Beatrice Battaglia, "Richard Jefferies, *After London*", in *Dictionary of Literary Utopias*, ed. by Vita Fortunati and Raymond Trousson (Paris: Champion, 2000), pp. 29-32.

Richard Jefferies (1848-1887, GB)
Dates: First published in 1885 in London.
Summary: A major catastrophe, of which any clear memory is now lost, has swept away civilisation and let Nature* prevail again and draw the world into primitive barbarism. Fields and meadows, footpaths and roads, open places and sites of villages and towns, gradually covered by grass and bushes, water and mud, have turned into marshes and forests. A great lake stretches at the centre of the island covering the site of ancient London which has become "a fearful place," "a buried cloaca." From its oily stagnant and black water, miasmic and pestilent vapours exhale forming a low cloud which hangs over the place, poisonous and fatal to any explorer. Sometimes the vapours take fire and floats to and fro in the form of fiery serpents, so people say the place is hunted by demons and spectres from the ancient world. When the Event took place, domestic animals and cattle, greatly reduced in number, took to the woods and became perfectly wild. As to men, the richer and upper classes used their money to escape while the poor, the ignorant and unlearned were left behind and divided into many races*, which can be summed up into three main groups: the Bushmen, the Gypsies and the house people. The Bushmen ,who are the descendants of beggars and tramps, live in camps where the eldest and the strongest is the absolute master. They are depraved and cruel; thieves and murderers, they are "the human vermin of the woods." The Gypsies, who are the descendants of the Zingari, have kept their blood and customs untainted under their kings and dukes who are absolute autocrats. Their only law is vengeance: thus they must be perpetually at war* with one another or with somebody else. The house people (divided into many provinces, kingdoms and republics) live in "towns," mostly upon the shores of the lake. They are seemingly better organised because the dominant class – the nobles – is made up of the descendants of those who could read and write. "The mark of a noble is that he can read and write." Actually organisation, common good, morality*, laws are but instruments at the service of the nobles "for the object of reducing the greater part of the people to servitude. For every offence the punishment is slavery and the offences are daily artificially increased that the wealth of the few in human beings may grow with them. The principal tyrant is supported by the nobles, that they in their turn may exercise tyranny over the merchants, and they again over all the workmen of their shops and bazaars"(ch. 4).
[]It is in this treacherous and violent world that Felix Aquila's epic adventure takes place. The eldest son of a disgraced baron, Felix has no option but set off in quest of some fortune that may enable him to marry his beloved Aurora. Having built himself a canoe, he goes up the river and after trying to take part in the war with no success, he goes forward on the lake, where he will accomplish the bold enterprise that will give him fame and power: he will visit the infernal site of ancient London and still survive. As a consequence of this divine enterprise, Felix will rise in reputation and influence and become Leader of the war among all the tribes of Shepherds. He then decides to go back home and fetch Aurora. The romance ends with Felix on his way back through the immense, unexplored forest which lies between him and Aurora, his heart full of hope and desire.
Analysis: Often quoted as a first example of apocalyptic science fiction*, *After London* is actually an almost unknown and ambiguous romance which, through its very ambiguity, shows a deep insight into the anxieties and longings at the heart of the Late Victorian mind and mood. The great catastrophe which sweeps away all civilisation (and which will hold out absurd hopes to Morris and will reappear two years later in Hudson's *A Crystal Age*) is clearly a projection of the growing need for rest generated by the spreading theories of evolutionary progress and scientific development which were making life more and more difficult and complex, driving man away from the simplicity of nature*.
[]Far from viewing nature as a stark mother, red in tooth and claw, in the manner of evolutionary thinking, Jefferies' attitude is more akin (though far less sentimental) to Hudson's in seeing Nature as an "old magician" (Bevis), dispenser of peace and joy and vital energy. It is Nature with her birds, grass, winds and limpid waters who gives rest and new vigour to Felix Aquila after his unlucky adventure

among his fellow men and after his exploration of "the place of so many crimes," the old site of London, now reduced simply to deadly poison.

[]And yet, in spite of her magic, Nature seems to have had no influence on the featuring of the new post-catastrophe social world, of which the responsibility rests wholly with men. Far from representing an escape away from the corruption and determinism of his age, Jefferies' primitive society is but a simplifying mirror which reflects Victorian society stripped to essentials in a more primitive context (Fowles). While this parodic narrative strategy suggests an easy comparison with S. Butler's *Erewhon**, the unambiguous evidence of its social satire shows how nearer Jefferies' message is to Morris's. The feudal society, described in ch. 4 as ruled by the strongest on deceit, injustice and cruelty, is actually based on the exploitation of the weakest, who live in a state of constant fear and precariousness: "Men ever trample upon men, each pushing on the front; nor is there any safety in remaining in retirement, since such are accused of biding their time and of occult designs... Were a man to study all day what he must do, and what he must not do to escape servitude, it would not be possible for him to stir one step without becoming forfeit! And yet they hypocritically say that these things are done for the sake of the public good, and that there are no slaves (not permitting the word to be used) and no man was ever sold. It is indeed true that no man is sold in open market, he is leased instead; and by a refined hypocrisy the owner of slaves cannot sell them to another owner, but he can place them in the hands of a notary... Debt alone under their laws must crowd the land with slaves ... a child from his birth is often declared to be in debt ... and thus the estates of the nobles are full of men who work during their whole lives for the profit of others." Unlike Morris' dream, Jefferies' journey* through medieval England takes the reader not far away but inside Victorian Britain and the injustices and violence of her social structure.

[]The few critics who have written on *After London* have overlooked its criticism of society preferring instead to stress the criticism of industrial development or the ambiguity and openness of its ending: as a consequence, the intention of the romance appears blurred and distorted, so allowing the attribution to Jefferies of a conventional and conservative vision. The criticism of the social system is of basic importance in the economy of the romance in order to understand Jefferies' attitude towards science and the meaning of Aquila's adventure. It is only by taking into account that the feudal setting of After London is meant to be read as a *mundus alter et idem* of the Victorian world, that we can see Aquila's journey as a journey not only into the past but also into a possible future: it is a warning. What is blamed is not science; on the contrary the ability of "the wonderful people of those times" is often praised. What is blamed is the use, or better the aim which scientific development is made to serve: profit and power. Like the degeneration of mankind in H.G.Wells' *The Time Machine**, the catastrophe is always connected to the stupidity and injustice of the economic and social system and it is therefore felt as a just punishment, a Great Purge. Aquila's voyage to the site of extinct London may be seen as a version of the descent to the abode of the Dead of classical epic. But Jefferies' is the most terrible of hells as it brings to light and embodies the nightmare hiding deeply at the bottom of bourgeois consciousness: the death of nature brought about by the blind folly of man , "the extreme desolation of the dark and barren ground... not a tree, bush, or living creature, not so much as a buzzing fly..., the sun... a billow of glowing blood, ...the earth... poison, the air poison, the very light of heaven... poison." In this surreal atmosphere powerful symbols emerge: scattered on the ground, a diamond bracelet, a heap of money and human skeletons.

[]Aquila's journey through the Victorian social system and its potential development may also be read as an exemplum of how a radical change can take place. As the Pilgrim on the brink of the Mines in Oliphant's *The Land of Darkness**, Felix is not attracted by either gold or knowledge for its own sake: "more exploration was not his object; it would never obtain Aurora for him." Like Mary with the Botanist in Wells' *A Modern Utopia**, Aurora represents the other sphere – the qualities of women , i.e. justice*, mercy, unselfishness, love*, as Abbot explains in *Flatland**; and it is this the only sphere which can provide the proper horizon in defining the extent of man's ambition and yearnings.

[]Those critics who have spoken of Jefferies' imperialistic leanings should not overlook this aspect of his work and particularly the conclusion of the romance, full of desire and yearning towards Aurora. Aurora is in fact *l'Amor che move* Aquila's journey; a symbol, in her very name, of a new beginning.

[]If we consider that *After London* is a kind of parable conveying both the dominant experience of the writer's inner life and the kernel of his philosophy of man, its narrative form should not appear so incoherent and strange as some think; it actually anticipates the three-part structure which is characteristic of twentieth-century dystopia (*The Machine Stops** and *Nineteen Eighty-Four**): the description of the dystopian world, the adventure of the protagonist, the final defeat and catastrophe*. In *After London* the collective catastrophe has already taken place, and the fact that the third stage – the individual defeat of the hero – is missing leaves some space for hope and moves the focus on the individual actions. This explains the importance of the second stage which proposes a new vision of the individual. This second part may be seen as Jefferies' own Odyssey (his favourite book), with Felix as a new Ulysses, a very different one from Tennyson's romantic hero. The journey is still the way to self-knowledge and self-fulfilment, but the relationship with Nature and the past is characterised no longer by a blind spirit of struggle and strife, but by the awareness of a vital continuity and contiguity, in spite of the various differences. What makes Aquila's journey a meaningful onward one is its very aim of going back to the past, taking it up and giving it a new life, through his individual experience. Knowledge and power are to be conceived no longer as an end in themselves, but as a means to gain love and life, as a guide to a new beginning.

[]Aquila's experience was destined to enter our collective memory not only with regard to the numerous polluted lethal sites scattered on the planet but also, and above all, with regard to the sense of guilt and impotence we feel when faced with the Faustian crimes perpetrated in the name of power and knowledge for their own sake which have caused the uncontrollable reaction of nature: "Where is now your mighty city that defied nature and despised the conquered elements – where now is your pride.? Where are your steam engines, your telegraphs, your printing presses... of what use is your bank reserve of £20.000.000 sterling against the soft, noiseless snow?"

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