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## ***Gulfs of Time, Ties with the Past: Uchronia Re-conceptualised***

But just then from some tower high up in the air came the sound of silvery chimes playing a sweet clear tune, that sounded to my unaccustomed ears like the song of the first blackbird in the spring, and called a rush of memories to my mind, some of bad times, some of good, but all sweetened now into mere pleasure.

William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 1890

### I. The Time of Uchronia.

Since the time when utopian writers have engaged in the challenge of envisioning a *time*, rather than a *place*, which could host their speculations about desirable destinies or apocalyptic dooms for mankind, writing uchronias has functioned as a powerful mode of foretelling, or speculating on, the future of humankind. In the narration of events which would radically modify the course of history, strong emphasis is laid on great gulfs or on deep ties between the future world and the past. Writers of uchronias foresee the future by inspecting history and memory of the past, because speculating on transformations of the social structures requires a historical perspective.

Conceptually, envisioning the course of history locates uchronia in-between utopia and science fiction. Uchronia is a temporal utopia, it involves a time voyage and the action develops in a temporal dimension, while space remains the same. The metamorphosis of ‘another place’ into ‘another time’ in Sébastien Mercier’s *L’an 2440* (1771) marks a radical reformulation of utopia as a literary genre and, as Raymond Trousson perceptively points out, the genesis of uchronia “constitue dans l’histoire de l’utopie un véritable

tournant copernicien”<sup>1</sup>. Clearly enough, Mercier’s emphasis on time responds to a substantial change in the episteme: as Reinhart Koselleck makes clear, since the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the development of history has no longer been envisaged *in* time, but *through* time and *because of* time<sup>2</sup>.

The introduction of historicized time, which transforms classical utopia into uchronia, testifies to a wider philosophical enquiry where the term “uchronie”, which first appeared in the *Revue philosophique et religieuse* in 1857, was semantically moulded on “utopia” by philosopher Charles Renouvier. While utopia is located in an imaginary place, uchronia involves a radical change of time: the temporal dimension becomes central, because the writer’s main concern is about the sense of history and human development. The full title of Renouvier’s work, *Uchronie (Utopie dans l’Histoire), Esquisse historique apocryphe du développement de la civilisation européenne tel qu’il n’a pas été, tel qu’il aurait pu être*<sup>3</sup>, published in Paris in 1876, clearly refers to a prospective historical development of European civilization, a development which has not been but could have been.

Terminology poses problems, since uchronia refers to a literary genre as well as to a time concept. More precisely, the term can designate metamorphosed 19<sup>th</sup>-century utopias which bear witness to the writers’ growing awareness that social structures evolve through time, but it also defines a philosophical concept that revolves around human desire to fathom a course of history different from the actual one. As Hinrich Hudde and Peter Kuon specify,

Nous appelons *uchronies* les utopias situées dans l’avenir, donc les oeuvres dans la lignée de *L’An 2440* – malgré certains désavantages de ce terme calqué sur celui d’utopie: l’inventeur du mot, Charles Renouvier, décrit, dans son *Uchronie* (1876) non pas l’avenir, mais une marche différente de l’histoire.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Trousson, “Utopie, histoire, progrès. *L’an 2440* de Sébastien Mercier”, publié par l’Académie Royale de Langue et Littérature Française, Bruxelles, communication du 13 novembre 1982, p. 279.

<sup>2</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, “‘Neuzeit’ – Zur Semantik moderner Bewegungsbegriffe”, in Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft – Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), p. 321.

<sup>3</sup> Republished as Charles Renouvier, *Uchronie (L’Utopie dans l’histoire)* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).

Cependant, la notion d'uchronie "s'est chargée d'avenir" et s'emploie de plus en plus fréquemment<sup>4</sup>.

The different course of history will multiply into parallel histories that develop from the arborescent universe of science fiction, where each world is like a tree branch grown as one of manifold possible ramifications. As Pierre Versins lucidly visualises, "Le monde y est comme un arbre touffu dont chaque branche est une Histoire, différente de toutes les autres, dont la différence réside dans le fait qu'elle a quitté, à la suite de l'altération d'un événement souvent minime, le tronc principal de l'Histoire"<sup>5</sup>.

The choice of a corpus that includes works habitually referred to as utopias, dystopias, and ambiguous utopias, requires methodological specifications. The term uchronia will be employed not only to define utopias that are set in another time but also, and more importantly, for utopias which unfold speculations about time. Thus, while futuristic novels or novels of anticipation may well be included in the survey, the focal point of the enquiry is the notion of time from an epistemological perspective.

As Hinrich Hudde remarks, while examining *L'An 2440* as a model for the novel of anticipation, "cette nouvelle forme de l'uchronie constitue la variante la plus importante, le renouvellement décisif du schéma inventé par Thomas More; l'uchronie devient, au XIX<sup>e</sup> et au XX<sup>e</sup> siècles, le sous-genre favori de l'utopie; c'est sous cette forme que se présente l'anti-utopie dans le sens moderne"<sup>6</sup>. Focusing on the uchronic aspect of utopia thus means to assess the functions and purposes of theories, conjectures, or sustained

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<sup>4</sup> Hinrich Hudde and Peter Kuon, "Utopie – Uchronie – et après: Une réévaluation de l'utopie des Lumières", in *De l'Utopie à l'Uchronie. Formes, Significations, Fonctions*, édité par Hinrich Hudde et Peter Kuon (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988), pp. 9-17: 10.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Versins, *Encyclopédie de l'Utopie, des Voyages extraordinaires et de la Science-Fiction* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 1972), p. 908. While science fiction writers speculate on the scientific and technological aspects of the temporal voyage, creators of uchronia exploit time shifts for envisioning the evolution of social structures through time.

<sup>6</sup> Hinrich Hudde, "L'influence de Mercier sur l'évolution du roman d'anticipation", in *De l'Utopie à l'Uchronie. Formes, Significations, Fonctions*, édité par Hinrich Hudde et Peter Kuon (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988), p. 110.

speculations about time in fictional writings that conjure up an alternative world. *After London* (1885) by Richard Jefferies, *A Crystal Age* (1887) by William Hudson, *News from Nowhere* (1890) by William Morris, *Swastika Night* (1937) by Katharine Burdekin, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) by George Orwell testify to the radical erasure of history, if uchronia portrays dreadful scenarios, or to the disquieting remembrance of the past, if uchronia forebodes a better future. In societies dominated by totalitarian regimes the retrieval of a buried cultural heritage discloses to the dissidents the width of their cultural blank. Moreover, the discovery of the forgery of memory reveals how the purported construction of a world from which the faults of the past have been removed – the achievement of uchronia – is the appalling, powerful ideology on which the regime maintains its power. On the other hand, in ideal worlds of the future the act of bearing witness to historical memory is dangerously ambivalent: mediators of memory such as books, commemorations and collective rites that revitalise the ties with the past disclose the vulnerability of all efforts made to fathom a radically new beginning of human history.

Uchronia always begins with the same question: how would History be if this or that event occurred or had occurred? It begins questioning history conceived as a coherent paradigm that explains human actions from generation to generation and then goes on to give voice to the human will to control and modify the course of events. More importantly, uchronia disentangles thought from official History and makes it possible to envisage a different history, *another* history of History.

Envisioning future history necessarily means dealing with the past, that is with the memory of how the world was before the historical event that marked a new beginning of history. Writers of uchronia challenge time by denying its univocity and by establishing a strong interaction with history. They do not modify a number of events due to develop in a long time span but rather focus on a widely known, easily recognisable historical period; they manipulate a historical ‘knot’, such as the Trafalgar Square massacre in *News from Nowhere* (1890) by William Morris or the role of the Germans during the II World War in *Swastika Night* (1937) by Katherine Burdekin, and imagine possible outcomes in a renewed historical framework. Uchronia transforms linear, univocal time into historical knots generated by a break of the causal chain, namely a historical accident witnessed by the traveller.

Uchronia thus creates a temporal alteration, a fissure in the plot of Time which makes it possible to change History and to explain what that change has provoked. Thus, uchronia is neither a temporal paradox, which is linked to a cyclical conception of time, nor a parallel universe, which explores simultaneous historical realities. The narrative pattern of uchronia presupposes that History, modified by the writer, remains History, identifiable as a paradigm of causes, purposes and odds, represented in a fictional scheme and projected forward, towards a possible future.

Not only does uchronia challenge time by exploiting the notion of historical knot, but it also competes with history by anticipating, and minutely describing, the future. Indeed, past and future are clearly distinguished through a narration of the time which marks the beginning of a new history. Such emphasis on the commencement reveals how the demiurgic creation of a new world must be legitimated through a painstaking account of its foundation.

Uchronia, founded on a temporal gulf created by a crucial event, intersects historical knowledge of the human past and fictional representation of the future; it develops as the union of utopia, history and fiction. Writers who depict a dreadful world of the future – a negative uchronia – will conjure up a far more compelling scenario by emphasising the erasure of the cultural past and the lack of historical roots. Conversely, the project of a better world-to-be will sound more arresting if it is founded on indisputable evidence of a previous, decayed civilization that has been disposed of.

If the temporal journeys backwards and forwards stimulate the writer's speculative faculties, they also engender instability. Indeed, the reshaping of historical and cultural memory is a troublesome process. In negative uchronias tampering with historical facts is constitutive of the status quo and memory is haunting in its fictional vestures and endless manipulations. Memory is a burden also for writers who, while envisaging a new beginning for humankind, want to demonstrate why the future will be better than the past.

## II. Victorian Uchronias: between Apocalypse and Nostalgia.

Victorian uchronias share depictions of the future characterised by an oscillation between sustained endeavours to introduce a dialectic sense of

History and nostalgia of the past. Social structures are doomed to corruption and death, and a new beginning depends on an apocalyptic event, that may be both a class revolution, as in Morris's *News from Nowhere*, or a natural catastrophe, like in Jefferies' *After London*. However, reminders of earlier stages of society or of previous ages somehow hinder the utopian writers' will to make a *tabula rasa* of the past. Their speculations about the future reveal profound ambiguities, as they appear to be neither persuasively sustained by a revivalist attitude, nor solidly founded on a dialectical view of historical processes.

While describing how society fell into barbarism, the cities collapsed and communication came to an end, the narrator in *After London* acts like a historian who surveys and tries to interpret confused, divergent, incoherent sources. The will to preserve cultural memory and make sense of it is precisely what differentiates the knight Felix Aquila from the other young men who live in a post-apocalyptic, neo-medieval world:

Besides the parchments [...] there were three books, much worn and decayed, which had been preserved [...]. One was an abridged history of Rome, the other a similar account of English history, the third a primer of science or knowledge [...]. Exposed for years in decaying houses, rain and mildew had spotted and stained their pages; the covers had rotted away these hundred years, [...] many of the pages were quite gone, and others torn by careless handling. [...] Felix had, as it were, reconstructed much of the knowledge which was the common (and therefore unvalued) possession of all when they were printed<sup>7</sup>.

The strong determination to know the past and to build up his own future gives Aquila the strength to begin his quest and to embark on a journey towards the unknown which symbolises a ritual passage from the rejection of amnesia to the construction of cultural identity. While portraying the future, uchronias warn against the danger that history and cultural memory can be swallowed by the eternal time flux or transmitted to posterity deprived of the hermeneutic tools necessary to make sense of them.

Jefferies, albeit pessimistic about mankind's possibility to start a new history, believes in the individual faculty of choice and self-determination.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Jefferies, *After London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 46-47.

Hudson, instead, focuses on the failure of personal identity, overwhelmed by the weight of a pervasive collective identity. The post-Victorian, Arcadian communitarian society discovered by Smith entraps him in an incomprehensible system of human relationships, from which sexuality has been radically removed, and plunges him into an oscillating state of heightened mnemonic faculties and obnubilation that finally annihilates him.

For the first time I experienced within myself that miraculous power the mind possesses of reproducing [...] the events, feelings, and thoughts of long years – an experience which sometimes comes to a person suddenly confronted with death [...]. A thousand memories and a thousand thoughts were stirring in me: I was conscious now, as I had not been before, of the past and the present, and these two existed in my mind, yet separated by a great gulf of time – a blank and a nothingness which yet oppressed me with its horrible vastness. How aimless and solitary, how awful my position seemed! It was like that of one beneath whose feet the world suddenly crumbles to dust and ashes, and is scattered throughout the illimitable void, while he survives, blown to some far planet whose strange aspect, however beautiful, fills him with an undefinable terror. [...] my agitation, the strugglings of my soul to recover that lost life, were like the vain wingbeats of some woodland birds blown away a thousand miles over the sea, into which it must at last sink down and perish<sup>8</sup>.

Historical continuity is seriously jeopardised in Hudson's *A Crystal Age*, where the past has turned into an immense cultural blank. The paralysed pseudo-Arcadian world hides the fear that human beings will ultimately fail to reshape social structures, because they are unable to preserve history. No reconciliation is thus possible between past and future: the excess of memory produces a short circuit and transforms Smith's critical awareness of history into an obsessive psychic state which ends up in entropy and autism. The agonistic relationship between memory and forgetfulness in uchronias is expressed through interferences of the past that are both disturbing and therapeutic: recollections arouse fearful presences to be exorcised; nonetheless, oblivion is constantly fought against by means of reminders which act as warnings against the recurrence of past errors.

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<sup>8</sup> William Henry Hudson, *A Crystal Age* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), pp. 190-191.

In *News from Nowhere* the inhabitants of socialist England bear witness to history by performing collective commemorative ceremonies. Whether they are effective as mediators of memory is a question that clearly emerges from Old Hammond's reply to William Guest who asks questions about extant traces of Victorian slums:

“Not an inch,” said he; “but some memory of it abides with us, and I am glad of it. Once a year, on May-day, we hold a solemn feast in those easterly communes of London to commemorate The Clearing of Misery, as it is called. On that day we have music and dancing, and merry games and happy feasting on the site of some of the worst of the old slums, the traditional memory of which we have kept. On that occasion the custom is for the prettiest girls to sing some of the old revolutionary songs [...] on the very spots where those terrible crimes of class-murder were committed day by day for so many years. [...] it is a curious and touching sight to see some beautiful girl, daintily clad, and crowned with flowers from the neighbouring meadows [...] – to hear the terrible words of threatening and lamentation coming from her sweet and beautiful lips, and she unconscious of their real meaning: to hear her, for instance, singing Hood's *Song of the Shirt*, and to think that all the time she does not understand what it is all about – a tragedy grown inconceivable to her and her listeners.”<sup>9</sup>

The girl is like a *persona* who re-enacts the unbearable life conditions of the lower classes in the Victorian age by singing a song of sorrow and dejection; Hammond's point is that the contrast between the dramatic content of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century song and the beautiful appearance of the young woman who does not grasp its meaning serves the purpose of showing how pleasurable life has become. Nevertheless, collective rites of memory raise the complex issue of the burden of historicism. An excess of history ends up hindering the construction of radically new social structures as well as the development of collectivity, crystallised and unable to transform itself.

Not only did Morris realise that individual recollections, collective memory and oblivion are interconnected, but he was also keenly aware of the precarious balance between the “demand” for a collective past and the

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<sup>9</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. by Krishan Kumar (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 69.



importance of foreseeing a future unencumbered by a past that paralyses the development of society. The unsolved oscillation between individual and collective modes of remembrance and forgetfulness clearly emerges in Hammond's speech. He explains that the new form of art or work-pleasure is not founded exclusively on the transmission of knowledge about the arts and crafts but rather develops from an instinctive craving for beauty awakened in men's minds<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, when he declares that "Yes, I am much tied to the past, my past, you understand"<sup>11</sup>, he openly acknowledges that material culture, such as the pieces of furniture made by his own father and belonging to a time earlier than his childhood, reminds him of the days of revolution, the days of a new beginning.

However, in spite of Morris's emphasis on a radical re-shaping of culture and society, any traveller to his future England could not refrain from wondering whether the journey has been made forwards, towards a new century, or rather backwards, towards the Middle Ages blended with the mythical hues of the Golden Age.

### III. Uchronia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Memory as Responsibility.

Negative uchronias which appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century stress a fierce antagonism between oblivion, exploited by totalitarian regimes, and the accidental resurfacing of sunk reminiscences or the deliberate un-digging of remnants of the past. Remembrance is the weapon through which the dissidents counterattack the status quo. A comparison between *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Swastika Night* reveals a significant similarity in the description of the moment when the protagonist becomes fully aware of the erasure of historical memory. Re-tracing it, talking about how the world was, imperfect as it was, heightens the revulsion for what the world has become and fosters rebellion.

Do you realize that the past, starting from yesterday, has been actually abolished? If it survives anywhere, it's in a few solid objects with no words attached to them [...]. Already we know almost literally nothing about the Revolution and the years

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

before the Revolution. Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And that process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped<sup>12</sup>.

While speaking to Julia, Winston performs a powerful act of historical consciousness by pronouncing, word by word, all that has been violently removed by the regime. Similarly, recollections and reconstructions of pre-Nazi culture disclosed by the German Knight von Hess strike Alfred as a shocking but revitalizing epiphany in *Swastika Night*:

[...] they wanted to forget that there had been, in Europe, any other civilisation at all. [...] In the heart of the pride lurked a fear, not of anything physical, but of Memory itself. This fear gradually grew into a kind of hysteria [...]. This fear of Memory reached its height with him [von Wied], and he gave us the logical and Teutonic remedy, destruction. All history, all psychology, all philosophy, all art except music, all medical knowledge except the purely anatomical and physical – every book and picture and statue that could remind Germans of old time must be destroyed. A huge gulf was to be made which no one could ever cross again<sup>13</sup>.

The re-appropriation of cultural memory undermines the power of totalitarianism, because it reveals that authorised official memory is an ideological palimpsest made of fabricated historical events and violently effaced strata of cultural memory. As Burdekin makes clear, the censored, revised, amended history spread by the regime as an account of the achievement of positive uchronia testifies, in fact, to the most appalling realisation of negative uchronia.

You can't cut all culture off at the root and expect it to go on flowering at the top. [...] one culture seems to grow out of another, one will go rotten, and another spring upon its grave, with a bit of the old one, like manure you see [...]. Now we

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<sup>12</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London and Toronto: Secker & Warburg, 1949), p. 156.

<sup>13</sup> Katharine Burdekin, *Swastika Night* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), pp. 78-79. Henceforward page numbers will be indicated between parentheses in the text.

have nothing in the ground. [...] Now we have nothing except the memory, in our music, of our own [culture]. But we killed even part of our own, our literature – that is all gone; we have nothing but the Hitler Bible and the legends, and what we call the history of Germany. [...] We're not exactly barbarians, we have technical skill and knowledge, [...] we do not starve. [...] We can create nothing, we can invent nothing – we have no use for creation, we do not need to invent. We are Germans. We are holy. We are perfect, and we are dead. (pp. 120-121)

The acts of safeguarding culture and of transmitting it as a legacy which the world-to-be will assimilate while building up its own cultural system is strictly connected with the capacity to make sense of the past. In *Swastika Night* Burdekin makes clear how the wide gulf of historical and cultural memory can be bridged by going on defending the only repository of history left, the secret book, through a net of persons who themselves have been invested with knowledge and are willing to act as mediators of memory from generation to generation.

Writing about history involves a process of construction because, as Jacques Le Goff argues, “Il n’y a pas de réalité historique toute faite, et qui se livrerait d’elle-même à l’historien”<sup>14</sup>. Historical construction becomes even more complex when it is the future to be envisioned, because the writer needs solid knowledge of the past and powerful speculative faculties. Nevertheless, cultural memory can be a huge barrier which the utopian writer strives to overcome while envisaging the initiation of a new history. The act of remembering in uchronia can activate a self-empowering as well as a self-invalidating drive. Uchronia, regarded both as a monumental trial to history and as a knowledge of the origins, finds its *raison d’être* in a gigantic dual challenge: to deliver man from the prison of a silent past, to let the future speak.

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Le Goff, “L’histoire nouvelle”, in *La nouvelle histoire*, sous la direction de Jacques Le Goff et Roger Chartier, Jacques Revel (Paris: CEPL, 1978), p. 218.