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The Horror of Strangeness: Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*

Matthew Beaumont

I think it must have been many seconds that I sat up thus in bed staring about, without being able to regain the clew to my personal identity. I was no more able to distinguish myself from pure being during those moments than we may suppose a soul in the rough to be before it has received the ear-marks, the individualizing touches which make it a person. Strange that the sense of this inability should be such anguish! but so we are constituted. There are no words for the mental torture I endured during this helpless, eyeless groping for myself in a boundless void. No other experience of the mind gives probably anything like the sense of absolute intellectual arrest from the loss of a mental fulcrum, a starting point of thought, which comes during such a momentary obscuration of the sense of one's identity. I trust I may never know what it is again.

I do not know how long this condition had lasted – it seemed an interminable time – when, like a flash, the recollection of everything came back to me. I remembered who and where I was, and how I had come here, and that these scenes as of the life of yesterday which had been passing before my mind concerned a generation long, long ago mouldered to dust. Leaping from bed, I stood in the middle of the room clasping my temples with all my might between my hands to keep them from bursting. Then I fell prone on the couch, and, burying my face in the pillow, lay without motion. The reaction which was inevitable, from the mental elation, the fever of the intellect that had been the first effect of my tremendous experience, had arrived.¹

Looking Backward 2000–1887 (1888) is of almost incalculable importance to the history of the utopian form. Edward Bellamy's socialist romance was by far the most popular and ideologically influential utopia produced in the late nineteenth century, a time when novels about the future probably appeared in greater numbers than at any other period in Western history. At the *fin de siècle*, utopian fiction suddenly seemed to be an intellectually and commercially viable medium for communicating political ideas, especially

oppositional ones, on both sides of the Atlantic. Ordinary middle-class readers as well as socialists of one stripe or another were electrified by the possibilities of the form. *Looking Backward* – which was only the second novel published in the United States to sell a million copies – was chiefly responsible for this state of affairs. Everyone interested in the so-called ‘social question’ debated the book, ‘down to the boot-blacks as they s[a]t on the curbstones’.²

Bellamy’s utopia caused a sensation in part because of its eloquent and quietly furious indictment of capitalist society. It was published at a time of rising unemployment and deepening industrial disputes, when people throughout the industrialized nations started to lose that supreme sense of confidence in the capitalist system which had characterized the third quarter of the century. At bottom, this was because of a sustained economic crisis that had seen capitalism slide in and out of recession since the early 1870s. If capitalist society for the first time seemed disconcertingly unstable, however, its collapse did not seem imminent. The working-class movement was inspired to an unprecedented extent by visions of a post-capitalist society; but, as the century reached its end, and inter-imperial rivalries intensified, breeding conflicts that finally climaxed in 1914, these visions started to dissolve into the distance. The explosion of utopianism at the *fin de siècle* was an expression of the disappointments as well as the achievements of socialists in this epoch. On the Left, the popularity of utopian dreaming was partly the effect of a historical situation in which socialists were incapable of exploiting in practical terms the political opportunities that had opened up to them.

In this climate, *Looking Backward* became a *cause célèbre* because, in addition, its innumerable readers used it as a kind of guidebook to the possibilities of a post-capitalist society. As such, it inspired others to offer blueprints for the future. Some were openly motivated by fear of its mass appeal. Alfred Morris, for example, attacked *Looking Backward* from the Right in *Looking Ahead!* (1892), which complained, not completely inaccurately, that ‘Socialist leaders, when pressed to formulate their policy, were in the habit of referring enquirers to [Bellamy’s] book, as affording a complete and unanswerable solution’.³ William Morris, for his part, attacked it from the Left in *News from Nowhere* (1891), a utopian romance that promoted the peaceful pastoral vision of a communist society formed in the aftermath of violent socialist revolution. Some contemporary readers, in contrast, were motivated to compose utopias by devoted enthusiasm for Bellamy’s secular vision of the heavenly city. Others simply lifted plot devices from the book, like H.G. Wells in *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899). Bellamy himself published a sequel, *Equality*, in 1897. According to Krishan Kumar’s calculations, at least sixty-two novels directly indebted to Bellamy’s utopian model were published in the United States and Europe between 1889 and 1900.⁴

The utopian tradition that commenced with Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) had generally located the ideal society about which it dreamed in unmapped

space. Bellamy's main formal contribution to the utopian tradition was instead to cement its association with unmapped time, by relocating the ideal society to a relatively far-distant future. In this respect, he built on polemical, often dystopian, narratives from the second half of the nineteenth century, like George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (1871), which depicted dramatic social alternatives to the present unfolding in the immediate future. *Looking Backward* therefore conjoined the utopian genre to the so-called imaginary history. And this suited an epoch shaped both by an acute sense of historical expectation and a deepening suspicion that, under the impact of imperial expansion, the amount of unmapped space on the planet was rapidly diminishing. As Bellamy declared in the Postscript to the second edition of *Looking Backward*, the book 'was written in the belief that the Golden Age lies before us and not behind us, and is not far away' (197). The final clause of that sentence seems ambiguous, for if it denotes that the origins of the Golden Age lie in the nineteenth century rather than some far-distant future, then it connotes that it can be found in the United States rather than some far-distant island. Bellamy's protagonist, Julian West, who suffers from acute insomnia, falls into a deep sleep one night in 1887, thanks to the assistance of a professional mesmerist, and wakes up one day in the year 2000; in both epochs, then, he finds himself, or loses himself, in Boston. He is a time-traveller.

In his review of *Looking Backward*, William Morris claimed that 'it is the serious essay and not the slight envelope of romance which people have found interesting'.⁵ Like a number of subsequent critics, he implied first that the utopia's essayistic and romantic elements are its sole formal components; and second that the latter can be dismissed as of merely incidental importance. More recently, Kumar has for example remarked that, of all the utopian fictions he discusses in *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, 'Bellamy's is in fact the least interesting, considered as literature'.⁶ Bellamy himself seems to have sanctioned this assumption, in spite of his comparative commercial success as an author of ghost stories and romances prior to the late 1880s. In an article of 1890, he observed that, in recasting the manuscript of *Looking Backward* after devising the idea of the 'industrial army', which he identified as 'the destined corner-stone of the new social order', he retained 'the form of romance' only reluctantly, including it 'with some impatience, in the hope of inducing the more to give it at least a reading'.⁷ Kumar has pointed out that, in adopting this attitude, Bellamy was 'rejecting his own past as a romancer and story-teller': 'He was self-consciously taking on a new, more purposive role, as social critic and prophet,' he concludes; 'but in doing so he ensured that, once his ideas had been generally absorbed, or were no longer considered interesting, there was little to attract a later generation to the book'.⁸ This is I believe a misrepresentation of *Looking Backward*, a novel that is in fact possessed of considerable psychological depth, as I hope to demonstrate through a close reading of the extract cited above. It seems to me that Bellamy's

finest achievement is his portrait of the protagonist's psychology, the aspect of the book that has probably been most consistently overlooked in scholarly accounts of it. *Looking Backward*, I argue, is a kind of case history in the psychology of the utopian imagination.

In spite of Kumar's claim, Bellamy's utopia is therefore continuous rather than discontinuous with his previous fiction – novels like *Doctor Heidenhoff's Process* (1880) and *Miss Ludington's Sister* (1884), as well as several short stories – in which he speculatively explores abnormal psychological states. In *Miss Ludington's Sister*, for instance, Bellamy speculates about 'the immortality of past selves', imagining an alternative state of being in which one's 'past and future selves' are both immediately, perpetually present: 'The idea of an individual, all whose personalities are contemporaneous, may there be realized, and such an individual would be by any earthly measurements a god.'⁹ *Looking Backward* is also a meditation on the idea of a personality consisting of both past and future selves; and rethinking it in these terms might help us recapture some of the excitement that it inspired in Bellamy's contemporaries. Fredric Jameson has commented on the difficulty of understanding this novel's initial impact, reflecting that 'the enigma of desire remains, and we are no longer very well placed to appreciate Bellamy's secret'.¹⁰ In some respects, we are better placed to understand the 'enigma of desire', I suspect, than the book's first readers.

So the critical consensus about *Looking Backward*, which insists that, like most utopian fiction of the late nineteenth century, it is emotionally flat and lacking in affect, falsifies it. Bellamy's protagonist, to take the example that most interests me, does not, as most accounts of the book assume, make an untroubled transition to the society of 2000. In fact, West suffers something like a trauma in time-travelling to the future. His psychology is a disturbed one that raises fascinating questions about the stability of the human subject under the peculiar existential conditions of utopian imagining. Bellamy reinvented the utopian form in part by conceptualizing it as the psychological portrait of an individual who effectively becomes dislocated from time; from both the present he half escapes and the future to which he is half assimilated. 'That story of another world,' writes the narrator of one of Bellamy's short stories, 'has, in a word, put me out of joint with ours'.¹¹ Throughout his fiction, Bellamy is fascinated by the psychology of disjointedness, of divided consciousness. *Looking Backward* is a study of time out of joint, and of a subject that is out of joint too.

In an interesting article on 'The Insomnia of Julian West', Tom Towers once argued that the 'chronic insomnia' from which Bellamy's protagonist suffers in the late nineteenth century 'becomes the comprehensive symbol of the totality of Julian's sense of social and psychic disturbance'. His emphasis on the hero's damaged psyche is original, but the article makes a misleading assumption that the damage is spontaneously repaired once West has appeared in the utopian society of the twenty-first century: 'Julian seems reborn into a new selfhood, making him for the first time at peace with himself and his world.'¹² In fact, the

opposite is the case: old neuroses cling to him and new ones emerge. Sleep, for example, remains a problem even after his reappearance in utopia. On his first night in 2000, it is in a state of 'dread' that he anticipates the moment at which he must be alone in the bedroom he has been allotted by the Leetes, his hosts in this socialist society, because he fears that the 'mental balance' that he has maintained in the presence of these 'friendly strangers' will collapse.

Even then, however, in the pauses of the conversation I had had glimpses, vivid as lightning flashes, of the horror of strangeness that was waiting to be faced when I could no longer command diversion. I knew I could not sleep that night, and as for lying awake and thinking, it argues no cowardice, I am sure, to confess that I was afraid of it. (28)

West is poised above a psychological abyss, and he fears that it is when he has to confront his existential situation alone that he will plummet into it. Terrified that the 'horror of strangeness' will finally overwhelm him, he consequently defers the moment when he must go to bed, questioning Dr Leete, his chief interlocutor, until three o'clock in the morning. At that point, Leete prescribes him a 'dose' that will ensure 'a sound night's sleep without fail' (28); and West does indeed sleep deeply.

It is when he wakes up the next morning that he experiences an acute psychological crisis. At first, West lies quite contentedly in bed, because he has no recollection of the fact that he has travelled through time. But when he realizes that he is in an unfamiliar bedchamber he starts up from the couch and stares crazily about the apartment. Momentarily – though it seems to him to last 'an interminable time' – he loses completely his sense of 'personal identity', and finds himself adrift in a state of 'pure being'. He is being reborn, and this process of parturition, as he is assimilated to the conditions of this utopian society, is a laborious and painful one. West struggles to explain this in retrospect.

There are no words for the mental torture I endured during this helpless, eyeless groping for myself in a boundless void. No other experience of the mind gives probably anything like the sense of absolute intellectual arrest from the loss of a mental fulcrum, a starting point of thought, which comes during such a momentary obscuration of one's identity. (45)

As he gropes in the 'boundless void', West is I-less as well as 'eyeless'.

But the sudden recollection that he has time-travelled to 2000, which succeeds this sense that his identity has been all but abolished, is no less devastating. In an instant, he realizes that all those he loved have been dead for almost a hundred years: he leaps from his bed, claspings his temples, and then flings himself back onto it, burying his face in the pillow. This psychic melodrama immediately precipitates him back into the boundless void he hopes instead to evade.

The emotional crisis which had awaited the full realization of my actual position, and all that it implied, was upon me, and with set teeth and laboring chest,

gripping the bedstead with frenzied strength, I lay there and fought for my sanity. In my mind, all had broken loose, habits of feeling, associations of thought, ideas of persons and things, all had dissolved and lost coherence and were seething together in apparently irretrievable chaos. There were no rallying points, nothing was left stable. (46)

In a state of severe mental dissociation, he reflects on the likelihood that he has suffered a schizoid split: 'The idea that I was two persons, that my identity was double, began to fascinate me with its simple solution of my experience' (46). But this solution, which is actually not an inaccurate one, offers little consolation. On the contrary, he becomes conscious that he is 'on the verge of losing [his] mental balance' (46).

In order to escape a complete psychological collapse, West quits the Leetes' apartment and races into the utopian city's empty streets. Like an agoraphobic adrift in the metropolis, he desperately scrambles about in Boston's unfamiliar quarters for some two hours. In this scene, the city itself effectively functions as an objective correlative for the boundless void. Finally, he races back to the apartment and collapses in a state of 'actual nausea', his brain apparently melting because of his sense of 'abjectness' and anguish: 'Throwing myself into a chair, I covered my burning eyeballs with my hands to shut out the horror of strangeness' (47). Again: the horror of strangeness. It is at this point that Leete's daughter reappears and coaxes West out of his psychotic state. However, the descriptive intensity of the passage I have cited above is such that, in spite of his assimilation to the Boston of the future thereafter, he never fully seems to escape the threat of some relapse.

The novel's poetic as opposed to political force depends on the idea established in this scene that West's identity is in some sense doubled; and that, as someone who is simultaneously a product of the nineteenth and the twenty-first century, he is doomed to inhabit the historical equivalent of what Bellamy once described in another context as a 'Jekyll-Hyde existence'.¹³ Doubleness is indeed something like an obsession in the shorter fiction, where the past and future are often placed in unsettling tension with the present: stories like 'The Old Folks' Party' (1876) and 'A Midnight Drama' (1877), in spite of the quaintness of their romance plots, are probing, experimental investigations into what he describes in the latter as the 'odd feeling of being double'.¹⁴ In the former, six young friends stage a fancy-dress party at which they must make themselves up as their future selves; that is, as they imagine they will look in fifty years' time. This game produces 'a singular effect': 'They began to regard every event and feeling from a double standpoint, as present and as past, as it appeared to them and as it would appear to an old person'.¹⁵ As in *Miss Ludington's Sister*, past, present and future selves are rendered co-existent in *Looking Backward*.

Read from the perspective of these examples of Bellamy's speculative fiction, *Looking Backward* can be interpreted as an attempt to infuse the utopian form

with psychological realism. It is a laboratory test of what, in 'The Old Folks' Party', he had called 'the fragile tenure of the sense of personal identity'.¹⁶ West does not become magically adjusted to the conditions of Boston in 2000; plausibly enough, he remains maladjusted. Bellamy therefore dramatically redefines the narrator of utopian fiction, presenting him as someone almost terminally troubled by psychic uncertainty. In Bellamy's socialist romance, time-travelling to the future entails an existential struggle. In thus psychologizing the utopian imagination, or even psychopathologizing it, he decisively modernizes utopian fiction. In this respect, *Looking Backward* anticipates the concerns of twentieth-century science fiction more strikingly even than Wells's novels, which it is generally assumed inaugurate the genre; for, as Jameson has observed, it is 'one of the grand and dramatic merits of SF as a form that it can thus win back from the sheerly psychological or subjective such expressive powers of pathology – depression, melancholy, morbid passion – and place this material in the service of collective drama'.¹⁷