Vita Fortunati, 'Utopia as a Literary Genre', in *Dictionary of Literary Utopias*, ed. by Vita Fortunati and Raymond Trousson (Paris: Champion, 2000), pp. 634-643.

Utopia is *par excellence* an interdisciplinary subject that calls for the application of diverse methodological approaches in order to be adequately understood in its full complexity. Utopia is an intriguing, polysemous subject-matter that links both ideological and literary aspects. Indeed, Utopia's dual nature, which is based on both ethics and aesthetics, puts the scholar in a complex hermeneutic position. The concept of the semantic mutability characterising the term utopia must warn the reader of the dangers of rigid connotations in the attempts at defining this term. Serious scholars of Utopia must face the tensions between two different textualities and referential realities, that is the textualities producing the utopian work and the referential realities interpreting it, often after many centuries. This complex balance between intention, historical context, different interpretations and perspectives opened by critical reflections represents the only methodological tool against distortions and misinterpretations in the analysis of Utopia, particularly nowadays when the end of Utopia is generally stated.

In the last two decades many critics have affirmed that we had witnessed an intense debate on the formal characteristics, the "literariness," in short the narrative strategies of utopia. After the seminal studies by R. Gerber (1955), N. Frye (1965) and C.S. Eliott (1970), several scholars have come back to the question of utopia as a literary genre, because many problems are still unsolved. For too many years, in fact, criticism has allowed itself to focus on the political, philosophical side of the question. Investigation into the meaning and intent of the utopian project itself has been privileged, and as a consequence, the formal aspect and rhetorical strategies specific to utopia have been largely ignored, or at the very least, relegated to the second place in the hierarchy of research priorities. The formal aspect of the utopian project, far from being marginal, is fundamental and, indeed, rightly precedes all other approaches in so much as the utopian writer makes skilful use of a range of rhetorical strategies in constructing his or her message. The utopian message, therefore, simply cannot be understood if its mode of presentation is not adequately confronted, that is to say in utopian literature there is a dynamic relationship between content and expression, a fictional mediation which any reader must reckon with if he or she would attempt to grasp its full meaning. Recently scholars (Kuon: 1986; Trousson: 1993) have set the useful notion of fictional mediation, that is, the study of the way in which meaning, in a utopian novel, is mediated through a specific literary form, keeping intertextuality into consideration. Their position is interesting because they emphasise that the utopian genre as a literary form is always *in fieri*, always evolving, as we shall see, into a more and more complex structure. The utopian novel follows both the history of forms and that of rhetoric strategies, a process by which the utopian paradigm grows richer and richer in new forms according to different historical contexts. As P. Kuon states: "The utopian project, the utopian society portrayed acquires its meaning by means of its literary (or "fictional") mediation."

Preliminary to the study of utopia as a literary genre is the distinction between Utopia (as a literary genre) and Utopianism, which is openly accepted among experts on utopia. The lack of precision in the terminology, that is, the lack of clear distinction between utopianism and utopia as a literary genre, was at the origins of the disheartening heterogeneity and disorder proper of some existing studies and

bibliographies. In these books, under the term "utopia," works that are very different are classified, from the classical literary utopias by More, Bacon and Campanella to works such as Dante's *De monarchia*, Erasmus' *Institutio principis christiani* or Sannazzaro's *Arcadia*. By Utopianism, it is generally meant that peculiar mental attitude which speculates on the alternative potentialities of experience. The "mode utopique," to say it with R. Ruyer's term, is the capacity to imagine that one is able to modify reality by means of the hypothesis of creating an order other than reality. Utopianism is, thus, a tension, the aspiration to go beyond the fixity of the present, with a vision, which is radically alternative to the reality in which the writer lives and operates.

By utopia as a literary genre it is meant a work where the utopian attitude has been translated into a literary form which presents a specific paradigm whose archetypal model is More's *Utopia* (1516). What needs to be emphasised is the extremely close link between this *mode utopique* and utopian writing itself. The utopian imagination presupposes a sense of estrangement in the face of reality. The utopian world is a world of possibility. Every utopian text begins its existence with an initial *If* from which each of its possible consequences proceeds. Utopia is a combinatorial game; a play on the possibilities that are offered us by experience. In brief, utopia is not reality but a possible reality. The game of utopia, much like that of chess, calls for a number of pieces that are subject to certain rules which, if the game is to be played well and in an orderly fashion, must be pre-determined in time and space, as the *ou-topos* has its own specific time and place. In chess, the bishop, the rook, the knight and the queen, all simulate the battle; in utopia, the *elsewhere*, the journey, the layout of some city, these simulate society. Beginning with what is generally considered the archetype of the genre, More's *Utopia*, we have this aspect of speculative play with reality – taking the form of a political proposal that is set up in contrast with a political reality. There is always a close link between the invented utopia and the social environment in which its author is situated, the alternatives offered, the representation of a radically different society, invariably springing from a lucid critique of what the present is for the writer. Indeed, the essence of utopia lies precisely in its inherent ambiguity, in its play between a design which is not-yet-real and the reality which the design contests. Such ambivalence constitutes both the strength and weakness of the genre: its strength in so much as utopia equals a tension towards the *elsewhere*, a capacity for imagining the other; its weakness because its paradigm is essentially but an abstraction of the real.

Studying the utopia as a literary genre from a semiological and formalist perspectives it means to go back and refer to a particular trend of literary criticism (semiologic and formalist) that revived the question of literary genres as fundamental in the artistic event. In a semiological perspective (Corti: 1972) genre is "the place where a text interacts, in a complex net of connections, with other texts." If this is the basis of the present theoretical approach, it is also true that there is the empirical evidence that, within our Western literary tradition, utopian texts could be seen as possessing certain unique characteristics, both semantic and formal. As a result, they could rightfully be considered to include a coherent "set" of texts, a proper chain of discourse; each separate instance consciously partakes of that which went before in a deliberately dialogic relationship between pre-established, reiterated conventions and new ones. This undeniable evidence of intertextuality and of specific text type obliged the formulation of a series of analytic hypotheses which we have attempted to verify by means of the comparative study of utopian Western literature.

One of the major risks of the approach to utopia as a literary genre is becoming entrapped in a too-rigid and static conception of genre. Those scholars who have succeeded in "discovering," in the history of the evolution of a particular genre, proofs for asserting the existence of a specific grammar have invariably had to face the knotty problem of reconciling the hypothesis of a structure that is unique with evidence of the subsequent modifications that such a structure has clearly undergone, that is of reconciling synchronic and diachronic analysis. It was in just such a situation that T. Todorov found himself when attempting to trace the history of fantastic literature as a genre. On one side he needed a scheme of reference, but in order to define such a scheme he also needed to deal with the history of such texts. As he himself put it, "A text is not only the product of an existent combination [...] it is also the product of the transformation of the combination itself [...] we must then say that all study of literature will be involved in [...] that double movement: of the work towards literature (or the genre) and of literature (and the genre) towards the text" (Todorov: 1970).

It is precisely because the study of utopian literature is made up of this intricate complex of various types of discourse that we must beware of falling into a meta-historical, abstract conception of the genre. We must constantly keep before us the fact that the forms of utopia vary from one age to the next, not solely as a result of changing aesthetic criteria, but also due to the ideological stance of separate and successive utopian writers. In short, what must be recognised, together with the "literariness" of the utopian text, is its status as historic artefact, since it is obvious that a modification in the ideological premises of a genre cannot help but be accompanied by modifications in its formal properties as well. In this perspective, then, the study of the relationship between sender (utopian writer) and receiver (the hypothetical reader) obtained in the utopian text appears to take on a new interest, not least because in this way it becomes possible to investigate the phenomenon by which a change in the ideological stand point from which a utopia is constructed triggers a contemporaneous change in the reader's *horizon of expectation* and consequently in his or her reception of the text.

It should be remembered, then, as H.R. Jauss maintains, that any literary work implies a horizon of expectation and that in order to understand its reception deeply this work must be located in a precise historical context. Moreover, only by viewing utopia as a genre, whose confines are but indefinitely delineated, are we open to investigate, in diachronic analysis, evidence of possible interference and/or contamination by other genres such as the tradition of the imaginary journey, the Robinsonnade, satire, romance, the *conte philosophique* and the novel. Thus, utopia is a genre undergoing continuous contamination, a hybrid genre in which elements of both the high tradition (like the influence of the myth of the Golden Age) and the popular tradition (like the influence of the Land of Cockaigne) are mingled and in which elements of both the great tradition of classic thought (Plato) and of Hebrew thought are present. Utopia is a "hybrid plant, born of the crossing of the paradisiacal belief of Judeo-Christian religion with the Hellenic myth of an ideal city on earth" (F.E. Manuel and F.P. Manuel 1979). Indeed, those who have gone in search of the archetypes of the utopian idea (e.g. C. Walsh: 1962, F. Polak: 1962, J.O. Hertzler: 1965) have been obliged to admit that the Greek ideals of *The Republic* and Plato's Laws meet and intermingle with the Judeo-Christian Biblical tradition – especially its Messianic (*parousia*), millenarian (*chiliasmos*), and apocalyptic aspects – even in the earliest traces of the genre. It is, indeed, this dual origin which makes utopia the complex genre it is, it being inevitable that the substantive differences in the two philosophical traditions should inform the

utopian vision in markedly diverse ways. Boman, in his seminal comparative study of Greek and Hebrew philosophy (1960), notes how the Greek conception of history is cyclical, without direction, history is seen as working towards a goal, pre-destined by an omniscient Creator. Whereas Hebrew thought moves primarily in time, the realm of its Greek counterpart is more properly space (think of the characteristics spaces of mythical Hellas: the Elysian Fields or the "Isles of the Blessed," Atlantis, etc.). It is precisely this sense of historical becoming that Hebrew thought introduced into the Utopian tradition: a teleological time that progresses towards an end that is the Promised Land.

What are then the characteristics of the utopian genre? To propose a rough definition of utopian narrative, then, one might say that it is the detailed and systematic description – achieved either in a positive sense or in an ironic-negative (or dystopian, anti-utopian) sense – of an alternative society, one which emerges in opposition to that within which the writer operates. The Utopian genre has been guided by two tendencies, two spirits, if you will, from its very inception. The first of these is best expressed by Thomas More's *Utopia*, and can be identified by its positive, lay design, that is, an optimistic faith in human beings' continuing ability to reform by means of a just social order. The second guiding tendency is best illustrated by Joseph Hall's *Mundus Alter et Idem* (1607), which subsequently influenced Jonathan Swift, Samuel Butler, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, to name but the best-known writers in a long tradition; it is the negative, the critical, the destructive spirit which undermines the model of Utopian perfectibility with its lucid but hopeless assertion of the fact that human beings are essentially evil. Anti-utopian worlds appear inextricably joined to Utopia from their very beginnings; thus we can speak in terms of a single genre marked by two distinct veins and can see how over the centuries, anti-utopia has pursued, so to ironically say, its predecessor in an incessant process of systematic dismantling of both its thematic and formal structure. Indeed, anti-utopia has operated from the start in dialectic relationship with the form and content of Utopia; a dialectic, however, which has seen the final demise of one of the contenders. In other words, it is as though there has been a termite eating its way slowly through the insides of Utopia; such is the effect of this parodic intertextuality. In fact, the whole of the anti-utopian tradition can be read as a continuous retelling and rewriting of the archetype represented by More's *Utopia*.

D. Suvin noted how the diverse definitions which had been proposed in the course of time all had one thing in common: the noun "description," or some other synonym that stressed this quality of literary fiction, or of verbal construction, particular to the utopian text. In short, the very nature and essence of utopia is *descriptive* and the ambition of the utopian writer, not unlike that of a newly-ordained demiurge, is, according to L. Marin (1973) "to project, into the language, a total and perfect presence to the spirit." In Utopian works description is given priority over narration, that is, it literally eliminates narration: the plot, the action and the hero's adventures exist only before and after the utopian event, not in the course of it, because the utopian place is characterised by the suspension of the action and of time. One leaves the historical world to enter a parallel universe where everything is given and nothing changes. The utopian place is always described in minute detail, with an obsession for particulars that seem to have been set up in diametric opposition to the historical and geographical indeterminacy of reality. To the maximum of abstraction corresponds this maximum of concreteness, together with a transparency that would hide no detail of the mechanisms at work in its "other" place. The opacity of our real world vanishes and in its place we have the crystalline transparency of this world that is "other."

Utopia, then, is invariably marked by this net refusal of the world-as-it is, a breaking of all bonds with historical reality, and a *tension-aspiration* towards the ideal. The vehicle that translates this aspiration into literary form is the journey. Schematically speaking, one might say that at the very base of the utopian text lies this mythical constant of the journey, implicitly and/or explicitly. Indeed, it becomes a sort of metaphor which lends form and structure to the utopian novel. What is peculiar to this type of narrative is that such a constant should be inserted into the context of a literary form that is characterised by rational description, regarding, for example, the government of some state. To put it another way, this myth of the journey as a struggle, as an arduous path that humanity must venture upon if it would know truth, is filtered, is made historical, through reason. The utopian genre presents us with texts whose systematically rational constructions (including the categories of modern political thought they adopt) are, quite paradoxically but quite profoundly, rooted in myth, and it is precisely this latter aspect of the utopian text which helps us to grasp the full extent of its complexity.

The journey in Utopia is not a mere technical device in order to enter utopian otherness. To the traveller, Utopia, the place of harmony and of absolute good, does not immediately appear as a whole, it is never a datum but it is the end of a path, a gradual discovery, the final step of an initiatory itinerary. In this respect, the journey influences the structure of the utopian project itself, for the knowledge of the country as other is gradual and proceeds either through the dialectic dialogue between the character-narrator and his guide or through the traveller's real journey inside Utopia.

As already pointed out, there is a continuous interplay between utopia and other literary genres. Since its very origin utopian literature is strictly connected with travel literature and the imaginary voyage. These genres are connected by a fascinating intertextuality and circularity that produce a series of recurrent topoi and stereotypes relating not only to the description of a place of otherness, but also to its inhabitants. It is sufficient to mention the explicit references in *Utopia* by Thomas More, to Amerigo Vespucci's travels and to the characteristics of the expert seaman that More gives to Raphael Hythloday (it is known that More and Erasmus were acquainted with Lucian's travel reports as well as it is known that among the book on Columbus' table there were both *Mandeville's Travels* and *Il Milione*). The rhetoric strategies common to both utopian writers and travellers were used to describe the place that is other as well as the paradoxical play between reality and fiction, with a continuous reference to Lucian who made of lies the basic element of his narration.

The other genre to which utopia is usually related is satire: scholars like Frye (1957) and Elliott (1970) have considered Menippean satire as the genre more closely related to utopia. As a matter of fact, these genres do not concentrate on psychological characterization, but rather describe the characters as the spokesmen of the ideas they represent. Secondly, they are characterised by a kind of intellectual fantasy which has always had a didactic aim. Thirdly, even the device of dialogue seen as a conflict of ideas is at the core of both genres. If these features are common to both genres, the satirical writer lacks the global attitude of rejection towards his society which would lead him to project a new or alternative world or, in the case of negative utopia, he lacks the total rejection to be expressed in a systematic description of the reality made absurd; indeed, the satirical writer analytically ridicules and denunciates the social values he judges false and hypocrite. It is true that utopia is always a criticism of the writer's

society but, unlike satire, it always aims, implicitly or explicitly, at a systematic description of society as it should be.

Utopia is also strictly connected to romance, fantasy and the fantastic genre. The world of utopia is, as it has been pointed out, the world of possibilities; there is no ambiguity, uncertainty, above all the supernatural, a category of the fantastic genre. The world of utopia is inhabited not by gnomes, goblins, dragons, fairies, but by human beings. In this sense utopian fantasy is unlike the marvellous or the fabulous, which are realms dominated by their own laws with no reference to everyday life. If this distinction proves useful to delineate the characteristics of the utopian genre, its history is marked by constant contaminations with the above mentioned genres: in utopian literature of the nineteenth century one can notice a universe ruled by manichean laws, or the schematic typology of the characters, or the re-working of some natural element with a clear symbolic meaning: the typical elements of romance. Still, we can find out modes of writing which utopia borrows from the fantastic genre because they are functional to the creation of the atmosphere of estrangement typical of the utopian novel. They are the "instrumental marvellous" and the "exotic marvellous": the former is employed by the utopian writer to describe the ingenious machines used to reach the other country; the latter is the use of hyperbole as well as of superlative adjectives aimed to conjure up the atmosphere of estrangement while defining the utopian setting.

If the relationship between utopia and the novel from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century is not constant, it becomes crucial in the present century. As a matter of fact, the anti-utopian novels of the twentieth century are marked by the introduction of psychological characterization, where the character is portrayed in his conflict with the totalitarian state system he opposes. The crisis of the utopian novel is followed by the end of the harmony between the individual and society, between the individual and the whole of other individuals. Starting from this opposition between the hero and the surrounding world, utopia introduces the main components of the novel: action, plot, the development of a story which is no longer external to utopia but its very essence. In twentieth century anti-utopia the reader finds himself at once within utopia and the classical character of the traveller becomes his critical conscience, the nervous centre of the narration: it is the diary, like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or in *We*, which signals a new awareness of the protagonists, and it is the mark of difference they bear, like in *Brave New World*, which make them unlike any other character.

Another example of this continuous contamination is evident when analysing the relationship between utopia and twentieth century science-fiction as well as the metamorphoses the utopian genre has undergone when turned into science fiction. The basic structure of the latter remains that of utopia, but it is sometimes enriched or degraded by its mingling with narrative devices and techniques borrowed from other literary genres (the detective story, the gothic novel, the feuilleton and so on). Science-fiction, as the term itself indicates, revives two main components of utopia, the marvellous fantastic elements and the practical ones, which are here mainly involved with the scientific and technological aspects of society. In the first interplanetary journey imagined by Francis Godwin in *The Man in the Moone* (1638), a kind of archetype of the science-fiction genre, both aspects are tightly connected and interwoven. On the one hand, the elements of the fantastic marvellous appear in the description of the gansa, the birds by which the sidereal space can be reached; on the other the practical ones typical of a realistic project. In science-fiction the universe, even though extending beyond the nebula, does not alter its nature. It goes on being

regulated by the same laws. From a general point of view we can say that the twentieth century science fiction, above all the more compensatory and escapist, is a popular genre which has neutralized the political arguments present in utopian literature.

From a structural point of view, the utopian text is characterised by a stereotype of both plot and form. Plot consists of the journey, which may be sub-divided into the *journey there*, the *sojourn*, and the *journey back;* the description of the utopian place is decidedly privileged over that of the journey there and back, and the central part of the text is given over the description-exposition of the socio-political principles on which it is based. As already observed, that the utopian writer is not concerned with the representation of psychological states or introspection. Though highly predictable, innovations in the plot are not uncommon. One of the most frequent additions, especially in 19th century utopian novels, is the introduction of the love intrigue. This is done to cater to the tastes of the vast majority of readers at a given point in time. Unfortunately, we cannot say that the female protagonist is introduced due to any desire to paint the feminine psychology in any depth. She is there for the sole purpose of adding a bit of zest to the tale. On the other hand, male characters are primarily but spokesmen for his or her ideas. In utopian texts, the character functions served are in essence two: the main character who is both traveller and narrator and the guide.

The function of this traveller-narrator within the text is to bring an outside point of view to the representation of the particular society being described -- an extraneous object, seen in this light. But this character-traveller is a double character because his function is that of mediating between two worlds, the ancient and the new; thus, his role proves ambiguous in this acting both inside and outside Utopia. Like the ethnologist, as Lévy-Strauss points out in his book *Le regard éloigné*, the traveller must proceed with a double movement of detachment (dépaisement) and assimilation in order to get in contact with the otherness. This double movement is evident in the techniques adopted for the description of the place that is other: a series of stylistic devices are very important in this kind of narration (the utopian and the travel literature) because they must induce a vision in the reader. The technical device of the "estrangement" is characterised by a double movement of detachment from what is other and its assimilation. The traveller is a character escaping from the society to which he belongs, he is an outsider capable of being different and then identifying with others and integrating. He represents the point of connection between two entities that could not communicate otherwise. His role as a mediator once again underlines the ambiguous relationship between Utopia and otherness: in order to be perfect (Benrekassa: 1983; Imbroscio: 1896), Utopia must face the imperfection characterising the outside world.

The representation of the clash between the two worlds, the utopian world and the historical world, is operated by means of dialogue: the eminently dialectic literary resource through which differing points of view mix and meet head on. This dialogic quality would appear inextricably linked to the juxtaposition between being-as-it-is and being-as-it-should-be inherent in the utopian text. Moreover, it is by means of this traveller-narrator speaking in the first person singular that the author is able to create various levels of ambiguity and ironic fractures in the narrative texture, depending upon the degree of identification or split between narrator and authorial point of view that is operated. This split is clearly evident in anti-utopias where the protagonist-traveller, as befits the rhetorical code of satire, becomes a sort of ambiguous double-faced masquerader, a mouthpiece which the anti-utopian author freely uses to denounce the world's folly. In many of these anti-utopian novels there is an ironic two-sided

relationship between author and character; at moments their compatibility is perfect, at others, the author steps back, and, as a God, throws an ironic glance upon his creature. Finally, this first person singular narrative voice becomes a tool through which the utopian writer ironically persuades the reader that what is being described has actually been seen, touched and heard by the traveller-narrator himself.

The variety within the genre is but superficial and consists simply in the various types of journeys that take place, whether they be in time, in space, underground, etc. These may be further classified according to the means of transportation variously employed: strange birds, space ships, and so on. And time travel is not infrequently accomplished by means of sleep, or dream (perhaps even drug-induced). The sense of estrangement created can also be enhanced by diverse means: the inversion between small and large or the overturning of the natural man-animal relation. These have often been effectively utilised in the construction of dystopias presenting a curious combination of the negative utopia and the traditional fairy tales techniques.

A structural marker of the utopian text is its "verbal inventiveness," the creation by these writers of extravagant place names that are not without symbolic, if at time ambiguous, meaning. It will suffice us to recall a few of the fanciful evocative names of islands marked on the map of Utopia -- Oceania, Christianopolis, Jansenia, Gerania, Lewistania, Icaria – or some of those given by the Italian writer Calvino in his *Le città invisibili* (1972) – Ipazia, Armilla, Eutropia and so on.

This penchant for the neologism would appear to underline a close link between the utopian text and the magical-religious utterance: by means of the word, the *logos*, the thing is created, discourse thus becoming a partner in the reality-making process. Language is therefore central to the utopian text, both as a linguistic game of invention (e.g., anagrams, puns), a kind of semantic challenge the reader must take up in an attempt at decoding, correctly, the text, and as the need to create a new idiom which will be the vehicle of the new society, a set of pure and perfect terms in which to couch the new world's perfection. Thus, utopia must also be viewed as the rich linguistic vein of lexicon-grammatical invention and discovery it has, over time, become.

Neither, however, can we ignore the iconographic aspect of utopia in a systematic examination of its verisimilitude: these myriad geographical drawings, maps of the islands and city plans, the glossaries and even alphabets, the sketches of complicated machinery, all of which constitute an essential part of the utopian message. Disturbing though these may be in their obsession with detail, they display once again the utopian writer's capacity for semiotic inventiveness and are rich in symbolic meaning. Indeed, their relation to the written text is frequently far from unequivocal.

Utopia as a literary genre is characterized by a specific structural paradigm as well as by some semantic constants which can be seen, according to Ruyer, as deriving from the utopian frame of mind. They are, to mention but a few, insularism, the geometrical attitude, dirigism, the myth of absolute transparency, collectivism, and pedagogism. These thematic constants can change owing to different historical contexts as well as to the different personalities and biographies of the utopian writers. Indeed, there is a complex interplay between biographical events and utopian writing which utopian psychoanalitical criticism has attempted to highlight. On the one hand, we can delineate some traits and features typical of the utopian frame of mind: the utopian writer is a reformer, a pedagogist who believes that teaching can modify man, a law maker who uses the laws in order to create a society of wiser and more righteous men; on the other hand, the very historical events in which the utopian writer participates and above all his

particular idiosyncrasies and his personality introduce in Utopia those new elements through which the genre can renew and modify itself.

It is important to underline that even one of the most influential Italian experts on utopia, an eminent scholar of the history of political doctrines, L. Firpo, in his studies he has highlighted the formal and fictional aspects of utopian texts. For him it was precisely this aspect which most particularly characterised and distinguished the utopian text and set it apart from the political treatise, the legal code and the reform schemes. It is certainly true that utopian literature has provided us with literary forms of expressions that are in effect poses, cryptic modes of critically dissecting social institutions and political power. In the history of the genre such "literariness" has been a source of both precise advantages and disadvantages: the fundamental advantage has been the possibility it has offered to the utopian writer for publicly airing what for the system may result heretical or even subversive themes, or perhaps simply ideas that are ahead of the author's time and place. On the other hand, the disadvantage may spring from the fact that the utopian message does not always receive complete decodification: the reader somehow stops short of an adequate reading, and remains at the surface of the tale where the work is but a mere literary exercise, a game, a *jeu d'esprit* offering a pleasantly escapist digression, but little more.

Unlike the political treatise, a utopian text, due to its fictional form, sets up a dialogue with its reader that can be articulated at various levels. In speaking of Thomas More's *Utopia* B. Baczko has perceptively defined the understanding, the complicity between the utopian writer and his or her ideal reader as a kind of agreement, a pact, which is rooted in the reader's awareness and acceptance of the codes and conventions that dictate the construction of the utopian paradigm.

Now it is undeniable that these fictional trappings and especially the technique of the verisimilitude, painstakingly employed by utopian writers in these texts make their reading a stimulating adventure, much more so that the political treatise, with its rigid and arid thematic presentation. A. Cioranescu (1972) rightly observes that from the point of view of classic literary canon there is no utopia that can be judged a faultless work of art. In fact, as we have highlighted, the structure of the utopian tale is frankly standardised and stereotyped. And yet, despite these structural limits, the utopian text is undeniably capable of provoking in its reader curiously strong reactions of identification and desire. In the structure of the utopian text at least three levels of discourse can be divided: that of myth or fantasy, that of the socio-political, and that of norm prescription. Hence, the myriad variety of possible reader's responses to these texts. The intimate link between concept and narrative scheme, political themes and the images meant to represent them, which are constructed in the utopian discourse, can but fail to create in the reader a double pleasure. On the one hand, what we have is the intellectual pleasure which stems from contemplating the ingenious product of the utopian mind, a perfect mechanism much like a game of combination of the diverse possibilities of experience. On the other hand, the pleasure also consists in the vision of the ideal society, entirely devoid of the evils and adversities of one's present life, taking form out there, at a distance, in a topographically remote or inexistent place and totally outside of historical time. The pleasure springs from the vision itself, so delightfully meaningful, yet also lies in the reader's awareness of the illusory quality of this same vision -- a vision which, paradoxically, becomes almost real to the reader within the space created by the tale as a result of the obsessive pain and precision in representing the detail of everyday life taken by its writer. The exquisite pleasure the utopian writer experiences

has in the creation of the absolute otherness of this perfectly harmonious world thus becomes the pleasure of the reader who ends up identifying with this fictitious invention, so that what we witness is a conflation of the imaginations of utopian writer and reader taking place through the text.

More was deeply aware of this fundamental characteristic of the utopian novel, that is, that of being "a speaking picture," as P. Sidney said of poetry. At the end of Book One, Raphael Hythloday, answering to the objections of his interlocutors, Peter Giles and More himself, on the validity of the institutions of Utopia's society, strongly states: "But you should have been with me in Utopia, and seen with your own eyes their manners and customs as I did -- for I lived there more than five years, and would never have left, if it had not been to make that new world known to others." Thus, Utopia must first of all convince the reader through the force of imagination and, indeed, this is what More suggests to Raphael Hythloday: "Then, let me implore you, my dear Raphael," said I, "to describe that island to us. Do not try to be brief, but explain in order everything relating to their land, their rivers, towns, people, manners, institutions, laws -- everything, in short, that you think we would like to know. And you can take it for granted that we want to know everything that we don't know yet."

One of the most stimulating directions in the study of utopia as a literary genre is focused on the controversial debate if utopia is traditionally a male genre. Women's Studies have revisioned the history of Utopias from the woman's point of view and have revealed a profound gap between the reformist intention shown by the Utopian author in writing his innovative political-economic or religious proposals and his moralistic and censorial conservatism when dealing with the problem of women. Utopian projects which for the man incarnate man's tensions and desire for renewal, for the woman, on the other hand, do not represent an *alternative place*. In the traditional Utopia, there is no possibility for women to go beyond the real which means, for her, *subordination, enslavement and subjection* (G. Pezzuoli: 1978). When dealing with this subject, the utopian writer does not do so in a critical manner but merely repeats the myths and customs of the patriarchal society of the time: on the one hand, woman becomes the object of his desire, on the other, there is the prevailing image of woman who gives life and who dispenses goods and values. The history of Utopia in a female perspective revealed the duplicity of the image of woman in Western culture: on the one hand, woman appears as a "land to be cultivated," "womb," exalted and sublimated because of her deep link with the natural cycles of the Earth; on the other hand, woman as an obscure, threatening force, with an insatiable sexual appetite. Thus, Utopia becomes either the place in which the Utopian writer gives voice to the most unrestrained erotic aspirations or the place in which the fear of sex and woman is exorcised by rigorous eugenic practices. To confirm this, we can also see the same tenacious conservatism in the treatment of the female character in the twentieth century dystopias, which should be read as a critique of the limits of traditional Utopian thought. Therefore we have Lenina, Linda and Julia, the female characters in *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell. Lenina, Linda and Julia appear to be perfectly integrated in the system and incapable of rebellion. The subordinate position of women in Utopia could be explained by the fact that the majority of Utopias of the past were written by men. But this explanation is insufficient because the few Utopias written by women do not present a radically new vision compared to the male Utopias. In these Utopias, in fact, a patriarchal vision is replaced by a matriarchal vision in which men have been eliminated (see, for example,

some Utopias in which the myth of the Amazons is taken up again), but the image and the roles of women only appear to be *new* because, in reality, these women in power blindly repeat and ape male roles. On the other hand, the incapacity and impotence of these women to think of themselves as independent subjects is the historical consequence of the fact that power management, be it political or religious, and economic planning and scientific research were the prerogative and sphere of male domination.

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, there has been a considerable flourishing of Utopian and science-fiction writing by women, especially in North America. This rebirth of Utopia as a literary genre can be explained by the happy marriage between feminism and Utopism. The Utopian and science-fiction genre is seen by women writers both as a privileged strategy for deconstructing the patriarchal system, responsible for the exclusion and oppression of women, and as fertile ground for narrative and stylistic experimentation, searching for a *female utopian language*. One of the aspects which Feminism has in common with Utopia is not only the desire to criticize and deconstruct the *status quo*, but also, and more importantly, the desire to present a world which is radically different from the present: that is, a world no longer structured on the rigid traditional division of sexual roles, a world capable of giving voice "to the female territory of difference." Female Utopian writing of the last thirty years, in fact, has given voice to new Utopian models which are desirable because they exalt the real values of female culture: pacifism, ecology and decentralization of power. These Utopias comes to represent, for an ever increasing number of women writers, the possibility of giving voice to an unexplored female universe, as they represent unusual situations as well as experimentation with new behavioural models. Utopia, as journey in time and space, could only be a splendid metaphor of this adventure in a territory not yet completely explored by the female consciousness. Therefore Utopia, as a project for a new alternative reality, also becomes a metaphor of the "*new woman*," a new concept of the female far away from the discriminations forged by patriarchal culture. One of the most important science-fiction writers, Ursula Le Guin, has significantly tried to construct a new female utopian paradigm based on the concept of critical utopia: she has enacted a dialectic dialogue with the Western Utopian tradition dominated by a reason which wants to control every aspect of reality and, above all, emphasizes the dominating and imperialistic vein which underscores much Utopian and science-fiction literature. The new critical Utopias written by Ursula Le Guin not only criticize, unmask and investigate the imperfections of present-day society, but also those of the alternative society, of the Utopia itself, which is not in the least immune from errors, problems and failures. The Utopia, then, is no longer static and is no longer a system which has been planned one time for all, but is a Utopia as a continuous battle to achieve a better world.

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