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### **Canonization and Obliteration: The Dialectic of Cultural Memory in Utopia**

The tradition of cultural vandalism in Utopia begins, as everyone knows, with Plato's *Republic*. Socrates expels the poets from the Republic because they are, to him, custodians of wicked and undesirable forms of cultural memory. The fact that Homer has been described as the "educator of Hellas", and that abolishing the study of Homer means destroying much of the existing school curriculum, is no defence against the pure light of reason. If there is an "ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry", there is another quarrel, no less ancient, between utopia and memory.<sup>1</sup> Had the *Republic* not been written before the age of the great libraries, it would doubtless have featured not just the expulsion of the poets but the burning of their books.

To the modern reader there is often something deeply shocking about the fury with which utopians, like other revolutionaries throughout history, set about the cleansing of the human mind. Does this perhaps mean that there is something peculiarly modern about our concern with the survival of cultural memory? While there is evidence to suggest that nearly all human cultures have wished to be remembered in one way or another, does our current anxiety about the preservation of memory perhaps seem a little excessive? For example, George Steiner has argued that the 'dominant apparatus' of contemporary American high culture is "that of custody", and that American institutions form the "great archive, inventory, catalogue, store-house, rummage-room of western civilization".<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama in *The End of*

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Vintage, n.d.), p. 378.

<sup>2</sup> George Steiner, "The Archives of Eden", *Salmagundi* 50-51 (1980-81), p. 70.

*History* says that “in the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history”.<sup>3</sup> For thinkers like Steiner and Fukuyama we already seem to have reached a kind of static utopia – a utopia not of perpetual happiness but of perpetual storage. The purpose of all this apparatus of preservation is not wholly clear.

Contrast the situation in classical utopian writing, where libraries and books – the archetypal instruments of cultural memory – are, as has often been noticed, rare.<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, it can be argued that the absence or relative absence of books from societies which do not really exist should not worry us unduly. The question of the preservation of memory becomes acute when we pass from the classical utopia or ‘no place’ to the modern uchronia, an imaginary society which supposedly represents our future, and which is therefore in a position to decide whether and how we ourselves might be remembered. If the utopians have few books, it is possibly because they have never had any use for them, or (as in the case of More’s *Utopia*) they have never discovered printing. If the uchronians have few books, then they have either deliberately destroyed the libraries of the past or, as in Wells’s *Time Machine*, allowed them to rot away through prolonged neglect.

As often as not the books have been burnt, and in fact, the road to uchronia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been lit by bonfires. Fire is the uchronian element. In Louis Sebastien Mercier’s *L’An 2440*, which Vita Fortunati has nominated as the first progressive, “kinetic” utopia, heaps of old books have been burnt “as a sacrifice offered up in the name of truth, good taste and good sense”, among them the works of Aristophanes, Herodotus and Sappho.<sup>5</sup> In Wells’s socialist utopia *In the Days of the Comet*, the citizens hold annual “Beltane fires”, consigning “their dank, dark cupboards, their ill-designed and yet pretentious tables and chairs, sideboards and chests of drawers, ... their ornaments”, and their “old dirt-

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’ [1989], quoted by Francis Wheen, ‘Introduction’ to H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, ed. Gregory Claeys and Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), xiii.

<sup>4</sup> See for example R. Trousson, ‘Libraries’, in Vita Fortunati and Raymond Trousson, eds., *Dictionary of Literary Utopias* (Paris: Champion, 2000), p. 353.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Sébastien Mercier, *L’An 2440: Rêve s’il en fut jamais*, ed. Christophe Cave and Christine Marcendier-Colard (Paris: La Découverte, 1999), 165; my translation. See also V. Fortunati, ‘History’, in Fortunati and Trousson, *Dictionary*, p. 289.

saturated books” (“dirt-saturated”, presumably, in an intellectual as well as a physical sense) into the flames.<sup>6</sup> Then there is Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, in which special squads of firemen go round burning every book that they can lay hands upon. Between Wells’s utopia and Bradbury’s dystopia there intervened the Nazi book-burnings, in which Wells’s own titles were among those that were publicly burnt.

In dystopia, to cite the title of Dr Guardamagna’s paper given at this conference, we may indeed regard ‘Lost Memory as a Fundamental Structural Element’. The emblem of dystopia is the Orwellian “memory hole”, that innocent-looking slit for the disposal of waste paper. In Emile Souvestre’s *Le Monde tel qu’il sera*, the Bibliothèque Nationale of the year 3000 is kept perpetually closed since the state does not find it worthwhile to pay to keep it open.<sup>7</sup> In Huxley’s *Brave New World* when the Savage asks Mustapha Mond why Shakespeare is prohibited, the World Controller’s answer is simply, “Because it’s old; . . . We haven’t any use for old things here. . . . We want [people] to like the new ones”.<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, Mond has a set of Shakespeare for his own personal use. Ancient books have become a species of pornography in Huxley’s society, and Mond therefore has a private set of Shakespeare just as the traditional gentleman had a locked case of forbidden works hidden away in his study. Winston Smith, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, makes it his task to seek out those relics of cultural memory, such as children’s nursery rhymes, which might be thought too trivial to have attracted the attention of the state censors – only to find, in the case of ‘Oranges and Lemons’ with its concluding line about the chopper to chop off your head, that the state has got there first.<sup>9</sup> The translation of ancient literary works into Newspeak provides Orwell with an opportunity to indulge in that uniquely depressing form of intellectual discussion which we might call utopian literary criticism. Perhaps the most devastating work in this genre, however, is Mercier’s work which has little if any satirical intention. In the year 2440, the narrator tells us how he searched the catalogue of the

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<sup>6</sup> H. G. Wells, *In the Days of the Comet* (London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 285.

<sup>7</sup> Emile Souvestre, “Le Monde tel qu’il sera” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol 37 (Paris: Lévy, 1859), pp. 216-17.

<sup>8</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World: A Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p. 177.

king's library for some record of the writers of his own time: "Heavens, what destruction! What huge volumes had gone up in smoke!" He finds, instead, a work of authoritative literary criticism, *Des reputations usurpées* (*Of undeserved reputations*) setting out the reasons why so many books have been condemned to destruction.<sup>10</sup> The fundamental reason, however, is the need to abolish the contaminations of cultural memory which join the future society to a despised and inferior past.

The question that arises, then, is whether the obliteration of cultural memory is essential to the utopian imagination, or whether it is simply a fact about the vast majority of classical utopian works. The evidence that utopias are intrinsically hostile to books can certainly be disputed. In More's *Utopia*, even though the Utopians have anticipated all the discoveries of ancient Greek philosophy and Greek science we are told that they take avidly to reading Greek literature once Hythloday has introduced them to the printing of books. In Morris's *News from Nowhere* the British Museum and Bodleian Library are still open even though it is hard to imagine that, in Morris's pastoral society, they are thronged with readers. A number of the denizens of Morris's future England are knowledgeable about the literature of the past. Wells's *Modern Utopia* contains, we are told, "stupendous libraries, and a mighty organization of museums".<sup>11</sup> Many more recent utopias replace these huge, monumental buildings with immensely powerful databases that can be accessed from anyone's computer keyboard. This leads to the point, of course, that utopia is always a reflection of the writer's present society, and that if we now find that the fullest possible preservation of cultural memory is desirable, then surely future utopias and uchronias must build in that requirement to their design.

Is the preservation of cultural memory an absolute good, or is it, perhaps, the function of utopia to remind us of the necessity of forgetting? Moreover, has the significance of preserved knowledge changed with the move, firstly, from utopia to uchronia, and, secondly, from the "static" to the "kinetic" utopia? Present-day western society's jealous anxiety about the survival of its own memory might be seen as an attempt to secure for ourselves the immortality that is no longer promised by religious belief; equally, it is a way of

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<sup>10</sup> Mercier, *L'An 2440*, pp. 169, 174; my translation.

<sup>11</sup> Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, p. 164.

promoting our own favoured view of ourselves as against other, presumably much less sympathetic, rival views that might come to prevail. At the same time, the Hegelian view of our ageing civilisation promoted by Steiner and Fukuyama suggests that more and more of society's resources might have to be devoted to preservation and storage, which is scarcely a recipe for adaptability and vigour.

To the extent that the classical utopia represents a perfect society, the realm of knowledge must be accounted as finite, and utopians are properly involved in weeding out unnecessary knowledge. Hence the censorship in Plato's *Republic*. But modern scientific ideology holds that human knowledge is essentially cumulative and that storage capacity therefore needs to go on expanding. The older our civilization, the more knowledge we have to store. Moreover, the classical utopia, according to Trousson, *is* a utopia but cannot *imagine* a utopia – that is, it cannot imagine a utopian state other than itself.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely the critical and cumulative view of scientific knowledge that has led to the replacement of this static utopia by the modern kinetic utopia, in which self-critique leading to self-renewal is essential to the society's dynamism. The question, then, is, how should the modern kinetic utopia organise its knowledge, and, assuming that the utopia is also a uchronia, what should it do with its knowledge of *us*?

Every utopia, including every uchronia, begins with a historical break, symbolised as we know by the trench dug by the founder of More's *Utopia*, King Utopus, cutting his island kingdom off from the mainland. Before his decisive cut the area was simply inhabited by barbarians. After it, however, chronicles have been kept detailing the full history of the previous 1,760 years. These chronicles are what I will call the Utopian canon. They emphasize that classical utopias are often deeply learned societies, but they determine their own learning, and the learning involves forgetting as well as remembering. There is a parallel here with the historical construction of nation-states, since, as Ernest Renan remarked, national identity involves a shared body of cultural memory which depends as much on agreement about what should be forgotten as what should be preserved.<sup>13</sup> The nation, including the utopian

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<sup>12</sup> Trousson, "Libraries", p. 354.

<sup>13</sup> Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" [1882], trans. Martin Thom, in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.

nation, implies a canon; and for some texts to be canonized others must be obliterated or, if not altogether obliterated, at least thrown into obscurity.

As we move from classical utopia to modern uchronia it must be mildly comforting to discover that we ourselves might be part of the uchronian canon of knowledge, in however casual a way, as in Morris's *News from Nowhere* where there is an inscription inviting the utopians to drink a toast to the memory of the old Hammersmith socialists.<sup>14</sup> Much more likely, however, is that we will be radically misunderstood if not altogether obliterated from memory, since we are what has to be forgotten (or, at least, remembered in a way that is distorted almost beyond recognition) to make the uchronia possible. But is that which has been forgotten, or excluded from the canon, necessarily irretrievable? Can it actually be made irretrievable? Can anything ever be finally deleted from the hard disk of uchronian memory?

Now, I do not pretend to understand what may have happened to material I think I have deleted from my own hard disk. Possibly you could say that it has become "apocryphal" rather than "canonical". But I would like to argue that one kind of past literature has a quite different status in the kinetic uchronia from its status in the static utopia (where it is effectively non-existent) – and this is the literature of utopia itself. We may suppose that the inhabitants of a kinetic uchronia will need to know that the state they inhabit represents the culmination of some of the dreams of previous ages, since they need to go on dreaming themselves. This is the importance of Wells's invention in *A Modern Utopia* of the utopia as meta-utopia, as a critical synthesis, that is, of previous utopian dreams.<sup>15</sup> Each stage in a uchronia might have its own canon of utopian writings, and its own apocrypha which might be looked up from time to time by those seeking to change and improve the uchronia. A uchronia, whatever its general view of libraries and databases, ought to retain a database of utopias, including the most unlikely utopias. These forgotten texts could become a potentially subversive, apocryphal literature in our uchronia, just as they are in any society.

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<sup>14</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. Krishan Kumar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> See Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction and Prophecy* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), pp. 96-112.

However, there are reasons why we should not get too excited about the possible survival of cultural memory even in a modern uchronia. Perhaps the main reason for the disappearance of cultural memories in any society is not deliberate destruction but change of circumstances. People forget because, unlike the archival systems presupposed by modern scientific ideology, their capacity for data storage is both limited and heavily prioritised. One of the most exemplary of recent kinetic uchronias is Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy*, a society that, like the classical utopias, is set in another place as well as in future time.<sup>16</sup> The act of leaving the earth behind to colonize a new planet, deliberately cutting off all ties and vowing never to return, is a perfect image for the construction of a utopia. The new society requires arduous physical labour and immense technical skill, in an environment for which humanity has little or no previous relevant experience, to ensure its very survival; it develops new forms of human co-operation and, eventually, its own history and politics; and the experience is so intense that the accumulations of terrestrial memory seem increasingly irrelevant. One would like to think that they were still accessible somewhere, but the settlement and terraforming of Mars is like King Utopus' historic cut, it makes for a break with a past which most people will see little, if any, point in retrieving. Above all, as in the chronicles of More's *Utopia*, a uchronia should first and foremost treasure its own memory – not ours. It must have a canon first and foremost; little by little, as Robinson shows in his trilogy, it will acquire an apocrypha as well.

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<sup>16</sup> The *Mars Trilogy* by Kim Stanley Robinson consists of *Red Mars* [1992]; *Green Mars* [1992]; *Blue Mars* [1996]; the editions I have consulted are all (London: Harper Collins, 1996).