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‘The Incompatibility I Could Not Resolve’: Ambivalence in H.G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia*

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The Utopia of a modern dreamer must needs differ in one fundamental aspect from the Nowheres and Utopias men planned before Darwin quickened the thought of the world. Those were all perfect and static States, a balance of happiness won forever against the forces of unrest and disorder that inhere in things. One beheld a healthy and simple generation enjoying the fruits of the earth in an atmosphere of virtue and happiness, to be followed by other virtuous, happy, and entirely similar generations, until the Gods grew weary. Change and development were dammed back by invincible dams forever. But the Modern Utopia must be not static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage leading to a long ascent of stages. [...] That is the first, most generalised difference between a Utopia based upon modern conceptions and all the Utopias that were written in the former time.¹

When H.G. Wells published *A Modern Utopia* in 1905, the book’s very title indicated its ambivalent nature. Since it described an ideal community, it could be viewed as a part of the utopian tradition that had begun with Plato’s *Republic* in the fifth century BC. At the same time, however, the epithet ‘modern’ signalled that it was also intended as a departure from this tradition. In contrast to the ideal communities described so far, Wells’s utopia was not set on some remote island but rather represented a political structure of a global nature. In order to understand this change, one has to take into account the context of the late nineteenth century when European expansion had reached its final stage and a *terra incognita* to be populated with an imaginary community no longer existed. ‘Time was when a mountain valley of an island seemed to promise sufficient isolation for a polity to maintain itself from outward force’, Wells declared in the first chapter of his book, concluding that a world state was the only model which now remained for outlining an ideal society (8). In addition, the philosophical basis of his utopia also meant a break with tradition. In contrast to the timeless character that had still defined William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1891), the ‘kinetic’ world state was

conceived of as a transitory state within a never-ending process of change. After the idea of a God-given 'chain of being' had been challenged by Darwin's theory of evolution, the static vision of traditional utopias seemed no longer acceptable. What was needed was a new model of society that respected the dynamism inherent in the new biological outlook.

In order to get an idea of the nature of Wells's utopia, however, it is important to realize that his subscription to evolutionary theory also had an impact on the mode of textual presentation. The emphasis on the transitory quality of all natural phenomena had two implications. On the one hand, it implied a rejection of the creationist view of nature; on the other it pointed to the limitations of the utopian vision itself. Rather than creating a coherent utopian model, Wells aimed at testing the potentials of the utopian imagination under the constraints of a Darwinian view of the universe. On the textual level, this resulted in a degree of openness that perfectly corresponded to the author's enthusiasm for all kinds of experimentalism.² Adopting the experimental method in utopian writing meant that the vision of an ideal state functioned as a hypothesis open to both verification and falsification. In the case of the *Modern Utopia*, the outcome was a critical reflection on the status of utopian writing rather than a blueprint for an ideal society.³

If Wells intended his work as an experiment on utopian writing, he had to make sure that his readers were not carried away by the charms of his fiction. In a 'Note to the Reader', he explained that he had spent a considerable amount of time on the question of how to construct his text. Rejecting the form of an 'argumentative essay' as well as that of a 'straightforward story', he had finally decided on a 'sort of shot-silk texture', that is a combination of both forms of presentation (xlvi).

What distinguishes *A Modern Utopia* from Wells's earlier scientific romances is the fact that the reader is continually made aware of its status as a literary artefact.⁴ Instead of lulling his audience into pleasant visions of an ideal society, Wells employed strategies of defamiliarization which bore a conspicuous resemblance to modernist modes of writing.⁵ There are various elements which are likely to irritate the reader rather than satisfy their curiosity. Not only does Wells add a frame text in which he distances himself from the 'owner of the voice' whom he mockingly describes as a 'rather too plump little man ... laboriously enunciating propositions' (4), but he also allows his narrator to make remarks which are liable to qualify the entire utopian project. When the utopian 'voice' refers to his model as the 'monster state my Frankenstein of reasoning has made' (140), for instance, he not only professes his higher education by simultaneously alluding to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), but he also hints at the possibility that his vision may even contain some dystopian elements. A qualifying effect is also achieved through the introduction of a character who acts as the voice's antagonist. The 'botanist', as he is called, turns out to be a representative of

the pre-Darwinian biology that Wells rejected. Like his eighteenth-century precursor Carl Linnaeus, the botanist is convinced of the timeless quality of classificatory models. Significantly, it is his conservative outlook which produces the collapse of the voice's utopian vision at the end of the narrative. Caught in the web of a philosophical determinism in which the 'scars of the past' make any attempt at creating a new social reality appear like a waste of time, he finally forces the narrator to redirect his attention to the bleak reality of contemporary London. As the latter finds himself disillusioned by the botanist's fatalist attitude, the only thing that is left for him is his confidence in the utopian imagination itself. 'There will be many utopias', he concludes, and adds rather vaguely: 'Each Generation will have its new version of Utopia, a little more certain and complete and real, with its problems lying close and closer to the problems of the Thing in Being' (220).

The negative depiction of the botanist cannot be understood without taking into account Wells's profound distrust in the reliability of classificatory models. On the one hand, this distrust had its roots in Darwin's refutation of the stable categories of creationism; on the other, it sprang from an epistemological scepticism the author had expressed early on. When Wells prepared the Atlantic Edition of his works in the 1920s, he took care that his epistemological essay 'Scepticism of the Instrument' was appended to *A Modern Utopia*.⁶ Given the author's nominalist standpoint, it is not surprising to find the utopian narrator also regarding all classificatory models with suspicion and insisting on the primacy of the individual. 'Until you bring in individualities, nothing comes into being', he declares in the first chapter, and for this reason he also rejects the utopian models of Plato and Thomas More. Instead of paying respect to the 'blood and warmth and reality of life', these authors had merely presented 'generalised people' (7). With regard to his own textual experiment, it is noteworthy that the voice rejects generalizations for aesthetic as well as political reasons. Aesthetically, they make a presentation appear 'jejune'; politically, they prove dangerous by not taking into account the complexities of social life. The narrator's concern for personal liberties shows that he is well aware of the dangers which can result from placing the demands of the community above those of the individual. In a chapter which harshly criticizes the typologies used in contemporary racial anthropology, he even characterizes 'crude classifications and false generalisations' as the 'curse of all organised human life' (191).

Set against the typological schemes employed in the social discourse of Wells's time, the narrator's arguments appear like an exercise in deconstruction. Although he is ready to acknowledge that every human being is naturally inclined to generalize from his or her singular experiences, he points to the dangers inherent in this approach. As far as social phenomena are concerned, the complementary processes of inclusion and exclusion which often accompany the process of generalizing are seen as a major problem. 'The natural man

does not feel he is aggregating at all, unless he aggregates *against* something', the narrator states in a chapter on 'Race in Utopia' and explains that general categories are often based on binary distinctions in which one element is preferred to the other: 'The Anti-idea, it would seem, is inseparable from the aggregatory idea; it is a necessity of the human mind. When we think of the class A as desirable, we think of Not-A as undesirable' (189). Significantly, the narrator points to the botanist to illustrate how the human drive to generalize can produce prejudices which lack any rational basis. As he explains, the botanist

has a strong feeling for systematic botanists as against plant physiologists ... but he has a strong feeling for all ... biologists, as against physicists and those who profess the exact sciences ... but he has a strong feeling for all who profess what is called Science as against psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, and literary men ... but he has a strong feeling for all educated men as against the working man ... but so soon as the working man is comprehended together with those others as Englishmen ... he holds them superior to all other sorts of European. (190)

Remarks such as these prove that Wells was very sensitive towards the ways in which classificatory models could be employed to petrify existing social prejudices. What disturbed him most were the typological schemes used by nationalists and racial anthropologists. Using the narrator as his voice, he warned that national and racial prejudices could be 'responsible for a large proportion of the wars, hardships, and cruelties the immediate future holds in store for our earth' (194). As we know today, it was a warning which would become prophetic within less than a decade.

What proved difficult, however, was the attempt to harmonize the critique of generalizations with the plan of sketching an ideal society. The problem lay in the fact that, by definition, utopian writing had to deal with social categories. As Justin Busch has remarked recently: '[U]topian thought is, of necessity, thought which deals in political generalities, however important the individuals as individuals may be seen as being within the final structure.'⁷ Accordingly, Wells's narrator finds himself caught between his distrust of classificatory models and his simultaneous desire to outline the general characteristics of his ideal society. If one compares those passages which outline his epistemological scepticism with those which describe the social structure of the utopian society, his dilemma becomes obvious. Trying to avoid the pitfalls of a naïve essentialism, the narrator argues that his social classes are based on pragmatic rather than philosophical principles. 'It is not a classification for Truth, but a classification to an end', he explains in the hope of not violating his own philosophical premises (160). What comes out of this can only be called a rhetorical manoeuvre. While on the one hand he professes a regard for 'humanity as a multitude of unique individuals in mass', on the other, he suggests that 'one may, for practical purposes, deal with it far more conveniently by disregarding its uniqueness and its mixed cases altogether' (160). The ensuing 'pragmatic' classification is

a rigid one, consisting of just four temperaments – the 'poietic', the 'kinetic', the 'dull' and the 'base' (157). The first group consists of highly talented individuals who also make up the 'Order of the Samurai' – an intellectual and moral elite which calls to mind Plato's 'guardians' as well as contemporary concepts of a 'new aristocracy'.⁸ The second comprises administrators who carry out the plans of the 'poietic'. While the first two groups meet the requirements of the utopian society, the third and the fourth fall short of its demands. The 'dull' lack sufficient intellectual capacities; the 'base' are characterized by their criminal energy and anti-social behaviour. Although the narrator maintains that the four temperaments are not hereditarily determined but of such a nature that people 'drift' to them 'of their own accord' (157), it is difficult to see how his classification could ever be brought in line with his belief in the primacy of the individual. Even more disturbing, the narrator's definition of four social classes betrays the very characteristic which, on another occasion, leads him to 'regard all generalisations with suspicion', namely their function to separate a desirable class 'A' – the 'poietic' and 'kinetic' – from an undesirable class 'Not-A' – the 'dull' and the 'base'.

That the narrator's classification of social types is based on strategies of inclusion and exclusion becomes clear by looking at another chapter entitled 'Failure in a Modern Utopia'. Here, the voice argues in favour of 'a kind of social surgery' to ensure that the number of undesirable individuals be held in check (84). The reader is informed that the utopian state is active in preventing the 'dull' from propagating, thus adhering to a kind of negative eugenics. The 'base' are segregated from the rest of society by being deported to remote islands which lie 'apart from the highways of the sea' (85). If such policies offend the modern reader, they are still fairly moderate if compared to Wells's earlier writings. In contrast to the grim forecasts he had made in his *Anticipations* (1901), the setting up of 'lethal chambers' is now explicitly dismissed.⁹ Still, the narrator's 'social surgery' included practices which clearly violated the principle of human rights that Wells would defend in his later years. Although the narrator professes that 'even for murder Utopia will not ... kill', he explicitly excludes from this practice 'deformed and monstrous and evilly diseased births' who still receive as little mercy as they did in Plato's *Republic* (84).

Given its rigid social policies, it is hardly surprising that the *Modern Utopia* has met with some negative criticism.¹⁰ It must be noted, however, that those readers who have taken Wells's book as a blueprint for a perfect society have failed to acknowledge its status as a textual experiment. A closer look at the text reveals the outcome of this experiment is anything but clear. Interestingly, it is the increasing complexity of the narrator's vision – a complexity which results from his intention to 'bring in individualities' – which is responsible for the fact that his imagination finally fails him. Towards the end of his narrative, he has to admit that 'a Utopia is a thing of the imagination that becomes more fragile with every added circumstance, that, like a soap-bubble, it is most

brilliantly and variously coloured at the very instant of its dissolution' (209). In the final chapter, the botanist's unwillingness to shake off the past turns out to be the decisive factor in making the utopian 'bubble' burst. After the experiment has failed, the narrator falls silent and Wells himself takes over. Reflecting on the tensions which result from the divergent tasks of drafting a social scheme and accepting the unique character of every single item, he confesses: 'In that incongruity between great and individual inheres the incompatibility I could not resolve, and which, therefore, I have had to present in this conflicting form' (222).

Indeed, what remains of the utopian vision is little more than this 'conflicting form' which only corroborates the Darwinian outlook the author has subscribed to from the beginning. If the ending betrays a loss of confidence in the concrete utopian model, this does not diminish the value of the utopian imagination. When the narrator concludes that 'each generation will have its new version of Utopia' (19), this statement can be interpreted as an acknowledgment of both the futility of any utopian programme and also as an expression of his unbroken belief in the 'principle of hope' which Ernst Bloch declared to be the driving force behind all utopian thought.¹¹ Wells's future career as a writer suggests that the latter reading is the more appropriate one. If there is a common characteristic detectable in all his works, it is his readiness to permanently reshape his political visions and to adapt them to the changing conditions of the twentieth century. Although it seems that he was not always aware of the problematic implications of some of his proposals, his readiness to revise his schemes clearly distinguished him from those contemporaries who succumbed to the charms of totalitarian ideologies. If viewed in this way, the bursting of the narrator's 'bubble' does not necessarily signify a failure of the experiment; it could equally be viewed as indicative of the author's awareness that the only utopia which made sense in the modern world was one which was sufficiently flexible to question and able to adapt itself.