

## **Vita Fortunati**

University of Bologna

### **Collective Memory and Identity in Utopia: the founding myth of its origin**

#### I.

The project of a united Europe can but take into account utopia and utopianism, because it demands a projective capability which does not aim at homogeneity and global levelling but at the preservation of local cultural differences. As the historian Le Goff has highlighted<sup>1</sup>, Europe is not only a geographical and political entity, but a mental attitude. In order to pursue this project we need to have a utopian tension: the new European utopia involves not only a deep enquiry into our differences, but also the construction of a value system shared by different European countries. In order to build up a new Europe we need to unveil false myths and dangerous ideologies, and especially to think again of our European roots. A monolithic and univocal conception of Europe can be deconstructed only by stressing the constant process of metamorphosis of its roots. A new collective European memory can be built up through the awareness that, even though bearing witness to a past of contesting memories and traditions<sup>2</sup>, both individuals and groups of people believe in the possibility of constructing a common basis of shared values. In this crucial historical moment Europe, due to the multiplicity of traditions and variety of cultural experiences, can challenge the threat of homologation of a single model coming from overseas.

In a recent study the Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari has emphasised that the strength of Europe is in its pluralism. In the tormented heart of Europe not only do Athens and Jerusalem coexist, but also Rome, Byzantium and

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *L'Europa medievale e il mondo moderno* (Roma: Laterza, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> See Helmut Peitsch, Charles Burdett and Claire Gorrara (eds), *European Memories of the Second World War* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999).

Moscow. Not only the North of protestant Europe, but also the catholic Mediterranean. Europe has grown and developed by successive layers, like geological strata, and it is still *in fieri*: it is a lively laboratory for new experiments and projects<sup>3</sup>.

European roots are hybrid, Europe is born from cross-fertilizations and is now the outcome of a métissage. The hybridisation of Europe is already present in the myth of its origin. The daughter of Agenor came from Egypt and from there she was raped by Zeus who, disguised like a bull, led her to Crete. It is only then that she takes her fatal name: Europe. An exile, a foreigner compelled to live in the western world, her name will now be Europe: Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia.

My paper falls into two parts: in the first one I want to stress the importance of cultural memory in the humanities, because such a research field has broken the boundaries of traditional disciplines fostering interdisciplinary and comparative studies. In the second part I would like to relate some key concepts of cultural memory to utopian studies.

## II.

A passage from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy. Untimely Meditations* (1873-76) encloses crucial issues regarding cultural memory:

Imagine the most extreme example, a person who did not possess the power of forgetting at all, who would be condemned to see everywhere a coming into being. Such a person no longer believes in his own being, no longer believes in himself, sees everything in moving points flowing out of each other, and loses himself in this stream of becoming. [...] Forgetting belongs to all action, just as both light and darkness belong in the life of all organic things. A person who wanted to feel utterly and only historically would be like someone who was forced to abstain from sleep, or like the beast that is to continue its life only from rumination to constantly repeated rumination. For this reason, it is possible to live almost without remembering, indeed, to live happily, as the beast demonstrates; however, it is generally completely impossible to live without forgetting. Or, to explain myself more clearly concerning my thesis: *There is a degree of insomnia,*

---

<sup>3</sup> Massimo Cacciari, *Geofilosofia dell'Europa* (Milano: Adelphi, 2003).

*of rumination, of the historical sense, through which living comes to harm and finally is destroyed, whether it is a person or a people or a culture*<sup>4</sup>.

Pierre Nora, in his study on *Les Lieux de mémoire*<sup>5</sup>, provokes the reader by saying that we talk so much about memory only because it no longer exists. This paradoxical phrase can be interpreted in various ways. Recent sociology studies<sup>6</sup> have shown how the idea of a memory related to the formation of the state-nation has disappeared. Consequently the old relationship between memory and nation must be re-discussed and renegotiated. The state-nation collapses, and so does the notion of memory as a form of group identity. On the other hand, it is the actual crisis of this value which has led to a deep re-discussion about the very meaning of memory itself. It is by no mere coincidence that this flourishing of studies about memory has gone alongside certain important historical events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the decline of ideologies and the collapse of the USSR, the re-emergence of heavy historical responsibilities and the surge of issues related to post-colonialism.

Aleida Assmann's studies on cultural memory have effectively shown that memory is an interdisciplinary object<sup>7</sup>. More importantly, her enquiry starts from literature and then extends to other disciplines, like history, the visual arts, photography, philosophy, anthropology and even the "hard" sciences. Her methodology proves that literature has become an important source for many disciplines which have dealt with the theme of memory. History and anthropology, for instance, have had a very complex relationship with memory. Indeed, the canonical distinction between history as a scientific, rational account of facts, and memory as a spontaneous, non-meditated and subjective

---

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History* (1873), <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/history.htm>. See also *The Use and Abuse of History*, translated by Adrian Collins, with an introduction by Julius Kraft, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> (Paris: Gallimard, 1997, first published 1984).

<sup>6</sup> See Jeffrey Olick, *States of Memory. Continuities, Conflicts and Transformations in National Retrospection* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München: Beck, 1999); *Ricordare: forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002).

recording of facts applied is no longer sustainable. Furthermore, history has always been considered as the real repository of ‘memory’, as a discipline with a solid statute. In the same way, anthropology, which from the very beginning has worked mainly with oral sources, with the explosion of post-colonial problems, has been obliged to deal with other traces, the places of memory, the archives, the documents and life histories, that is, with all the material neglected for so long. These anthropological issues are thoroughly addressed in works such as *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity and Consciousness in South Africa*<sup>8</sup> by Jean and John Comaroff, two American scholars on African cultures who work on the colonial archives and study biographies and life histories, oral and written, as historical and anthropological documents.

The key concept emerging from the recent cultural studies on memory is that memory is a dynamic process, it is reconstructed by means of a continuous critical look at the present. Walter Benjamin underlines the dangers of a memory which, by too much extending towards the past, crystallises it and mythicises it. “To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l’ordre du jour* – and that day is Judgement Day”<sup>9</sup>.

The memory-power nexus is important for understanding how memory has been, over the centuries, subject to manipulation and exploitation by the hegemonic state. In *Luoghi e corpi. Antropologia dello spazio, del tempo e del potere*<sup>10</sup> Francesco Remotti points out how, in order to understand the processes of identity formations of a collectivity or of a nation, it is necessary to investigate the relationship between “what disappears”, “what remains” and “what re-emerges”. Indeed, only through a careful analysis of the processes which select and filter the past can we highlight the dialectics among these three categories and avoid the dangers of an ideological manipulation of memory. As the previous quotation from Nietzsche clearly

---

<sup>8</sup> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 256.

<sup>10</sup> (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1993), pp. 76-77.

shows, man must forget in order to be able to live, but the relationship and the dialectics between memory and forgetting are never “given” and never linear. To understand who we are, we need to distance ourselves from those who came before us, but we also need to establish a certain continuity. The dialectics between continuity and discontinuity in relation to our past must always be renegotiated. Starting from Halbwachs’ studies on the collective memory<sup>11</sup>, nowadays it is important to stress the social interaction which takes place during the act of remembering, because this interactive act prevents fixing and crystallising memory. Collective memory is then no longer a monolithic idea, it is not a substantial entity but implies a more fluid concept: we need to grasp the dynamic aspects of remembering, that is its mnemonic practices.

What is required, then, is a continuous and alert critical attention to the dangerous processes of revision and rewriting of history, processes which we have unfortunately witnessed over recent years. Re-studying our past means not just reconsidering the most controversial moments of European cultural history, which have been deliberately cancelled, silenced or censured, but also questioning once again dangerous interpretative stereotypes in which certain events have been embedded. In this respect, scholars of 20<sup>th</sup>-century dystopias have pointed out how totalitarian regimes are represented by utopian writers as founded on strategies of erasure of memory and the historical past<sup>12</sup>.

This critical attitude towards memory becomes central today since the “living memory” faces a crisis: the eye witnesses of the biggest tragedies of the last century are disappearing and the process of forgetting or mystifying the memory seems dangerously inevitable. From this point of view, Assman’s book is extremely important because it studies the various *mediators of memory* which include not only literature, but also cinema, photography, television and museums. Such mediators play a fundamental, though controversial role, also in utopia, where rites of commemoration and

---

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la memoire* (Paris: Alcan, 1925); *On Collective Memory*, edited, translated, and with an introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> In *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien: enquête sur le siècle* (Paris: R. Laffont, 2000), Tzvetan Todorov criticises the dangers of an obsessive cult and reverence of memory.

monuments feature as signs of the past the utopian writers endeavour to cancel.

Recent studies on memory have revealed the conflicting relationship which there has always been between memory as storage and archive, that is *ars*, art, mnemo-technics, and memory as a subjective and individual act, as *vis*. We can witness how fertile the dialogue between studies on memory and on utopia has been by stressing not only the importance of memory as a repository of experience and values but also as a critical tool for revising the past. Utopian scholars such as Vincent Geoghegan<sup>13</sup>, Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini<sup>14</sup> have reworked on Bloch's thought and expounded the concept of 'emancipatory memory' not as a simple act of recollection but as *anamnesis*, that is recognition, *anagnoris*. The act of *anagnoris* involves judgement and produces knowledge. Bloch's fertile idea is that between the past and the present there is not a relationship of similarity, because the subject must be able to perceive the changes in order to assume a critical stance. Only in this way can memory become an active force and acquire such an emancipatory value. This line of thought also implies the rethinking of the notion of nostalgia in a critical perspective: nostalgia, that is the sense of yearning for something that no longer exist is overcome by means of a critical assessment which implies the recognition of the potentialities which have not been fulfilled in the past<sup>15</sup>. The impetus for change is then aroused both by the suffering for what has not been achieved and by the critique of the past. What emerges from the notion of critical nostalgia is that memory cannot be separated from feeling, because the subject necessarily charges the act of remembering with conflicting desires and expectations.

The question is then whether it is possible to find a mediation between the subject who remembers and the institutions in charge to preserve a "collective memory", between the subject who remembers an historical event and

---

<sup>13</sup> Vincent Geoghegan, "Ernst Bloch: Post-secular Thoughts," in Lawrence Wilde (ed.), *Marxism's Ethical Thinkers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 51-70.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (eds), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> See Vita Fortunati "Memory, Desire and Utopia: a New Perspective on the Notion of Critical Utopia" in *Time Refigured. Myth, Foundation Texts & Imagined Communities* in Martin Procházka and Ondrej Pilný (eds) (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2005), pp. 39-51.

History itself, between micro- and macro- histories. Subjective memory is thus fundamental for founding personal identity, an identity, however, which can be in contrast with collective identity. It is the interaction, sometimes a collision, between these two memories which gives rise to the construction of critical cultural memory. 20<sup>th</sup>-century dystopias reveal how in totalitarian regimes the negotiation between individual and institutional memory is prevented and annihilated by the prevaricating power of ideology.

As cultural studies have pointed out, the inner tension in memory consists in the difficult relationship between the subject's search for truth and the inevitable rhetorical use of fictionality. Memory implies construction, *fiction*, as indicated by its Latin meaning "to mould", "to shape", because it is always mediated by language. Similarly, analysing the role of memory in utopian texts reveals how complex it is for the writer to achieve a balance between fabulation and the quest for a truthful representation of the utopian world.

### III.

If we start from the basic assumption that the utopian writer constructs utopia by conjuring up another place *ex nihilo*, we would be driven to think that in utopia there is no history and no sense of change between present and past, between present and future. In a word, there is no memory. My working hypothesis is that every utopian project needs a history of its own which explains its origin/foundation. Utopia needs the narration of its history whose fictional paradigm is focused on its origin deriving from a foundation myth. As I have pointed out in a recent essay<sup>16</sup>, the myth of the origins is the founding event for the formation of collective identity. Both nation and utopia are rooted in a myth of their origins dating back to an unspecified, far away time which is fundamental for the formation of both concepts. Such myth is characterised by a duality: on the one hand, it is universal, in the sense that all nations and all utopias thrive on it; on the other hand, such myth is moulded according to specific cultural and historical contexts. Many scholars have

---

<sup>16</sup> See Vita Fortunati and Zelda Franceschi, "Nazione e utopia: elementi comuni nella costruzione di due concetti ambivalenti", in *Nell'anno 2000. Dall'utopia all'ucronia*, a cura di Bruno Bongiovanni e Gian Mario Bravo (Firenze: Olschki, 2001), pp. 121-134.

pointed out the fictional structure of utopia and have persuasively argued that ontologically utopia needs verbalisation: it has to be told to exist. In the narration of its origin the fictional strategies play a fundamental role, since in stressing the mythical beginning the utopian writer exploits the imaginative power of fabulation.

Every utopia builds up its own memory which emerges from the dialogue between the traveller and the utopian inhabitant. In fact, in classical utopias the guide, who is entitled to present the features of the new world, starts recollecting its origins by means of the structural element of the dialogue. Indeed, collective memory in utopia is mainly conveyed through orality, which functions as the strongest tie among generations, because the people who act as living memory transmit a sense of belonging stronger than the one conveyed through written texts.

Studying memory in utopia means to reconsider its complex relationship interaction with myth and history. While scholars have highlighted that utopia was firstly conceptualised in the Renaissance as a secular project which stresses the centrality of man as a maker, less slight critical attention has been devoted to the utopian writers' urge to recollect how utopia has risen. The elucidation about the origin of the utopian project hides the desire to go back to primeval perfection and harmony. Such an attitude can be defined as nostalgic, since the utopian thinker is aware that his ideal cannot be fully attained and, consequently, suffers from a sense of deprivation of the origins. This nostalgia has deep roots in a lost, remote sense of belonging, to a transcendent origin which one yearns to rejoin. Nostalgia is thus experienced like a disease, that is the tragic consciousness of human limits. The creation of a new, perfect world ultimately conceals ambiguous religious values: on the one hand, utopian writers act like new gods in their demiurgic faculties, on the other they strive to depict utopian inhabitants like a new Adam and Eve in Heaven.

Re-examining utopia from a diachronic point of view means to outline how the foundation myth of the origins is deeply connected with the notion of time in different historical contexts. In particular, some Renaissance and 19<sup>th</sup>-century utopian texts allow me to shed light into a conceptual shift in the notion of the relationship between time and in its relationships with myth and history in utopia.

In Thomas More's *Utopia* the country outlined by Raphael Hythloday takes shape through his narration, in the dialogue among himself, Peter Giles



and Thomas More, the character. Book II opens with the narration of the origins of the island, where the new history starts with the myth of Utopus' foundation. Utopus modifies the course of history by violently intervening in the morphological features of the peninsula; his act also has a deep symbolic value, as it highlights that the existence of utopia needs a carefully outlined space. The transformations carried out by Utopus do not only involve the spatial dimension but also the anthropological nature of the natives. The act of foundation coincides with a process of civilisation and is thus intrinsically connected with the formation of the Utopians' identity of the utopian inhabitants.

RAPHAEL: [...] They say, though, and one can actually see for oneself, that utopia was originally not an island but a peninsula. However, it was conquered by somebody called Utopos, who gave it its present name [...] and was also responsible for transforming a pack of ignorant savages into what is now, perhaps, the most civilised nation in the world. The moment he landed and got control of the country, he immediately had a channel cut through the fifteen-mile isthmus connecting Utopia with the mainland, so that the sea could flow all around it<sup>17</sup>.

In Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* the tale by the guide aims at explaining to the traveller how utopia has been achieved. In particular, the storytelling of the miraculous event serves the purpose of explaining how the evangelisation of the natives took place. In *New Atlantis* Bacon exploits a double strategy which will function as a model for future utopias. On the one hand, catastrophe, here caused by the deluge, creates a chasm between the past and the present; on the other, the story retrieves the history of the past and establishes a deep link with it. And the past is tinged with myth: Bacon rewrites Plato's fable of Atlantis and the events of the Old Testament. The birth of Bensalem and of its history are thus deeply marked by the permanence of mythical traces. The floating ark enclosing the books marks both the beginning of the new history and the preservation of fundamental testimonies of the old one.

---

<sup>17</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, translated, with an introduction, by Paul Turner (London: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 69-70.

About twenty years after the ascension of our Saviour, it came to pass that there was seen by the people by Renfusa [...], within night [...] as it might be some mile into the sea, a great pillar of light; not sharp, but in form of a column or cylinder, rising from the sea a great way up towards heaven: and on the top of it was seen a large cross of light, more bright and resplendent than the body of the pillar. [...] It so fell out, that there was in one of the boats one of the wise men of the society of Salomon's House [...] who having awhile attentively and devoutly viewed and contemplated this pillar and cross, fell down upon his face...

when the wise man had taken it [the ark or chest of cedar], [...] it opened of itself, and there were found in it a Book and a Letter; both written in fine parchment and wrapped in sindons of linen. The Book contained all the canonical books of the Old and the New Testament [...]<sup>18</sup>.

Even *The City of the Sun* by Tommaso Campanella highlights how in the dialogue between Genovese and Ospitalario one of the first questions regards the mythical origins of the Solarians: they are described as a people migrating from remote places inhabited by fairly unknown populations. The mythical origin of the City of the Sun thus is reconnected to the dramatic conflict between aggressive peoples and the wise philosophers who had to flee away and found a new civilisation.

GEN. Questa popolazione è fuggita lì dall'India per scampare all'invasione dei Tartari del gran Mogol che devastavano la regione, e di altri predoni e tiranni. Essi deliberarono di fare vita comune basata su principi filosofici<sup>19</sup>.

In the 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-centuries utopias are characterised by a strong emphasis on the narration of the mythical origin as the fundamental structural element. The deep tie with myth keeps the sense of the past very much alive and creates a sense of fixity which affects the utopian writer's projection towards the future. Far from undervaluing the idea that classical utopia encloses potentialities whose outcomes have been fulfilled in successive

---

<sup>18</sup> Francis Bacon, *Nuova Atlantide*, a cura di Luigi Punzo, testo inglese a fronte con la favola di Prometeo (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 2001), pp. 72-76.

<sup>19</sup> Tommaso Campanella, *La città del Sole*, a cura di Tonino Tornitore (Milano: Unicopli, 1998), pp. 20-21.

periods, I want to stress the multi-layered-ness of the construction of the utopian project, which develops from the coalescence between rational thought and mythical grounds.

A fundamental turning point in utopian thought is when utopia is no longer static, but becomes kinetic, because time, and no longer space, is the element around which utopias revolve. Utopia becomes uchronia: the elsewhere land is no longer a distant island in an unknown geographic place; the elsewhere land is located in the future. This new temporal category of time transforms utopia into a programme, into a literature of anticipation that puts together eschatological dynamism and a laic teleological conception.

The strenuous endeavour to find a balance between the utopian thinker's projection towards the future and a regressive shift towards a mythical past characterises William Morris's utopia. *News from Nowhere* exemplifies not only the conceptual change in the notion of time and memory, but also the contradiction that utopia conceals *vis-à-vis* history conceived in Marxian terms<sup>20</sup>. The author devotes a whole chapter to explaining "How the Change Came", that is how the capitalist, industrialised Victorian England turned into a socialist country. In other essays I tried to demonstrate how Morris's notion of time appears unsolved, neither entirely sustaining a revivalist attitude, nor fully revolving on Marxian dialectics<sup>21</sup>. Morris strives to find a balance between his faith in socialist dynamism and the recollection of a Victorian age which has not stopped haunting the mind of the traveller, William Guest, even when he is visiting the London of the future. Morris envisions a future which has erased the historical present and has revived the Middle Ages by transforming them into a Golden Age: however, the technique Morris adopts, that is the constant contrast between the future London rooted in the Middle Ages and the Victorian past, reveals how difficult it is for him to prospect a society which has got rid of a wide span of the history of Great Britain. Morris presents both the achievements and the shortcomings of a vision which tries to integrate utopia and memory. In fact, he not only creates a history within

---

<sup>20</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, edited by Stephen Arata, Canada, Broadview Literary Texts, chapter XVII, "How the Change Came", pp. 147-172.

<sup>21</sup> See Vita Fortunati and Paola Spinuzzi, "Dialectics between Labour and Rest in Morris's Utopia: *News from Nowhere* (1890)" (Porto: Granito Editores e Livreiros, 2003), pp. 119-136.

utopia but is also aware that utopia needs to keep the sense of continuity alive. While going backwards and forwards through time, he gets trapped in his temporal journeys: the future becomes a past future. And he is also trapped in the games he plays with memory, because ultimately his memory is not critical, is not emancipatory but rather tinged with nostalgia. In his utopian project he tries to envisage a future society growing on the cultural memory of ancient England, but Morris's desire stays fixed both on an idealised view of the Middle Ages and on a disturbing view of the Victorian epoch. Socialist revolution, evoked through a description overflowing with gloomy and dramatic details, is marked not only by the myth of the apocalypse but also by reminiscences of the Ragnarök, the Nordic doomsday.

But no one scarcely could throw himself down, so tight as the crowd were packed. I heard a sharp order given, and wondered where I should be the next minute; and then – It was as if – the earth had opened, and hell had come up bodily amidst us. It is no use trying to describe the scene that followed. Deep lanes were mowed amidst the thick crowd; the dead and dying covered the ground, and the shrieks and wails and cries of horror filled all the air, till it seemed as if there were nothing else in the world but murder and death

[...]

“How fearful! And I suppose that this massacre put an end to the whole revolution for that time?”

“No, no,” cried old Hammond; “it began it!”<sup>22</sup> :

On the other hand, in the following chapter, significantly entitled *The Beginning of the New Life*, Morris unfolds a narration intertwined with rhetorical tropes which are most suited to render the sense of palingenesis and of rebirth:

“Yes,” said the old man, “the world was being brought to its second birth; how could that take place without a tragedy? Moreover, think of it. The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be delight in the life of the world; intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells,

---

<sup>22</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, *op. cit.*, chapter XVII, “How the Change Came”, p. 160.

such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves; this, I say, was to be the new spirit of the time. More akin to our way of looking at life was the spirit of the Middle Ages, to whom heaven and the life of the next world was such a reality, that it became to them a part of the life upon the earth; which accordingly they loved and adorned, in spite of the ascetic doctrines of their formal creed, which bade them contemn it<sup>23</sup>.

The aspect that seems most significant in studying the relationship between memory and forgetfulness is that the inhabitants of Nowhere have undergone a dangerous amnesia regarding the historical fact preceding the “Change”. Guest, Old Hammond and Ellen ask themselves why the people who live in future London ignore History and do not feel the need to know how the socialist utopia has been achieved. One of the first things that Guest learns is that utopians do not feel the need to know History, because “... it is mostly in periods of turmoil and strife and confusion that people care much about history”<sup>24</sup>. As Stephen Arata notes in his introduction; “a few continue to study the records of the past, but the society as a whole exists in a perpetual present”<sup>25</sup>. For most of the inhabitants “the last Harvest, the last baby, the last knot of carving in the market place is history enough”<sup>26</sup>.

The dangerous innocence characterising the people of Nowhere in relation to their history is viewed with suspicion by Guest and consequently by Morris himself. Old Hammond’s clearly points out how the tale of the 1<sup>st</sup> of May celebrations sound rhetorical to him, since the people who take part in these ritual ceremonies sing songs without remembering the political and symbolical meaning of the event they are celebrating. Ellen is well aware that the oblivion of history is a dangerous trait for a society that has achieved perfection. Perhaps it is exactly in order to avoid this danger that Morris charges historical and cultural memory with so much importance, as a gift legacy to be transmitted from the old to the young.

---

<sup>23</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, *op. cit.*, chapter XVIII, “The Beginning of the New Life”, pp. 174-175.

<sup>24</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, *op. cit.*, chapter V, “Children on the Road”, p. 79.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Arata, “Introduction”, in *News from Nowhere*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, *op. cit.*, Chapter XIX, “Concerning Love”, p. 102.

Every utopian project, while trying to construct a new beginning, reveals its closeness to real (official) historical events: even if the utopian writer wants to cut with History, the past lies behind, lurking and leaving traces in the future he prospects. A future haunted by the past is one of the greatest paradoxes of the utopian enterprise and explains why underpinning the act of memory is so important: it reveals the unsolved antinomies of the process of collective memory in utopia. If it is true that utopia creates a world *ex nihilo*, it is nevertheless also true that when he accomplishes this creation he feels the need to build up a common cultural heritage, a common identity. Significantly enough, in the City of the Sun the walls are engraved in order to show to the town folk the graphic description of the various fields of knowledge.

In classical utopia the guide, that is the utopian writer, has the task not only of remembering, but also of selecting what has to be remembered. In fact, collective memory, exhibited as an homogeneous cultural product shared by the entire community, is but the personal memory of the utopian writer who disguises it and transforms it into a communal enterprise. Such an act of memory, accomplished without any kind of negotiation by the members of the utopian community, hides a dangerous authoritarian component, which will become the main target in 20<sup>th</sup>-century dystopian fiction.

One of the main structural features of the classical utopian project is the absence of the sense of temporal change, its fixity in a perfection that can be neither tainted nor corrupted. In *Perfezione e Finitude. La concezione della morte in età moderna e contemporanea*<sup>27</sup> edited by Marina Sozzi, Paola Spinozzi and myself, a strong stress has been laid on the anxiety of the utopian writer who must come to terms with the certainty of human finitude. This means that in utopia, in spite of the compensatory strategies set up by the writer for neutralising this conundrum, the signs of the presence of time are evident. Collective rites, the commemoration of the dead and the illustrious, places dedicated to death rites and finally the veneration of old people's wisdom reveal the tension between finitude and immortality. They reveal the contrast between the removal of time by means of rites and its inevitable resurgence in them, because, ultimately, they function as substitutes of time.

---

<sup>27</sup> (Torino: Lindau, 2004).