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THE DANGEROUS ATTRACTIONS OF IMAGINARY OTHER WORLDS: A CURSE OR A BLESSING?[1]

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Abstract. Utopian literature is very heterogeneous, comes across in the shape of essays, dialogues / debates, poems, stories / fictions / narratives and plays, and thus displays a huge generic diversity and hybridity of forms. In this essay the phenomenon is studied through reference to English Literature from the medieval period to the twentieth century. The focus is on the ambivalence of utopias. To me, it resides in the relationship between fact and fiction or history / reality and utopian visions. Both the blessing and the curse of utopias result from it. The attraction consists in the possibility, the vision, but the danger in the perversion of the ideals in reality. We are dealing here with a double-edged phenomenon, with "dangerous attractions". This does by no means lessen the value of utopian schemes. Utopias have always played around with notions that can at least be anticipated imaginatively, function as inspiration or warning. They are characterized by conflicting (affirmative and subversive) representations, express discourse and counter-discourse. Their various insights (moral, ethic, philosophical, social, political, religious) may be extremely useful / welcome in the future. For the world of tomorrow such narratives could be an important corrective.

Key words: utopian literature, generic hybridity, the relationship between fact and fiction or history / reality and utopian vision, functions of utopias, ambivalence of utopias.

[1] This essay is based on a paper held at a conference of the Faculty of Cultural Studies at the University of Dortmund in 2005. The conference topic was "The knowledge of yesterday and the world of tomorrow".

As can be seen very easily, the title contains figures of speech that all express contrast: the oxymoron "dangerous attractions" and the antithesis of "curse" or "blessing". Please, rest assured that this is no accident. The title thematizes the relationship between history and utopia. Inherent is a curious contrast. Between the poles of history and utopia there seems to prevail an interaction and a tension of a very peculiar nature, including positive and negative aspects. In the following, I should like to elaborate on this ambivalence.

English Literature abounds in examples of utopian (but also anti- and dystopian) texts. The works listed below represent developments in literary history across a period of six hundred years. The effects of the works unfold within very diverse generic conventions. The poems, essays, stories and plays demonstrate generic hybridity. They are remarkably heterogeneous:

the allegorical dream vision (e.g. William Langland's "Piers Plowman", written between 1367 and 1386);

the pastoral (e.g. Edmund Spenser's "The Shepheardes Calender", 1579 and Sir Philip Sidney's prose romance "The Arcadia", printed 1590);

the political essay (Sir Thomas More's "Utopia", published 1516);

the epic (e.g. Edmund Spenser's "The Faerie Queene", 1590/96);

the romance (e.g. William Shakespeare's "The Tempest", performed 1611);

the novel / romance / Robinsonade (e.g. Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe", published 1719);

the travelogue / satire (Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels", published 1726);

the satirical novel (Samuel Butler's "Erewhon", 1872);

the fantasy (Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland", 1865 and "Through the Looking-Glass", 1872);

the Utopian socialist fantasy (e.g. William Morris's "News From Nowhere", 1891);

science fiction (H.G. Wells's "scientific romances", e.g the social allegory "The Time Machine", 1895);

anti-utopias / dystopias (e.g. Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World", 1932; George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four", 1949);

modern drama (Edward Bond's "Lear", 1971, published 1972) [Drabble: 10, 20, 63, 68, 183, 184, 192, 242, 397, 400, 440, 480, 514, 556, 563, 585, 605–606].

I take the liberty here of neglecting the reasons for and the background of the transition from space utopias into time utopias and increasingly pessimistic prospects for the future. They have been well researched by now. Rather, I should like to offer four theses on the history-utopia correlation.

(1) Utopian texts as literary, fictive constructs owe their genesis to a special impulse from

reality / history. Yet somewhat misleadingly they are still at times regarded as escapist works that supposedly turn their back on reality or the respective historical present / context and haven't got anything to do with it. Far from it. On the contrary. To me, they rather design a counter-model to the social reality of the time. It allows the reader to still see that reality shining through the utopian scheme. The utopian social system / model of life serves the function of critiquing the socio-political reality of the time.

This has been the case with all pioneering utopias that achieved effects worldwide, beyond the boundaries of national literary history. They entered the literary canon, eventually became classics. In early modernity, Sir Thomas More condemns private property as the basis of all societal evil in his "Utopia". Centuries later Karl Marx discusses the socio-economic-political phenomenon of "ursprüngliche Akkumulation": the increasing social contrast between the poor and the rich during the transition from feudalism to early capitalism. This observation may also have triggered his notions of a classless society in which money, labour, spare time, education, the gender relationships operate in contrast to the discursive practices of his own time. In the Age of the Enlightenment, Jonathan Swift presents to us in the fourth part of "Gulliver's Travels", set in the country of the houyhnhnms, an ideal world characterized by rationality. It is a counter-model to the omnipresent historical evils and wrongs of his own present (e.g. abuse of the sciences, colonial claims to territories and power, imperial wars). In the nineteenth century, the secondary world created by Lewis Carroll in his famous fantasy, in which Alice follows the white rabbit down the rabbit hole, mirrors the primary world, the rigid Victorian culture of childhood and girlhood (the contemporary concept of femininity). Poetry has to be recited and songs have to be sung in public for reasons of social status or as a punishment. Not only does the enormous pressure on Alice of constantly observing the rules of politeness turn out to be a demanding exercise, even worse: it proves a totally inefficacious and senseless survival strategy. It simply does not pay off if you are the only one who heeds rules. And indeed, don't we all know it: good girls don't get anywhere! A remarkable message for the late Victorian Age. So the text questions the Victorian assumptions, sets of belief, norms and social practices and, instead, comes up with different suggestions [Binder]. We do not only see how life "was", but rather, how it ought to be (better or ideally). This is mimesis at its best, discourse and counter-discourse are interlinked. M.O. Grenby actually formulates: "Fantasy, we find, is not an escape from reality but, often, a rewriting of it" [Grenby: 154].

Eventually, in the twentieth century, Aldous Huxley with "Brave New World" and George Orwell with "Ninety Eighty-Four" anticipated as well as mirrored very real societal horrors.

(2) Precisely due to their ability to rise above history and a present that is felt to be unsatis-

factory, to step back from / out of history, but at the same time to return to it in other ways, to incorporate it critically in imaginary countermodels, utopias realize Aristotle's notion of the special potential of poetry (positive connotation of mimesis). Sir Philip Sidney appropriates Aristotle's premises for the emerging English national literature in his "A Defence of Poetry"(written 1579–1580) [Drabble: 146]: this potential does not reside in a direct imitation of reality, in objective statements about it, in just showing life "as it is", but rather how it could be. Poetry is visionary and therefore seen as superior to other discourses such as philosophy or history / historiography. It legitimizes itself through its creative appropriation of reality. And does not have to be historically or empirically true in order to impact readers. It achieves its effects as well by way of imagination / fiction: "Now, for the Poet, he nothing affirmes, and therefore never lyeth" [Sidney: 52].

Any absolute claim to truth and any rigid or simplistic notion of the relationship between fact / history and fiction ended anyway approximately in the eighteenth century at the latest. The mimetic conception of literature (imitation) was replaced by the expressive conception (originality, the cult of the genius of the author). Instead of absolute truth (as in the medieval period), probability or verisimilitude became the literary standards of the time (Cf. also [Binder: 80]). In their endeavour to attract the middle classes as new reading audiences to the emerging genre of the novel, the writers (often through the fiction of an editor) assured their potential readers / customers of the authenticity of their works. And the texts themselves employ very diverse authentication strategies[1].

The books, advertised as "non-fictive reports", were thus made to appear harmless or at best useful even to puritanically minded people. A feat of brilliance in literary marketing is the preface to "Robinson Crusoe". It emphasizes the seriousness and usefulness, the didactic, moral-religious, instructive and entertaining aspects of the novel ("to teach and to delight") and reassures readers:

> "The Story is told with Modesty, with Seriousness, and with a religious Application of Events to the Uses to which wise Men always apply them (viz.) to the Instruction of others by this Example, and to justify and honour the Wisdom of Providence in all the Variety of our Circumstances, let them happen how they will. *The Editor believes the thing to be a just History of Fact; neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it*: And however thinks, because all such things are dispatch'd, that the Improvement of it, as well to the Diversion, as to the Instruction of the Reader, will be the same; and as such, he thinks, without farther Compliment to the

[1] See [Nünning: 79] on the fiction of the editor and authentication strategies.

World, he does them a great Service in the Publication" (my emphasis. – *C.M. B.*) [Defoe: 1].

And yet the fascinating effects that fiction is apt to work on its readers are precisely due to its ability to appropriate reality / history, to artistically defamiliarize it. This facilitates a fresh view of reality. The texts thrive precisely on this clash between reality and literature / life and art. In Swift's "Gulliver's Travels", published only a couple of years after Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe", there is no strict demarcation line between fact and fiction (not important yet in the medieval period, for instance for romances, and only becoming significant with the rise of modern science) any more. It is shown to be irrelevant. The lines are constantly blurred in the narrative. And this is particularly intriguing and enoyable for the reader.

Literature is *not* life, this is the wonderful thing about it, but in any case it makes statements about life / reality, either overtly or indirectly. There is always an attitude towards life / reality inherent in it. Luckily enough this new literary / artistic / fictive reality does not have to be lived through by readers. They are allowed to mentally / imaginatively share the experiences, fill the lacunae according to their own life and reading experiences (Reader Response Theory). The German term for this practice of decoding and encoding is very apt: "literarische Fremderfahrung". The play with various possibilities / alternative options, the tension between the given and the possible, are the decisive factors here, the blessing of literature. In detail, literary texts, among them utopias, exert very diverse effects on readers, fulfil heterogeneous functions with different reading audiences at different times: cognitive (literature as a source of knowledge, a help to understand reality), normative (literature conveys values and norms of judgment and behaviour), social (literature experiments, impacts social behaviour), humanizing (literature as an instrument of orientation, creating a reality of its own).

(3) A decisive issue in or about many utopian texts is the question of the practicability / implementation / historical realization of the ideals envisaged. Often the impossibility of historical realization is already inscribed or at least implied in the narrative structures and strategies. One example is the sixth book of the allegorical epic "The Faerie Queene". It elaborates on the virtue of courtesy. Spenser's concept sees courtesy as the individual's behaviour according to the norms (moral / ethic / religious / political / social) of the time (microcosm). But at the level of society, the national state (macrocosm), in the political sense, it is conceived of as a form of social justice. This ideal quality results from a well-balanced relationship between all social classes. The inherent ideology suggests to respect social differences, to maintain the existing social system at large [Bimberg 1989: 1, 37; Bimberg 2009: 45].

"Spenser emphasizes the contrast. He juxtaposes his ideal representations with examples taken from the rough social reality of his time. The pastoral idyll of Book VI for example is destroyed by the invasion of the robbing and slave-trading brigants. The fact that Spenser shows not only positive and harmonious phenomena, but simultaneously provides his readers with contrasts existing in social reality as well, reveals him as a writer fully capable of expressing diverse views and also social critique.

In all this Spenser does not plead the case for unrestricted human liberty. His critical remarks and suggestions for alteration, correction and improvement do not encroach upon the foundation of the existing political, economic and social conditions. As to such fundamental issues as the political rule of the country, the state religion or foreign politics he largely agrees with the opinions shared and the course of action taken by the ruling classes in England then, probably not out of hypocrisy, but due to his own insights, views and patriotic convictions from whose literary presentation, however, he was hoping to gain success and preferment. His ideal of man is restricted in its attainability to those who actually participated in the rule of England and Ireland, and his ideal of society largely justifies the prevailing conditions and sanctions the historical status quo. The characteristic contrast often emphasized by Spenser between his ideal notions and socio-political reality (which he wishes to reduce through the education towards virtuousness) and the fact that he desires no significant changes nonetheless, extends through the whole epic. The whole "Faerie Queene" thus reveals considerable contradictions and tensions.

To what extent it dawned upon the poet (half a century before the English Revolution) that the social contrasts could no longer be concealed, reconciled or smoothed over and would finally deprive his ideal projections of their last chance for practical realization, cannot be said with certainty. Spenser may have been convinced of the power of poetry, yet he does not give in to a euphoric delusion about the ethic, moral or didactic potential of effectiveness of his epic for changing the world for the better: Book VI, dedicated to the virtue of Courtesy, culminates dramatically in the inexorable early-capitalist reality violently forcing its entry into the idyll of the shepherds' contemplative life to which the Knight of Courtesy had retreated temporarily. The climax in Meliboe's statement that "each hath his fortune in his breast" (*FQ*, Book VI, Canto IX, stanza 29, line 9) is followed by the murder of the shepherd. Obviously man was not ready and prepared yet to rise completely above 'God-given' circumstances. The early-capitalist development swept over those people who meant to find peace, harmony and security by keeping aloof from it" [Bimberg 2009: 47–48].

The narrative structure of the "Utopia" (multiperspectivity in the form of a dialogue / a debate) likewise suggests that historical realization is regarded as rather unlikely. A little less than a century later William Shakespeare, in the romance "The Tempest", allows the mariners shipwrecked on the island (whose concrete geographical position is still disputed in scholarship and criticism) to ridicule the utopian vision of

rule. How could it be that in a commonweal all people should be equal, but one should be king over the others? A king needs subjects after all. Yet more: half a century later, after the Restoration, John Dryden confirms this message in his creative adaptation of Shakespeare's play. In Dryden's royalist rendition Gonzalo's social utopia is partly parodied and turned into its opposite: the mariners divide political rule over the island amongst themselves almost as monarchs do. They fight each other and reconcile each other over this [Bimberg 1991: 128–29] (cf. also [Bimberg 1995: 44–45]).

Remarkably enough Jonathan Swift reserves his ideal world of rational behaviour to that of (the) horses. In their world there is no place for Gulliver who is regarded as a detestable yahoo. He is expelled from the paradise of reason. Throughout the books, travels and adventures the reasonable nature of mankind is questioned time and again. Swift demonstrates in an almost painful way that the world is not ruled by reason at all, nor can it be mastered rationally. Man is *not* able to lift himself above his (beastlike / animalistic) instincts. England and its rulers are not fashioned as ideal models of enlightened absolutism, but are unmasked in all their absurdity, aggressivity, greed and thirst for power. They are only made to appear superior at first – by comparison to other rulers (a case of othering).

In fact, Gulliver's intercultural encounters with others people(s), countries and states take a very asymmetrical course.

> "[W]hat is the use of all his active, eager and open approaches to other people, countries and cultures, to foreign tongues, communication, ideas and behaviour? In spite of all his linguistic proficiency and intercultural competencies gained in the regions he has visited during all his journeys, he ends up unfit to live in human company upon return to his native country. This is not a very optimistic message" [Binder: 184].

So, when Gulliver returns he is completely disillusioned. The insight into the relativity of human values, the loss of any feelings of pride in his native country, the disillusionment about absurd sciences that are remote from people's needs and do not contribute anything to improve the fortunes of mankind or offer solutions to pressing concerns, drive him almost insane. He is an outcast among his own people and even his family, becomes a misanthropist, and gets on better with horses than humans.

In Edward Bond's drama "Lear" the playwright makes three regimes (those of Lear, his daughters Bodice and Fontanelle, and that of the guerilla leader, his daughter Cordelia) replace each other within three acts. Had Lear first erected a wall for the protection of his people against foreign / external enemies, he is soon taking action against his own people in order to maintain his system. At the end he is shot, caught in the attempt to pull the wall down. Associations with 20th-century history are only too obvious.

(4) Very rarely has a utopian text ever presented an immediate or direct threat to society, though it may not have been altogether undangerous for some writers to express certain ideas that were unpopular for rulers at the time. However, to me another sort of danger appears much more ghastly: the attempt to reverse the process of the genesis of utopias from history and to transfer utopian models into history. More precisely, it is the danger of a wrong realization of an ideal or of a wrongly understood, wrongly interpreted societal model, one whose implementation is justified with dubious or false reasons.

Imaginatively I gladly followed Alice down the rabbit hole. But honestly, would you have wanted to live in Sir Thomas More's Utopia? At least as far as discussions with the current generation of students go, the prospect is not too enticing: travel permits, uniform-like dresses, cities that look completely identical. Why travel to another place at all if it just looks the same as the one you live in? The prospect of a future historical realization makes many people shudder. And yet history knows enough concrete examples of dubious realizations. What most young Westerners today do not want to experience in reality, has been lived through by lots of older Eastern Europeans. For them this was not "*literarische Fremd*erfahrung", but a very real, i.e. lived, experience. Depending on their political convictions it may have been a little paradise on earth; a golden cage; something that was so normal that it did not bother them; a slightly annoying, but still tolerable affair; a nuisance or a painful heteronomy respectively. This may be as it is – whenever students who are a third my age, good-humouredly (but also rather unthinkingly) assure me these days that "Nineteen Eighty Four" is just a fairy-tale, I start a little.

Conclusion

Utopian dreams may well turn into nightmares when becoming reality / history. Maybe the true meaning of "utopia" / "eutopia" (no place / good place) [Cuddon: 1016] is actually: too good to be(come) true? It is one thing to embrace utopian ideals, but another to have to live them (if they have remained positive qualities at all and not been perverted). It is not nice at all to be locked in in a utopia that has turned to stone, become an iron (and not a golden) cage. Utopias are great as long as people are not forced to live them involuntarily, can choose for themselves in which societal system to live or contribute to shape the one they live in.

Utopian literature or their authors cannot be blamed for the negative consequences, the curse implied in this ambivalence. It is rather a matter of the correlation between history and utopia. What with utopias deriving originally from history, there is principally always a danger inherent in their reversed transfer to reality / history, the chance for abuse, manipulation, corruption and perversion. This does not lessen the value, the positive functions of utopian ideals. Both the blessing and the curse of utopias result from the

clash between reality and ideal. The attractive blessing consists in the possibility, the vision, the nice alternative, but the dangerous curse in the perversion of the ideals. We are dealing here with a double-edged, very ambivalent phenomenon: with "dangerous attractions".

So what do utopias (and anti-utopias and dystopias) as narrative discourses have to offer in the future? Which role are they going to play? Utopias have always thematized notions that can be anticipated imaginatively, function as inspiration or warning. They are characterized by conflicting (affirmative and subversive) representations, express discourse and counter-discourse. I do not see the utopian, antiutopian or dystopian energy or potential as spent yet. Perhaps we need such texts more than ever before? As a mirror or as a distorted picture / a travesty? The (moral / ethic / philosophical / social / political / religious) insights cannot possibly age / really become obsolete. For the world of tomorrow such narratives could be an important corrective. It will be thrilling to watch further developments of this "ideology of form".

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*All the publications under the name 'Bimberg' are titles of the author of this essay.

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