the reading public appreciated Howells’ send-up of American society and his *Altrurian Romances* were quite popular and influential.

*A Traveler from Altruria* enjoyed mild success even though it ran in an edition of only twenty-five hundred copies. *The New York Times* lists it as one of the “leading novels of the season” in June 1894 and also includes it as one of the books “most in favor” during the month of February 1895.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, *Current Literature* features the novel in their “What to Read; Where to Find It” book list of July 1894.<sup>111</sup> In *The Arena*, B. O. Flower declares it one of the “works which challenge special notice because of the profound impression [it is] making upon the public mind.”<sup>112</sup> And, a *Ladies Home Journal* article states that both Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* and Howells’ *A Traveler from Altruria* should be included on a list of fifty books “best suited for intelligent American girls of fifteen years or thereabouts.”<sup>113</sup> These reviews and announcements, though arguably products of the publisher’s commercial agenda, point to the popular reception of Howells’ utopian work and help explain its eventual inclusion in the White House library.<sup>114</sup> Howells’ *A Traveler from Altruria*, like Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*,

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<sup>109</sup> Frederic Taber Cooper, “The Master of Stair,” *The Bookman* 25.4 (Jun 1907): 17.

<sup>110</sup> “Display Ad 8—No Title,” *The New York Times* Jun 30, 1894: 5; “New Publications,” *The New York Times* Mar 11, 1895: 3.

<sup>111</sup> “Book List—What to Read; Where to Find It,” *Current Literature* 16.1 (Jul 1894): 94.

<sup>112</sup> B. O. Flower, “The Latest Social Vision,” *The Arena* 18.95 (Oct 1897): 14.

<sup>113</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “A Young Girl’s Library,” *The Ladies Home Journal* 12.12 (Nov 1895): 4.

<sup>114</sup> “The List of 1,780 Titles Compiled by Experts for Inclusion in the White House Library,” *New York Times* Aug 16, 1963: 22.

inspired several imitators. In fact, even the editor and owner of the *Cosmopolitan*, John Brisben Walker, confessed to Howells that he was writing ‘A Brief History of Altruria’ and two similar novels appeared in 1895: *Altruria* by Titus K. Smith and *God in His World* by Henry Mills Alden, Howells’ editor at Harpers.<sup>115</sup> But, it was not until after Howells’ second installment of his *Altrurian Romances*, *Through the Eye of the Needle*, was published in 1907 that reprints of his previous effort were issued. It is difficult to quantify the popularity of Howells’ utopian novels because Harpers, his publisher, suffered a series of fires in the early twentieth century and as a result, the majority of sales records from that period were lost. *A Traveler from Altruria* and the beginnings of *Through the Eye of the Needle* were initially published in *Cosmopolitan*, with a circulation of a quarter of a million in 1897. Howells remarked that during the serial run of *A Traveler from Altruria* he got more letters about it than about any other story he had written, “letters from all over the country and from all kinds of people.”<sup>116</sup>

In Howells’ time he delivered many invited lectures inspired by his utopian work, and *A Traveler from Altruria* was even adopted as a text in the New York public school system. While attending a church service in Kittery Point, Maine, Howells was solicited to speak about his utopian work. As Howells explains, “[T]he crowd got round and pleaded with me to speak or read, that I raced over to the Barnbuy, got the *Trav. From Altruria*, and gave ‘em a good dose. [...] They liked it so well that they all shook hands

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<sup>115</sup> Kirk, Clara Marburg, *William Dean Howells, Traveler from Altruria 1889-1894* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1962) 85-87.

<sup>116</sup> Marion Wilcox, “Works of William Dean Howells (1860-96),” *Harpers Weekly* (July 4, 1896): 40.



and thank me. [It was] reported later that it was the greatest hit ever known in K. P.”<sup>117</sup> This popularity prompted Howells to revisit Altruria and compose the sequel. In a letter to his brother, dated February 24, 1907, Howells writes: “Just now I am writing a sequel to the Altrurian business which you stereotyped for me twelve years ago under the title *The Eye of the Needle*. There is now a revival of interest in such speculations, and the publishers think the book, with an interesting sequel, giving an account of life in Altruria, will succeed. I hope so.”<sup>118</sup> This revival included Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *A Woman’s Utopia* (1907), Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1907), and Upton Sinclair’s *The Millennium* (1907), all published the same year as Howells’ sequel. Between 1894 and 1895, a communitarian experiment, named Altruria, was undertaken by Christian Socialists in California and from 1906 to 1907, Upton Sinclair and a handful of like-minded literati and philosophers including Sinclair Lewis, Edith Summers Kelley, John Dewey, and William James took part in the establishment of Helicon Hall, a utopian experiment in New Jersey. This renewed interest in utopian speculation enabled Howells’ utopian sequel to enjoy a reception similar to its precursor as the *New York Times* deemed *Through the Eye of the Needle* “worthy of note as literary news,” and *The Dial* listed the novel among its list of “One Hundred Books for Summer Reading: A Guide to the Season’s Best.”<sup>119</sup> Despite critics’ reservations as to the merit of Howells’

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<sup>117</sup>Letter from W. D. H. to Mrs. W. D. Howells, April 26, 1909. Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* vol. 11 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 266.

<sup>118</sup>Letter from W. D. H. to Joseph A. Howells, February 24, 1907. Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* vol. II (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 242.

<sup>119</sup>“Topics of the Week,” *New York Times* Apr 27, 1907: BR272; “Other 7—No Title,” *The Dial* 52.504 (Jun 16, 1907): 21.

utopian work, his novels nonetheless enjoyed a positive reception, inspiring literary imitators and communitarian experiments.

When Howells' sequel was published, Harpers advertised the novel with the following copy: "Here is a country not on the map, a people who do not exist, an impossibly ideal way of living"<sup>120</sup> In spite of the impossibility of utopia, Howells maintained a faith that informed the majority of his later work. In the fifteen years between the Altruria installments, Howells published a volume of poetry, *Stops of Various Quills* (1895) that, perhaps even more so than his utopian efforts, illustrates his "hope in doubt" philosophy. The evolution of Howells' poetry mirrors the evolution of his novelistic efforts. As one reviewer remarks: "Mr. Howells' earlier and later poetry bears a marked contrast. [...] From the beginning he was a keen lover of nature, and this is apparent in many of his earlier poems. In his later work there is less of nature and a more serious interest in the great social problems of the age."<sup>121</sup> In *Stops of Various Quills*, Howells grapples with questions of fate, faith, and human mortality and the following excerpts from the collection exemplify his perspective:

From "Question"

...

Where, in what land, or on what lonely sea?  
 When, in the light of what unrisen sun?  
 Under what fatal planet? There is none  
 Can tell, or know aught but that it shall be:  
 The one thing certain which all other things  
 Have taught my being in its inmost springs  
 To feel the sole impossibility.

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<sup>120</sup> "Display Ad 26—No Title," *New York Times* May 25, 1907: BR335.

<sup>121</sup> F. M. Hopkins, "American Poets of To-Day: William Dean Howells," *Current Literature* 24.4 (Oct. 1898): 23.

From “Another Day”

...

Another day, and with it that brute joy,  
Or that prophetic rapture of the boy  
Whom every morning brings as glad a breath  
As if it dawned upon the end of death!

All other days have run the common course,  
And left me at their going neither worse  
Nor better for them; only, a little older,  
A little sadder, and a little colder.

But this, it seems as if this day might be  
The day I somehow always thought to see,  
And that should come to bless me past the scope  
And measure of my farthest-reaching hope.

“Hope”

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We sailed and sailed upon the desert sea  
Where for whole days we alone seemed to be.  
At last we saw a dim, vague line arise  
Between the empty billows and the skies,  
That grew and grew until it was the shape  
Of cove and inlet, promontory and cape;  
Then hills and valleys, rivers, fields, and woods,  
Steeple and roofs, and village neighborhoods.  
And then I thought, “Sometime I shall embark  
Upon a sea more desert and more dark  
Than ever this was, and between the skies  
And empty billows I shall see arise  
Another world out of that waste and lapse,  
Like yonder land. Perhaps—perhaps—perhaps!”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> William Dean Howells, *Stops of Various Quills* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1895) 16, 17, 36.

In an 1896 review of Howells' poetry collection, Harry Thurston Peck remarks: "The first and strongest impression that one gets from the perusal of this volume is an impression of intense sadness. A profound melancholy pervades every one of the short poems that are here collected. This melancholy, this pervasive sadness, one cannot quite call pessimism, for it does not spring from a pessimistic spirit."<sup>123</sup> To be sure, Howells seems preoccupied with questions of God, death, and the afterlife in these poems, undoubtedly the result of the tragic loss of his daughter Winnie six years earlier. In "Change," Howells writes: "Suddenly I think of her that died, and know/ Whatever friendly or unfriendly fate/ Befall me in my hope or in my pride/ It is all nothing but a mockery,/And nothing can be what it used to be [...] in the deathless days before she died."<sup>124</sup> But, in spite of the doubts and fears that pervade Howells' poetry, there remains an abiding sense of hope. In "Question," Howells recognizes the impossibility of comprehending both the present and the future in its totality and yet, in "Hope," rather than foreclose on the unknowable, Howells affirms the future with the optimistically repeated declaration: "Perhaps—perhaps—perhaps!" Rather than conclude this line with a question mark and indicate reservation, doubt, and insecurity, Howells enthusiastically embraces the unknowable future with an exclamation further emphasizing that the recognition of the irrepresentability of utopia does not preclude hope. Howells once wrote, "I cannot forecast the future by any effort of faith or imagination," yet his inability

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<sup>123</sup> Harry Thurston Peck, "Mr. Howells as a Poet," *The Bookman* 2.6 (February 1896): 25.

<sup>124</sup> Howells, *Stops of Various Quills* 9.

to forecast in no way forecloses on his ability to hope and his “hope in doubt” philosophy embodies the utopian ideal and inspires us to optimistically face an uncertain future.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Letter from W. D. H. to Aurelia Howells, December 24, 1899. Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* vol. II. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 117.

## CHAPTER III

## BRAVE NEW WORLDS:

## UTOPIAN HORIZONS IN THE WORK OF ALDOUS HUXLEY

Enjoying my bath in the flux, I feel no longing for rocks of ages or other similar external solidifies. I am in my element in the current, and pant for no dry land.<sup>1</sup>

Aldous Huxley, "Varieties of Intelligence"

As his home burned to the ground in Los Angeles, California on May 12, 1961, Aldous Huxley could have rescued several literary treasures from the smoldering structure: a first edition of Voltaire's *Candide*, which belonged to his grandfather; a first edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, by his late friend D. H. Lawrence; or signed volumes by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and the late H. G. Wells. Instead, the *only* literary work Huxley retrieved was his manuscript of *Island*. It may not be surprising that Huxley would want to save this work in progress. But, considering the stress and frustration writing this manuscript caused him, it would not be surprising if he let the fire liberate him from the task of completing it. Published one year later, *Island* (1962) is a utopian novel that combines Huxley's lifelong study of mysticism, religion, philosophy, and political, social, and behavioral science; it is also Huxley's last literary publication. In his later years, Huxley distanced himself from the dystopian ideas that characterized his best known novel, *Brave New World* (1932), and instead focused on exploring his utopian impulses. For someone who once declared utopias to be "admirable, but fundamentally

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<sup>1</sup> Aldous Huxley, "Varieties of Intelligence," *Aldous Huxley Complete Essays: Vol. II, 1926-1929*. Eds. Robert S. Baker and James Sexton (Chicago: Ivan R Dee P, 2000) 174.

irrelevant,” what caused Huxley to reverse course and pen a utopian novel?<sup>2</sup> The answer to this question is found in an examination of the distinctions between dystopia and utopia, and close-readings of both *Brave New World* and *Island* show that Huxley’s move toward utopia was inevitable.

Lyman Tower Sargent, pioneer of utopian studies and widely regarded as the foremost bibliographer of utopian literature, refined his definitions of utopianism in “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited” (1994). In this often cited essay, Sargent defines utopia, dystopia, and anti-utopia as nonexistent societies “described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space.”<sup>3</sup> But, he qualifies his definitions of each with the following distinctions: “[Dystopia] is intended to be considerably worse than the society in which the reader lives,” and “[Anti-Utopia] is aimed to criticize utopianism.”<sup>4</sup> Sargent further argues that “Anti-utopia is in common use as a substitute for dystopia, but as such it is often inaccurate, and it is useful to have a term to describe those works that use the utopian form to attack either utopias in general or a specific utopia.”<sup>5</sup> Sargent distinguishes between anti-utopia and dystopia by arguing that anti-utopian work criticizes the contemporary moment while dystopian work projects contemporary trends to illustrate far worse future conditions. Given these definitions, it is difficult to place *Brave New World* in either genre as it is more of a hybrid of the two. In one sense, Huxley criticizes contemporary trends in his depiction of London in A.F. 632, though it is

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<sup>2</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1934) 56.

<sup>3</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5.1 (1994): 1-37, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Sargent 9.

<sup>5</sup> Sargent 37.

certainly considered utopic by most of its citizens. Therefore, *Brave New World* could be read as a utopia that criticizes utopia: an anti-utopia. At the same time, Huxley takes contemporary trends to their logical conclusions to depict a far worse future society: a dystopia. Tom Moylan, in his widely influential *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, and Dystopia* (2000), argues, in tracing the history of the dystopian genre, that Huxley's novel is a classic dystopian text: "Gradually, however, dystopia's critical sensibility is taken up by authors who look beyond technology and the authoritarian state and turn to the especial imbrication of the economy and culture that capitalism has achieved at the cost of diminishing the complexity and potential of all humanity and the earth itself. Within the web of classical dystopias, it is Huxley's work that offers the first thorough critique in this vein."<sup>6</sup> Moylan also acknowledges a hybrid—the anti-utopian dystopia—in which "the best that can happen is a recognition of the integrity of the individual even when the hegemonic power coercively and ideologically closes in."<sup>7</sup> *Brave New World* is best placed in the "anti-utopian dystopia" category inasmuch as individuation and the quest for autonomy are honored, if ultimately unfulfilled as dissenters are either subsumed within the system, or destroyed. Whether anti-utopian, dystopian, or both, Huxley's ability to imagine a more hopeful future world is mitigated by these genres as the forms are too constrictive to forward substantive alternatives to the existing order. Ultimately, utopian discourse lends itself more readily

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<sup>6</sup> Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, and Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Westview P, 2000) xii.

<sup>7</sup> Moylan xiii.



to dreams of the future where dystopia's "capacity for totalizing interrogation" focuses more on critiques of the future.<sup>8</sup>

Despite moving toward utopian writing in his later life, Aldous Huxley's name is often synonymous with dystopian work, specifically *Brave New World* (1932). Huxley's most famous novel ends with John the Savage cursing his flesh in self-flagellation: "'Oh, the flesh!...Kill it, kill it!'"<sup>9</sup> Huxley's protagonist, self-exiled to a lighthouse on the outskirts of London, hopes to "escape further contamination by the filth of civilized life [and to] be purified and made good."<sup>10</sup> But, when travelers happen to spot him and notify reporters, his solitude and attempts at salvation are compromised. Unable to escape civilization, or expunge its influence, the Savage finds himself at the end of his rope—literally—and hangs himself. The Savage's suicide leaves the reader with little doubt as to the future of the *Brave New World* of A. F. 632—its conditions are lethal and inescapable. Huxley's novel, like most dystopian texts, offers an oppressive and totalizing depiction of the inevitable near-future if disturbing trends in science, technology, and social organization go unchecked. For Huxley, what began as a "leg-pull" on H. G. Wells and "a revolt against the horror of the Wellsian Utopia" evolved into his most famous and widely-read warning of what the world might become.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Moylan xii.

<sup>9</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper Perennial P, 1965) 198. From this point forward the novels will be referenced as *BNW* and *BNWR*, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Huxley *BNW and BNWR*, 189.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Aldous Huxley to Mrs. Kethevan Roberts, 24 Aug, 1931. *Letters of Aldous Huxley*. Ed. Grover Smith. New York: Harper and Row, 1969. 348. For a discussion of H. G. Wells and Huxley see Sybille Bedford's *Aldous Huxley: A Biography* Vol. 1, 1894-1939 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973) 244, 253.

The interwar years of the early twentieth century were ripe for the production of dystopian novels; the economic, social, and political instability provided a fruitful ground for the extrapolation of a negative future based on an uncertain present. *Brave New World* is arguably the definitive dystopian novel, second only, perhaps, to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948). In fact, competition between Huxley and Orwell was quite fierce, so much so that Orwell, on several occasions, implied that Huxley's novel was not entirely his own. In a letter to F. J. Warburg, Orwell wrote, "I think Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* must be plagiarized from [Zamyatin's *We*] to some extent."<sup>12</sup> Orwell took these suspicions public in a book review of Zamyatin's *We*: "The first thing anyone should notice about *We* is the fact—never pointed out, I believe—that Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* must be partly derived from it."<sup>13</sup> Huxley never publicly responded to Orwell's accusations. When Orwell sent Huxley a copy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Huxley replied with a letter implying the inferiority of Orwell's effort: "I feel that the nightmare of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is destined to modulate into the nightmare of a world having more resemblance to that which I imagined in *Brave New World*."<sup>14</sup> In *Brave New World Revisited* (1958), Huxley makes a point of praising Orwell's predictions. But, he notes that, given the historical contexts of 1948, Orwell had more evidence and support for his predictions, whereas Huxley did not have the benefit of Nazism and Stalinism to sustain his. Huxley claims that "the odds were more in favor

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<sup>12</sup> Letter from George Orwell to F. J. Warburg, 30 March, 1949. *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*. Vol. 4. Ed. Ian Angus. (London: Nonpareil Books, 2000) 485.

<sup>13</sup> George Orwell, "Book Review of Zamyatin's *We*—Untitled." *Polemic 2* (Jan 1946): 26.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Aldous Huxley to George Orwell, 21 Oct, 1949. *Letters of Aldous Huxley*. Ed. Grover Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 604.

of something like *Brave New World* than of something like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” coming into fruition.<sup>15</sup> However derivative or inspired, both dystopian novels address the dire conditions produced by an authoritarian government run amok and the devastating effects of mechanisms of social control.

In times of chaos and uncertainty, stability is at a premium and especially so in the interwar period of precarious peace. Huxley penned *Brave New World* with the not too distant memory of World War I, and the technological “progress” that promised to rebuild, reshape, and remedy the postwar landscape is at the center of the novel. For Huxley, the year A.F. 632 brings a post-Fordist near-future of mechanization, technology, science, and invention marshaled to sustain production and achieve stability—the new World State’s motto is “Community, Identity, Stability.” Social stability in Huxley’s dystopia is achieved by the implementation of a “Hatchery and Conditioning Centre” where citizens are predestined and habituated and ten World Controllers assure that conditions are aimed at “making people like their inescapable social destiny.”<sup>16</sup> The system for reproduction and socialization is complete; there are no margins for error or exception. Industry, efficiency, and stability are the new gods as “Our Ford” is the new “Our Father” and the “T” is the new “+.” The collective wisdom is “Ford’s in his flivver. All’s well with the world,” Charing-Cross Tower is renamed Charing-T Tower, Big Ben is renamed Big Henry, and citizens make the sign of the “T” across their chests in reverence to Ford’s first automobile. There are no philosophers, poets, or artists and the rosy-pink, newly hatched children are transformed into anemic, pale citizen-cogs in

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<sup>15</sup> Huxley, *BNWR* 2.

<sup>16</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 11.

the social machine and given names that pay homage to gods of efficiency, industry, and conformity: Lenina, Henry, Marx, Trotsky, Wells, Edsel, Benito, Hoover, Watson, Morgan, Engels, and Diesel. There is little individuation in the system as over two billion citizens share only ten thousand names and they are placed in a rigid hierarchy and categorized as either Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas, or Epsilons with the designation “plus” or “minus.” All of this standardization and uniformity is achieved through the Bokanovsky Process of controlled egg-embryo development, or arrested development. This process is “one of the major instruments of social stability” and it produces “[s]tandard men and women; in uniform batches”<sup>17</sup> This eugenic practice serves to stabilize the population and mitigate aberration and not only are the citizens in a state of arrested development, but so, too, is the World State.

Ironically, the forward-thinking, progressive technologies are used to stabilize the State and maintain the status quo. This stability is insured by the erasure of historical record and the privileging of present conditions “[a]ccompanied by a campaign against the Past; by the closing of museums, the blowing up of historical monuments [...and] the suppression of all books published before A. F. 150.”<sup>18</sup> Mustapha Mond, one of the ten World Controllers, is fond of saying “history is bunk” and every attempt is made to arrest time and preclude contingency. Huxley’s novel shows us how such endeavors lead inevitably to totalitarianism and any and all aberrations are absorbed and neutralized in the service of maintaining stability at all costs. As Mond explains: “No civilization

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<sup>17</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 4.

<sup>18</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 39.

without social stability. No social stability without individual stability.”<sup>19</sup> In order to insure individual stability, citizens of Huxley’s dystopian future partake of *soma*, a hallucinogenic substance that offers a moment of transcendent tranquility with “[a]ll the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects.”<sup>20</sup> Soma mitigates questioning, subdues creativity, and prevents insolent insubordination, and the World Controllers dispense it liberally: “half a gramme for a half-holiday, a gramme for a weekend, two grammes for a trip to the gorgeous East, three for a dark eternity on the moon.”<sup>21</sup> Soma also stops time inasmuch as it places the user in a state of suspended animation: “In the end [Lenina] persuaded [Bernard] to swallow four tablets of *soma*. Five minutes later roots and fruits were abolished; the flower of the present rosily blossomed.”<sup>22</sup> Soma produces the effect of an interminable present as it erases both the past (roots) and the future (fruits). The narrator further describes soma’s effects and explains that “[Lenina] swallowed six half-gramme tablets of *soma*, lay down on her bed, and within ten minutes had embarked for lunar eternity. It would be eighteen hours at the least before she was in time again.”<sup>23</sup> Soma places the user “out of time” and when their journey subsides, they return blissfully to where they departed.<sup>24</sup> The *past* and the *future* are sickening influences in this new world; as Lenina chants: “Was and will make me

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<sup>19</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 31.

<sup>20</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 42.

<sup>21</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 43.

<sup>22</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 80, original emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 108, original emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 118.

ill.”<sup>25</sup> Because soma is so easily accessible and its use is universally urged, the citizens of the future can mitigate any stress or anxiety they might experience by popping a gramme, or two, or more. Whenever citizens are troubled by their conditions, they are conditioned to take soma.

From their first days in the Hatchery, citizens are habituated, via repetitive messages, to embrace soma, encourage its use, and welcome its effects: *A gramme is better than a damn; A gramme in time saves nine; One cubic centimeter cures ten gloomy sentiments; I take a gramme and only am.* This training—hypnopaedia—is considered “the greatest moralizing and socializing force of all time.” As the Director of Hatcheries explains: “Till at last the child’s mind *is* these suggestions, and the sum of the suggestions *is* the child’s mind. And not the child’s mind only. The adult’s mind too—all his life long. The mind that judges and desires and decides—made up of these suggestions. But all these suggestions are *our* suggestions! [...] Suggestions from the State.”<sup>26</sup> The totalizing system is sustained through suggestion; the citizens of A.F. 632 are fully interpolated by the time they leave the Hatchery and their communal identification is reinforced through a “Solidarity Service.” Collective solidarity is crucial to the maintenance of social stability and the service reinforces anti-individuation and consummates in the annihilation of the self: “The group was now complete, the solidarity circle perfect and without flaw. Man, woman, man, in a ring of endless alternation round the table. Twelve of them ready to be made one, waiting to come

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<sup>25</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 80.

<sup>26</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 20.

together, to be fused, to lose their twelve separate identities in a larger being.”<sup>27</sup> With all the trappings of a traditional religious service—hymns, genuflection, and communal sacrament—the service perpetually renews citizen investment in communal identity and the convergence of all into a “Greater Being.” Huxley’s dystopia shows the sublimation of freedom and individuation in the service of a greater collective cause. Citizens are initiated into the system from Hatching and through hypnopaedic indoctrination—*When the individual feels, the community reels*—ritual, and doses of soma, their submission is complete.<sup>28</sup> As one solidarity hymn proclaims: “Come, Greater Being, Social Friend, Annihilating Twelve-in-One! We long to die, for when we end, Our larger life has but begun.”<sup>29</sup> The social machine works rather efficiently except for the disgruntled and dissatisfied Bernard Marx.

Bernard Marx, a shorter-than-average Alpha Plus hypnopaedic specialist, is plagued with an inferiority complex and misgivings about the brave new world. A subject of much mockery from his peers, Bernard feels like an outsider and “feeling an outsider, he behaved like one, which increased the prejudice against him and intensified the contempt and hostility aroused by his physical defects.”<sup>30</sup> Bernard is constantly antagonizing the system with his own mockery and reluctance to submit mind, body, and soul to the motto of “Community, Identity, Stability.” He even refuses to liberally partake of soma—“‘I’d rather be myself,’ he said, ‘Myself and nasty. Not somebody

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<sup>27</sup> Huxley, *BW* 62.

<sup>28</sup> Huxley, *BW* 72.

<sup>29</sup> Huxley, *BW* 63.

<sup>30</sup> Huxley, *BW* 50.

else, however jolly”—and he longs to be more on his own and “not so completely a part of something else; not just a cell in the social body.”<sup>31</sup> Bernard’s antipathy and dissatisfaction is sensed by both his peers and his superiors and the Director of Hatcheries admonishes his unwillingness to submit to the system:

I’m not at all pleased with the reports I receive of your behaviour outside working hours. You may say that this is not my business. But it is. I have the good name of the Centre to think of. My workers must be above suspicion, particularly those of the highest castes. Alphas are so conditioned that they do not *have* to be infantile in their emotional behaviour. But that is all the more reason for their making a special effort to conform. It is their duty to be infantile, even against their inclination. And so, Mr. Marx, I give you fair warning.<sup>32</sup>

Of course this reprimand has the opposite effect of persuading Bernard to goose-step and instead, “Bernard left the room with a swagger, exulting, as he banged the door behind him, in the thought that he stood alone, embattled against the order of things; elated by the intoxicating consciousness of this individual significance and importance.”<sup>33</sup> The fact that the Director feels so strongly as to give him such individualized attention—even in the form of reproach—emboldens Bernard to persist with his questioning and maintain his differentiation from the community at large. But, despite his protests and his heightened awareness that he is enslaved by his conditioning, Bernard is powerless to change the system, until he returns from his holiday at the Savage Reservation in New Mexico.

The majority of *Brave New World* focuses on the initiation of John the Savage into the World State. The introduction of John the Savage into Bernard’s society serves

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<sup>31</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 68, 69.

<sup>32</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 75.

<sup>33</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 75.



to disrupt the dystopian paradigm; John is the wrench Bernard throws into the machine. Because of his Alpha-Plus status, Bernard is given permission by Mustapha Mond to take holiday in New Mexico and visit the Savage Reservation—an uncivilized place, as yet, unadulterated by the new world order, where women still give birth and nurse their infants, and men still speak of time, death, and God. The Savage Reservation “is a place which, owing to unfavourable climatic or geological conditions, or poverty of natural resources, has not been worth the expense of civilizing.”<sup>34</sup> Bernard suspects that one particular resident of the reservation, John the Savage, is the illegitimate son of the Director of Hatcheries. Having been warned that the Director intends to replace him and send him to a center in Iceland, Bernard hopes that bringing John the Savage back to civilization will give him leverage. Once Bernard returns to the Hatchery, the Director announces Bernard’s relocation:

A painful duty constrains me. The security and stability of Society are in danger. [...] [T]his colleague of yours—or should I anticipate and say this ex-colleague?—has grossly betrayed the trust imposed on him. By his heretical views on sport and *soma*, by the scandalous unorthodoxy of his sex-life, by his refusal to obey the teachings of Our Ford and behave out of office hours, “even as a little infant,” (here the Director made the sign of the T), “he has proved himself an enemy of Society, a subverter, ladies and gentlemen, of all Order and Stability, a conspirator against Civilization itself. For this reason, I propose to dismiss him, to dismiss him with ignominy from the post he has held in this Centre; I propose forthwith to apply for his transference to a Sub-Centre of the lowest order and, that his punishment may serve the best interest of Society, as far as possible removed from any important Centre of population.”<sup>35</sup>

The Director concludes by asking Bernard if there is any reason why he should not be dismissed and Bernard presents John the Savage who “fell on his knees in front of the

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<sup>34</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 124.

<sup>35</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 114.

Director, and said in a clear voice: ‘My father!’.”<sup>36</sup> Since copulation is encouraged in the brave new world, but parenthood forbidden, this exclamation/accusation gives Bernard trump and the Director is powerless to pronounce judgment and immediately resigns from his post at the Hatchery. Emboldened by this act and his newfound popularity and importance by association—everyone wants to meet and greet the Savage—Bernard proceeds to initiate John the Savage into civilization.

The rest of Huxley’s novel advances by a series of encounters between John and the brave new world as the visitor finds himself unimpressed, disillusioned, and increasingly miserable in his new environment. John serves as a gadfly who openly challenges and questions the State and Bernard serves as his interlocutor. In a series of reports to the World Controller, Bernard records John’s adjustment to civilized society: “‘The Savage,’ wrote Bernard in his report to Mustapha Mond, ‘shows surprisingly little astonishment at, or awe of, civilized inventions [...] though I must admit that I agree with the Savage in finding civilized infantility too easy or, as he puts it, not expensive enough.’”<sup>37</sup> John begins as a practical joke on the Director, but becomes Bernard’s brother-in-arms in subversion; John refuses to take soma and he reads works by Shakespeare—contraband copies brought back from the reservation. But, unlike Bernard, whose conditioning renders him incapable of extreme subversion, John overtly challenges the status quo. John’s ultimate assault on civilization occurs at a soma-dispensary, where he cannot hold back his indignation: “‘Stop!’ called the Savage in a loud and ringing voice. ‘Stop!’ He pushed his way to the table; the Deltas stared at him

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<sup>36</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 116.

<sup>37</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 121.

with astonishment. [...] ‘Listen, I beg you,’ cried the Savage earnestly. ‘Lend me your ears...’ He had never spoken in public before, and found it very difficult to express what he wanted to say. ‘Don’t take that horrible stuff. It’s poison, it’s poison.’ [...] ‘Poison to soul as well as body.’ [...] ‘Throw it all away, that horrible poison.’ [...] ‘I come to bring you freedom.’”<sup>38</sup> After John is subdued and taken to the hospital, he continues to question and caution: “But do you like being slaves?”; “Do you like being babies?”; “Don’t you want to be free and men?”; “I’ll teach you; I’ll *make* you be free whether you want to or not.”<sup>39</sup> During John’s assault on the conditioned masses, Bernard and Helmholtz, another frustrated compatriot, join him. This action, on the part of Bernard and Helmholtz, is important because in Huxley’s dystopia inaction is so prevalent. Opportunities for action rarely present themselves and they are relished, especially by discouraged and aggravated citizen-cogs like Bernard and Helmholtz; action is motivated by personal feeling, not rote conditioning. After the authorities arrive to arrest the chaos and restore order, John, Bernard, and Helmholtz are taken to reckon with the World Controller and learn their fate.

Like most dictators in totalitarian regimes, Mustapha Mond maintains a comfortable distance from the masses and indulges in activities deemed too dangerous for the precarious constitutions of his citizenry, even for the Alpha-Pluses. Mond has access to all of the relics of the past and secures they never reach impressionable hands; his study is full of books that are prohibited and he is fond of saying: “It’s prohibited you

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<sup>38</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 162.

<sup>39</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 163, original emphasis.

see. But as I make the laws here, I can also break them.”<sup>40</sup> Upon greeting the three dissidents, Mond turns to John and states: “So you don’t much like civilization, Mr. Savage,” to which John replies: “No.”<sup>41</sup> In the exchange that follows, Huxley reveals the irony of the dystopic brave new world: as totalizing and conformist as it purports to be, there is a strong undercurrent of instability and insubordination. When the triumvirate question the Controller as to the status of literature in civilized society and the prohibition of works by Shakespeare, and others, the Controller replies: “Because our world is not the same as Othello’s world. You can’t make flivvers without steel—and you can’t make tragedies without social instability. The world’s stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can’t get.”<sup>42</sup> Mond further explains that the absence of literature, poetry, and art is “the price we have to pay for stability.”<sup>43</sup> Ironically, if social instability did not exist, then John, Bernard, and Helmholtz would never feel dissatisfied, assault the dispensary, and be summoned to the World Controller for reproach. Even Mond admits that not all is perfect when he adds the caveat that “if anything should go wrong, there’s *soma*.”<sup>44</sup> Of course, *soma* should not be necessary if everyone’s needs are met. Additionally, there is no guarantee that dissatisfied citizens—like Bernard and John—will even consume the opiate. But, Mond insists that the World State lives up to its motto of “Community, Identity, and Stability,”

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<sup>40</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 168.

<sup>41</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 167.

<sup>42</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 169.

<sup>43</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 169.

<sup>44</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 169.

and the prohibition of science and art are necessary to maintain the status quo: “Every discovery in pure science is potentially subversive. [...] It isn’t only art that’s incompatible with happiness; it’s also science. Science is dangerous; we have to keep it most carefully chained and muzzled.”<sup>45</sup> Because “change is a menace to stability,” Bernard, John, and Helmholtz must also be muzzled and removed from the social body; if the hand offends, cut it off.<sup>46</sup> Mond explains that Bernard and Helmholtz will be exiled to an island where they will “meet the most interesting set of men and women to be found anywhere in the world. All the people who, for one reason or another, have got too self-consciously individual to fit into community-life. All the people who aren’t satisfied with orthodoxy, who’ve got independent ideas of their own.”<sup>47</sup> Apparently there are several such islands containing many subverters like Bernard and Helmholtz, which further belies the Controller’s assertion that the World State has achieved stability that provides pure happiness and satisfaction for its entire citizenry.

Mustapha Mond banishes Bernard and Helmholtz to an island, but insists that John the Savage stay so that he can continue to observe him. John refuses to be an experiment and self-exiles to a remote area outside of the city where he can be alone: “The Savage had chosen as his hermitage the old lighthouse which stood on the crest of the hill between Puttenham and Elstead.”<sup>48</sup> At the novel’s conclusion, Huxley didactically describes John as a Christ figure, an allusion already made when the Savage

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<sup>45</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 173.

<sup>46</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 172.

<sup>47</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 174.

<sup>48</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 187.

insisted on “saving” the lemmings from the evil soma. From the moment John arrives at his secluded dwelling, he begins a routine of prayer and self-flagellation bent on purifying the civilization from his soul: “From time to time he stretched out his arms as though he were on the cross, and held them thus through long minutes of an ache that gradually increased till it became a tremulous and excruciating agony; held them, in voluntary crucifixion.”<sup>49</sup> During one of these periods of atonement, John whips himself to eliminate the scourge when he is spotted by some travelers. Not long after, reporters arrive to capitalize on John’s suffering and co-opt it in a “feelie” film titled “The Savage of Surrey.” Soon, throngs of visitors flock to the lighthouse to witness the affliction firsthand: “As in a nightmare the dozens became scores, the scores hundreds. The Savage had retreated towards cover, and now, in the posture of an animal at bay, stood with his back to the wall of the lighthouse, staring from face to face in speechless horror.”<sup>50</sup> The crowd of spectators begins to mimic the Savage and whip each other in an orgy of atonement, effectively co-opting difference and absorbing anomaly to create and maintain sameness and stability. John is shocked and horrified by the sight and realizes that there is no escape from the oppressive civilization and he resorts to killing himself in an ultimate effort to cleanse his spirit. Huxley makes it clear that the totalitarian brave new world cannot tolerate derisive individuation and anyone who cannot be civilized or subsumed in the system is summarily discharged—Bernard and Helmholtz to an island and John to his death.

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<sup>49</sup> Huxley, *BW* 187.

<sup>50</sup> Huxley, *BW* 196.

In Huxley's dystopia, the World State is static and maintained by citizens who worship the trinity of Community, Identity, and Stability. The system of hatching and conditioning assures there is no social mobility—the hierarchy is strict and absolute—and there is no room for movement, improvement, or hope, either individual or collective. There are no alternatives to already preconceived, conditioned, and pre-destined outcomes. The banishment of Bernard and Helmholtz, and John's suicide, symbolize the end of possibility, the end of alternatives, and the end of subversion and change; John cannot change the World State and he cannot escape it. Of course the purported totality of the system is undermined by the very existence of Bernard, Helmholtz, and John—clearly the system is not perfect for everyone. The “swarming, indistinguishable sameness” that stabilizes the State “on its unswerving course,” is unbearable for those who crave drama, difference, and feeling.<sup>51</sup> As John tells the World Controller: “I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin.”<sup>52</sup> Even if soma provides a respite from weariness, its users are always returned to the “miseries of space and time”; the totalitarian system is inescapable.<sup>53</sup>

In dystopian novels, as in dystopian societies, there is room for critique, but not movement. There is no room for the flowering or forwarding of alternatives or playing with reality. The space for the advancement of hope in dystopia is limited. Huxley, like Bernard, Helmholtz, and John, can merely offer a critique within the totalizing system,

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<sup>51</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 160, 170.

<sup>52</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 184.

<sup>53</sup> Huxley, *BNW* 23.

but there is no further movement, no promise of a future to come, and no hope in the system. In this way, dystopia is subject to the common criticism of utopia that condemns it for its own totalitarian tendencies. Utopia's association with totality was reinforced by post World War II critics like Karl Popper and F. A. Hayek who argued fervidly that utopianism's uncompromising reconstructions of society can only result in despotic regimes. According to Popper, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1950), "[T]he Utopian method must lead to a dangerous and dogmatic attachment to a blueprint for which countless sacrifices have been made,"<sup>54</sup> and similar statements can be found in F. A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) and Jacob Talmon's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1952). But, as argued earlier in this study, utopia's etymology (*eu/ou-topos*—the good place that is no place) precludes this charge. However, dystopia lacks the *ou-topic* import to mitigate its totalizing features. In fact, the closed circuit of dystopian texts renders them incapable of suggesting substantive directions for improvement. In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Tom Moylan notes Theodor Adorno's criticism of Huxley's narrative on these grounds: "In his 1955 essay on *Brave New World*, Theodor Adorno considers Huxley's nightmare vision as a contradictory production of capitalist culture. Although this noted dystopia exposes the terrible truth of the totally administered and commodity-driven social system, Adorno argues that it nevertheless manages that terror and contains it in a narrative that failed 'to contemplate a praxis which could explode the infamous continuum.'"<sup>55</sup> Adorno wanted Huxley to offer more than a critique, but this criticism is unjust as the dystopian form leaves little room

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<sup>54</sup> Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1950) 156.

<sup>55</sup> Moylan 122.



for much else. Huxley can merely offer characters that attempt to counteract and contradict the hegemony, but, in the end, their efforts are futile. John heeds the call for change when he meditates on the words of Miranda from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "O brave new world!" Miranda was proclaiming the possibility of loveliness, the possibility of transforming even the nightmare into something fine and noble. 'O brave new world!' It was a challenge, a command."<sup>56</sup> But, despite his best efforts, he is consumed by the system and rendered impotent. Possibility and change are made possible through the chance and contingency totalitarian systems seek to eradicate. Chance and contingency are enabled by the passage of time; dystopias fear time and the future and make every attempt to control it. This is why John affronts the World Controller by insisting that he have the "right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow."<sup>57</sup> For Mustapha Mond and the rest of the World State, the unknowable is something to be feared and arrested; everything is done to control it. But, for John, the unknowable is welcomed, embraced, and affirmed. Unfortunately, John's utopian impulses are destroyed by the dystopian brave new world.

In 1946, Huxley penned a Forward to a new edition of *Brave New World* in which he acknowledges the faults of the novel and makes no apologies: "To pour over the literary shortcomings of twenty years ago, to attempt to patch a faulty work into the perfection it missed at its first execution, to spend one's middle age in trying to mend the artistic sins committed in youth—all this is surely vain and futile. And that is why this

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<sup>56</sup> Huxley, *BW* 161.

<sup>57</sup> Huxley, *BW* 184.

new *Brave New World* is the same as the old one.”<sup>58</sup> Huxley chooses not to patch this reprint of his work, but he does spend some time pointing out its faults and what he calls “the most serious defect in the story,” namely the totalitarian framework: “The Savage is offered only two alternatives, an insane life in Utopia, or the life of a primitive in an Indian village.”<sup>59</sup> For Huxley, *Brave New World*’s plot is too constrictive; John the Savage should have been given other options, there should have been more play in the text and more room for negotiation. But play and negotiation are scarce in dystopia and Huxley cannot see clear to make room for them, even in hindsight. Huxley also judges his novel on how well it projected, or predicted, the future and asks: “From our present vantage point, fifteen years further down the inclined plane of modern history, how plausible do its prognostications seem? What has happened in the painful interval to confirm or invalidate the forecasts of 1931?”<sup>60</sup> Huxley proceeds to enumerate major historical events since his novel’s original publication: “The nationalistic radicals had their way, with the consequences that we all know—Bolshevism, Fascism, inflation, depression, Hitler, the Second World War, the ruin of Europe and all but universal famine.”<sup>61</sup> For Huxley, these events precluded a “series of economic and social changes unprecedented in rapidity and completeness,” and he predicts that these changes will necessarily result in totalitarian regimes:

These far from painless operations will be directed by highly centralized totalitarian governments. Inevitably so; for the immediate future is likely

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<sup>58</sup> Huxley, *BNW and BNWR* xiii.

<sup>59</sup> Huxley, *BNW and BNWR* xiv.

<sup>60</sup> Huxley, *BNW and BNWR* xv.

<sup>61</sup> Huxley, *BNW and BNWR* xviii.

to resemble the immediate past, and in the immediate past rapid technological changes, taking place in a mass-producing economy and among a population predominantly propertyless, have always tended to produce economic and social confusion. To deal with confusion, power has been centralized and government control increased. It is probable that all the world's governments will be more or less completely totalitarian.<sup>62</sup>

Just as the dystopian genre limits Huxley's ability to explore alternatives, his near-fatalistic vision hinders his ability to see a world without limitations.

In 1958, Huxley published a collection of essays on the same social, political, and economic themes he explored in *Brave New World*, titled *Brave New World Revisited*. In this text, Huxley dispenses with the fiction construct and offers a series of non-fiction essays that continue the debates ignited by his dystopian novel. In light of the Cold War, Huxley feels the need to assess contemporary trends through the lens of his earlier predictions. Huxley offers a glimpse into his thoughts before and after penning *Brave New World* and this collection of essays focuses primarily on issues of over-population, propaganda, and the use of mind-altering drugs. Huxley's desperation in the face of increasingly troubling present conditions is palpable from the opening page: "In 1931, when *Brave New World* was being written, I was convinced that there was still plenty of time."<sup>63</sup> Huxley's tone from the outset is one of desperation; he fears the future he predicted a quarter of a century earlier is too close and there is not enough time to change course. When writing *Brave New World*, Huxley held out hope that the future might not look so bleak, or at least not for quite some time. In his Introduction, Huxley writes:

Twenty-seven years later, in this third quarter of the twentieth century A.D., and long before the end of the first century A. F., I feel a good deal

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<sup>62</sup> Huxley, *BNW* and *BNWR* xviii.

<sup>63</sup> Huxley, *BNWR* 1.

less optimistic than I did when I was writing *Brave New World*. The prophecies made in 1931 are coming true much sooner than I thought they would. The nightmare of total organization, which I had situated in the seventh century After Ford, has emerged from the safe, remote future and is now awaiting us, just around the corner.<sup>64</sup>

As much as *Brave New World Revisited* is an exposition of present conditions in light of Huxley's past forecasts, it is also, indirectly, a meditation on the genre of dystopia and its ability to adequately address the issue of a precarious present and uncertain future.

Dystopia is too fixed and too placed to be as productive as utopia and *Brave New World* focuses too much on stability, rather than the affirmation of possibility. Of course, as demonstrated above, there is inconsistency and instability in dystopia, too, but to a lesser degree. As Jacques Derrida's discussion of *différance* shows us, language necessarily exceeds representation and dystopian literature is no exception. For Derrida, meaning, through language, is never fully present—it does not disclose itself all at once—and a close reading of *Brave New World* reveals the inherent instability in the system. However, in its attempt to represent totalizing systems, dystopian novels are not as comfortable or playful with the inconsistencies. Dystopian texts critique totalizing systems, but, in doing so, they risk becoming stuck in their own critique—they become what they try to work against. Dystopia is productive, but it is not productive in the same way that utopia is productive. Dystopia forecloses on possibility; utopia affirms it. Future possibilities exist because of contingency and utopia validates this contingency and possibility in the face of the unknowable future—the impossible no-place. After writing *Brave New World* and *Brave New World Revisited* (1958), Huxley moved from

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<sup>64</sup> Huxley, *BNWR* 1-2.

the constraints of dystopia to utopia. Huxley had to move to *Island*; he could not dwell in the negative space of dystopia.

In order to aptly criticize the dangerous and totalitarian tendencies of the present, the dystopian text must spin these trends to their logical conclusions and depict a totalizing, static, and oppressive future. In so doing, the critical potential of dystopian texts is compromised by the narrative's entrapment in its own totalizing system. Unlike utopias, dystopias are too firmly entrenched in their organizational structure to freely play with possibilities. Even when characters like John the Savage buck the system and present alternative realities, they are snuffed out and the system remains unchanged. Of course, this is the mission of dystopian literature—to illustrate the destructive potential of systematization—and *Brave New World* succeeds. But, Huxley remained dissatisfied and maintained a desire to explore alternatives to the totalizing picture. Like the limited movement of individuals in totalitarian societies, Huxley's ability to play with multiplicity and push the boundaries of his text was limited by the constraints of the dystopian genre. Huxley states that "[s]cience may be defined as the reduction of multiplicity to unity," and the same definition might apply to dystopian literature. In his essay, "Over-Organization," Huxley explains the destructive tendencies of science and technology: "[M]odern technology has led to the concentration of economic and political power, and to the development of a society controlled (ruthlessly in the totalitarian states, politely and inconspicuously in the democracies) by Big Business and Big Government."<sup>65</sup> This consolidation of power creates powerless individuals and, as Huxley argues, "[t]oo much organization transforms men and women into automata,

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<sup>65</sup> Huxley, *BNWR* 15.

suffocates the creative spirit, and abolishes the very possibility of freedom.”<sup>66</sup> But, despite the desperate and, at times, fatalistic tone of the essays in *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley concludes by stating: “Perhaps the forces that now menace freedom are too strong to be resisted for very long. It is still our duty to do whatever we can to resist them.”<sup>67</sup> Huxley was similarly constrained by the over-organized mode of dystopian fiction and chose instead to explore future potentialities in his utopian novel, *Island*.

The perpetual passion for possibility necessarily leads closer to utopia— this is why Huxley moved toward utopia; he had to. In the Preface to his collection of Huxley’s correspondence, editor Grover Smith remarks, “Some men affect always to know where they are going; Huxley, in his exploratory wisdom, refused to be sure [...] something would always turn up—not to rescue a life bogged down in improvidence, for such was not Huxley’s, but to stimulate a life receptive to fresh motivations.”<sup>68</sup> Huxley’s receptivity to new ideas and embrace of new experiences pulled him in utopian directions and he refused to be complacent in his views or complicit in philosophies that proposed unassailable solutions. Huxley’s biographer, Sybille Bedford, explains that “Aldous’s own philosophy was dynamic; he never said: ‘This is enough;’ he never stood still,” and this perpetual inspiration, drive, and openness to experience is epitomized in Huxley’s philosophy of the “life-worshipper.”<sup>69</sup> In the late 1920s, Aldous Huxley’s non-fiction

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<sup>66</sup> Huxley, *BNWR* 18.

<sup>67</sup> Huxley, *BNWR* 97.

<sup>68</sup> Smith 2.

<sup>69</sup> Bedford, *Aldous Huxley: A Biography*. Vol. 2. 329.

essays centered on the concept of the life-worshipper, “an effort to conceive of an ego-ideal shaped by a radical openness to experiences that are discrepant, discontinuous, and anarchic.”<sup>70</sup> According to Huxley, the self is “a manifold and discontinuous being that reflects and shapes an equally fragmented and pluralist world.”<sup>71</sup> Huxley’s life-worshipper is a utopian; s/he revels in playful multiplicity, “refusing to adopt an exclusive perspective, aware of the innumerable alternatives that might be embraced.”<sup>72</sup> Rather than dogmatically pursue and adhere to a singular ideal, the life-worshipper courts and welcomes diversity and instability. In “Pascal,” from his *Do What You Will* (1929) essay collection, Huxley explains:

The life-worshipper suggests that man shall make use of all his keys instead of throwing all but one of them away. He admits the fact of vital diversity and makes the best of it. In this he is unlike the general run of thinkers, who are very reluctant to admit diversity, and if they do confess the fact, deplore it. They find diversity shocking, they desire at all costs to correct it. And even if it came to be universally admitted that no one world-view could possibly be true, these people would continue, nonetheless, to hold fast to one to the exclusion of all the rest. They would go on worshipping consistency [...] or, in other words, they would practice and demand consistency through fear of inconsistency, through fear of being dangerously free, through fear of life.<sup>73</sup>

These worshippers of consistency are the population that controls Huxley’s brave new world of community, identity, and stability, and his dystopian novel depicts freedom as dangerous and subversive. But, Huxley’s utopian novel, *Island*, celebrates the diversity

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<sup>70</sup> Baker, Robert S. and James Sexton, eds. *Aldous Huxley: Complete Essays*. Vol 2 (Ivan R. Dee P: Chicago, 2000) xvii.

<sup>71</sup> Baker, Robert S. and James Sexton, eds. *Aldous Huxley: Complete Essays*. Vol 2. xvii.

<sup>72</sup> Baker, Robert S. and James Sexton, eds. *Aldous Huxley: Complete Essays*. Vol 2. xvii.

<sup>73</sup> Huxley, Aldous, “Pascal.” *Aldous Huxley: Complete Essays*. Eds. Robert S. Baker and James Sexton. Vol 2 (Ivan R. Dee P: Chicago, 2000) 402.

of experience. The editors of Huxley's collected essays assert that the "difficulty for Huxley was whether such an inclusively generous reading of experience was possible."<sup>74</sup> Huxley was able to readily "read the experience" of the life-worshipper, but articulating the experience in writing proved more difficult.

In the years between the publication of *Brave New World* and *Island*, Huxley's literary production was sporadic and he turned his focus to painting, a shift owing to relentless insomnia and a case of writer's block. In a letter to Harold Raymond, his editor at Chatto and Windus, dated February 25, 1935, Huxley confesses: "This sleeplessness leaves one in a sorry state of incapacity to do anything. If, as I hope, I get over the state fairly soon, I trust to have the book finished by next autumn. Otherwise—God knows."<sup>75</sup> Much of the difficulty Huxley experienced in writing *Island* is chronicled in his personal correspondence in the decades preceding the novel's publication. In another letter to Harold Raymond, dated May 27, 1941, Huxley explains, "With regard to future books, I am not yet certain what I shall embark on next. The Utopian idea still haunts me, and I have a new notion as to its treatment."<sup>76</sup> On January 30, 1956, Huxley writes to his children, "I begin to have insights into the problem of realizing in practice the notions for a phantasy, which have been haunting me, abstractly, for several years past."<sup>77</sup> A few months later, on March 14, 1956, Huxley gives a more explicit description of this *phantasy* in a letter to Dr. Humphrey Osmond, "[*Island* is] a projected phantasy about an

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<sup>74</sup> Baker, Robert S. and James Sexton, eds. *Aldous Huxley: Complete Essays*. Vol. 2. xvii.

<sup>75</sup> Smith 433.

<sup>76</sup> Smith 466.

<sup>77</sup> Smith 788.



imaginary society, whose purpose is to get its members to realize their highest potentialities. [...] I have not yet started on the book, but keep the idea simmering on the mental hob, while I do other things. I hope to get down to serious work quite soon.”<sup>78</sup> Five months later, Huxley writes Dr. Osmond again: “I am now starting work on my phantasy, which begins, as I make notes, to take the rudiments of shape. I can’t decide whether to go on with it, full blast, or to go back to the problem of doing something for the stage with *BNW* [...] But then I shall probably be sorry I didn’t get on with the phantasy!”<sup>79</sup> One month later, on September 23, 1956, another letter from Huxley to Dr. Osmond reveals that Huxley chose to move forward with stage plans for *Brave New World* and postpone, once again, his work on *Island*: “I have postponed work on my phantasy to embark upon an adaptation for a musical comedy of *BNW*.”<sup>80</sup>

Almost two years later, Huxley does not find writing *Island* any easier, and he confides this difficulty in a 1958 letter to his daughter: “I have been horribly busy on articles—I hope to some effect—and am sick and tired of this kind of writing; but at the same time find it frustratingly difficult to find the right story line for my projected Utopian novel. Let’s hope it will present itself soon, so that I can really get to work.”<sup>81</sup> In a letter to Dr. Osmond, that same year, Huxley writes, “It is interesting to try to imagine what could be done to create a good society [...] interesting but, as you can

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<sup>78</sup> Smith 792.

<sup>79</sup> Smith 805.

<sup>80</sup> Smith 808.

<sup>81</sup> Smith 848.

guess, exceedingly difficult.”<sup>82</sup> Huxley’s persistence in writing *Island*, despite the frustrations and setbacks, is noted in a 1958 letter to his children: “Meanwhile I have been very busy, feeling my way into the phantasy about a society in which serious effort is made to realize human potentialities. I can’t tell how it will turn out, but the only thing is to go ahead, one step at a time, and then see what happens, and how, on the basis of what has happened, to go further.”<sup>83</sup> But, despite this renewed enthusiasm, it takes Huxley several more years to finish his utopian novel as it seems to resist his efforts to complete it.

Huxley explains his difficulty concluding the novel in a 1959 letter to Dr. Osmond: “In the coming summer, I hope to do some work on my Utopian novel, which *keeps opening up* as I work upon it, so that it threatens to expand into something *indefinitely vast*.”<sup>84</sup> Utopia’s openness both liberated and frustrated Huxley. While it allowed for unencumbered exploration, it also refused closure—a source of great anxiety for a man economically dependent on publication. Later that same year, in an August 20, 1959 letter to his son, Matthew, Huxley expresses the burden of writing a utopian novel and how the subject matter exceeds and resists his efforts:

I am trying to lighten up the exposition by putting it in dialogue form, which I make as lively as possible. But meanwhile I am always haunted by the feeling that, if only I had enough talent, I could somehow poetize and dramatize all the intellectual material and create a work which would be simultaneously funny, tragic, lyrical, and profound. Alas, I don’t

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<sup>82</sup> Smith 850.

<sup>83</sup> Smith 851.

<sup>84</sup> Smith 869, my emphasis.

possess the necessary talent, and so shall have to be content with something that falls considerably short of the *impossible ideal*.<sup>85</sup>

Though impossible, Huxley redoubles his efforts to finish the novel and a January 18, 1960 letter to his brother reveals Huxley's renewed determination: "I must get to work intensively on my Utopian phantasy, the writing of which presents extraordinary difficulties."<sup>86</sup> Later that year, Huxley struggles with concluding his utopian novel and expresses exasperation and a desire to finish in a letter to Dr. Osmond: "I am working hard on my book, and wish to goodness it were finished. But the end is still a long way off. [...] I shall be thankful when I finally get through. It won't be as good as I wd like it to be, I fear: but still I think it will have been worth attempting."<sup>87</sup> Despite the impossibility of the task and years of frustration and aggravation, Huxley manages to complete the novel and, though somewhat dissatisfied with the finished product, feels the Sisyphean task worth the effort.

The finished product, published one year before Huxley's death, centers on the utopian island of Pala, hypothetically located between Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Sumatra. Huxley adopts the classic "visitor in a strange land" utopian trope with his protagonist, William Asquith Farnaby, shipwrecked on the island's shore. Farnaby is a London-based journalist who set sail solo in search of Pala. After a squall capsizes his boat, he awakens in the jungle of Pala and the novel opens with the word "Attention"—a reveille to both the reader and Will Farnaby. The speaker of this word is a mynah bird that reappears throughout the novel to remind us to "pay attention" to the "here and now"

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<sup>85</sup> Smith 875-876, my emphasis.

<sup>86</sup> Smith 884.

<sup>87</sup> Smith 893, 900, sic.

and to be aware of, and embrace, the present. After his accident, Farnaby is able to climb out of the surf to seek shelter under a canopy of trees: “His knee hurt him excruciatingly, but he climbed on. There was no alternative. And then the light had begun to fail. In the end, he was climbing almost in darkness, climbing by faith, climbing by sheer despair.”<sup>88</sup>

This passage serves as a metaphor for Farnaby’s experience of Palanese life; he is often beset by despair and confusion, but he manages to overcome his initial diffidence to immerse himself in the island’s culture.

Will Farnaby’s re-education is predicated on his ability to welcome the diversity of present experiences offered to him. The first person to rescue him—both physically and spiritually—is a young Palanese girl named Mary MacPhail. When Farnaby meets her, he inquires about the mynah bird:

“Why does he say those things?”

“Because somebody taught him,” she answered patiently. What an ass!

Her tone seemed to imply.

“But why did they teach him *those* things? Why ‘Attention’? Why ‘Here and now’?”

“Well...” She searched for the right words in which to explain the self-evident to this strange imbecile. “That’s what you always forget, isn’t it? I mean, you forget to pay attention to what’s happening. And that’s the same as not being here and now.”

“And the mynahs fly about reminding you—is that it?”

She nodded. That, of course, was it.<sup>89</sup>

Following this exchange, Mary explains to Will that in order to fully be aware of the present he must affirm both the negative and positive experiences in life. Will is severely shaken by the trauma of his shipwreck and his perilous efforts to seek shelter: “Under [Mary’s] questioning he told her what had happened. The storm, the beaching of the

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<sup>88</sup> Huxley, Aldous. *Island*. Harper and Row: New York, 1962, 8.

<sup>89</sup> Huxley, *Island* 12.

boat, the long nightmare of the climb, the snakes, the horror of falling...He began to tremble again, more violently than ever.”<sup>90</sup> Because of his inability to confront and move past the trauma, he is encumbered by this past and unable to fully appreciate his present conditions. Mary instructs Will to embrace, remember, and affirm the trauma of his accident: “‘You can’t be here and now,’ she went on, ‘until you’ve got rid of those snakes.’”<sup>91</sup> The Palanese people, like Huxley’s life-worshipper encourage affirmation, rather than denial and suppression of experience. From the opening pages of the novel, Huxley presents a *brave new world* that values the totality of experience—both good and bad—rather than a society that privileges certain experiences over others in a totalizing system. The Palanesian’s utopian philosophy is chronicled in *The Book of Pala: Notes on What’s What*.

After Will meets Mary in the jungle, she takes him to meet her grandfather, Dr. Robert MacPhail, who takes over as Will’s guide to the island. As Will recovers from his injuries, Dr. MacPhail slowly initiates Will into Palanese culture and gives him *The Book of Pala* stating: “[I]f you want to know what Pala is all about, there’s no better introduction.”<sup>92</sup> *The Book of Pala* is part philosophy, part history, part mysticism, and part lifestyle guide that essentially articulates the utopian wisdom of the Palanese people. This text punctuates Will’s previous lessons on attention and affirmation: “Good Being is in the knowledge of who in fact one is in relation to *all* experiences. So be aware—aware in every context, at all times and whatever, creditable or discreditable, pleasant or

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<sup>90</sup> Huxley, *Island* 12-13.

<sup>91</sup> Huxley, *Island* 13.

<sup>92</sup> Huxley, *Island* 40.

unpleasant, you may be doing or suffering. This is the only genuine yoga, the only spiritual exercise worth practicing.”<sup>93</sup> The *Book of Pala* is also part religious—or anti-religious—tract inasmuch as it criticizes stoic, dogmatic *belief* and instead advocates for unmitigated *faith*: “Give us this day our daily Faith, but deliver us, dear God, from Belief.”<sup>94</sup> This differentiation echoes utopia’s hope in the face of impossibility; rather than promoting blueprints and doctrinaire precepts, Pala encourages exploratory faith in the midst of a precarious present. This *faith* vs. *belief* distinction mirrors the hope/certainty, open/closed, dynamic/static dichotomies that inform utopian/dystopian discourse. But, importantly, this faith should not be conflated with a traditional Judeo-Christian, or conventional utopian, faith in a compensatory after-life or Shangri-La.

The Palanese do not believe in a future-perfect, otherworldly heaven, or heaven-on-earth, and several Palanese make this clear to Will: “[Susila explains] No Alcatrazes here,’ she said. ‘No Billy Grahams or Mao Tse-tungs, or Madonnas of Fatima. No hells on earth and no Christian pie in the sky, no Communist pie in the twenty-second century. Just men and women and their children trying to make the best of the here and now, instead of living somewhere else, as you people mostly do, in some other time, some other homemade imaginary universe.’”<sup>95</sup> Huxley was very critical of utopia as escapist and compensatory and he expresses this concern in an October 27, 1946 letter to his brother Julian:

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<sup>93</sup> Huxley, *Island* 42, original emphasis.

<sup>94</sup> Huxley, *Island* 101.

<sup>95</sup> Huxley, *Island* 114.

Meanwhile one must obviously attempt objective improvements—preferably with a short-range objective. For it seems to be a fact that when people think of far-off communist Utopias or Thousand-Year Reichs, they are so much dazzled by the beauty of what they see in the unknowable future, that they are ready to commit any atrocity in the present and to sacrifice millions of victims for the sake of the glorious time that will be had by all two or three hundred years from now.<sup>96</sup>

Similarly, in a 1927 essay, “Measurable and Unmeasurable,” Huxley explains that “[Utopians] are too much preoccupied with what ought to be to pay any serious attention to what is. Outward reality disgusts them; the compensatory dream is the universe in which they hope to live.”<sup>97</sup> This anti-utopian sentiment was palpable in the first half of the twentieth century and Huxley’s *Brave New World* was clearly influenced by it. However, by the 1950s, Huxley understood utopia differently and expressed this difference in *Island* with an emphasis on the affirmation of an uncertain present-future. Huxley once wrote that “salvation is not in the next world; it’s in this...here and now.”<sup>98</sup> The Palanese mynah’s repetition of “Attention” and “Here and Now” alerts both Will Farnaby and the reader to the importance of the present.

This presence is, of course, difficult to articulate—it exceeds representation; the moment the present is evoked, it is always, already past. This impossibility of representation lies at the heart of utopia where the “good place” is “no place.” Huxley highlights this difficulty when Will, toward the end of the novel, partakes in a Palanesian ritual of imbibing Moksha, an elixir that enables the experience of a “timelessly present

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<sup>96</sup> Smith 553.

<sup>97</sup> Baker, Robert S. and James Sexton, eds. *Aldous Huxley: Complete Essays*. Vol 2. 145.

<sup>98</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Those Barren Leaves*. New York: Doran, 1925, 77.

Event, of a Now.”<sup>99</sup> After taking the Moksha, the narrator explains that “*it*—this timeless and yet ever-changing Event—was something that words could only caricature and diminish, never convey. [...] Speaking was difficult. Not because there was any physical impediment. It was just that speech seemed so fatuous, so totally pointless.”<sup>100</sup> Later, during a communal ceremony, Will impotently tries to articulate the experience: “And here, dancing in and out between them, was the Logical Positivist, absurd but indispensable, trying to explain, in a language incommensurable with the facts, what it was all about.”<sup>101</sup> This inadequacy of language is the defining feature of utopian discourse—the impossibility of articulating the “good place.” Utopia plays with language; the interplay and complication of the real and the fantastic animates utopian texts.

Huxley was beset by this interplay and he struggled to adequately balance his utopian novel: “I am only concerned with not taking words too seriously; with understanding the nature and limitations of language, and its relations with what it stands for; with making the best of both worlds—the experiential and the symbolic.”<sup>102</sup> One year before the novel’s publication, Huxley explains this difficulty in a letter to his son: “I am working away on my Utopian novel, wrestling with the problem of getting an enormous amount of diversified material into the book without becoming merely expository or didactic. It may be that the job is one which cannot be accomplished with

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<sup>99</sup> Huxley, *Island* 325.

<sup>100</sup> Huxley, *Island* 325-326.

<sup>101</sup> Huxley, *Island* 332.

<sup>102</sup> Letter to Reid Gardner, 18 Sept. 1962 in *Letters of Aldous Huxley* 938.



complete success.”<sup>103</sup> *Island* is mostly exposition, though Huxley manages to insert a fair amount of witty dialogue and playful banter between his characters. Given the vast amount of exposition, Huxley is careful not to fall into the didactic trap and the tone of his novel rarely approaches moralizing censure. Of course the Palanese teach Will Farnaby about their society, but their manner is more encouraging than critical. Through Will’s visits with the Palanese, he learns that the population of Pala is over one million, that they have a constitutional monarchy consisting of a federation of self-governing units, that all members of the cooperative community work and enjoy it as a road to enlightenment, and that everyone belongs to the MAC (mutual adoption club) and parenting duties are shared. But, more importantly, Farnaby learns that Pala is an island of possibility open to change, willing to adapt, and mindful of the contingency and luck that has shaped its existence. As Ranga Karakuran explains to Farnaby: “In fact Pala as a whole has been extraordinarily lucky. It’s had the luck, first of all, never to have been anyone’s colony.[...] We were left to go our own way and take responsibility for our own affairs.”<sup>104</sup> Ranga makes clear that because Pala does not have a harbor, it escaped the interest and influence of colonizers from the Middle East, Portugal, and England. The recognition of this contingency is important because it shows that the relative autonomy Pala enjoys is predicated on circumstances beyond its control. The Palanese know that change is the only constant and their philosophy is to affirm their present conditions in the knowledge that every moment—good or bad—contains the potential for enlightenment.

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<sup>103</sup> Smith 875-876.

<sup>104</sup> Huxley, *Island* 95-96.

In *Brave New World*, every effort is made to eliminate chance and mitigate contingency; in this dystopian, closed society, openness is feared as a harbinger of uncertainty, an invitation to chaos. In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley explains that “*Brave New World* was a nightmare of too much order.”<sup>105</sup> But, in *Island*, the Palanese welcome “the incomprehensible sequence of changes and chances that make up a life, all the beauties and horrors and absurdities whose conjunctions create the uninterpretable and yet divinely significant pattern of human destiny.”<sup>106</sup> This affirmation is utopian hope in the face of the impossible, uncertain, and unknowable future. This life-affirming, rather than life-denying, feature of utopianism is clear when Will observes:

To make the best of *all* the worlds—the worlds already realized within the various cultures and, beyond them, the world of still unrealized potentialities. It was an enormous ambition, an ambition totally impossible of fulfillment; but at least it had the merit of spurring them on, of making them rush in where angels feared to tread—with results that sometimes proved, to everybody’s astonishment, that they had not been quite such fools as they looked. They never succeeded, of course, in making the best of all the worlds; but by dint of boldly trying they made the best of many more worlds than any merely prudent or sensible person would have dreamed of being able to reconcile and combine.<sup>107</sup>

Utopians make the best of the present and affirm the “good place” in spite of its transitory, “no place” nature. Utopians recognize the impossibility of sustaining, or repeating, the present, but rather than seek refuge in the epistemological imperialism of Science, or Religion, to create order and stability, they embrace the impossible future and affirm its instability. The Palanese understand that such openness is an invitation to the “to come”—for better or worse: “Openness to bliss and understanding was also, [Will]

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<sup>105</sup> Huxley, *BNWR* 1.

<sup>106</sup> Huxley, *Island* 30.

<sup>107</sup> Huxley, *Island* 156, original emphasis.

realized, an openness to terror, to total incomprehension.”<sup>108</sup> But, the alternative to *living* with uncertainty is *dying* with a life-negating fear of the future and a futile attempt to control the present. Utopia is life-affirming; the “good place” that is “no place” is a hopeful gesture and acceptance of the precarious present and future. Any endeavor to create a predictable and stable present—the traditional view of utopia—is courting death in its effort to arrest time and eschew change: “[It is] inspired by a Will to Order, an urge for tidiness, which revolts against the wild and maddening diversity of men and likes to concentrate instead on the uniformities of culture. But the result, of course, is fatal.”<sup>109</sup> In this way, the traditional view of utopia as the attainment of a perfect place is synonymous with the totalitarian tendencies of dystopia. Both foreclose on possibility and doggedly pursue a chimerical state of perfection. The will to order, define, and control kills the utopian endeavor—once parameters are delineated and boundaries fixed, utopia ceases to exist. Huxley’s *Island* is not a story of a perfect place; Pala embodies the perpetually open state of utopia.

Though it may appear that the Palanese have reached a state of perfection, inasmuch as they seem to have avoided many of the disastrous pitfalls of the rest of the world: famine, poverty, war, etc., they readily admit that their island is far from ideal. With respect to educating young children on the island, one of Pala’s residents tells Will: “They’re made to understand that Pala isn’t Eden or the Land of Cockaigne. It’s a nice place alright...[b]ut the facts of life are the facts of life. Even here.”<sup>110</sup> These *facts of life*

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<sup>108</sup> Huxley, *Island* 336.

<sup>109</sup> Letter from Aldous Huxley to Dr. Humphrey Osmond, Feb. 16, 1958. *Letters of Aldous Huxley*. 847.

<sup>110</sup> Huxley, *Island* 236.

include crime, albeit to a lesser degree than the Western world, illness, and death:

“Public health and social reform are the indispensable preconditions of any kind of general enlightenment. But, in spite of public health and social reform, people still die. Even in Pala.”<sup>111</sup> At the novel’s conclusion, Pala’s harborless shores cannot protect them from invasion and occupation; they are raided for their oil reserves. Pala does not purport to be perfect and the Palanese are not immune to the contingencies of life. But, rather than try to escape or deny them, they affirm and embrace them. The Palanese are Huxley’s “life-worshippers”; they hope in the midst of nowhere and uncertainty.

*Island* is Huxley’s opus; it is the culmination of his life’s work. In a 1994 interview, Huxley’s widow, Laura, was asked which of her husband’s books she would recommend to the uninitiated reader. Laura Huxley replied, “I definitely recommend that they read *Island*, because that is Aldous’ legacy.”<sup>112</sup> But, some critics see this culminating work as a resolution to all of the issues Huxley struggled with in *Brave New World* and *Brave New World Revisited*: over-population, over-organization, etc. In “Choosing Utopia: An Existential Reading of Aldous Huxley’s *Island*” (2001), Alex Macdonald acknowledges the tension in Aldous Huxley’s *Island*: “[I]t is arguable that Pala is a good place which represents a triumphant positive conclusion to Huxley’s life-long battle with dualism, that Will Farnaby’s conversion from cynicism to utopian faith is the culmination of the progression of the earlier novels [...] it is equally arguable that *Island*, especially its horrific ending, represents the return of Huxley’s profound

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<sup>111</sup> Huxley, *Island* 293.

<sup>112</sup> Rick Doblin, “Interview with Laura Huxley 3/12/94,” *Newsletter of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies*. 4.4 (Spring 1994).

pessimism.”<sup>113</sup> Through an existential analysis, Macdonald downplays this tension and argues that *Island* “illustrates clearly [Huxley’s] movement toward unity [and] the central trend in Huxley’s novels was the movement from a view of reality which was thoroughly dualistic at the start of his career to one in which, at the end, dualism had been resolved.”<sup>114</sup> But, *Island* offers no such resolution and, in fact, an erasure of dualism would render the text decidedly un-utopian. It is precisely this tension, and the absence of a resolution, that makes *Island* an exemplary utopian work.

The *utopia=unity* formula Macdonald forwards denies the very paradox he initially acknowledges and it ignores Huxley’s warnings against unity, identity, and stability issued in *Brave New World*. For Huxley, stability equals death—both literal and metaphorical—and such resistance to change leads to the end of possibilities: “Hang a carrot just out of the donkey’s reach and he will start to run, he will go on running. But if ever he got his teeth into it, he would stop at once. [...] An easily realizable ideal quickly loses its power of stimulation. Nothing lets a man down with such a bump into listless disillusionment as the discovery that he has achieved all his ambitions and realized all his ideals.”<sup>115</sup> This deferral is essential and productive; to deny this is to deny life. As Huxley explains, “[T]he triumph of good would mean the total annihilation of existence. A homogenously perfect life is a contradiction in terms. Without contrast and diversity

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<sup>113</sup> Alex Macdonald, “Choosing Utopia: An Existential Reading of Aldous Huxley’s *Island*.” *Utopian Studies* 12 (2001).

<sup>114</sup> Macdonald 1.

<sup>115</sup> Aldous Huxley, “Spinoza’s Worm,” *Do What You Will* (London: London, Chatto and Windus, 1929) 321.

life is inconceivable.”<sup>116</sup> Macdonald’s contention that *Island* is “the end of a lifelong search to resolve the dualisms of [Huxley’s] earlier novels,”<sup>117</sup> ignores Huxley’s reckoning with dualisms and his recognition of their aporetic import.

To make his argument, Macdonald quotes a description of what Will Farnaby observes under the influence of the arguably hallucinogenic “*moksha*-medicine”: “What he was seeing now was the paradox of opposites indissolubly wedded, of light shining out of darkness, of darkness at the very heart of light.”<sup>118</sup> Macdonald then offers the following analysis: “At this moment the dualisms of flesh and spirit, of past and present, intention and action, are subsumed into the Divine Ground of Being. Here is what might be called the metaphysical climax of the novel and of Huxley’s career, a vision of unity—expressed in terms of imagery and marriage—where before there had been dualistic separation.”<sup>119</sup> Of course, immediately following this moment of what Macdonald calls “transcendence and enlightenment,” the novel draws hastily toward its dramatic conclusion where Pala falls under attack and this undermines the positive, bucolic, unity for which Macdonald argues.<sup>120</sup> Utopias are not sustainable or achievable and Huxley’s maintenance of the good-place/no-place paradox is essential and productive. To be fair, Macdonald acknowledges the disjunction in Huxley’s conclusion, but he seeks to redeem it and offer a resolution: “How are we to account for the deep contradiction between

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<sup>116</sup> Huxley, “Pascal,” *Do What You Will* (London: London, Chatto and Windus, 1929) 391.

<sup>117</sup> Macdonald 1.

<sup>118</sup> Macdonald 1.

<sup>119</sup> Macdonald 1.

<sup>120</sup> Macdonald 1.

optimism and pessimism which seems woven into the novel, and what message are we to take from it? One way to resolve the interpretive dilemma is [...to say] that although we may remain pessimistic about the world at large we can be optimistic about the prospects for individual enlightenment.”<sup>121</sup> Macdonald, and others, seem troubled by the contradictions in Huxley’s work and determined to resolve them.<sup>122</sup> But, no resolution is necessary; these contradictions are essential to utopian discourse and to privilege and attempt a resolution is to betray the form. Aldous Huxley alternated between feelings of pessimism and optimism throughout his lifetime and this tension informed much of his literary work: “Dualism...Without it there can hardly be good literature.”<sup>123</sup> In a letter dated November 26, 1940, Huxley wrote to an acquaintance: “I have come to be profoundly pessimistic about great masses of human beings, but profoundly optimistic about individuals and groups of individuals existing upon the margins of society.”<sup>124</sup> Elsewhere Huxley wrote, “There is no reason to be boundlessly pessimistic although there’s lots to be alarmed at, but we are not yet at the abyss.”<sup>125</sup> Huxley’s optimism certainly informed *Island*, but a certain skepticism and attention to the contingencies of life makes the novel utopian and saves it from a dogmatic and myopic blueprint for a perfect world.

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<sup>121</sup> Macdonald 1.

<sup>122</sup> See also the work of David Bradshaw (Introduction to *Island*. London: Flamingo, 1994) and Gorman Beauchamp (“Island: Aldous Huxley’s Psychedelic Utopia.” *Utopian Studies* 1.1 (1990): 59-72.)

<sup>123</sup> Huxley, *Island* 215.

<sup>124</sup> Smith 461.

<sup>125</sup> Richard F. Shepard, “Brave New World.” *New York Times*. August 25, 1957: 123.

When Huxley began writing his utopian novel, he was convinced that it would be less chimerical and more realistic: “It’s an ideal. But I hope not a stratospheric ideal, what may be called a Topian rather than Utopian phantasy, a phantasy dealing with a place, a *real* place and time, rather than a phantasy dealing with *no* place and time.”<sup>126</sup> In fact, the epigram from Aristotle that Huxley chose to open *Island* speaks to his desire to avoid the other-worldly, pie-in-the-sky, escapist narratives traditionally associated with utopian discourse: *In framing an ideal we may assume what we wish, but should avoid impossibilities.* Aristotle was more of a pragmatist; he states that we should have hope and ideals, but they should already be among the realm of the possible. In other words, impossibilities are destructive, at worst, and distracting, at best; impossibilities are antithetical to ideals and hope. Ironically, Huxley opens his novel with this quote, only to rebuff Aristotle’s advice. In fact, impossibility is a necessary and productive part of Huxley’s utopian project. After painstakingly laboring over the project for years, Huxley recognizes the difficulty involved in trying to articulate utopia. In an October 12, 1958 televised interview on a program called “Braintrust,” Huxley tells the interviewer that he has begun to write a new novel and he describes the relative ease of penning *Brave New World* compared to his difficulty composing *Island*: “[*Island*] is a kind of reverse *Brave New World*; an extremely difficult thing to write [...] it’s much easier to write about negative things.”<sup>127</sup> Huxley wrote *Brave New World* in four months; it took him four years to write *Island*. Rather than try to force an artificial and impossible ideal, Huxley eventually finds harmony in the dissonance of his utopian novel and embraces it. He

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<sup>126</sup> Bedford 241, original emphasis.

<sup>127</sup> Bedford 241.



affirms the *ou-topos* of utopia and in an inscription to the French edition of *Island* to Ernest Masurel writes: “A voyage to an island that cannot be arranged by Thomas Cook’s.”<sup>128</sup> After completing the novel and editing proofs, Huxley considers the cover art and writes the following suggestion to his publisher, Ian Parsons:

After sending off my letter and the sketch for the cover, a wild idea occurred to me. Would it be possible to reproduce on the jacket a picture by some good artist that is suggestive of the book’s subject? I enclose a postcard of Van Gogh’s ‘Fields under Storm-clouds’ (his last painting, I believe), which symbolizes very forcibly the precariousness of happiness, the perilous position of any Utopian island.<sup>129</sup>

In *Island*, Huxley explores the tension and incongruity of an impossibly perfect place and he plays with the relationships between the real and the ideal. Huxley’s Pala lacks sustainability, but it acknowledges this and persists in spite of it.

The Palanese people continually discuss how to create the “good place” precisely because it is “no place” and the political and ethical potential of *Island* resides in the suspension of utopia’s realization. The irony of More’s *eu-topos/ou-topos* becomes all the more relevant and influential when considered in light of Derrida’s exploration of the irony and ultimate ethical significance of an idea that cannot be fully presented or realized (*différance*), a space that cannot be traversed (*a-poria*), and of a community-to-come engendered by these notions. Because meaning is dependent upon continual linguistic deferral, the non-presence of language is what makes meaning possible. Logical positivists, for example, see this non-presence as a problem in language that needs to be solved and feel that language should transparently mirror the world. But,

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<sup>128</sup> Bedford 349.

<sup>129</sup> Letter from Aldous Huxley to Ian Parsons, Jan. 19, 1962. *Letters of Aldous Huxley*. 928.

Derrida claims that this non-presence is precisely what makes language and meaning possible—it is not a deficit, but a strength. In the same way, utopia’s inability to be achieved and realized is precisely what makes utopia possible. In his later work, Derrida extends his analytic of language to ethics, where ethical discussion originates when a solution is not fully present. This point of impasse—what Derrida refers to as the *aporia*—is the point at which limits are tested and a more active, rather than passive, ethics takes place.<sup>130</sup> Ethical discussions can only begin to be investigated at the point at which solving an ethical problem is impossible. In other words, ethics starts with a problem whose solution is not present. For example, in an essay called “On Forgiveness,” Derrida argues that it is only the unforgivable (that which is impossible to forgive) which actually calls for forgiveness; that is to say, figuring out what forgiveness means can only begin at the point where we encounter something that is unforgivable.<sup>131</sup> The impossible “no-place” of utopia is the very condition for the possibility of utopia. Derrida’s ethical irony is also utopia’s irony because the discussion of the “good-place” originates when the perfect society is not fully present, or is impossible/impassable and unachievable.

Utopian irony is also a commentary on our human condition and the assumption that we can control and organize our reality. *Island* begins and ends with the word “Attention”—an instruction to *attend* to reality, to accept its inconsistencies and unpredictability, rather than impose artificial, and escapist, ideals of Order. Utopian novels, like *Island*, express the human condition without the assurance that we can fix it.

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<sup>130</sup> See Jacques Derrida’s *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001).

<sup>131</sup> Jacques Derrida. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001) 32.

In this way, utopia exposes, and reckons with, the irony of reality; it does not avoid it. This, of course, is ironic in itself since utopia is traditionally understood as an escape from reality. Instead, Huxley's utopia articulates a sense of hopeful indeterminacy in the face of reality. Where the genre of dystopia closed the doors of perception for Huxley, utopia opened them and empowered him to explore unmitigated possibilities. In his poem, "The Choice," Huxley expresses his life-worshipping, utopian philosophy. The narrator of the poem rhetorically asks: "Say—where would you like to die/ And have your friend to bury/ What once was you?/ 'On the top of a hill/ With a peaceful view/ Of country where all is still?'—" The rest of the poem is the narrator's reply:

Great God, not I!  
I'd lie in the street  
Where two streams meet  
And there's noise enough to fill  
The outer ear,  
While within the brain can beat  
Marches of death and life,  
Glory and joy and fear,  
Peace of the sort that moves  
And clash of strife  
And routs of armies fleeing.  
There would I shake myself clear  
Out of the deep-set grooves  
Of my sluggish being.<sup>132</sup>

This poem could be a suitable epitaph for a man who enjoyed his "bath in the flux" and once said that "the only completely consistent people are dead." It is also further evidence that Huxley did not strive for stability or perfection in his lifetime and that *Island* is a celebration of life in all of its inconsistent glory, rather than a static culmination of his life's work. *Island* does not end a dialogue begun with *Brave New*

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<sup>132</sup> Aldous Huxley, "Choices." *The Collected Poetry of Aldous Huxley* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 77.

*World*; it is an invitation to continue the conversation of how to conceive of the impossible good place. Huxley's utopia is not an end-game, rather it sparks debate, inspires discussion, and initiates the game.

Perhaps, then, it should not be surprising that Huxley saved his manuscript of *Island* from his house fire. Of course the blaze could have liberated him from the task of completing the novel that so challenged and frustrated him, but Huxley could not, and would not, welcome this liberation. Huxley once said, "The world is to a great extent illusory. It is nonetheless essential to improve the illusion," and though a satisfying conclusion to his utopian novel eluded him, he refused to abandon the project.<sup>133</sup> This is the point of utopia; there are no guaranteed Edens—to claim to have found one is to annihilate the utopian enterprise, but to refuse to consider one is to claim to have found it, or to negate life altogether. The rhetoric of utopia is to engage the present without privileging presence, to anticipate the future, without expecting fruition: "life on this planet is valuable in itself, without any reference to hypothetical higher worlds."<sup>134</sup> Utopia is not concerned with attainability or sustainability, it is an exercise in negotiating the perpetual interstices between the present and the future—just as language functions by continual referral and deferral. As Aldous Huxley wrote: "Even in Utopia people would pine for an occasional escape, if only from the radiant monotony of happiness."<sup>135</sup> Utopia resists realization and always exceeds itself.

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<sup>133</sup> Beford 324.

<sup>134</sup> Huxley, "Pascal" 390.

<sup>135</sup> Huxley, Aldous, "Poppy Juice." *Aldous Huxley: Complete Essays*. Eds. Robert S. Baker and James Sexton. Vol 2 (Ivan R. Dee P: Chicago, 2000) 317.

## CHAPTER IV

## THERE'S "NO PLACE" LIKE HOME:

## URSULA K. LE GUIN'S AMBIGUOUS UTOPIAS

The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerant uncertainty.

Ursula K. Le Guin

In 2005, Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman edited the first essay collection devoted exclusively to Ursula K. Le Guin's Hugo and Nebula award-winning novel, *The Dispossessed* (1974).<sup>1</sup> In the Introduction to their anthology, *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*, the editors explain that the essays "tackle head-on a question that recurs throughout the edited volume, specifically the extent to which Le Guin's 'ambiguous utopia' poses a challenge to prevailing models of utopian literature and thought premised on an association between utopia and the idea of perfection."<sup>2</sup> All of the contributors to this volume agree that Le Guin's take on utopia is a radical break from the traditionally totalitarian texts as she uniquely emphasizes its ambiguous, rather than authoritarian, nature. In the opening essay of his collection, "The Dynamic and Revolutionary Utopia of Ursula K. Le Guin," Laurence Davis contends that *The Dispossessed* breaks the mold of static utopias:

*The Dispossessed* is a utopia and it is intended as such. It is not meant to be regarded as a utopia in the obsolescent perfectionist understanding of the term, however. Hence its intriguing subtitle: "An Ambiguous

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<sup>1</sup> Le Guin has the distinction of being the only author to win both awards for the same book in the same year.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, Laurence and Peter Stillman, eds. *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield P, 2005) x.

Utopia.” As even those who are most sympathetic to the tradition are now likely to concede, the vast majority of literary utopias have been static states, seemingly devoid of processes tending to upset them or change their design.... This content-driven stasis is matched by the narrative stasis of the standard utopian form...the familiar narrative resolution of the conflict between the visitor to utopia and his or her utopian guide, in which the visitor’s doubts are all quickly overcome, seems to promise a disturbingly final resolution of all residual conflict, questioning, and unhappiness.<sup>3</sup>

But, Le Guin does not necessarily break new ground and reinvent the utopian novel.

Utopian literature is always, already ambiguous and resistant to closure, but by being self-consciously playful with her text and aware of utopia’s ambiguity in a way that previous authors have not been, Le Guin brings utopia’s irony and impossibility to the fore, thereby disclosing its ambiguity and political and ethical significance. Unlike, Bellamy, Howells, and Huxley, Le Guin openly discloses her intent to explore the limits of utopian discourse and play with its possibilities. It would seem that given utopia’s undoing by its relationship to modernist precepts like totality that Jacques Derrida’s work would further undermine the discourse. But, a close examination of his later work, in conjunction with Le Guin’s novel, shows that not only does Derrida’s work not dismiss utopianism, it invigorates it. A discussion of Derrida’s work with time and presence helps elucidate the aporetic analytic at work in Le Guin’s utopian fiction. In her novels *The Dispossessed* and *Always Coming Home* (1985), along with her essays, Le Guin does not write about a different kind of utopia; she better articulates utopia’s aporetic ambiguity.

Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* is part of the utopian resurgence of the 1960s and 1970s, two decades marked by an influx of new utopian narratives as well as reprints of

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<sup>3</sup> Davis and Stillman 3, 4.

previously undiscovered utopian texts. B. F. Skinner, Ernest Callenbach, Samuel R. Delany, Joanna Russ, and Marge Piercy contributed to the renaissance, and formerly unrecognized utopian work by authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman were resurrected by specialized presses. Several of these works, including Le Guin's, are characterized as "critical utopias" by scholars like Tom Moylan who point out the "strategy of critical utopia's self-reflexively foregrounding their own conditions of textual production in light of the historical opportunities and pitfalls of utopian writing."<sup>4</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, in his widely influential essay, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," defines the "critical utopia" as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopian genre."<sup>5</sup> This new wave of literary utopianism emphasized not only an evaluation of contemporary world views, but the critique of the utopian genre itself. No longer were utopian texts seen as literary panaceas capable of restructuring and remapping the world, rather they were more thoughtful social critiques focused on revelation and possible revolution, rather than reinvention. As Tom Moylan explains in *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (1987), "A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, and Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Westview P, 2000) 9.

<sup>5</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," 5 *Utopian Studies* (1994): 1-37, 9.

while preserving it as dream.”<sup>6</sup> However, earlier utopian authors also rejected utopia as blueprint, but writers like Le Guin made such critiques less ambiguous.

The cover of the original paperback edition of *The Dispossessed* reads: “The magnificent epic of an ambiguous utopia!” Interestingly, Sir Thomas More is credited with the first English use of the term *ambiguous* in 1528. The prefix *ambi-* means “both”—not merely “undecided,” but “both at once”—in the same way that More’s *utopia* means *both* “good place” and “no place.” Le Guin’s novel explores the tension between two planets—Anarres and Urras—via the experiences of an intrepid explorer named Shevek. These sister planets share a complicated and contingent relationship and neither of them seems ideal. Le Guin explains that 175 years prior to the events in the novel, Laia Odo, a philosopher and political revolutionary, led a group of anarchists on the capitalist planet Urras. Upon her death, her followers carried out a revolution that resulted in their mutually agreed upon exile and the colonists’ establishment of a rebel outpost on the neighboring planet of Anarres. The revolutionaries agreed to leave the Earth-like Urras for the undeveloped Anarres in order to found a society based on Odonian principles of cooperation and community and, according to the terms of settlement, nearly all communication and travel between the two planets was abolished. An exception to this isolation is the occasional contingent of ore freighters from Urras that visit Anarres to plum its rich ore reserves—a condition of the settlement agreement. The juxtaposition of the Anarresti experiment in nonauthoritarian communism with the capitalist system on Urras establishes the backdrop of Le Guin’s narrative.

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<sup>6</sup> Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 1987) 10.



When the novel opens, the Anarresti have been isolated from Urras for nearly 200 years, with the occasional exchange of scientific research between the planets' institutes serving as the only transgression of their mutually agreed upon segregation. The novel's protagonist is Shevek, a physicist whose mathematical research makes possible the *ansible*, a communication instrument capable of transmissions exceeding the speed of light. Ironically, for two planets who have agreed to cease communication, his research's promise of instantaneous communication animates the tension between them. Shevek is acutely aware of, and profoundly affected by, the isolation of his home planet and his decision to leave for an unprecedented visit to Urras is the focus of the novel. Driven by a determination to reunite the two worlds, "the need for communication, [and] the wish to unbuild walls," Shevek accepts an invitation from the Urrasti scientific community to visit and share his research.<sup>7</sup> Upon his arrival in Urras, the local newspaper reports:

His first steps on Earth! Urras' first visitor from the Anarres Settlement in 170 years, Dr. Shevek, was photographed yesterday at his arrival on the regular Moon freighter run at Peier Space Port. The distinguished scientist, winner of the Seo Oen Prize for service to all nations through science, has accepted a professorship at Ieu Eun University, an honor never before accorded to an off-worlder. Asked about his feelings on first viewing Urras, the tall, distinguished physicist replied, "It is a great honor to be invited to your beautiful planet. I hope that a new era of [interstellar] friendship is now beginning, when the Twin Planets will move forward together in brotherhood."<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately for Shevek, the Urrasti invitation is less informed by brotherhood and goodwill than competitive self-interest and the desire to co-opt his research for their own technological advancement. The Urrasti aspiration to control time through the

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<sup>7</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (New York: Harper Collins, 1974) 75.

<sup>8</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 78.

development of the ansible mirrors the novel's focus on the passage of time and its relationship to place, sustainability, and the achievement of utopia.

Shevek's publication, "The Principles of Simultaneity," is his attempt to conceive of a unified theory of time that can account for the ambiguous nature of time as both linear and cyclical. As Shevek explains: "Time goes in cycles, as well as in a line....So then time has two aspects. There is the arrow, the running river, without which there is no change, no progress, no direction, or creation. And there is the circle or the cycle, without which there is chaos, meaningless succession of instants, a world without clocks or seasons or promises."<sup>9</sup> As a physicist, Shevek experiences unparalleled success in the field of physics and is invited to join the State research team at the Central Institute for Sciences in Abbenay, a move that marks an uncomfortable introduction to the burgeoning bureaucracy of Anarres' institutions. Before his departure, a fellow scientist advises Shevek: "[T]ake care, in Abbenay. Keep free. Power inheres in a center. You're going to the center."<sup>10</sup> His colleague's admonition proves prophetic as Shevek's intellectual pursuits make him a rebel-scholar and the target of sharp criticism from his supervisors at the Institute. When Shevek declares, "I'm interested in Simultaneity principles," his superior glares at him with "the veins on his temples bulging" and replies, "Grow up. Grow up. Time to grow up. You're here now. We're working on physics here, not religion. Drop the mysticism and grow up."<sup>11</sup> Shevek's work marks a departure from the more conventional research of his fellow Anarresti physicists and the scientific

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<sup>9</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 223.

<sup>10</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 58.

<sup>11</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 104.

establishment alienates him. This lack of intellectual and material support precipitates Shevek's decision to seek a more hospitable scientific community on Urras.

Shortly after arriving at Anarres' Central Institute, Shevek sees the truth in his colleague's forewarning that "power inheres in a center." His function at the Institute becomes clear: "Shevek was to do the thinking, and Sabul [the lead researcher] would take the credit."<sup>12</sup> Shevek is assigned a room to himself (a punitive insult in a society of communitarians), he is required to learn the language of the Urrasti, but not share it with others, and he is forbidden to pursue his own scholarly interests in temporal theory. He questions these dictates and, before long, rebels against them: "He was sketching out notes for a series of hypotheses which led to a coherent theory of Simultaneity. But that began to seem a petty goal; there was a much greater one, a unified theory of Time, to be reached, if he could just get to it. He felt that he was in a locked room in the middle of a great open country: it was all around him, if he could find the way out, the way clear. The intuition became an obsession."<sup>13</sup> Shevek works diligently on his theory and hopes to convince Sabul to submit it to the PDC—a clearinghouse and watchdog group responsible for approving material for dissemination across Anarres and with Urras. Sabul repeatedly rejects Shevek's work, but Shevek persists: "He needed Sabul. He wanted to publish what he wrote and to send it to the men who could understand it, the Urrasti physicists; he needed their ideas, their criticism, their collaboration."<sup>14</sup> Shevek proceeds to finish his manuscript and gives it to Sabul who roundly dismisses it as an

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<sup>12</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 117.

<sup>13</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 112.

<sup>14</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 117.

“Egoistic divagation” from sequency physics that “can result only in sterile spinning of impractical hypotheses without social organic utility.”<sup>15</sup> Only after Shevek offers to name Sabul as co-author of the text does the manuscript pass inspection and reach publication with fifteen copies designated for delivery to Urras on the next ore freighter. The Urrasti receive Shevek’s work favorably and this exchange opens the opportunity for Shevek to make an unprecedented trip to the neighboring planet. The decision to travel does not come easily to Shevek as he understands the tremendous risk involved: the inability to return.

In order to make this trip, Shevek finds a loophole in the Terms of Settlement—the Urrasti are prohibited from visiting Anarres, but the terms do not say that an Anarresti cannot visit Urras. With this technicality in hand, Shevek petitions the Anarresti officials to sanction his trip: “The Terms of Settlement don’t forbid it. To forbid it now would be an assumption of authority by the PDC, an abridgment of the right of the Odonian individual to initiate action harmless to others.”<sup>16</sup> A Syndicate official informs Shevek: ““Anyone can leave Anarres...He can go whenever he likes, if the proprietarians’ freighters will take him. He can’t come back.””<sup>17</sup> Since a return from Urras would, technically, make Shevek a visitor from Urras, he would be prevented from disembarking on his homeland. This administrative quibbling is indicative of the growing bureaucracy that is increasingly distancing Anarres from its Odonian roots. Despite his belief that “to a great many people, anyone who went to Urras and tried to come back would simply be

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<sup>15</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 238.

<sup>16</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 356-7.

<sup>17</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 357.

a traitor,” Shevek convinces himself that the trip is worth whatever risk accompanies it: “If I could finish the theory there, and give it to them—to us and them and all the worlds, you know—I’d like that. Here I’m walled in...I’d like to share [my work].”<sup>18</sup> As difficult as it is for Shevek to leave behind his wife and child, he believes that his voyage promises to gain more than it risks to lose.

It is only after Shevek leaves Anarres for Urras that the reader gets a fuller picture of what life is like on both planets and sees for the first time the significance of the novel’s subtitle: “An Ambiguous Utopia.” Shevek’s trip forces him to examine his homeland’s promise of “the good life” as the reader is invited to do the same. Initially, the novel leads the reader to assume Anarres is the “better” of the two worlds, given the settlement’s foundation in Odonian principles of mutual aid and cooperation. In the opening pages of the novel, when he is on the freighter in route to Urras, Shevek is subjected to a series of inoculations because his destination planet harbors illness and disease and, because these threats are absent on Anarres, he lacks resistance. Le Guin explains: “Shevek submitted to this and other injections in silence. He had no right to suspicion or protest. He had yielded himself up to [the Urrasti]; he had given up his birthright of decision. It was gone, fallen away from him along with his world, the world of the Promise.”<sup>19</sup> Early on it appears that Shevek trades a homeland of promised freedom for a dangerous, authoritarian territory. But, Shevek’s observations of both lands reveal the mutability of such distinctions. Soon after Shevek’s departure, the inferiority of the capitalist, “propertarian” society on Urras is put into question. It is this

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<sup>18</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 378.

<sup>19</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 9.

two-world-undecidability (*ambiguous aporia*) that forces Shevek and the reader to question what and where the “good place” really is.

In interchanging chapters, Shevek’s backstory on Anarres is revealed concurrently with his present trip to Urras. As the chapters alternate, life on the two planets is revealed and Shevek’s opinion of Urras runs counter to the prevailing Anarresti view that the planet of proprietarians and profiteers is a place to “detest,” “hate,” and “fear.”<sup>20</sup> Upon arrival in Urras, Shevek is overcome by its beauty and the stark contrast to his home planet:

It was the most beautiful view Shevek had ever seen. The tenderness and vitality of the colors, the mixture of rectilinear human design and powerful, proliferate natural contours, the variety and harmony of the elements, gave an impression of complex wholeness such as he had never seen, except, perhaps, foreshadowed on a small scale in certain serene and thoughtful human faces. Compared to this, every scene Anarres could offer, even the Plain of Abbenay and the gorges of the Ne Therras, was meager: barren, arid, and inchoate...their landscape was like a crude sketch in yellow chalk compared with this fulfilled magnificence of life.... This is what a world is supposed to look like, Shevek thought.<sup>21</sup>

Shevek is not only awed by Urras’ magnificent landscape, but the hospitality of its citizenry also belies his expectations. He receives a warm welcome from his scientific colleagues, a residence that eclipses his Anarresti dwelling, and a servant to assist him in adjusting to Urrasti life. Most importantly, he finds a community of scholars eager to collegially engage him intellectually: “With immense pleasure and with that same sense of profound recognition, of finding something the way it was meant to be, Shevek

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<sup>20</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 43.

<sup>21</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 65.

discovered for the first time in his life the conversation of his equals.”<sup>22</sup> At one point, after his first semester at his teaching post, Shevek begins to feel at home in Urras and starts to consider staying: “Shevek ended his career as a tourist with relief. The new term was opening at Ieu Eun; now he could settle down to live, and work, in Paradise, instead of merely looking at it from the outside.”<sup>23</sup> Of course, not all is as it seems as Shevek begins to feel more isolated and it becomes clear that his sponsors merely want to exploit his research for their own technological advancement. Shevek’s view of Urras is complicated, because while it seems the planet is *Paradise*, he seems just as unfulfilled there as he was on Anarres:

Here he seemed to have no sense of direction. He worked at the Light Research Laboratory, read a great deal, and wrote three papers that summer and autumn: a productive half-year, by normal standards. But he knew that in fact he had done nothing real. Indeed the longer he lived on Urras, the less real it became to him. It seemed to be slipping out of his grasp—all that vital, magnificent, inexhaustible world which he had seen from the windows of his room, his first day on the world.<sup>24</sup>

It becomes painfully apparent to Shevek that the “paradise” he found on Urras is chimerical, inaccessible, and ephemeral. In the same way, the “promise” of Anarres remains unfulfilled as Shevek contemplates how his own planet fails to live up to its Odonian legacy.

The Urrasti refer to Anarres as the “little planet of starving idealists,” but the idealistic foundation of Anarresti society is slowly eroding into a bureaucracy that threatens to compromise the liberties of its citizens. As Le Guin explains,

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<sup>22</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 71.

<sup>23</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 126.

<sup>24</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 130.

“[d]ecentralization had been an essential element in Odo’s plans for the society she did not live to see founded... There was to be no controlling center, no capital, no establishment for the self-perpetuating machinery of bureaucracy and the dominance drive of individuals seeking to become captains, bosses, chiefs of state.”<sup>25</sup> But, the Anarresti felt centralization was necessary to an efficient infrastructure and “from the start the Settlers were aware that that unavoidable centralization was a lasting threat, to be countered by lasting vigilance.”<sup>26</sup> Such vigilance did not last as the center of Abbenay became a toehold for egoists (the Anarresti insult for people driven by self-interest) like Sabul and others who discovered ways to manipulate and control their fellow citizens. Though there is no robbery, murder, or rape on Anarres, personal liberties are still transgressed in more subtle, political ways: the Division of Labor controls all employment postings and the PDC controls all public and private correspondence. As much as Anarres seems to be a planet of volunteers working together for the common good, unburdened by the financial and commercial anxieties of the proprietarians on Urras, the citizens do not appear to be very fulfilled or content. In stark contrast to the abundant beauty on Urras, the Anarres landscape is described as “dry, cold, and windy” where life “had not evolved higher than fish and flowerless plants” and “the sun burned, the wind froze, the dust choked.”<sup>27</sup> Urras is a shiny, unblemished apple, rotten at the core and Anarres is a seed of hope planted in arid soil—neither state is ideal. By disclosing the inconsistencies of both planets, Le Guin brings the undecidability of utopia to the

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<sup>25</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 95.

<sup>26</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 96.

<sup>27</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 93.



fore. She makes clear that such a paradise cannot sustain itself; at the moment it appears tenable, it exceeds itself and resists apprehension—it becomes *dispossessed*. Once Shevek appears to feel at home in the paradise of Urras, its underbelly surfaces to destroy the illusion. Similarly, Anarres once appeared to follow Odo’s blueprint, but eventually its infrastructure took a different course. Both Urras and Anarres illustrate the “no place” of utopia as neither planet embodies its “good place” perceptions; the “paradise” and the “promise” of the planets are undermined throughout the text.

Despite the ambiguity of utopia in *The Dispossessed*, the novel is not anti-utopian or dystopian. Rather, it is the ambiguous treatment of utopia that makes this a decidedly utopian novel. Shevek’s observations on fleeting paradises and broken promises are directly related to his research to discover a unified theory of time—a similarly ambiguous endeavor. His parsing of life on Anarres and Urras as two planets with irreconcilable differences mirrors his attempt to reconcile time’s sequency and simultaneity. Just as utopia is, at one and the same time, the “good place” that is “no place,” time embodies both linear and cyclical properties: “Time goes in cycles, as well as in a line....So then time has two aspects.”<sup>28</sup> Time is a recurring motif throughout the novel; Le Guin’s narrative structure of past/present alternating chapters echoes the linear/cyclical temporal theory Shevek espouses throughout the text. The novel ends where it begins and begins where it ends with Shevek both preparing to leave and return to Anarres. Shevek’s meditations on his experience of time and his attempts to convey this experience to others comprise the bulk of the narrative. In fact, Shevek is synonymous with time; he embodies it: “Time did not pass. There was no time. He was

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<sup>28</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 223.

time: he only. He was the river, the arrow, the stone.”<sup>29</sup> Shevek is Anarres’ historical record and the harbinger of its future and his work on the unification of Sequency and Simultaneity is what animates the novel’s plot.

The discussion of time’s ambiguity in the novel hearkens the reader to draw connections between the passage of time and the instability of utopia. The following excerpts from Shevek’s discussion with an Urrasti outline his understanding of time:

“[W]e don’t experience the universe only successively....Do you ever dream, Mr. Dearri?...It is only in consciousness, it seems, that we experience time at all. A little baby has no time, he can’t distance himself from the past and understand how it relates to his present, or plan how his present might relate to his future....The unconscious mind of the adult is like that still. In a dream there is no time, and succession is all changed about, and cause and effect are all mixed together....Sequency explains beautifully our sense of linear time, and the evidence of evolution. It includes creation, and mortality. But there it stops. It deals with all that changes, but it cannot explain why things also endure. It speaks only of the arrow of time—never the circle of time....Time goes in cycles, as well as in a line. A planet revolving: you see? One cycle, one orbit around the sun, is a year, isn’t it?...But within the system, the cycle, where is time? Where is beginning or end? Infinite repetition is an atemporal process.”<sup>30</sup>

Le Guin’s emphasis on the ephemeral/eternal, ambiguous nature of time echoes postmodernism’s parsing of *presence* and, more specifically, Derrida’s discussion of the aporia which helps articulate the impossibility of utopia.

Derrida explains that it is impossible for all words, signs, and meanings to be coherently or sensibly presented and attained at one time, at one instant or present. Consequently, signification actually requires deferral and any difference therein, what Derrida calls *differánce*: “Differánce is the systematic play of differences...of intervals

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<sup>29</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 9.

<sup>30</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 222-23.

without which the ‘full’ terms could not signify, could not function.”<sup>31</sup> Difference, a concept once regarded as an addendum to clarity and identity, comes to the fore by making all meaning or identity possible through an already existing, necessary interval disruption among signifiers. As Derrida explains, “The identity of a language can only affirm itself as identity to itself by opening itself to the hospitality of a difference from itself or a difference within itself.”<sup>32</sup> Because, as Shevek’s work affirms, time is not merely a sequence of present instances, but a simultaneous confluence, meaning is continually deferred. This is why Shevek’s search for a “unified” temporal theory is ironic—such unification remains elusive by the very nature of time. Continual deferral renders the present, or *presence*, inarticulable: “No context can determine meaning to the point of exhaustiveness. Therefore the context neither produces nor guarantees impassable borders.... Like any pragmatics [language] takes into consideration gestural operations and contextual marks that are not all and thoroughly discursive. Such is the Shibboleth effect: it always exceeds meaning and the pure discursivity of meaning.”<sup>33</sup> Language exceeds presentable or re-presentable signification because of time, or of what cannot be completely presented—yet is nevertheless included and indispensable. Such an ironic condition is what Derrida calls an *aporia*.

It is the *aporia* that is so crucial to Derrida’s thought and to an understanding of the impossible no-place of utopia. The *aporia* is what prevents Shevek from feeling at home in Anarres or making a home in Urras; it is what compels Shevek to leave Anarres

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Positions* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981) 26.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Aporias*. Trans. Thomas Dutoit (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 1993) 11.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *Aporias* 9, 10.

and what prevents him from truly returning. *Aporia*, from the Greek *aporos*, means “non-passage,” a way not able to be traversed. But, this non-passage is not synonymous with a wall, border, or boundary, as such a delineation would mean a limit and the articulation of a present. Instead, the non-passage of *aporia* is the inaccessibility of such delineations and definitions. For Derrida, “deconstruction is explicitly defined as a certain aporetic experience of the impossible, the ‘nondialectizable contradiction’.”<sup>34</sup> The *aporia* reveals the indeterminacy of a utopian destination of perfection: “As for the dream of a unity, or finally of a place...this dream is forever destined to disappointment; this unity remains inaccessible.”<sup>35</sup> The inaccessibility of such a unity is at the heart of Shevek’s struggle in *The Dispossessed*; the novel chronicles his futile attempts to unify Anarres and Urras, and time itself.

To illustrate Shevek’s aporetic experience, the motif of walls is erected throughout the novel, beginning with the first sentence: “There was a wall.”<sup>36</sup> Le Guin continues to explain, “For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall. Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.”<sup>37</sup> These opening lines present the wall as a metaphor for Shevek’s consciousness and his experience of life on two worlds. These lines also gesture to the instability of the wall inasmuch as Le Guin refers to it in the past tense. *The Dispossessed* is ultimately the story of Shevek’s

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<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Aporias* 15.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Points*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf, et. al. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 1992) 136.

<sup>36</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 1.

<sup>37</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 1.

attempts to unbuild/traverse impassable walls and his recognition of their infinite mutability, analogous to the desire to create utopia and the acknowledgement of that impossibility. The Anarresti erect such a wall in an attempt to arrest time, to preserve their past and present, and to dismiss the future. By building walls around their utopia, the Anarresti only succeed in entombing themselves, as Shevek explains, “Those who build walls are their own prisoners.”<sup>38</sup> The Urrasti similarly live “behind walls” as Shevek notes upon his arrival: “The towers of the city went up into mist, great ladders of blurred light. Trains passed overhead, bright shrieking streaks. Massive walls of stone and glass fronted the streets.”<sup>39</sup> Recognizing that attempts to define and present utopia only succeed in its destruction, Shevek declares: “I’m going to go unbuild walls.”<sup>40</sup> Shevek states this in the opening pages of the text in reference to accepting his new post at Abbenay and, undeterred by his futile attempts there, he reaffirms this pledge in the novel’s closing pages upon his departure from Urras back to Anarres. The unbuilding of walls is directly connected to Shevek’s desire for community and his hope for a future that promises openness, rather than closure, between Anarres and Urras. This need, “the need that had brought him across the dry abyss from the other world, the need for communication, the wish to unbuild walls,” is the articulation of hope and an ethical promise that is a critical part of both experiencing the aporia and engaging utopia.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 332.

<sup>39</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 132, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 332.

<sup>41</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 75.

The crucial point for Derrida is that the aporia necessitates a response—it calls for responsibility rather than nihilistic apathy: “[T]here is in fact no philosophy and no philosophy of philosophy that could be called deconstruction and that would deduce from itself a ‘moral’ component. But that does not mean that deconstructive experience is not a responsibility, even an ethico-political responsibility.”<sup>42</sup> Critics of Derrida accuse his work of being dangerous, nihilistic, and devoid of any ethico-political import since, it is argued, without recourse to normative categories we are merely left in a stasis of indecision. Similarly, utopianism has been criticized for the same reasons; anti-utopians deride utopia’s perceived connection to totalitarianism and dogmatic stasis. But, Derrida’s work, like utopianism, makes considerable room for movement, action, ethics, and politics—indeterminacy, the aporia, and the no-place constitute the conditions for responsibility. The structure of the aporia, and therefore of deconstruction, does not issue or advocate a political and ethical dormancy. Shevek promises to unbuild walls and keep hope alive in the face of uncertainty and Derrida argues that such a politics and ethics are the consequences of the aporia:

It is there [in the asymmetry of time] that differ<sup>ance</sup>, if it remains irreducible, irreducibly required by the spacing of any promise and by the future-to-come that comes to open it, does not mean only (as some people have too often believed and so naively) deferral, lateness, delay, postponement. In the incoercible differ<sup>ance</sup> the here-now unfurls. Without lateness, without delay, but without presence....<sup>43</sup>

The aporia requires and indeed is the activity, movement, and precipitation of affirming something not determined. It necessitates a timely response, or *responsibility* to the other—that which is not present, unforeseeable, the not-yet to come. The aporia is

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<sup>42</sup> Derrida, *Points* 364.

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Spectres of Marx*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) 31.

responsibility itself, which is to say, the structure of openness, open to respond without having a predetermined understanding of how to do so since any predetermination or limit on responsibility would mean reducing the aporia to mere presentable boundaries and distinctions. By reducing utopia to *topos*, some critics have neglected the crucial *ou*—the not *topos*—and consequently dismissed the aporetic import of the genre. Le Guin highlights this aporia through Shevek's experience of Anarres and Urras and his meditations on time and the unrepresentable. Utopia both *is* and *is not*, at the same time; it is the aporia *par excellence* and the aporia compels activity and a response to the other, to that which is at any moment unrepresentable or unrealizable. Deconstruction implores us in the name of the ontological conditions by which we are bound—time and language—to engage, listen and respond to this other, this utopic no-place.

Without the undecidability of the aporia, the future could no longer be a promise of something to come, but rather an inactive and immobile future-present, an already predictable moment; without the aporia, the future *qua* future, the future-to-come, is unfeasible. Such a wholly presentable state of affairs is one in which politics or ethics need not be discussed since there would remain no possibility of anything to come, anything other than what is predictable:

For a possible that would only be possible (non-impossible), a possible surely and certainly possible, accessible in advance, would be a poor possible, a futureless possible, a possible already *set-aside*, so-to-speak, life-assured... The possibilization of the impossible possible must remain at one and the same time as undecidable as the future itself.<sup>44</sup>

Shevek believes in the future, he believes in the to-come, he hopes for the building of community and keeps open to its possibility without the guarantee of

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<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*. Trans. George Collins (London: Verso P, 1997) 29.

its coming. This ethic is what Derrida refers to as *messianicity*, an impossible, indeterminate experience of the other to-come (*à venir*). As Derrida explains, “As soon as you address the other, as soon as you are open to the future, as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future, of waiting for someone to come; that is the opening of experience.... This universal structure of the promise, of the expectation for the future, for the coming... that is what I call the messianic structure.”<sup>45</sup> According to Derrida, messianicity is different from messianism, the latter would require the instantiation of a universal—a totalitarianism—much like the difference between utopia and instantiations of utopia. In *The Dispossessed*, Shevek comes to understand utopia as continual and ephemeral, rather than present and immutable. Odonian social theory is premised on such a promise: “The validity of the promise, even promise of indefinite term, was deeply rooted in the grain of Odo’s thinking.”<sup>46</sup> Shevek understands the structure of the promise, he embodies it: “I am here because you see in me the promise.”<sup>47</sup> But, Shevek is not the Messiah; he does not bring revelation, unity, or consummation to the cosmos, he promises the possibility of community.

The building and unbuilding of walls thematic in *The Dispossessed* is mirrored by Shevek’s alternate feelings of isolation and longing for community. Shevek is often framed alone and enclosed in rooms at his home, office, or on the spaceship. Early in the

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<sup>45</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida,” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*. Ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham UP, 1997) 22.

<sup>46</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 244.

<sup>47</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 300.



novel, Le Guin writes: “[Shevek] was clearly aware of only one thing, his own total isolation. The world had fallen out from under him, and he was left alone.”<sup>48</sup> But, despite his feelings of alienation, he chooses to extend himself beyond these walls in the hope of building community: “I’m going to fulfill my proper function in the social organization. I’m going to go unbuild walls....I thought it would be better not to hold apart behind a wall, but to be a society among others, a world among others, giving and taking.”<sup>49</sup> According to Shevek, the residents of Anarres “refuse to look outward” and acknowledge their contingent relationship with others, thereby breaking any potential promise of community.<sup>50</sup> To keep the possibility of this promise, Shevek must take the risk of visiting Urras; this risk is the only move that honors and remains open to the future. After his visit to Urras, Shevek understands that the creation of community behind walls is the destruction of community and any denial of contingency and attempt to define, contain, and maintain a present, forecloses on the future and results in death.

As Shevek explains to his Urrasti hosts:

“You don’t understand what time is,” he said. “You say the past is gone, the future is not real, there is no change, no hope. You think Anarres is a future that cannot be reached, as your past cannot be changed. So there is nothing but the present, this Urras, the rich, real, stable present, the moment now. And you think that this is something which can be possessed! You envy it a little. You think it’s something you would like to have. But it is not real, you know. It is not stable, not solid—nothing is. Things change, change. You cannot have anything....And least of all can you have the present, unless you accept with it the past and the future. Not only the past but also the future, not only the future but also the past! Because they are real: only their reality makes the present real.”...“I

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<sup>48</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 6.

<sup>49</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 332, 346.

<sup>50</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 340.

thought I knew what ‘realism’ was,” Keng said.... “How can you, if you don’t know what hope is?”<sup>51</sup>

Shevek understands that hope—the belief in the promise—is the only reality and that such reality exists in holding, at the same time, the past, present, and future, just as the utopian holds the “good place” that is “no place,” at the same time. Utopia is both the aporia and the hope in the face of the aporia; it is the impossible impasse and the promise of the possible unbuilding of walls.

The notion of the impossible and of what may never be precluded, and therefore must be affirmed, whether good or bad, is the driving force of utopian endeavors that rather than courting death, animates life. This is the very philosophy that keeps Shevek’s dream of community alive. But, as Derrida explains, “[h]owever affirmative deconstruction is, it is affirmative in a way that is not simply positive, not simply conservative, not simply a way of repeating the given institution.”<sup>52</sup> Rather, the affirmation, what Derrida calls the *yes*, is the opening gesture we make to what is to come, whether good or bad. To affirm means to affirm the aporia, to accept the impossible and to consent to the unrepresentable: “To say *yes* is also to promise, to promise moreover to confirm the *yes*. There is no *yes* that is not a promise to confirm itself...And it is there that I am responsible before even choosing my responsibility.”<sup>53</sup> This affirmation and responsibility utters the *yes* without knowing what is to come. Utopia’s critics would say that the idea of affirmation necessitates a future-present, for surely we know what we are saying *yes* to, but the conflation of the *yes* with a terminable

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<sup>51</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 349, 351.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida” 5.

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, *Points* 384.

idea of what is to come evokes presence and fails to recognize the aporia. Affirmation is the “nonpassive endurance of the aporia” and “the condition of responsibility.”<sup>54</sup>

Shevek’s decisions to both leave and return to Anarres are affirmations and promises and he is aware of this ethical import and responsibility:

[I]t’s true, chronosophy does involve ethics....The baby, again, the animal, they don’t see the difference between what they do now and what will happen because of it. They can’t make a pulley, or a promise. We can....And there morality enters in. Responsibility....To break a promise is to deny the reality of the past; therefore it is to deny the hope of a real future. If time and reason are functions of each other, if we are creatures of time, then we had better know it, and try to make the best of it. To act responsibly.<sup>55</sup>

Time does not merely function in defined terms of vanishing succession where the past gives way to the present which subsequently yields to the future. Shevek understands that such a certainty of duration and progression is not possible:

[Shevek] had been groping and grabbing after certainty, as if it were something he could possess. He had been demanding a security, a guarantee, which is not granted, and which, if granted, would become a prison....The fundamental unity of the Sequency and Simultaneity points of view became plain; the concept of interval served to connect the static and the dynamic aspect of the universe. How could he have stared at reality for ten years and not seen it? The wall was down....It was simplicity: and contained in it all complexity, all promise. It was revelation.<sup>56</sup>

Time consists of both the present and the non-present and the past, present, and future are inextricably linked, the full weight of which bears on our lived experience and ethical imperative. In the same way that time can never be made fully present, utopia can never be achieved in the traditionally static and totalizing sense. Utopia’s critics overlook the

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<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *Aporias* 16.

<sup>55</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 225.

<sup>56</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 280.

aporetic import of the discourse by not accounting for the unaccountable or unrepresentable, thereby equating it with presence and idealism. But, utopia is the practice of affirming the aporia, it is hope in the presence of the impossible.

The alternating chapters of *The Dispossessed* chronicle Shevek's physical and emotional journeys and his growing disillusionment with the selfless conformity on Anarres and the selfish egoism on Urras. Through his experiences, Shevek comes to understand that a place of perfection does not exist behind closed walls. Despite this realization, Shevek maintains a hope that unbuilding and opening walls and doors will result in communities that affirm, rather than deny, each other. Utopia is about openness to the unrepresentable and engagement with the aporia and these concepts accompany the themes of community and solidarity in the novel. Where dialogue ceases and estrangement results, the possibility of utopian work disappears. When Odo founded Anarres, "she intended that all communities be connected by communication and transportation networks, so that goods and ideas would get where they were wanted, and the administration of things might work with speed and ease, and no community should be cut off from change and interchange."<sup>57</sup> Shevek takes this mission seriously and sees Anarres' secession from Urras as a rupture in need of repair. Upon Shevek's arrival on Urras, Le Guin writes: "Invitations to receptions, dedications, openings, and so forth were delivered to Shevek daily. He went to some, because he had come to Urras on a mission and must try to fulfill it: he must urge the idea of brotherhood, he must represent, in his own person, a solidarity between the Two Worlds."<sup>58</sup> When Shevek

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<sup>57</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 95.

<sup>58</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 144.

addresses the Urrasti, he explains: ““The bond that binds us is beyond choice. We are brothers. We are brothers in what we share...in hunger, in poverty, in hope, we know our brotherhood. We know it because we have had to learn it. We know that there is no help for us but from one another, that no hand will save us if we do not reach out our hand.”<sup>59</sup> Shevek’s extension of his hands to Urras is the iteration of his promise of brotherhood, community, and solidarity. Throughout the text, Shevek asserts that, being from the anti-propertarian Anarres, he arrives on Urras with “empty hands,” but he brings his ideas, his hopes, and his promises. The temporal theories he brings will enable the invention of the ansible, “a device that will permit communication without any time interval between two points in space....[and] make a league of worlds possible.”<sup>60</sup> Shevek needs the Urrasti as much as he feels they need him and the recognition of this contingency is essential to the establishment of solidarity. The following remarks by Shevek to the Urrasti emphasize the mutualism between them:

“I must explain to you why I have come to you, and why I came to this world also. I came for the idea. For the sake of the idea. To learn, to teach, to share in the idea. On Anarres, you see, we have cut ourselves off. We don’t talk with other people, the rest of humanity. I could not finish my work there. And if I had been able to finish it, they did not want it, they saw no use in it. So I came here. Here is what I need—the talk, the sharing....But the ideas in my head aren’t the only ones important to me. My society is also an idea. I was made by it. An idea of freedom, of change, of human solidarity, an important idea.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 300.

<sup>60</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 344.

<sup>61</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 345.

The extension and reception of hands is key to community building and the openness to affectation and change is key to utopia. The formation of utopia in Le Guin's novel is continually deferred, but the discussion of its creation endures.

Shevek's dream of a communal cosmos and the creation of the ansible remain deferred by the novel's conclusion, just as utopia must remain deferred, since any realization would result in destruction. As Derrida explains: "[Community] is never found, one never knows if it exists...to think one has found it would be not only be mystified, but would right away cause one to lose it, destroy it. Such a community is to come...which is coming but 'has not happened.'"<sup>62</sup> The communities that Shevek builds in the novel, from his boyhood chums and fellow scientists at the regional institute on Anarres to his new colleagues in Urras, expand and contract, gain and lose members. Shevek continues to make connections and form solidarities, not because he assumes doing so will result in a final determination of social engineering, but because he feels the imperative to connect with others and remain open to affectation. This imperative inspires Shevek to welcome Ketho, the first mate on his return flight to Anarres, to deplane with him on his home planet. After Ketho asks to accompany him, Shevek warns of the precarious conditions they may be returning to:

"Things are a little broken loose, on Anarres. That's what my friends on the radio have been telling me about. It was our purpose all along—our Syndicate, this journey of mine—to shake things, to stir up, to break some habits, to make people ask questions. To behave like anarchists! All this has been going on while I was gone. So, you see, nobody is quite sure what happens next. And if you land with me, even more gets broken loose.... Once you are there, once you walk through the wall with me, then as I see it you are one of us. We are responsible to you and you to us;

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<sup>62</sup> Derrida, *Points* 351.

you become an Anarresti, with the same options as all the others. But they are not safe options. Freedom is never safe.”<sup>63</sup>

Ketho asks to accompany Shevek despite the potential risk to both parties and together the two gentlemen embrace impermanence and undecidability and consequently accept the affirmation and responsibility provoked by the aporia. The aporia requires, and indeed is, the activity and precipitation of affirming something not determined, and the closing pages of Le Guin’s novel demonstrate this affirmative ethic. This affirmation is predicated on the ability to recognize that each moment of time is inextricably bound to others; all moments are moments of becoming—potentialities—that may appear dangerous, interesting, exciting, depressing, or wonderful, but affirmation calls us to see them as conditions of possibility. Throughout the novel, Shevek asserts that “we are the children of time” and he recognizes the contingency this relationship creates between himself and others.

*The Dispossessed* illustrates the aporia of utopic discourse and emphasizes its call for affirmation and responsibility. Rather than providing a traditionally utopian ideal of an unaffected and uncomplicated future-present, Le Guin offers a way to think about responsibility in the face of the aporia. As Derrida explains, “Each time a responsibility (ethical or political) has to be taken, one must pass by way of antinomic injunctions, which have an aporetic form, by way of a sort of experience of the impossible.”<sup>64</sup> It is Shevek’s resolve to affirm the indeterminacy of the unrepresentable future and to say *yes* to what is to come. It is his responsibility to never foreclose on the to-come, because this

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<sup>63</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 384.

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, *Points* 359.

impossibility is the very breath and provocation of his responsibility. In *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, for example, Derrida argues that the unforgivable is in reality the only thing that calls, and so requires a response, to forgiveness: “[I]t seems to me to begin from the fact that, yes, there is the unforgivable. Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive? The only thing that *calls* for forgiveness.”<sup>65</sup> In the same spirit, to foreclose on utopia is to abnegate responsibility, because the very concept of utopia entails the idea of the to-come. Shevek does not foreclose on the possibility of brotherhood and, though he insists that he comes to the other with empty hands, he extends himself in solidarity to Ketho: “I said to [an Urrasti ambassador] that I had nothing to give in return for what her people and yours have done for me; well, maybe I can give you something in return. An idea, a promise, a risk...”<sup>66</sup> The ellipses in this quote are original to the text and indicate the as yet unknown, indeterminable, to-come of such a promise. After their conversation, Ketho has “a very slight tremor in his voice of excitement, of hope,” and the novel concludes on the eve of their disembarkment.<sup>67</sup> *The Dispossessed* ends with Shevek in-between Urras and Anarres with the central conflicts and tensions unresolved, but there is hope at the impasse and walls are breached.

Shevek offers “an idea, a promise, and a risk” to the Urrasti and Le Guin’s gifts the same to her readers in *The Dispossessed*. More than any other utopian writer, Le Guin recognizes and celebrates utopia’s inherent ambiguity. In her Afterword to the aforementioned anthology, *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin’s The*

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<sup>65</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 32.

<sup>66</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 385, original emphasis.

<sup>67</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 385.



*Dispossessed*, Le Guin evaluates the essay contributions and discusses her motivations for writing the novel. She begins by explaining her reticence to participate in the volume given her experience with previous critical treatments of the novel: “[*The Dispossessed*] has given me a lot of grief. It has generally, not always but often, been discussed as a treatise, not as a novel. This is its own damn fault, of course—what did it expect, announcing itself as a utopia, even if an ambiguous one? Everybody knows utopias are to be read not as novels but as blueprints for social theory or practice.”<sup>68</sup> Le Guin continues:

I wasn’t surprised that it was treated as a treatise, but I wondered if the people who read it as a treatise ever wondered why I had written it as a novel. Were they as indifferent as they seemed to be to what made it a novel—the inherent self-contradictions of novelistic narrative that prevent simplistic, single-theme interpretation, the novelistic ‘thickness of description’ that resists reduction to abstracts and binaries, the embodiment of ethical dilemma in a drama of character that evades allegorical interpretation, the presence of symbolic elements that are not fully accessible to rational thought?<sup>69</sup>

Le Guin recognizes the inherent ambiguity in utopia and uses novelistic conventions to highlight its impossibility, undecidability, and resistance to totalizing interpretation. One critic in the Davis and Stillman anthology contends that “Anarres is not perfect. It is an ambiguous utopia, not because its utopian nature is ambiguous, but because it accepts that skepticism is simply the ground from which we must work.”<sup>70</sup> But, utopia *is* “naturally” ambiguous, and this would answer the query Le Guin poses in the Afterword: “I for one am curious as to why I play these particular tricks only when writing

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<sup>68</sup> Davis and Stillman 306.

<sup>69</sup> Davis and Stillman 306.

<sup>70</sup> Davis and Stillman 279.

utopias.”<sup>71</sup> It is precisely utopia’s ambiguity, irony, and playfulness that allows for Le Guin to play her novelistic “tricks.” Utopia inspires, supports, and sustains this kind of playful engagement. Le Guin acknowledges that her penchant for “narrative experimentation” and “postmodern self-conscious fictionality” is most at home in the utopian genre and she faults the essay collection for being ahistorical and treating *The Dispossessed* as if it existed in a vacuum without accounting for similar texts in her oeuvre, specifically an essay on utopianism and *Always Coming Home* (1985): “It’s hard for me to put these out of mind when thinking about *The Dispossessed*. Both offer a chance to compare some of the things I did in the earlier novel with things I said in the essay, or did in the later novel—testing for consistency, change of mind, progress, regress, aesthetic and intellectual purpose.”<sup>72</sup> A brief examination of these other texts helps sharpen Le Guin’s views on utopia and illustrate her contributions to utopian literature.

In 1982, Le Guin delivered a memoriam lecture concerning the work of the late critic Robert C. Elliott that was later published as the essay “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be.” This essay, part of *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (1989), articulates Le Guin’s understanding of her utopian work. The title of the essay owes to a quote from Elliott where he explained that conventional utopia is “the product of ‘the Euclidean mind’ which is obsessed by the idea

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<sup>71</sup> Davis and Stillman 307.

<sup>72</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 307.

of regulating all life by reason.”<sup>73</sup> Le Guin appreciates that “the purer, the more Euclidean the reason that builds a utopia, the greater is its self-destructive capacity,” and this essay explains, ironically, the *reasoning* behind her approach to utopia.<sup>74</sup> Le Guin begins by asking, “What are we offered by way of hope?,” and answering: Models, plans, blueprints, wiring diagrams.”<sup>75</sup> According to Le Guin, the “Euclidean utopia is mapped, it is geometrically organized” and she suggests that “the utopist would do well to lose the plan, throw away the map.”<sup>76</sup> In this essay, Le Guin seems to acknowledge the anti-utopians’ anti-blueprint sentiment and its impact on the waning of the utopian impulse, but she sees clear to resurrect utopia from its Euclidean and totalitarian associations: “I am trying to suggest, in an evasive, distrustful, untrustworthy fashion, and as obscurely as I can, that our final loss of faith in that radiant sandcastle may enable our eyes to adjust to a dimmer light and in it perceive another kind of utopia. As this utopia would not be Euclidean, European, or masculinist, my terms and images in speaking of it must be tentative and seem peculiar.”<sup>77</sup> Utopia can persist if utopists recognize the futility of Euclidean models and opt instead to embrace, affirm, and say *yes* to the challenge of investing in impossible futures. Le Guin’s “terms and images” are “tentative and seem peculiar” precisely because such attempts to articulate the impossible are imprecise. As Le Guin explains, “If utopia is a place that does not exist, then surely

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<sup>73</sup> Robert C. Elliott *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970) 100.

<sup>74</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (New York: Grave P, 1989) 87.

<sup>75</sup> Le Guin, *Dancing on the Edge of the World* 96.

<sup>76</sup> Le Guin, *Dancing on the Edge of the World* 97-98.

<sup>77</sup> Le Guin, *Dancing on the Edge of the World* 88.

(as Lao Tzu would say) the way to get there is by the way that is not a way.”<sup>78</sup> This acknowledgement of utopia’s impossibility rejects the Euclidean model, replacing it with the kind of ambiguous discourse found in her utopian novels.

Utopia, like language, is not transparent, linear, easily defined, or *present* and in order to engage utopian discourse, Le Guin believes we must recognize its indeterminacy: “I don’t think we’re ever going to get to utopia again by going forward, but only roundabout or sideways; because we’re in a rational dilemma, an either/or situation as perceived by the binary computer mentality, and neither the either nor the or is a place where people can live.”<sup>79</sup> In *The Dispossessed*, Shevek surmises that “a thinking man’s job [is] not to deny one reality at the expense of the other, but to include and to connect.”<sup>80</sup> Just as Shevek cannot live in Urras *or* Anarres, but must reckon with, rather than deny, his experiences on both planets, Le Guin notes that the liminal space between these worlds is where the utopian project begins, and never ends. Toward the end of her essay, Le Guin writes: “Increasingly often in these increasingly hard times, I am asked by people I respect and admire, ‘Are you going to write books about the terrible injustice and misery of our world, or are you going to write escapist and consolatory fantasies?’”<sup>81</sup> Presented with another *either/or* situation, Le Guin’s novels resist this paradigm and she writes *neither* and *both*. Like the “idea, promise, and risk” that Shevek

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<sup>78</sup> Le Guin, *Dancing on the Edge of the World* 93.

<sup>79</sup> Le Guin, *Dancing on the Edge of the World* 98.

<sup>80</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 284-285.

<sup>81</sup> Le Guin, *Dancing on the Edge of the World* 98.

presents to his brothers and sisters, Le Guin delivers on her promise and breaks Euclidean rules in *The Dispossessed* and a lesser known novel: *Always Coming Home*.

*Always Coming Home*, winner of the Kafka prize in fiction and short-listed for the National Book Award, is Le Guin's twenty-third novel and her opus. *Always Coming Home* is a fictional ethnography, complete with glossary, recipes, poems, short stories, songs, and illustrations, presenting the life of the Kesh in vast detail. The Kesh are people of the Valley in Northern California whose culture is clearly influenced by Native American traditions; their matriarchal society rejects materialism, expansion, and avarice. As a foil to the Kesh, Le Guin includes the Condor, a patriarchal warrior culture motivated by violence, domination, and greed. Like Anarres and Urras in *The Dispossessed*, the Kesh and Condor provide opposing views on social organization and both are unsustainable and imperfect. The events in the central plot take place one thousand years after a global apocalypse where industrial catastrophes have left much of the landscape and its inhabitants contaminated and sterilized by chemicals and radiation. Against this backdrop, the reader is presented with descriptions of both societies through the eyes of Stone Telling, the female protagonist who struggles with her identity—her mother is a Kesh and her father is a Condor. Like Shevek, Stone Telling travels from her Kesh homeland to experience life with her father, only to return to share her story with her mother's people. Such plot devices are conventionally utopian, but Le Guin's narrative structure, as in *The Dispossessed*, illustrates utopia's aporetic indeterminacy.

*Always Coming Home* is remarkable for both its structure and content as Le Guin reveals Kesh culture through Stone Telling's story and the ethnographer-narrator Pandora's journal entries. Via an undefined method of time travel, Pandora, a self-

proclaimed “future archaeologist,” discovers the Kesh and records her observations. Accompanying Pandora’s notes are a series of literary artifacts from the Kesh including such miscellany as recipes, aphorisms, and landscape illustrations. All of these materials are loosely held together by the bildungsroman novella of *Stone Telling* and these disparate narratives form a bricolage that invites the reader to connect the proverbial dots to create a clear picture of this utopian world. But, from the opening pages of the novel, Le Guin informs the reader that such a clear picture is elusive. The first line of the novel reads: “The people in this book might be going to have lived a long, long, time from now in Northern California.”<sup>82</sup> Le Guin’s use of the conditional verb phrase serves to merge past, present, and future, and alerts the reader to the play with time and representation to follow. Most of the narrative, from both *Story Telling* and *Pandora*, does not articulate a present condition, but rather negotiates past, present, and future simultaneously, highlighting the difficulty of *representation* in utopian discourse. Pandora’s voice dominates the text as she struggles to recover Keshian culture and recreate it for her readers, and Le Guin tells the reader to respect Pandora’s complex task: “The difficulty of translation from a language that doesn’t yet exist is considerable.”<sup>83</sup> Pandora constantly encounters problems relating the details of Keshian life and she incorporates numerous endnotes to explain her difficulty. The indeterminate history and present of the Kesh mirrors the utopian indeterminacy of their future-present. Through Pandora’s painstaking archaeological efforts, the reader learns a great deal about the life and times

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<sup>82</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin. *Always Coming Home* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 2001) 1.

<sup>83</sup> Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* 1.

of the Kesh, but the clearest message concerns the culture's commitment to openness, change, and possibility.

In the same way that Le Guin casts ambiguous doubt on the presumably utopian Anarresti society in *The Dispossessed*, she creates the same uncertainty with respect to the Kesh. Contrary to some critics' assertions, Le Guin does not present the Kesh as a blueprint for utopian society. In a *Time* magazine article, reviewer Paul Gray writes: "The Kesh are what humans could become if they would stop trying to impost their wills and designs on the earth. The enormous swatches of pseudoanthropological material in *Always Coming Home* amount to a blueprint for an allegedly better world."<sup>84</sup> But, throughout the novel, Le Guin emphasizes the indeterminacy and contingency of Keshian culture. One of the Keshian aphorisms Pandora records states: "To be singleminded is to be unmindful. Mindfulness is keeping many different things in mind."<sup>85</sup> The Kesh function through adaptation and revision, rather than myopically clinging to a unilateral prescription for what their world should be. Even if an outside observer, like Pandora or the reader, wanted to duplicate the Kesh way of life, they would have a difficult time finding a blueprint to follow as the Valley's archives are periodically purged to make room for new texts and new ideas. When Pandora asks the Valley's archivist, "How do you decide what to keep and what to throw away? The library really isn't very large, when you consider how much writing goes on here in the Valley," the archivist replies: "It's difficult. It's arbitrary, unjust, and exciting. Books no one reads go; books people

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<sup>84</sup> Paul Gray, "History of an Imagined World: *Always Coming Home*," *Time* (October 14, 1985): 22.

<sup>85</sup> Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* 312.

read go after a while. But they all go.”<sup>86</sup> With an archive in such flux, it is clear why Pandora has a difficult time recording the history and present of the Valley, much less forecasting its future. The gaps in the archive mirror the indeterminacy of utopia and conventional blueprints for the realization of a perfect heaven on earth are unavailable.

Le Guin points out that the Valley is not a conventional utopia at all and the Kesh are anything but perfect. At one point, Pandora accuses the archivist of the Valley of being a utopian: “I never did like smartass utopians. Always so much healthier and saner and sounder and fitter and kinder and tougher and wiser and righter than me and my family and friends. People who have the answers are boring.” The archivist replies: “But I have no answers and this isn’t utopia.”<sup>87</sup> The Kesh certainly do not have all of the answers; they still have rebellious teenagers, painful death, social outcasts, loafers, and dissidents. There is no rule of law or government to impose and sustain order and the Kesh reject the totalitarian and militaristic intimidation of the Condor. But, the absence of a final solution in the text is precisely what makes *Always Coming Home* utopian. Utopia always, already exceeds itself; it is not perfect or achievable. Yet, utopia is not altogether impossible—its etymology acknowledges the existence of the “good place” even if it cannot be found. The culture of the Kesh exists in pieces and fragments of stories and artifacts, even if Pandora has difficulty recreating them. And just as Pandora feels she has found them, she loses them in the empty shelves of the library or the faulty memory of the archivist. As Derrida explains: “[Community] is never found, one never knows if it exists...to think one has found it would be not only be mystified, but would

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<sup>86</sup> Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* 314.

<sup>87</sup> Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* 316.



right away cause one to lose it, destroy it. Such a community is to come...which is coming but 'has not happened.'"<sup>88</sup> Pandora recognizes the "to come" and her hopeful persistence in the face of the indeterminate is utopia par excellence. At the novel's conclusion, in direct address, Pandora recognizes and affirms utopia's perpetual deferral:

When I take you to the Valley, you'll see the blue hills on the left and the blue hills on the right, the rainbow and the vineyards under the rainbow late in the rainy season, and maybe you'll say, "There it is, that's it!" But I'll say, "A little farther." We'll go on, I hope, and you'll see the roofs of the little towns and the hillsides yellow with wild oats, a buzzard soaring and a woman singing by the shallows of a creek in the dry season, and maybe you'll say, "Let's stop here, this is it!" But I'll say, "A little farther yet." We'll go on, and you'll hear the quail calling on the mountain by the springs of the river, and looking back you'll see the river running downward through the wild hills behind, below, and you'll say, "Isn't that it, the Valley?" And all I will be able to say is, "Drink this water of the spring, rest here awhile, we have a long way yet to go, and I can't go without you."<sup>89</sup>

Le Guin concludes her text by inviting readers to join Pandora in the search for utopia, no matter how long it may take to never find it.

Le Guin's respect for the ambiguity of utopia is evidenced throughout *Always Coming Home*. From the part fiction-part ethnography generic conflation and multiple narrative voices, to Stone Telling's experiences as both a Kesh and Condor, and Pandora's position as future-interlocutor of a past culture. This clear acknowledgement and incorporation of utopia's undecidability and blurred boundaries differentiates Le Guin's utopian novels from others in the genre. Of course, some reviewers accuse Le Guin's novel of being conventionally utopian and therefore open to dismissal. As the aforementioned *Time* reviewer remarks:

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<sup>88</sup> Derrida, *Points* 351.

<sup>89</sup> Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* 339.

No one can fault Le Guin for a lack of ambition. But her book erects several serious hurdles. Readers are likely to respond to its argument along partisan lines. Those who believe that man began stumbling toward destruction when he stopped being a noble savage will find their fondest dreams fulfilled. Watch for a Kesh cult to spring up on college campuses. Others, who think primitive societies formed a nasty, brutish, and short phase in the evolution toward civility, will be unmoved by the serene monotony of Kesh life.<sup>90</sup>

This reviewer, who also calls the Kesh culture “Edenic,” subscribes to conventional interpretations of utopia and with a combination of mockery and cynicism fails to account for the narrative complexity in Le Guin’s novel. Not all reviews of *Always Coming Home* are so dismissive. Samuel R. Delany, in the *New York Times Book Review*, praises Le Guin for her “high invention” and “deep intelligence” and calls *Always Coming Home* “a slow, rich read, full of what one loves most in her work: a liberal Utopian vision, rendered far more complex than the term ‘utopian’ usually allows.”<sup>91</sup> Like Delany, critic Peter Fitting has praised Le Guin for widening the scope of utopian discourse, expanding the genre, and creating a “turning point” in the feminist utopian tradition.<sup>92</sup> *Always Coming Home* garners a fraction of the critical attention received by *The Dispossessed*, but both novels together reveal Le Guin’s deep understanding of the utopian genre and her pioneering efforts to ironically represent the unrepresentable.

In a 1976 review of *The Dispossessed*, one critic writes: “Portland science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin’s latest and most straightforwardly political novel is not, properly

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<sup>90</sup> Gray 23.

<sup>91</sup> Samuel R. Delany, “The Kesh in Song and Story,” *The New York Times Book Review* (September 29, 1985): 31, 56.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Fitting, “The Turn from Utopia in Recent Feminist Fiction,” in *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*, eds. Libby Faulk Jones and Sarah Webster Goodwin (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1990) 142.

speaking, utopian at all. A bona fide utopia does not admit of ambiguity, contradiction and conflict, and the anarchist society of the planet Anarres which Ms. Le Guin describes is rife with them.”<sup>93</sup> Thirty years later, critics champion Le Guin’s invention, innovation, and insight in Davis and Stillman’s essay collection. But, it is important to recognize that although Le Guin more self-consciously and plainly addresses utopia’s precarious instability, this is not a revision or rewriting of utopia. This distinction is important because novels in the utopian tradition reveal such ambiguity, some more explicitly than others, and to say Le Guin “rewrites the very idea of utopia,” and to credit her with redefining the genre, betrays the meaning of utopia.<sup>94</sup> As one critic argues, “Anarres is not perfect. It is an ambiguous utopia, not because its utopian nature is ambiguous, but because it accepts that skepticism is simply the ground from which we must work,”<sup>95</sup> but utopia is precisely, by nature, ambiguous and divisions such as this deny the import of utopia. Bülent Somay argues in “From Ambiguity to Self-Reflexivity: Revolutionizing Fantasy Space,” that Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* marks a “total break” in the utopian tradition. Quoting Nicholas Berdayev, Somay writes: “Utopia is always totalitarian and totalitarianism, in the conditions of our world, always utopian,” and argues that the “libertarian/anarchist/liberal critique of utopias has always stressed the hidden (and

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<sup>93</sup> Win McCormack, “*The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Novel*,” *Oregon Times Magazine* (Feb/Mar 1976): 11.

<sup>94</sup> Curtis, Claire, “Ambiguous Choices: Skepticism as a Grounding for Utopia,” *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed*.” Eds. Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman (New York: Rowman and Littlefield P, 2005) 265.

<sup>95</sup> Curtis 279.

sometimes not-so-hidden) monolithic/totalitarian premise in utopianism.”<sup>96</sup> Somay further asserts:

The utopian tradition, up until the “open-ended” utopias of the 1970s, was authoritarian in style as well as totalitarian in content. Any social order which is described as something final or something *finally achieved* leaves no room for further change. This totalitarian content results in a narrative style that is also closed. Utopian narratives present their imaginary social orders to their audiences in the form of a referendum, a matter of “yes/no,” rather than open-ended suggestions that would encourage the readers to “write” their own hopes, designs, and doubts into the text. In short, therefore, until the late twentieth century, utopia never left any room for ambiguity.<sup>97</sup>

According to Somay, all utopian narratives are authoritarian and closed in both style and content, until the new wave of feminist utopias in the 1970s, an argument he makes in a previous essay titled “Towards an Open-Ended Utopia” where he argues that *The Dispossessed* bucks the static tradition of the utopian genre.<sup>98</sup> But, this claim refuses to acknowledge the ambiguity throughout the utopian tradition from More to Bellamy, Howells, and beyond. Somay constructs a straw-man for his argument and he remains convinced that even if *The Dispossessed* is ambiguous, Le Guin must locate utopia *somewhere*: “If Anarres does not pretend to be a utopia, then the utopian horizon, which is walled inside and then excreted from Anarres, must be located somewhere.”<sup>99</sup> But, as Shevek realizes, walls around utopia disable, rather than enable, and utopia exceeds any attempts to define it: “[Shevek to the Urrasti] You cannot keep doors open. You will

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<sup>96</sup> Somay, Bülent, “From Ambiguity to Self-Reflexivity: Revolutionizing Fantasy Space,” *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed*.” Eds. Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman, 234.

<sup>97</sup> Davis and Stillman 235.

<sup>98</sup> Somay, Bülent, “Towards an Open-Ended Utopia,” 11.1 *Science Fiction Studies* (Mar 1984): 24-5.

<sup>99</sup> Davis and Stillman 241.

never be free.”<sup>100</sup> Le Guin contends that “*The Dispossessed* doesn’t have a happy ending. It has an open ending...The circle is open. The doors are open.”<sup>101</sup> Le Guin portray Anarres as a society that seeks to eradicate difference—a common, traditional conception of utopia—but, as Derrida’s work shows, such difference is necessary for meaning and utopia cannot exist without it. By building walls of exclusion to control, eradicate, and erase difference, Anarres destroys itself. Shevek explains that the Anarresti “made laws, laws of conventional behavior, built walls all around ourselves, and we can’t see them, because they are part of our thinking.”<sup>102</sup> Such thinking disables any ability to envision utopia, much less search for it, and, for Le Guin, it is worth searching for.

As evidenced in the concluding pages of both utopian novels, utopia is located nowhere, yet the protagonists are hopeful as they embrace uncertain futures. In *The Dispossessed*, Shevek is precariously perched for return to his homeland with hope for reconciliation and progress. Such progress does not mean the movement toward an ultimately better, perfect reality—there is no culmination or resolution. Rather, it is a dialectic that persists with a promise and a hope—not a guarantee. This is affirmation in the face of impossibility; this is utopia. In *Always Coming Home*, Pandora points in the direction of an elusive utopia, inviting the reader to join her in the journey. This dynamic engagement of a deferred promise is a challenge to the status quo, the antithesis of the stagnant, stable, and static models that anti-utopians critique. Such a conventional understanding of utopia and its accompanying critique has worked to render the genre

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<sup>100</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 304.

<sup>101</sup> Davis and Stillman 308.

<sup>102</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 331.

impotent. But, Le Guin sees such criticism as enabling a review of utopia: “I am trying to suggest, in an evasive, distrustful, untrustworthy fashion, and as obscurely as I can, that our final loss of faith in that radiant sandcastle may enable our eyes to adjust to a dimmer light and in it perceive another kind of utopia.”<sup>103</sup> In her essay collection, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, Le Guin explains her idea of utopia: “I have no idea who we will be or what it may be like on the other side, though I believe there are people there. They have always lived there. It’s home. If we, clambering up out of the abyss, ask questions of them, they won’t draw maps, alleging utter inability; but they may point.”<sup>104</sup> Such a utopia is inarticulable, but this gesture to the “to come” recognizes its perpetual elision and invites the seeker to continue the journey home in spite of it.

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<sup>103</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View,” *Dancing on the Edge of the World* (New York: Grave P, 1989) 88.

<sup>104</sup> Le Guin, *Dancing on the Edge of the World* 98.

## AFTERWORD

For other nations, utopia is a blessed past never to be recovered; for Americans it is just beyond the horizon.

Henry Kissinger<sup>1</sup>

As the horizon of many utopian aspirations, America embodies and engenders hope. America's potential for greatness, and investment in perpetual progress, is outlined in her Declaration of Independence and echoed in works like *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918), where Adams writes:

At the rate of progress since 1800, every American who lived into the year 2000 would know how to control unlimited power. He would think in complexities unimaginable to an earlier mind. He would deal with problems altogether beyond the range of earlier society. To him, the nineteenth century would stand on the same plane with the fourth—equally childlike—and he would only wonder how both of them, knowing so little, and so weak in force, should have done so much.<sup>2</sup>

But, in the new millennium, the utopian spirit that animated writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is in decline. In a 2004 interview, Ursula K. Le Guin remarked: “The question of writing a utopia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century or the 21<sup>st</sup> is kind of a vexed one. I think partly because it is rather hard for us to believe at the moment, to really, really believe in a better place; we have been disappointed pretty often. We have been so far down, for so long now, people can't even remember what it's like to have real good cheer running around the country.”<sup>3</sup> It seems that the American temperament of the twenty-first century oscillates between complacency and apathy. Some feel they have realized

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, “Eulogy at Nelson Rockefeller Funeral” (1979).

<sup>2</sup> Henry Adams. *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918) 56.

<sup>3</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin,” Interview with Kurt Anderson. [Studio 360](#) Public Radio International. WNYC, New York, 14 Aug 2004.

the American dream and are comfortable with their lives, so the world needs little improvement. Such famous twentieth century pronouncements like Francis Fukukama's "the end of history" and Margaret Thatcher's "there is no alternative," proclaimed the triumph of neoliberalism over other socio-political systems. On the other hand, there are those whose lives are shadows of what they hoped they would be, and there seems to be nothing they, or anyone else, can do to improve their present conditions, much less their futures. Either life is "as good as it gets" or "it can't get any better." Still, hope survives. We need only examine the strategy and sloganeering of the 2008 Democratic Presidential campaign—"Change You Can Believe In"—and the unprecedented grass roots mobilization and significant financial contributions it inspired. In his nomination acceptance speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, President-elect Barack Obama proclaimed: "I will restore our moral standing, so that America is once again that last, best hope for all who are called to the cause of freedom, who long for lives of peace, and who yearn for a better future." Obama acknowledged the palpable apathy in America's political climate, but he closed with a promise of hope and change:

When Washington doesn't work, all of its promises seem empty. If your hopes have been dashed again and again, then it's best to stop hoping and settle for what you already know....Instead, it is that American spirit—that American promise—that pushes us forward even when our path is uncertain; that binds us together in spite of our differences; that makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen, that better place around the bend....America we cannot turn back. We cannot walk alone. At this moment, in this election, we must pledge once more to march into the future. Let us keep that promise—that American promise—and hold firmly, without wavering, to the hope that we confess.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Barack Obama, "Democratic Presidential Nomination Acceptance," Democratic National Convention. Denver, CO. 28 Aug 2008.



Pushing “forward even when our path is uncertain” is the responsibility that utopia engenders; utopia is hope in the face of impossibility. Utopian hope persists in spite of current and past sentiments against it. It is an integral part of our everyday, lived experience—always, already behind us, with us, and in front of us. The authors profiled in this study understood that utopia is not a place to be realized, determined, defined, and achieved, but, rather, an impulse and an ethic. Utopia is the sustained engagement with the relevance of the impossible and each of the novels studied in the preceding chapters confronts the impossible future with gestures of hope in spite of it.

Utopian critics, too, persist in their desire to engage utopian irony. Both historian Russell Jacoby and cultural and literary critic Fredric Jameson’s recent work addresses the place of utopia in the new millennium and, rather than dismissing it as a futile, fanciful thought experiment, these authors renew the discussion Sir Thomas More began 500 years ago. In *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (2005), Jacoby revisits the terrain he traveled five years earlier in *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (2000). Jacoby’s new study begins where his earlier effort left off with the proclamation: “Buoyant idealism has long disappeared. In an age of permanent emergencies, more than ever we have become narrow utilitarians dedicated to fixing, not reinventing, the here and now.”<sup>5</sup> His opening chapter further describes utopia’s reception in the twenty-first century: “[F]or both the prosperous and the destitute utopian ideas are as dead as door nails. They are irrelevant for the affluent and immaterial for the hungry—and dangerous for many intellectuals to boot. To the

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<sup>5</sup> Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005) ix.

desperate, utopian ideas seem meaningless; to the successful, they lack urgency or import; to the thinking classes, they lead to murderous totalitarianism.”<sup>6</sup> Jacoby aptly captures current treatments of utopia and seeks to combat anti-utopian sentiment. To this end, he explores a Judaic strain in Marxist thought.

Jacoby begins with a distinction between “blueprint utopians” and what he calls “iconoclast utopians”; the former he can do without, the latter preserves the spirit of utopia. For Jacoby, the iconoclast utopians are “iconoclastic inasmuch as they eschew blueprints and utopian inasmuch as they evoke a future.”<sup>7</sup> Jacoby explains: “In the same way God could not be depicted for the Jews, the future could not be described for the iconoclastic utopians; it could only be approached through hints and parables. One could ‘hear’ the future, but not see it.”<sup>8</sup> For Jacoby, blueprint utopians like Sir Thomas More and Edward Bellamy are too myopically preoccupied with detailing social plans to engage the spirit of utopia. But, iconoclast utopians like Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Martin Buber respected the spirit of utopia enough not to map it. According to Jacoby, these figures were “political in their worldly hopes for the future and Jewish in their resistance to depicting it....Rather than elaborate the future in precise detail, they longed, waited, or worked for the utopia but did not visualize it....[T]hey did not privilege the eye, but the ear [thereby obeying] the commandment prohibiting graven images. God, the absolute, and the future defied representation.”<sup>9</sup> Utopians in the Jewish

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<sup>6</sup> Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect* 1.

<sup>7</sup> Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect* xv.

<sup>8</sup> Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect* xv.

<sup>9</sup> Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect* 94, 33.

intellectual tradition hold the key to utopia's future precisely because they refuse to picture it: "If the future defied representation, however, it did not defy hope."<sup>10</sup> Jacoby seeks to invigorate utopian discourse by chronicling the work of thinkers who embody the utopian spirit, but, because of religious observance, stop short of illustrating their ideas of the future. This treatment helps to sever utopia from its blueprint (totalitarian) associations and reveal a more productive aspect of the discourse.

Published the same year as Jacoby's text, Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005) is a collection of previously published essays and an extended discussion of the concept of utopia and its political function. Like Jacoby, Jameson dismisses blueprint utopianism: "[Utopianism's] vacuous evocation as the image of a perfect society or even the blueprint of a better one are best set aside from the outset without further comment."<sup>11</sup> For Jameson, like Jacoby, the utopian spirit is in crisis mode:

[C]learly enough, at this point the very spirit of Utopian invention has been modified, its difficulties increased from the point of view of Fancy, while the function of Imagination slowly atrophies for want of use; it is this process which we have called the waning of the Utopian impulse, the enfeeblement of Utopian desire, and which saps our political options and tends to leave us all in the helpless position of passive accomplices and impotent handwringers.<sup>12</sup>

Jameson attempts to refresh a discussion of utopia by using a concept he calls "anti-anti-utopianism" that he believes escapes the problems of content, positivity, and presence associated with utopia. For Jameson, even irony—the uniting of the positive and

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<sup>10</sup> Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect* xviii.

<sup>11</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005) 72.

<sup>12</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies* 55.

negative—is a positive exercise and he professes the neutrality of anti-anti-utopianism: “Irony is thus a way of unifying opposites...irony still believes in content. The problem that now confronts us is...how to invent a formalism, not by spurious synthesis or the ironic superposition of our opposites, but rather by going all the way through that contradictory content and emerging on the other side.”<sup>13</sup> To emerge “on the other side,”

Jameson continues:

They must neither be combined in some humanistic organic synthesis, nor effaced and abandoned altogether...a scandal that remains vivid and alive, and that cannot be thought away, either by resolving it or eliminating it: the biblical stumbling block, which gives Utopia its savor and its bitter freshness, when the thought of Utopias is still possible...for those only too wary of the very real political function of the idea and the program of Utopia in our time, the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism may well offer the best working strategy. (180, xvi)

Jameson’s meditation on the fate of utopia in the new millennium goes a long way toward resurrecting the discourse on utopia. But, Jameson never really fleshes out his central idea of anti-anti-utopianism aside from its critical strategy of negation and so the reader is left to wonder what he means by such a concept devoid of positive content. It is a rearticulation of the dialectic’s thesis/antithesis/synthesis model, but Jameson promises more. At times Jameson’s prose proves more obfuscatory than explanatory, and if the reader chooses to accept Jameson’s anti-anti-utopia without qualification, it is doubtful that such a concept really adds anything relevant to the discussion of utopia. Jameson proposes to synthesize two negations to arrive at a neutral term: “Not both at once, but neither one nor the other, without any third possibility in sight. This neutral position does not seek to hold two substantive features , two positivities, together in the mind at once,

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<sup>13</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies* 179.

but rather attempts to retain two negative or privative ones, along with their mutual negation of each other.”<sup>14</sup> Since, by his own admission, Jameson’s concept takes a “neutral” position, it denudes utopianism of that which distinguishes it from other forms of discourse---namely, all semblance of a hopeful vision. In other words, what is utopia without any content or sense of hope?

Jameson also intimates that deconstruction is along the same analytic path insofar as it lacks positive content:

This still leaves us in a very unpromising place indeed, one in which no substantive or positive vision of Utopia can be accepted; in which all the concrete specifications of Utopia must be challenged, in a process reminiscent of what Adorno’s negative dialectic offered to do for philosophy and its propositions (and what Derridean deconstruction also does in so thoroughgoing a way that unlike Adorno it even refuses any positive or substantive concept of its own negative method, and indeed of method as such).<sup>15</sup>

Jameson ignores the ethical dimension of deconstruction: the aporia. Derrida’s discussion of the undecidable “to-come” prompts responsibility. In an essay titled “The Future as Disruption,” Jameson asserts that the recovery of utopia in the new millennium is “not a matter of solving the dilemma or of resolving its fundamental antinomy: but rather of producing new versions of those tensions, new ratios between the two terms, which disrupt the older ones (including those invented in the modern period) and make of the antinomy itself the central structure and the beating heart of Utopia as such.”<sup>16</sup>

Derrida’s aporia comes closest to approximating such a position. Jameson is right to look for something other than the merely positive connotation of utopia, but utopia is not

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<sup>14</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies* 179-80.

<sup>15</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies* 180.

<sup>16</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies* 214.

merely positive; as my project demonstrates, utopia is a heuristic of the aporia. Utopia preserves hope while, at the same time, acknowledging the indeterminacy of what is hoped for. Jameson gestures in the direction of the aporia, but where he finds a roadblock my study finds an open door.

Derrida's ethical irony is also utopia's irony because the discussion of "the good" originates when the perfect society is not fully present, impossible, and unachievable. The discussion of what counts as a good society can only begin when we acknowledge and examine an unachievable, impossible (impassable) idea of "good." Because such a realization is unachievable it calls us to continually probe what the "good society" is. My argument illustrates that More's *good place* that is *no place* was not meant to be *someplace*—it was meant to be impossible. Yet, unlike other critics, I argue that this *no place* is productive. Modern critics of utopia shape it into a static, perfect place to which the natural reaction is to criticize and reject it as unable to reflect and respond to the vicissitudes of the modern world; it is viewed as quixotic and impractical. I maintain that utopia is defined by an essential irony; while the promise of utopia cannot be fulfilled, neither can it be discarded. The rejection and erasure of utopia results in its own finalized project and becomes what it denies. But, if utopia cannot be wholly attained, nor wholly rejected, what are we to make of it? My study suggests that the impossibility of attaining the modernist view of utopia, and also the inability to fully rid ourselves of utopia results in an impasse or aporia. This impossibility/impassibility produces a tension that provokes engagement and action. In this way, utopia implies a response; it implies responsibility, not the complacency or self-satisfaction that derives from the idea

of perfection. Utopia's impossibility not only allows us to probe the limits of what constitutes a good society, it calls us to do so.

Perhaps the contemporary critic that comes closest to a reckoning with utopian irony is Slavoj Žižek. In the documentary *Žižek!* (2005), released the same year as Jacoby and Jameson's studies, the Slovenian philosopher declares:

[We] should reinvent utopia, but in what sense? There are two false meanings of utopia. One is the old notion of imagining an ideal society which we all know will never be realized. The other is the capitalist utopia in the sense of the new and perverse desires that you are not allowed but even solicited to realize. The true utopia is when the situation is so without issue, without a way to resolve it within the coordinates of the possible, that out of the pure urge of survival you have to invent a new space. Utopia is not a kind of free imagination. Utopia is a matter of innermost urgency; you are forced to imagine it as the only way out. And that is what we need today....In a proper revolutionary breakthrough, the utopian future is neither simply fully realized, present, nor simply evoked as a distant promise which justifies present violence—it is rather as if, in a unique suspension of temporality, in the short-circuit between the present and the future, we are—as if by Grace—for a brief time allowed to act as if the utopian future is (not yet fully here, but) already at hand, just there to be grabbed.<sup>17</sup>

Utopia's impossibility does not neutralize or negate its hope and Žižek understands that utopia is an integral part of our lives. In this way, Žižek affirms and reinforces the ethical dimension of utopia.

Both Jacoby and Jameson recognize utopia's decline in the new millennium and they shed new light on a dimming discourse. However, Jacoby's conclusion that iconoclast utopians could not aptly describe or illustrate utopia because of the commandment against graven images does not fully address utopia's inherent ambiguity. Jameson's anti-anti-utopian proposal is also problematic inasmuch as his idea of utopia

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<sup>17</sup> *Žižek!* Dir. Astra Taylor. Perf. Slavoj Žižek. DVD, 2005.

stripped of hope remains vague. Sir Thomas More's neologism means "good place" that is "no place," so dispensing with content in favor of pure neutrality seems to neglect the full import of utopia proper. If we dispense with the notion that utopia is the lipstick on the pig of totalitarianism, then we can move beyond efforts to circumvent utopia by appealing to concepts like anti-anti-utopianism and focus instead on how utopia functions. The halt in utopian literary production in the twenty-first century may be related to postmodernity's crisis of representation. But, as I assert, the utopian genre is uniquely positioned to confront such a crisis and its playfulness with irony and impossibility is commensurate with postmodern concerns.

Utopia is a literary form and a political discourse that goes beyond the written word to influence, incense, inspire, or incite readers to action—it provokes a response. My readings of American literary utopias disclose narrative characteristics, from temporal instability to radical shifts in points of view, to show that the value of utopian literature lies in its exploration of alternative possibilities without prescribing finite and present solutions. By reading these texts not as platonic, finished projects, but rather works that, in varying degrees, reckon with utopia's ambiguity, the literary analysis of utopia moves from a discussion of perfect places to something "to-come." These narratives remain unfinished projects whose political and ethical potential resides in the suspension of utopia and our ability to see just beyond the horizon.



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