Spaces of Utopia

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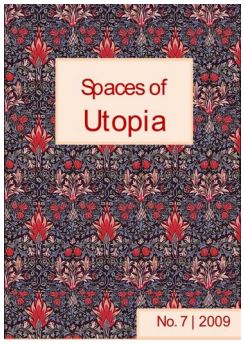

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Utopia Matters

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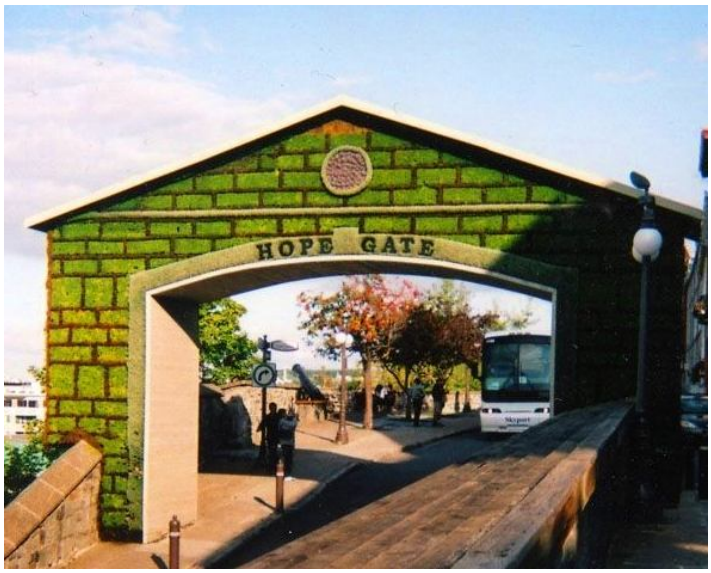

Hope Gate, Quebec City, Canada

The recent economic crisis has forced a discussion of the future of utopianism that had been declared pointless after the Fall of the Berlin Wall: What is the future of late capitalist society? How do we or indeed can we now imagine a post-capitalist, post peak-oil, post-industrial global society based on principles of sustainability, community and self-sufficiency? But then again, has the end of utopia, the end of history not already been declared after 1945, 1968 and again after 1989?[1] Why get entangled again in seemingly futile, fragmented and minimal utopian gestures? Wasn't Huxley right in *Brave New World Revisited* (1959) when he suggested that conspicuous consumerism would replace utopian dreaming?

Yet, the US election results on the 5th of November seem to indicate that Utopian hope can fuel political change. Barack Obama's victory and inaugural speeches tap into specifically American utopianism: "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer" (Obama 2008). Like Columbia in Gast's allegorical representation of America's manifest destiny, the new US will update "the great experiment of liberty" and "reclaim the American Dream" for all (Weinberg 1935: 45).

John Gast, *American Progress*, *ca* 1872

Ironically, the libertarian Milton Friedman may have been correct in his assumption that only a crisis will promote true change (Friedman 1982 [1962]). Antonio Negri recently compared our postmodern, late capitalist condition to a "porcelain factory", a delicate and fragile construction that needs an alternative political practice, one that is truly utopian (Negri 2008). I would like to take this brief reflection as an opportunity to contemplate the many possibilities for utopian thinking that present themselves to us now (for a similar brief, see also Vieira /Freitas 2005).

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One of the problems after 1945 and 1989 was that utopia was quite carelessly equated, on the one hand, with ideology, on the other, with a specific model of utopia; the classical utopia in the vein of Thomas More. Equally, as the modern age documents, utopias have had the tendency to turn into horrific dystopias and consequently are dismissed *apriori*. The end of history, the end of utopia means the end of ideology (and thus the end of a fundamental human desire). This is a problematic equation in itself.[2] On the one hand, we must acknowledge that utopias were written after 1989, integrating, in the case of Germany and Central Europe, the re-invention and creation of new nation states (Sargent 2005: 2). Utopian desire was thus never quenched. On the other hand, the equation of utopia with ideology assumes that neoliberalism is not an ideology but a science. But is neoliberalism nothing else than endless exploitation, wrapped in the coat of "ultra-logical Utopianism" which draws its persuasiveness from the basic structural elements of a cult religion?[3] Thus, concludes Michael Winter: "Utopians do not dream anymore. In the affluent society of the modern Industrial West, Utopian Dreams have degenerated into advertising slogans" (Winter 1993: 300).[4] The Disneyfication of utopia, the creation of "a supposedly happy, harmonious, and non-conflictual space" serves "to soothe and mollify, to entertain, to invent history and to cultivate nostalgia from some mythical past, to perpetuate the fetish of commodity culture rather than to critique it" (Harvey 2000: 166-167). Capitalism is a naturalized but hidden ideology that governs every aspect of our world.[5] As Margaret Thatcher concluded, 'There is no Alternative' (TINA).

In his recent book Robert Kagan pessimistically declares the 'end of dreams' in that the neo-liberalist doctrine of freedom and democracy has failed as a universal utopia – a problematic desire in itself. The current collision between emerging autocratic systems in China and Russia and Western democracies does not call for another dream or ideology (for Kagan, synonymous concepts) but for a 'concert of democracies' (Kagan 2008: 97). This is, to Kagan, the only pragmatic answer to the 'excessive optimism' of the 1990s (a relic of the Enlightenment) and the recent economic 'excessive pessimism' (*idem,* 99). Sally Kitch blames utopianism for a range of political fallacies and proposes a theoretical framework that is based on "post-utopian realism" to restart "humanity from scratch" (Kitch 2000: 9, 1). Ironically, to "restart humanity from scratch" is nothing else than an expression of utopian desire itself. In a similar vein, Anthony Giddens calls for a 'utopian realism' that creates the illusion of radical change within the existing system of social and economic exploitation (Giddens 1991: 154-158). Immanuel Wallerstein dismisses the idea of utopianism as politically useful and coins the term *utopistics* to highlight how reform based on rationality can be and indeed is the most constructive and historically possible (Wallerstein 1998). Klaus Kraemer thus argues for 'intertemporal rationality' that tailors market economy to ecological sustainability (Kraemer 1996: 234). What is missing in these responses is the aspect of utopia that propels visions of a different or better world beyond the existing status quo.

Considering this, the degenerate consumer utopias wrapped recently into marketing slogans of 'new frugality', 'new thriftiness' or 'simple living' are mere

mockery of a very important strand within the utopian tradition of voluntary simplicity.[6] Weekend supplements of broadsheets, new magazines like *Simple Living* and a whole new blog and publishing range on living sustainable lives, downsizing and 'Living on a pound per day' (Kath Kelly) create a new 'green' and 'thrifty' consumer. Some years ago, Germany's *MediaMarkt* coined advertising slogans such as 'Geiz ist geil!' ['thriftiness is awesome'] and 'Ich bin doch nicht blödi' ['I'm not stupid'] to attract the 'new' thrifters. The desire of competing manufacturers to gain advantage in the new 'green' market causes them to ruthlessly exploit the ecological conscience of consumers that derives also from an erroneous conception of nostalgia for a simple life.

Our present economic-psychic constitution indeed is epitomized in the return of nostalgia.[7] Some critics read the postmodern nostalgia as "historical inversion", a distortion of the present through "nostalgia-tinted spectacles", as a weak evasion of "the work of mourning" (Bakhtin 1981: 147; Jameson 1991: 290; Ricoeur 1988: 206). The 'backward look', warn sceptics, will exile us from the present, and turns us into lifeless pillars of salt in our attachment to the past. As the desired past (and a sense of home) never existed, the act of remembrance is illusion, fulfilment is never possible. This unreflected nostalgia conceals historical suffering and discord, real social relations and a privileged class, or turns the simple life into a heritage industry. The postmodern nostalgia fabricates a remembrance of times past ("armchair nostalgia") and of things that we never lost (Reiss 1983: 193; Appadurai 1996: 77-8).

Recent studies have emerged post-1989 from former Eastern Block countries where experiences of drastic and sudden political and social changes have also inspired this kind of nostalgia.[8] "Ostalgia", the counterfeit desire for a simpler, more straightforward past that never existed emerged fairly quickly after 1989.[9] Talk was even of plans to build a GDR theme park in the Oberschöneweide district of Berlin. This problematic nostalgia has by now been questioned by more recent productions like *Der Rote Kakadu* (*The Red Cockatoo*, 2005) and *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2006) which remind the audience of the violence and terror of living in the GDR beyond the Trabant, Spreewald gherkins and 'Ossi Kitsch'.

The other response to the modern condition and certainly to the recent financial crisis is the reawakened Randian utopia of unfettered capitalism. Ayn Rand's absolute belief in American Enlightenment ideals of technological progress and outright individualism (an equation of scientific and technological progress with social progress), the transformation of the capitalist producers into 'Captains of Industry' and her uncritical celebration of the American Dream that elevates the individual to the fundamental unit of American society have attracted prominent followers.[10] "[M]an must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. To live for his own sake means that *the achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose*" (Rand 1964: 20). It is interesting that the *Ayn Rand Centre for Individual Rights* and especially its Executive Director Yaron Brook have been very active recently. Taking his cue from Rand's novel, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), Brook contends that "[w]hen America's

markets are finally free of all coercion – in other words, when laissez-faire is achieved – financial crises such as the one we're experiencing will never happen again" (Brook 2008). John Galt, in *Atlas Shrugged*, warns of the crisis turning point: "Yes, this *is* an age of moral crisis", "Are you now crying: No, this was not what you wanted? A mindless world of ruins was not your goal?" (Rand 1999 [1957]: 929). The world in ruins is the world we have now and, according to Rand's followers, can only be rescued by the Utopia of Greed.[11]

In the above responses to late modernity, the radical potential of utopia is at best reduced to a mere means of socio-political critique, at worst abused as political spin. Whilst the classical utopia is outdated and has been overtaken, certainly since the eighteenth century by the temporal utopia and the critical utopia, a "contemporary utopianism (…) needs to resort to a *utopian heuristic* or *art of invention*" (Hudson 2003: 2). But how can we think a creative utopian heuristic that is radical and meaningful? As Jameson puts forward, "[w]e have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic" (Jameson 1983: 125).

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Already Thomas More's seminal *Utopia* (1516) remorselessly records the political and social ailments of early modern Europe. It echoes principal humanist

debates on the best state government, civic self-government, social equality, political wisdom in the light of the development of absolutism and early capitalism. Whereas in Book I, England is seen as held in the clutches of agrarian capitalism where "sheep (...) become so great devourers and so wild, that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves" (More 1992: 26), the Utopians in Book II recognize the true value of material goods and class distinction: "for the smaller or finer thread of wool, which self-same wool (be it now in never so fine a spun thread) a sheep did once wear, and yet was she all that time no other thing than sheep" (*idem*, 82). Some of these issues were also discussed by More's friends and contemporaries such as Erasmus in *Adages* (*Chiliades Adagiorum*, 1502-32) or his *The Praise of Folly* (1511). The paradigm governing the *Adages* was the principle of *amicorum communia omnia* ('Friends hold all things in Common'), the spirit of true community that we also find in *Utopia.*

Nineteenth-century utopians and utopian socialists such as Robert Owen, William Morris and Henry David Thoreau, to name but a few, challenged the inherent flaws of industrial capitalism and offered different socio-economic blueprints. The ruthlessness of companies and nations under the pretext of liberty, wealth and transcendental freedom was noted by George Santayana. In the twenty-first century, Naomi Klein redefined this capitalist ruthlessness as 'Disaster Capitalism' that seeks to exploit political or economic disasters to pursue the ultimate realization of neo-liberalism (Klein 2007). Santayana saw the liberalist market economy as one stage of the life cycle of industrial capitalism. The paradigm of infinite progress, a problematic inheritance from the Enlightenment is,

according to Santayana, a mere superstition. His "Alternatives to Liberalism" (1934) points towards the Kantian project of perpetual peace in a cosmopolitical world (Santayana 1934: 761-762).[12]

The patriotic utopianism of the US, reignited by the recent elections of the American President, has thus long been countered by the Utopia of a United Europe.[13] Victor Hugo's speech at the International Peace Congress of 1849 called for "a common thought, common interests, and a common destiny" amongst the Europeans:

> A day will come when there will be no battlefields, but markets opening to commerce and minds opening to ideas. A day will come when the bullets and bombs are replaced by votes, by universal suffrage, by the venerable arbitration of a great supreme senate which will be to Europe what Parliament is to England, the Diet to Germany, and the Legislative Assembly to France (Paris, August 21, 1849).[14]

Previously, Gottfried Leibniz, in *Corpus Juris Gentium* (1693), Abbé de St. Pierre and of course Immanuel Kant's treatise on *Perpetual Peace* (1795) considered the reciprocity of a peace that ensures security, law and order in a 'universal community'.[15] Certainly Immanuel Kant envisaged a world community governed by cosmopolitan law, a "community [that] widely prevails among the Earth's peoples" (Kant 2003 [1795]: 18). Whilst Robert Kagan describes Kant as a mere Utopian, we need to understand that Kant saw his essay as "an amendment to the unwritten code of national and international rights, necessary to the public rights of men in general" (Kagan 2004: 18). President Barack Obama's utopian investment in the US as the promoter for change is interestingly supplemented by a reference to Thomas Paine in the inaugural speech. Obama's quote from Paine's *Crisis* pamphlets (1776-1783) underpins Obama's gesture but should also remind us that Paine proposed a

'Congress of Nations' governed by common principles of equality, justice and peace. Cosmopolitan webs of co-operation are the only weapon against, as George Washington warned in his Farewell Address, the "baneful effects of the spirit of party" (Washington 1796: 16). Utopia is and must be flexible, heterogeneous, local yet global, located at the blurring boundaries of the aesthetic, ethical, juridical and political. Utopia demonstrates the continual exploration of that which is possible. But, "[u]nlike the fantasy of the Rapture, the apocalyptic erasure that allows the ethereal escape of true believers, local people's renewal movements begin from the premise that there is no escape from the substantial messes we have created and that there has already been enough erasure – of history, of culture, of memory" (Klein 2007: 466). To be 'shock resistant', to be truly Utopian, instead of starting from scratch, we need to start "from scrap, from the rubble that is all around" (*ibidem*).

Thus, to Margaret Thatcher, I would have answered 'TATA' – 'There are Thousand Alternatives'![16]

Notes

[1] The film *Die fatten Jahre sind vorbei* (*The Educators*, 2004) addressed the 'sell-out' of the utopian ideals of 1968 generation in the character of Hardenberg. He had been a leader of the Socialist German Student Union and was once friends with Rudi Dutschke, before eventually marrying, getting a job in the financial business and abandoning his ideals.

[2] See Louis Althusser, "Marxism and Humanism", where he deals with a very different 'end of history' (Althusser 1964: 109-133); see also Sargent 2008: 263-273.

[3] See Bourdieu 1998 and Benjamin (1991 [1921]): 100-103.

[4] Translation mine. See also Jacoby 2005.

[5] See Slavoj Žižek's *Organs without Bodies* (2003), which engages with the unspoken truths about capitalism and neo-liberalism.

[6] See for instance the Quaker's *Testimony of Simplicity*, the principles of the Shakers, Amish, Mennonites, *The Fellowship of the New Life*, Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Richard Gregg's *The Value of Voluntary Simplicity* (1936), E. F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* (1973) or Duane Eligin's *Voluntary Simplicity* (1981).

[7] It is also exemplified in the increase of mental health problems in the affluent world. For more popular work on this, see Oliver James's *Affluenza* (2007).

[8] See the online magazine *n/osztalgia*, a joint project of two magazines, *Plotki* (Berlin) and *Anthropolis* (Budapest), and the publication *n/osztalgia – ways of revisiting the socialist past* (2007).

[9] The films *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) and *Kleinruppin Forever* (2004) are such result of the 'failed utopia' of the GDR. More interesting, the film *The Architects* (1990; filmed in the latter half of 1989) depicts the struggles of a young architect to build a new utopian community outside of East Berlin within the decaying GDR socialism of the late 1980s.

[10] See for instance Alan Greenspan, *The Age of Turbulence: Adventures in a New World* (2007).

[11] Interestingly, *Fortune* magazine prematurely asked if greed was dead in 1989 (Henkoff 1989: 40-46).

[12] Peter Glotz, in a fictitious economic history of the world from the viewpoint of the year 2080, also proposes an alternative, post-liberalist utopia that is based on social and bio capital (Glotz 2004: 21-33). See also Weber 2008.

[13] See, most recently, Derrida 1991; and Habermas / Derrida 2003.

[14] Hugo 1914. See also Malettke 2001: 51-60.

[15]See Morgan / Banham 2007 for a discussion of the importance of Kant and Utopia.

[16] This slogan was first used by the political scientist and writer Susan George.

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Interview with James Graham Ballard

(Shepperton, 21 January 1997)

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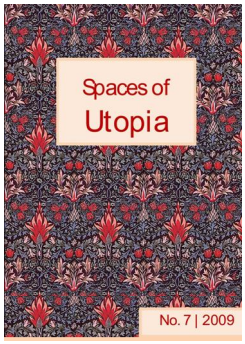

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James Graham Ballard died last April at the age of 78. He was described by David Pringle as "one of the most strikingly original English writers of the past half-century" and praised for his capacity to engage in different genres and fields – from science-fiction to avant-garde experimentation, from mainstream novels to crime fiction – "while remaining instantly recognisable" for his recurrent themes, his images, and his style (Pringle 2009).

This interview was held on 21st January, 1997, a few months after the publication of the novel *Cocaine Nights*, the first of a supposed tetralogy of detective stories (including the later *Super-Cannes*, *Millennium People* and *Kingdom Come*). I met Ballard in Shepperton, in the small semi-detached house where he had lived for nearly four decades and from where he observed the world, by then virtually in a state of seclusion. We chatted freely, drinking white wine and sitting in front of the copy of a Delvaux painting; on the walls, two posters of the movie *Crash* directed by Cronenberg and whole shelves full of books with the name of famous painters on their covers.

A part of the interview was then translated into Italian and published in the literary journal *Linea d'Ombra*. Only recently did I start thinking of re-editing and publishing the full text in its original version, especially since I took part in an international conference on Ballard at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, in May 2007. There, around the most credited Ballardian scholars, gathered a large number of young researchers and students who had never had the chance to meet the writer and ask him the many questions raised by his books. My thought goes to them even more now, after Ballard's death.

In our two-hour conversation, back in 1997, Ballard gave proof of his keen understanding and far-reaching insight into the realm of art and the spirit of his times. He also showed that he was still, and would always be, in a way, a science-fiction writer, at least in accordance with his own definition of the genre as an imaginative reinterpretation of present-day reality. Utopian and dystopian tendencies run through Ballard's thought and inhabit his narrative reinvention of this world and of the next. Before being a writer, he was a dreamer and dreams often carry with them the seeds of the future. After all, in Shakespeare's words, "we are such stuff as dreams are made on".

When you speak about yourself do you always tell the truth?

Do you have any suggestions whether I'm not telling the truth? Give me some examples. Honestly, I'm suspicious.

For instance, when you talk about your childhood in the concentration camp...

I've always made it clear that *Empire of the Sun* is a novel. It is semiautobiographical, partly based on my experience. So the question whether what I describe in *Empire of the Sun* is true or not is irrelevant.

What about your interviews?

Oh, I see. Well, in my interviews I try to be consistent. When you look back to the Second World War it's not easy to remember everything clearly. It was a long time ago, and it was a period of great confusion. I have mixed memories: some things were good, some were bad, some were frightening, some were not. Children are very changeable in their emotions, they can feel happy one day and sad the next. Anyway, I try to speak the truth.

How do you feel being considered mainly for *Empire of the Sun* and *Crash*, as it happens in countries like mine? Are there any books which relate to you the most?

There are important films about these books of mine. Honestly, film is such an important medium these days. It is the main art form of the 20th century, I think. If you have major directors making films like Cronenberg, adapting a novel, you reach a huge new audience. Even though only one in a hundred of the people who goes to see the film buys the book, it's a big new audience. In France, for example, over one million people went to see *Crash*. One million! If one in a hundred of them buys the book, that's ten thousand copies. You know, it's a big readership. Even if

one in a thousand buys the book, it's a thousand readers. So films are very important. Of course I've written a lot of books; in particular, I've made a lot of short stories. I've written twenty books now, half are short stories. And people don't really like short stories.

I do.

Many people don't. Publishers don't like short stories anymore. People don't buy them, they want novels. That's a pity to me because I've written a lot of short stories and, in many ways, my short stories are better than my novels, I think. Let's say not better, but they are very important. There are writers, novelists who also write short stories, but their novels are more important. In my case, it's not true: the short stories are just as important really as the novels. You know, there is nothing I can do about it.

Do you think your books might have adverse, unintended side effects, as in the case of medications? I mean, do you think they could be dangerous in some cases? Let's think about *Crash* and the impact it could have on violent people and young generations.

That's always a fear, of course. But so far, as far as I know, it has been shown almost everywhere in Europe – everywhere, I think, except in England – and we had no reports of accidents, criminal acts. I see the book and the film of *Crash* as cautionary tales, they are warnings. What they are saying is that we have an entertainment culture that is obsessed or at least fascinated by violence. In this entertainment culture elements of sexuality and violence are all mixed together.

And what *Crash* – the book and the film – does is to analyse what is really going on. And it is meant to be a warning. If you like, it's saying: "OK, this is where the road may lead". It's like someone putting a sign on the road or beside it: "Dangerous bends ahead". It is meant to be a warning. It doesn't mean speed up, it means slow down. The message of *Crash* is: "Slow down", I hope.

Are you afraid about the future or confident in the power of creativity? I think you said something about the future in your latest book, *Cocaine Night*.

My character says something. That is different. Never think that the character is speaking for the author.

What do I think about the future? I will not be here, but in the long term, for my children and grandchildren, twenty, thirty years from now, I'm optimistic. In a short term I'm pessimistic. I think the next years may be very difficult ones for us. People are getting bored and I think boredom is a big danger. They don't rely on institutions, as they used to. Consumerism no longer means sparkling and new, it is not exciting any more. I can remember in the 1930s and after the war, in the 1940s and in the 1950s, people were very excited by the consumer society. People were getting more prosperous, making more money, they could buy more things. So, they were going out and they would buy new kitchens, new cars, new clothes, new everything. Their life seemed to be richer, better. That's finished now. People are bored with consumerism. In this country certainly the Church has lost its authority. The British monarchy is a joke. And in politics there are no big themes anymore, most politicians are just corrupt. So people have nothing. In a short time – and that's frightening – the world has nothing. There is one rule of nature. In an

English phrase, nature abhors, nature hates the vacuum: it rushes in. And so there are many troubles ahead, but I think we'll come through.

You said that David Pringle knows you better than you do. Do you believe some readers can understand books better than their writers? Would such readers be your ideal reading public?

Yes, absolutely. That's got just implications for your profession, for literary criticism. I don't think the writer is necessarily aware of all that he writes. He or she may be aware of everything in one book or one short story but, when you get more books, you need a carefully trained mind to stand back and look at the whole. The writer is very close, too close to his work to see it clearly, I think.

What is imagination to you?

Well, it's to invent imaginary worlds that have a deeper meaning than the conventional, realistic world. This is the gift of the imagination, not that you can invent fantasy, but that you can invent imaginary things providing meaning. That's why people read novels, go to the opera, listen to music, read poetry. They don't want just fantasy, what they want is meaning. They are looking for meaning in their lives, that's what they want most of all.

And what about science fiction?

I don't read it today. It's finished, it's changed. It's just commercial fantasy, now. Except for, say, people like William Gibson. I like William Gibson very much, but

most science fiction is not very good. Mostly, it's "Star Wars", "Star Trek". I don't care for it, it doesn't express anything relevant to reality.

You said that you like cyberpunk and William Gibson in particular.

I was very impressed by *Neuromancer*, I thought it was good. That's an interesting approach to science-fiction, concerned with the real world. Although I don't believe in science fiction.

What about Philip K. Dick?

Excellent. He was good, he was very good. He was interesting. He was really over completely paranoid. He believed that the whole of life is a big conspiracy.

I prefer William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* in particular; that's a wonderful book. Burroughs contains a lot of science-fiction elements. His work is written in demotic speech, everyday speech, American slang. How do you translate that? I find it difficult to read it because it's not written in English, it's written in American.

In a way, you seem to have been writing just one single huge book since situations, characters, themes and "obsessions" are often repeated. For instance your last work, *Cocaine Nights*, recalls the atmosphere and the setting of *Vermilion Sands*, with its idle community of sunbathers, aristocrats, doctors and artists made to cope with the looming sense idea of an unredeemable guilt. Do you still think that our future will be like that, or is our present already like that? Do you believe that, since you wrote *Vermilion Sands*, we have been moving in that direction?

The present is starting to be like that and the future will probably be like that. The world I describe in *Cocaine Nights* now really exists: if you go down to the Costa del Sol you will find places like that. One sees that's something that is happening all over the world. In America people started retreating from the cities and going into special estates where there are TV cameras for all the residents. That's a very dangerous step; they become a sort of prisoners.

It is somehow like the luxury housing estate monitored by TV cameras you described in the novel *Running Wild*.

Yes, very similar. That's something that has already started. It's bad to live in complete isolation, I think.

"Time" seems to be one of your favourite themes. In *Cocaine Nights* you wrote: "Come to Estrella de Mar and throw away your calendar". Do you suggest that, by throwing away the calendar and putting aside our watches, we would feel more at ease with ourselves?

Well, I don't think so. The person who says that in *Cocaine Nights* is one of my crooks.

I am not a moralist, unlike most 19th- and 20th-century European and American novelists. Such authors as Dostoyevsky, Moravia, Sartre, Camus make a moral judgment, they are asking: "Are the characters behaving in a good way or in a bad way?" And you could say that each novel is a kind of trial where we examine the characters, we see what their moral position is and then we counter-judge. This happens with Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina.

I am not a moralistic novelist. I don't offer my own opinion, I leave everything open for the reader to judge. In *Vermilion Sands* I don't take moral decisions about the characters. There's no verdict: "Do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?" No, not in my fiction. I don't do that. Even in *Crash*, the most extreme of my novels, I don't take sides. I got a letter from an English student yesterday, saying: "Are you positive or negative about *Crash*? What is your attitude?" It seems he has only read the book and he is writing a little essay. I wrote back saying: "I don't have an attitude. I believe in leaving the things ambiguous because it's not easy, you can't always have a clear moral judgment". It applies to *Vermilion Sands* and it applies to *Cocaine Nights*. That's why maybe some people don't like my fiction, because I don't make it clear.

I think that this position can be related to the idea of playing so often expressed in your books, where the important thing is not winning or losing, but somehow playing against yourself.

True! Well reported, good way of putting it.

You said that you dream a lot and can remember your dreams very well. Is there any relevant difference between the dreams you used to have and the ones you have today? Has your attitude towards the contemporary world changed accordingly?

As you get old your dreams do change. When I was in my 20s and 30s I had disturbing and unsettling dreams. Now that I'm in my 60s my dreams are much more pacific, they are the dreams of an aging person. As you get older you come

to terms with the dreams that, perhaps, upset you for many years. You understand your parents, you forgive them, you have children and you have grandchildren. You get a different perspective on the world.

It is very difficult to say how close dreams are to works of art, to works of imagination, like novels. I think they are very different, I don't think dreams are like novels or short stories. You see it in the surrealist paintings, like that [pointing at his famous copy of a Delvaux destroyed in the Second World War]. It looks like a dream but, you know, nobody ever has a dream like that; they are different. I think that, as you get older, you feel more peaceful: that's a good thing!

Many of your characters are women. In *Vermilion Sands*, for instance, they are a mysterious and mighty presence, halfway between realistic creatures and symbolic beings. Are you afraid of women?

Yes, of course! All men are afraid of women because of their power; I'm not unusual in that respect, I think. Remember that, through the years and through art history, most people are not happy all the time; they are only happy for a small part of their life. For men, of course, women are firstly involved with their vision of happiness, for obvious reasons, not just for sexual reasons. They remember their early childhood, their mothers. At the same time, women are very ambiguous. Young men find them very difficult to understand, they don't know how to please them. So women have become very mysterious figures, and that's why you find them portrayed as enchantresses, magicians, sorceresses, which is true of *Vermilion Sands*, of course. Also, men perceive that women are sometimes *amoral*, they exist outside the morality, they are capable of behaving in a *non-*

moral way, in an *unmoral* way. Not *immoral*, but *unmoral*. And this is very unsettling. When men find them, they are drawn to destruction. You know the connections between the heart of the human experience and the heart of the human imagination, and the connections between love, eroticism and death. For men, women make the links between the two.

Do you think that the Freudian term *projection* can be better referred to showing or concealing?

Oh, it's a technical question. I'm not quite sure what the term *projection* really means, in its full sense, so I want to be careful about what I say. Both, I think, is the answer.

Do you believe that psychopaths have some sort of special insight that the so-called *sane* people lack?

I think that mentally disturbed people often have brilliantly original insights into the areas of dreams and fantasies. Not all, but many indeed. I think the great writers and painters probably share something with them, that derangement of the senses. You know, the French poet Rimbaud talked about a willing, a deliberate derangement of the senses. And I think that the derangement the psychopaths have is very close to that that some artists, some writers have. I've known many mentally ill people, but it comes to my mind there are people who have similar insights. Particularly, those who are getting used to take doses of drug all day long. So, you have to be careful.

What is inspiration to you? When you write a story do you have to identify with the characters and events you describe?

Yes, it is necessary. It can be very disturbing, of course. I mean, writing *Crash* was a very disturbing experience because I had to imagine myself into the novel, to make it seem more true. Now it's twenty-five years and my children were very young – they were ten, twelve, thirteen – so it was a dangerous book for me to write. But that's true of all books. I mean, in *Cocaine Nights* I had to make the character of Bobby Crawford, the tennis player, sympathetic. It's very difficult to make sympathetic and attractive someone who is a criminal, you know. It's difficult. I had to enter his mind and make it likeable and make him convincing. So, while I was writing his part, I had to try to be like him, and that's very difficult. That's what the novelist has to do.

You said that, when you write, you start from some ideas, some obsessions, then words follow one another, like a stream, and you put them on the page. When you finish a book, do you think you said something more, or something different from what you meant at the beginning?

It's always different; it never is what you first imagined. That's the strange thing, it just changes. It is a good thing because you're working with materials that have a texture. That's like a sculptor carving a piece of wood, let's say. The wood has a grain; you can cut it: in one direction it's very easy, in another it's very difficult, if you're against the grain. You know, it influences the shape. Well, the world of words – the narrative – changes and has its own structure, its own logic. That's why it never comes out as you planned, but it's good.

When you begin to write, do you still hope to work out the original idea or you just accept that it will change?

Well, you hope that you'll be able to express the original idea of it, the touch of your imagination, but you've got to accept that, when you actually read it, you'll say: "Well, that's not quite what I wanted".

After you finish a book, do you ever read it again? For instance, when you saw the film *Crash*, didn't you check how faithful it was to the book?

No, I don't, actually. *Crash* is too frightening for me. It's a really frightening book.

How important are style and plot for you?

Story is very important because I think that human imagination expresses itself in terms of stories. You see this in myths, in legends, in the way you describe your life. You come home from the office and your wife says: "What happened today?" And you reply: "Oh, my God, let me tell you, it is something so amazing!" Or your father arrives and tells your mother: "Oh, what a patient I visited!" We explain the world in terms of stories. Stories are very important. You see this in dreams, legends, myths, everything. Story is the way we engage other people's emotions. I think that the partial rejection of stories by the Modernist movement was probably a big mistake. It just produced a lot of unreadable books that have been forgotten; I'm afraid that's probably true. You know, some literary critics say that story is old-fashioned. It's a big mistake because we think in terms of stories.

Maybe that's why you don't like Postmodernism as well, apart from the fact that you seem to hate the label.

No, I don't like it, that's right. I don't like Postmodernism because it plays games, it's really looking at itself in the mirror, it's reflexive. It's saying: "Dear reader, we know this is just a novel", and it's a mistake. We don't think like that, our imagination doesn't work like that. I think it's a big mistake. I think Postmodernism is finished, it's going nowhere, it has killed itself.

You mean that the effect is that you can't identify with what you read.

Well, you can't be emotionally involved. If the structure doesn't even take it up seriously and it's just a game, why should you take it seriously?

You are often described as a visionary writer. I think you like this definition, don't you?

Yes, visionary is good.

Do you think that painters can see or represent things better than other people?

Well, the whole of the Surrealists, and of course the painters, since they are purely visual, have a huge advantage on the writers because they are so immediate. A novel is just made up of letters on the page, it doesn't have the impact of an actual image. But the novel is so holding, so widely read today, not so much as in the past, but still widely read.

You are often asked a lot of questions about your works, your ideas, your vision of reality. Are there any questions you would like to ask to your reading public?

No, there aren't any questions I would like to ask. I just tell stories, I'm a storyteller, you know. As long as a little crowd – few people – would rally around me in the village square and listen to my tales, I'll be happy. If not, I'll move on to the next village.

So you don't seem to have any particular expectations about your reading public. You said you would be content if some of the people who saw Cronenberg's film buy your book. Is that all? Don't you hope them to understand what they read in some way?

That's it. I'm confident. If people make the effort, to me it's enough. I think they are intelligent enough to understand.

How do you look back to your starting point as a writer? And, in particular, how do you recall the atmosphere of the 1960s?

The 1960s were very exciting, I think in Italy too. In the 1950s we were still getting out of the war. Then, suddenly, the consumer society, television... Everything happened in the 1960s. Some things were good, some were bad. The Kennedy assassination was bad, the Vietnam War was bad. But there was a sort of explosion of energy from the youth, and pop music was important. Drugs? Well, hard to say. I didn't take drugs myself. But maybe there were positive sides to the

drug culture, then. Mostly people smoking marijuana. So much was happening in those years! Have you come across a book of mine called *The Atrocity Exhibition*?

Yes, of course.

I think it was published in Italy recently with some notes; it looks good. Well, that's my book about the 1960s and a book about a lot of my fiction. I mean, a lot of my ideas are in that book. I consider it as a key for a lot of my fiction. I think so, not all, but a lot of it.

But maybe it's easier to understand it if you read it after the rest of your fiction, rather than the reverse, because it's not very immediate, I think. I mean, you find images, and spots, and things that are impressive, but it's difficult to work out the overall vision.

You may be right. It's not an easy book to read, because you shouldn't try to read it from the beginning to the end, you should just dip into.

That's the way you believe it must be read?

Yes, just in a scattered way, that's the point. I talked a lot about it. It was astray, *non-linear*. There's also the expression *non-linear novel*, if you like. But you've got to read a *non-linear novel* in a *non-linear* way. You don't start at the beginning and try to impose the kind of expectations that you place on a conventional A+B+C narrative. That book is interesting, you should read it like a newspaper. When we read a newspaper, we don't start at the top letter, we work through it. You read it in a mosaic-like way, don't you? That's the way you read it. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is

going to be made into a CD-ROM. The man who's doing it knew that I started writing it in 1966 or something, a long time ago, long before anybody ever thought of CD-ROMs. And he said the book is a CD-ROM novel written twenty-five years before CD-ROMs, because it's not really straight line, you can go any direction you like. That's what CD-ROMs are good at. You should read it like that: open the pages and wait for something interesting. If nothing interests you, forget it.

Do you think that this idea of *non-linear* writing can be somehow similar to the non-Euclidean geometry asserted by some surrealist painters, like Max Ernst? I mean, the idea of subverting something that was all too fixed and all too conventional?

You put it well, that's exactly the object of it. I'm not saying that I want every novel to be written like *The Atrocity Exhibition*. But once in a while it's useful. I think each writer should write a book in a *non-linear* style, because our brains tend to conventionalise everything. The brain wants to be able to quickly understand what's going on in the world, so it imposes certain conventional views. And that's the problem. Our brain doesn't really like novelty, because novelty is unsettled. You can see it in small children. They don't really like novelty, even if you think they love it. If you ask: "Shall we go to the circus?", they answer: "YES!!!", and get all excited. As a matter of fact they love the circus for one hour, or two hours; but in their ordinary lives, children are very unsettled if something very different happens. They hate too much change, they like everything to be the same. And the brain of some adults is the same. We like everything to be the same, that way we feel reassured. [Pointing at the walls] The walls are white rectangles. My brain tells me:

"They are walls, relax. They are objects. [Pointing at the sofa] Relax, it's a sofa". So, what *The Atrocity Exhibition* does is to say: "Wait a minute". You know, it's like those toys we call kaleidoscopes: they are all of glass, you can shake them, you look through them and you suddenly see new patterns. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is like a kaleidoscope you could shake and then you can see everything new, in a fresh way, as if for the first time. I think it is very useful. A lot of ideas I've written about are in *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

So you think that the reader has an important role in recreating what you wrote? I mean, the images, the frame.

Yes, the reader can arrange it in every way he or she likes. It's set more like reality. You know what you can feel when you visit a strange city. Everything is very confusing, totally confusing. You can't make sense of anything. Well, when you've lived in a place for a long time, you think: "How the hell did I find this place confusing? It's so obvious!" It's like London for me. I've been going there for nearly fifty years. I remember when I first came to London I was so amazed and now I'm no longer. But it is necessary to break through all those conventions.

It's the same breakthrough you wanted to produce in science fiction. It was something fixed, those were the rules of the game and you decided to subvert them.

Certainly true, absolutely! I mean, some people of course – people inside science fiction – when I supposed to have been writing sci-fi, kept saying: "Ballard isn't really writing science fiction". Well, I'm not sure how much I did really write it, even

in the early days, it's difficult to say. I've always been interested in science. It's just that the mainstream novel has not been interested in science, in popular science.

When you wrote *The Atrocity Exhibition* it was a great surprise for everybody, because it was an unusual literary work. Would you like to surprise again your reading public and disappoint their expectations as you did in the past?

Yes, but I've got the feeling I'm too old. I don't know if I'm capable of writing another book like that. It's something you can do when your mind is clearer. But maybe I will, who knows? ▪

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Apocalyptic and Apocalypticism in the Poetry of E. P. Thompson

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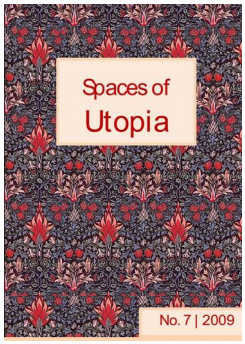

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Nothing will alter because a child is born.
That was a fable.

E. P. Thompson

There is a little-known collection of poems by Edward Palmer Thompson called *Infant and Emperor: Poems for Christmas*. These poems reflect a lesser-known Thompson, one who was fascinated by the revolutionary possibilities of biblical stories and Christian theology.[1] My argument is that Thompson manages to recover the subversive edge of Christianity precisely through – and not despite – his debunking of spiritual and reverent interpretations of the Christmas stories.

However, before making that argument a few preliminary comments are in order. First, it is necessary to distinguish between different senses of the terms 'apocalyptic' and 'apocalypticism': between a genre of literature, a worldview and a social movement. The word 'apocalyptic' functions as a noun and an adjective and refers either to a genre of literature or to a worldview. As a genre, it is well known from the Bible where there are two works that belong to the apocalyptic genre:

Daniel and *Revelation* (also known by its Greek title, the "Apocalypse"). The original Greek word, *apocalypto*, means the revelation of a truth, but since that truth refers (in the biblical books) to knowledge about the end of the world, the term apocalyptic came to refer to the end times. Apocalyptic also refers to a particular worldview which views the world as full of signs of the end, waiting everyday for the final cataclysm. By contrast, apocalypticism designates a movement, often gathered around a leader, which anticipates and tries to predict when the end time will come. Such movements have come and gone throughout history, but in Christian circles they have often arisen during times of social unrest and economic crisis. We may picture it this way: apocalypticism is the social movement which has an apocalyptic worldview and which reads and attempts to interpret apocalyptic literature. However, an apocalyptic worldview and apocalyptic literature are not restricted to such movements, for anyone may read such literature or take on such a worldview. For the sake of clarity in what follows I use the terms apocalyptic literature, apocalyptic worldview and apocalypticism (sometimes apocalyptic movement). Second, Thompson's poems arose over some three decades from the 1950s onwards in response to important moments of his involvement with the nuclear disarmament movement. Thompson was, after all, not merely a scholar but also a communist activist. Only in the early 1980s did he gather them together, add one or two extras and produce a cycle of poems. Third, they come under the heavy influence of Thompson's British hero, William Blake, who stands beside Marx within Thompson's own pantheon (see Thompson 1978: 316). Apart from the obvious connection with Blake's poetry, there is a strong millenarian or – preferably

– apocalyptic feel about these poems. In what follows then, I begin with a discussion of the poems before considering the wider question of the role of apocalyptic and apocalypticsm in his work.[2]

Poetry

The poems gathered under the title *Infant and Emperor: Poems for Christmas* (1983)[3] put various moments of the infancy stories of Jesus in touch with political events – such as the Suez invasion and the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the atrocities of the Korean War in 1951, or the activities of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament to which Thompson dedicated much of his energy. Or rather, these events were the initial reasons for writing some of the poems in the first place. They run through the well-known moments of the Christmas myth, moving through the Annunciation to Mary, the search for lodgings at the inn in Bethlehem, the birth itself, Herod's murder of the innocents and the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt. Part of the popular narrative of Christmas, they are actually an amalgam of the different stories found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (the only two Gospels that have such infancy narratives). Three things fascinate me about this collection. First, when faced with events of global significance, Thompson resorts to biblical language and themes, melding apocalyptic and Christmas themes. Second, he recovers a revolutionary side of Christianity that is less known than it should be. Third and somewhat paradoxically, he can do so because he doesn't buy into the belief structure; he takes it as fable. Let me take each in turn.

Myriad images meet in these poems, but the major ones deal with apocalyptic themes and the dual interplay between Herod and the child of the poor. As for apocalyptic and millennial imagery, we find “fabulous holy armies” (idem, 1), Herod assuming “his hour” (Thompson 1983: 2) Leviathan, the Beast, the inherited kingdom, the perpetual threat of “Horsemen and Eagles, Emperor, Wolf and bull” (*idem*, 10), and the massacre of the innocents. But there are also two poems that are more explicitly apocalyptic literature – “Scenario for the Flight into Egypt” (*idem*, 15-17) and “Prayer for the Year’s Turning” (*idem*, 18-19). The first is modernised a little too much, with its “Heaven’s Angel” winging in like a bikie, directions for camera use (zoom in, fade out, extras, cut, etc.), and the “rival holy armies” using fighter-bombers, snipers and grenades, and with marines crawling up beaches and massive civilian casualties. By contrast, “Prayer for the Year’s Turning” is much better, for it weaves together the natural cycles of earth (winter solstice and spring), the hope of Christmas, and the very human threat of self-inflicted annihilation. It takes a few stanzas to realise that the various constellations and heavenly bodies – Mars, Trident, Poseidon, Polaris, Vulcan, Hades and the Neutron Way – are a mix of warlike ancient ones and the new hardware of surveillance and nuclear warfare. But the poem itself turns from heaven to earth, calling on people to watch below, to “search about the planet’s floor / For the nativity of hope”. At that moment the solstice with which the poem begins, the winter festival of Christmas (at least in the northern hemisphere), becomes the “arrested solstice” of the “boreal” Cold War. Just as the earth turns from the midst of winter’s Christmas, so also Thompson calls for a “soft apocalypse of Spring”. It

is of course the major drive of anti-nuclear campaign in which Thompson was involved, but with a brilliant inversion: the apocalypse of nuclear destruction must give way before a very different apocalypse that averts the former.

The second group of images clusters around two symbols: Herod and the child as a sign of the poor. William Blake peers from behind much of the imagery, with its Leviathan and Beast, the gate of a woman's womb, the seed and a pervasive antinomianism.[4] While Herod becomes the symbol of oppressors (at one point merging with the Roman Emperor [*idem*, 10]) who march their holy armies through history, the child becomes the symbol of hope for the oppressed "walking and walking down the centuries" with the "stubborn stamina of God's forgotten poor" (*idem*, 16). Thus, in the excellent poem "Nativity" (*idem*, 2-3) the Christmas story becomes an "arctic legend" in which kings, angels and mysteries are all frozen … except for two who escape: one is the brutal Herod "on the high horse of power" who continues to send his soldiers and magistrates to attack, arrest and beat the innocent. The other is the child who passes "through the only gate / No magistrate may guard" and to whom the poor gather in assistance to drive back the guards so that the "seed" may grow. The oppressor and his armies may still be with us, but so is the collective hope of the poor.

At times Thompson puzzles over why the birth of a child should bother the Herods of history so much. Is it the assertion of independence from Mary, the deception that hints of love, innocence and peace, as the poem "Annunciation" (*idem*, 1) suggests? Is it because a sleeping new-born challenges the corruptions of power, drawing upon almost forgotten qualities of human life?

> Frost-bitten mercy, hope pulling off her gloves
> Crusted with ice, benighted company
> Numb from the cold. And even at the inn
> They stir the failing fire, long for release –
> Will no-one bring the kindling of love,
> A sprig of innocence, a twig of peace? (*idem*, 5)

Is it because innocence, hope and love nurtured in a mother's womb or arms are the first stirrings of "insurgent provinces, revolt within the State" (*idem*, 10)?[5] Is it because the poor will not be put down to remain submissive? They – like the shepherds and wise men who have become beggars in "Visitor at the Inn" (*idem*, 6) – have a knack of knocking on the window while the "feast of the banknote" rages on inside.

I have already slipped into my second point – the revolutionary edge of these poems – but it is difficult to separate that element too sharply from the language itself. What Thompson has done, perhaps unintentionally, is give voice to the scandal of these infancy narratives from the Gospels. Over against the syrupy celebrations of Christmas everywhere around us he has pinpointed the political challenge that lies barely concealed in these stories. Perhaps it is something that can be done these days only by one who openly confesses that he is not a believer, that the theological mumbo-jumbo makes little sense to him. So the "Holy Roman Church" becomes a deluded venture – "cross-natured Christendom" that built a "world of faith" out of Mary's "faithlessness" (*idem*, 1). He is all too aware that the Church has had a very cosy relationship with the Herods of this world, blessing and praying for them.[6] In an excellent section of "Lamentation in Rama",

he has heaven become an informer: “The gracious powers above / Keep watch on the little streets?” (*idem*, 13)

This down to earth scepticism comes not a moment too soon, for at times Thompson risks getting a little too sentimental about innocent babies as symbols of love and hope during millennial crises. He is much more forceful when he reminds us that much of what the Church has made of Christmas is pious clap-trap. For example, when he takes head-on the myth of the birth of the son of God in “The Infant” (*idem*, 7) he suggests “some seraph goofed” and accidentally teleported “Him” as a puny baby, a “helpless sod” full of wind and unable to save himself. Or, in Mary’s “Lullaby”, she calls Jesus “Master Egotrip”, “Mister Big” and “prince of Pandemonium”:

> Windy boring preacher
> Wrapped in a shawl –
> Stop bawling your commandments
> Shut up and rest,
> And sleep full of the sermon
> Of your saviour’s breast (*idem*, 9).

Much of it is excellent poetry and far better than his novel, *The Sykaos Papers*. Yet the question remains as to how Thompson pulls it off – giving the Christmas stories a radical political edge. The paradox is that whereas Thompson probably thought he was undermining the stories themselves, he has in fact brought out their radical tendencies. I have already mentioned one reason, namely that he doesn’t believe all the high claims made by the Church and can thereby dispense with the theological twaddle. Another is that he is far more interested in the human and earthly elements of the stories. Less interested in angels “coming

to" (Luke 1: 28) virgins, or a pious Joseph trying to do the right thing by God, shepherds directed by a singing choir of angels to visit the baby (the voices they heard turned out to be only the wind), or pagan magi following a star, or even the claim that this is the birth of the son of God, Thompson focuses on what is all too human in the stories – illicit sex, discomforts and pains of pregnancy, mothers who take no bullshit, the ever-present police, magistrates, armies and tyrants.

Yet, there is a far more important reason why Thompson touched on the radicalism of stories of infant and emperor: they are nothing less than fables:

> Nothing will alter because a child is born.
> That was a fable (*idem*, 1).

The "fable" in question is both Mary's made-up story to cover up an "illicit" pregnancy – about a divine child announced by some angel known as Gabriel – and the birth narratives as a whole (they appear only in Matthew and Luke in rather different forms). They are indeed fables; no serious biblical scholar takes them as anything else. I would go one step further and suggest that they are necessary fables. Any political movement needs its fables, or political myths as I prefer to call them (Boer 2008). In drawing upon this stock of images, symbols and stories in order to bring out their radical possibilities, Thompson has managed to recover these stories in the form of political myth. The reason: "It was the other part that the poor understood – Herod, the Roman magistrates, the cross" (Thompson 1983: 1).

Apocalyptic and Apocalypticism

It would seem that Thompson has brought out a radical political side to the Christmas fable, particularly through his juxtaposition of apocalyptic themes, the themes of tyrannical oppression and resistance, and their connection with political events contemporary with him. There are, however, two items that call for further comment: the nature of apocalypticism in Thompson's work and his involvement in the nuclear disarmament movement.

As far as apocalypticism is concerned – which designates a social movement and is more precise term that Thompson's own usage of millenarianism or chiliasm – he deals with it extensively in both his treatments of the Methodists (Thompson 1966: 375-400) and William Blake (Thompson 1993). In each case his assessment shifts tellingly from one side to the other: while the Methodists exhibit an inauthentic apocalypticism, the radical Dissenters like Blake tap into an authentic version. As far as the Methodists are concerned, Thompson argues that the apocalypticism was the result of counter-revolution, especially during the Napoleonic Wars between England and France. When the revolutionary hopes of social change have been disappointed, when the police and spies and army move in to capture, imprison and execute the leaders, then where do those radical energies and hope go? They may go underground, to be nurtured until another time (the work of the radical Dissenters), or they may find expression in fervid outbursts of religious revival. This second form of apocalypticism becomes a desperate and dismal picture, especially when it is one of the reasons (in Thompson's opinion) for the success of his loathed Methodists. With their

emotional meetings, damnation of sin, calls for conversion and millenarian imagery, the Wesleyans were able to give an outlet to these frustrated hopes of the poor. Thompson even hints that the Methodists preyed on the dashed hopes of social change. All of the outward manifestations of the Methodist meetings – groaning, crying out, fainting, shouting, weeping, paroxysms and even mass hysteria – become a sign of the psychic process of counter-revolution, the "chiliasm of despair" (Thompson 1966: 388)[7] and not revolution itself. And so he designates it an inauthentic millenarianism in contrast to the Jacobin agitations of the late 18th century.

But when he comes to radical Dissenters like Blake he changes his tune. Now he resists dismissing apocalypticism as the raving of lunatics (a dismissal one hears all too often today in "learned" circles). So we find him countering the caricature of chiliasm as the terrain of disturbed individuals, suffering from paranoia and megalomania, by arguing that it is a language, an imagery of the poor and oppressed. Or rather, while there may indeed be the occasional deranged individual (or Methodist), the biblical imagery of the Whore of Babylon, the Beast and the New Jerusalem has consistently provided the language of opposition by minority groups (Thompson 1966: 48-50).

It takes little guesswork to notice that such language is drawn directly from the Bible, especially the two explicitly apocalyptic books, *Daniel* and *Revelation*.[8] Not a little has been written in biblical studies on the matter. Technically, apocalypse means a revelation (*apocalyptein*), usually of what is to come in history with a specific focus on the end of the world, or at least the end of oppression.

While earlier studies drew upon anthropological literature to argue that apocalyptic literature is characteristic of severely oppressed and disempowered groups (see Wilson 1980), more recently it has been argued that we need to distinguish between apocalyptic as a literary genre and as a world-view, and apocalypticism as a politico-religious movement. In light of this distinction, Thompson is interested in the second and third features. The movements are of course his favoured sectarian Dissenters, as well as the whirlwind followings of various prophets, while the worldview was both informed by the Bible and expressed their deep opposition to the corrupt status quo. For those who flocked to hear and follow Mother Jane Wardley (the Shakers) or Richard Brothers in 1793-4 and "Zion" Ward in 1829-36,[9] their worldview was steeped in the Bible and the traditions of Radicalism. It was a time "when men's psychic world was filled with violent images from hell-fire and Revelation, and their real world filled with poverty and oppression" (Thompson 1966: 801). But they were also those who flocked to Robert Owen's version of communism in the early 19th century that Engels was to praise so much. This is the apocalyptic worldview that Thompson finds in William Blake. The fact that the apocalyptic worldview "touched Blake with its breath" (Thompson 1966: 50), that it runs deeply throughout his poetry and painting, that Blake cannot be understood without its imagery is enough for Thompson to give it some space.

What are we to make of this sharp difference between condemnation of apocalypticism (Methodism) and approval of an apocalyptic worldview and literature (Blake)? Rather than a clear case of misguided dislike of the Methodists and zeal for Blake, I would suggest that Thompson is onto something, namely the

political ambivalence at the heart of apocalyptic literature and worldviews and even apocalyptic movements. We might approach the issue through what that great champion of apocalyptic literature Ernst Bloch calls the "discernment of myths" (Bloch 1972: 34-58; 1970: 41-58), for apocalyptic literature deals in the language and imagery of myth. Thompson's criterion is the same as Bloch's: how is that apocalyptic imagery used on a political level? In Thompson's judgement, the Methodists used it for reactionary and escapist reasons, while radical Dissenters like Blake found a more politically revolutionary use. But I would go further than Thompson on two counts. First, since a good deal of millenarian frenzy today emanates from the vast numbers of fundamentalist Christians in the United States,[10] and since this is by no means the preserve of those excluded from power and oppressed, we need to cast a very sceptical eye over this type of apocalypticism. It becomes a means for the powerful (religious and political) Right to assert its historical "mission", as well as express the fear that their own political might is crumbling (See Runions 2004a, 2004b). Second, it is not merely a matter of the use to which apocalyptic imagery is put, for it also bears within itself a political ambivalence. In other words, apocalyptic literature, worldviews and movements give voice to a tension between reaction and revolution that one so often finds with Christianity. It may go one way or another, or, as is more often the case, it reproduces that political ambivalence within the groups that appropriate it. Thus, the imagery of the Beast and the Whore become a potent polemic against a corrupt state of oppression (in the hands of a Blake or a Daniel), but the anticipation of the Last Judgement can also become a justification for the self-

righteous agenda of reaction (as has so often been the case for the Church). This means that I find Thompson's argument that the Methodist's millenarian tendencies were a result of counter-revolution less than persuasive; rather, that counter-revolutionary direction comes out of the ambivalence internal to apocalyptic and apocalypticism.

The apocalyptic Blake also runs in Thompson's veins in other ways. I think of the approving nods towards a chiliastic Blake at the end of *Witness Against the Beast*. Thus, with his affirmations of "Thou Shalt Love" and "Thou Shalt Forgive", Blake provides "a plank in the floor upon which the future must walk" (Thompson 1993: 228). But the final item of apocalyptic I wish to pick up here is Thompson's anti-nuclear campaigning – the context for the poems contained in *Infant and Emperor*.

The story of Thompson's involvement in the disarmament movement has been told often enough. Beginning spasmodically in the 1950s, it became almost a full-time pursuit in the 1970s and 80s, especially during the time of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Both the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and END, The European Nuclear Disarmament, and the Campaign for Nuclear, a vast popular movement with its connections across Europe, both East and West, demanded so much in terms of travel, meetings, talks and popular publications, that he put his other writing on hold (see further Bess 1993). Rather tellingly, *Witness Against the Beast* was much delayed as a consequence, and the planned book on Romanticism never eventuated.[11] In a sense, we might see the Blake book as a belated justification of his disarmament work.

But was the Nuclear Disarmament Movement an apocalyptic movement and are the writings Thompson produced during this time apocalyptic literature? Here are some of the titles of the works he wrote: *Beyond the Cold War: A New Approach to the Arms Race and Nuclear Annihilation* (Thompson 1982); *Star Wars: Self-Destruct Incorporated* (Thompson / Thompson 1985); *Extremism and Cold War* (Thompson 1982); *The Heavy Dancers* (Thompson 1985); *Zero Option* (Thompson 1982); *Protest and Survive* (Thompson / Smith 1980); *Prospectus for a Habitable Planet* (Thompson / Smith 1987). I would add to these doomsday scenarios in the chilling conclusion to *The Sykaos Papers* (Thompson 1988). In this rambling and overly clever attempt at science fiction, the best part is the heroine's final account of the nuclear Armageddon from her vantage point of the moon. In one sense, the novel – with its alien visitor trying to make sense of Earth – all leads to this final cataclysm. Further, this struggle for disarmament was both a distinct movement based on a feared end of the world and it made use of the full range of apocalyptic language – both apocalypticism and apocalyptic. And it was a struggle that informed the actions and writings of E. P. Thompson for some two decades.

Now, we can disapprove and say that Thompson was getting carried away, that the world did not end and that all this was millenarian fantasy. Or we can point out that the fear of nuclear annihilation, or for that matter, global warming and environmental destruction, are displaced fears and anticipations of the end of capitalism. But I remember at the time, when I became deeply aware of the threat of an all-out nuclear war in the 1980s, that these prospects were real. Human

beings had the capacity for the first time in that species' history to make a swift end to it all. Some human beings, animals and plants would probably have survived, but not in any way that was known at the time (perhaps there is some truth in that anticipation of the end of capitalism). Of course, the Cold War came to a swift end, there were revolutions all across Eastern Europe, communism "lost" and the capitalist West "won". Since then it has been calm sailing …

There is, however, a distinct difference in the way the anti-nuclear movement made use of apocalyptic themes. It was not that they welcomed such a cataclysm, calling on the Russian and US leaders to press their fatal buttons. They used the threat of a nuclear conflagration to bring an end to the arms race, to bring a groundswell of opposition to the policy makers and warmongers. In other words, they sought to avert Armageddon and bring about what Thompson calls in his poetry a "soft apocalypse". But is this not a call to repentance in its own way? It reminds me of the little fable of Jonah in the Bible. Jonah is called by God to pronounce doom on Nineveh, which he does after some fishy persuasion. But the people of Nineveh repent, go around in sackcloth and ashes, and God spares them. All to Jonah's profound chagrin, for he had wanted their end. This is not a call to repentance so that one may be among the Elect at the Last Judgement; it is a call that seeks to avert that judgement and take a radically different path.

Conclusion

What Thompson has done with these poems, written in the context of his involvement in the nuclear disarmament movement and under the influence of

William Blake, is (re-)discover and give voice to a radical element within Christianity, contained even in the Christmas fable.

Yet there is a lurking question, and with that I conclude this essay: has Christianity been misinterpreted by the Church itself, by Enlightenment anti-clericalism and by many of Thompson's Marxist comrades? Surely it is a conservative, if not reactionary movement that is all too comfortable with the rich and the powerful. Indeed, the Church in all its many branches has been more often than not one of the rich and powerful. What are we to make of this radical and revolutionary side of Christianity?

I would suggest that it is one side of a deep political ambivalence or tension within Christianity. It may go one way or the other, towards reaction or revolution. If various pieces of the Christian Church have all too often carried on a dirty little relationship with the odd Roman Emperor from the time of Constantine onwards, or with the lords and kings of the Middle Ages, or indeed the political Right wing in our own day (and here there is little difference between conservative popes or evangelical Protestant Christians), then other elements have tapped into a deep revolutionary current, such as Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers in 17th-century England, or Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants' Revolt in 16th-century Germany, or the guerrilla priests of liberation theology like Camillo Torres in the 20th century. In fact, this ambivalence may also be found in the Bible, where the murmuring and rebellious Israelites in the myth of the wilderness wanderings challenge Moses time and time again, or some of the prophets call for an end to exploitation, or the rebel Jesus who is put to death by the Romans as an agitator, or the perpetual

theme of revolutionary chaos that threatens the order the ruling class desperately tries to assert, or indeed that curious message of grace in the letters of Paul, something that irrupts unexpectedly undeservedly into the everyday run of life to change all the coordinates of our existence (See further Boer 2007). My point here is not that one take on the Bible or Christianity is closer to the truth and another a misinterpretation; rather, both are perfectly valid: the Bible may very well be read as a friend of the rich and powerful, but it may equally well be an inspiration for revolutionary groups seeking to overthrow their rich and powerful oppressors. Ernst Bloch's two comments on the Bible sum it up rather well: while it is "often a scandal to the poor and not always a folly to the rich", it is also "the Church's bad conscience" (Bloch 1972: 25 and 21; 1970: 34 and 25). What Thompson has done in his poems for Christmas is recover the radical side of the equation.

Notes

[1] He is of course far better known as the great proponent of "social history" from the bottom up. This approach was first presented with *The Making of the English Working Class,* a work that fundamentally changed the way history was written. It is history from the side of the losers, the silenced, from those who left few records barring the ones of their opponents – the labourers, peasants, the poor without any work, the barely literate or illiterate and their clubs, friendly or benefit societies, illegal trade unions, occasional insurrections, religious groups and sects.

[2] To my knowledge there is no secondary literature on *Infant and Emperor*. There is a small collection of material on Thompson and religion (Dreyer 1986; Jaffe 1989; Currie / Hartwell 1965: 640-1; Gilbert 1979; Heathorn 1998; Taylor 1995), which I have consulted with benefit, but it does not compare to the vast amount of secondary literature on Thompson's main historical work, especially *The Making of the English Working Class*.

[3] Along with his re-conception of revolution as peaceful, these poems added fuel to those who accused his of "socialist humanism" and "utopian socialism" (see Bess 1993: 23).

[4] See Thompson's study of Blake, the last one he wrote (Thompson 1993; see also Boer forthcoming)

[5] See also the "stirring in the womb" that "alerts the testy police" (*idem*, 13).

[6] See "The Massacre of the Innocents", which really has the spirit of Marx's own satire against the seamless connection between corrupt power and religion (*idem*, 11-12).

[7] See also Jaffe's treatment of the issue in light of subsequent debates (Jaffe 1989).

[8] Outside the canon there are far more, such as the *Apocalypse of Adam and Eve* or the writings from Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls).

[9] Not, however, Joanna Southcott of the early years of the 19th century. The reason: she too arrives in a time of political reaction and reveals the truth of the Methodist appeal, for large numbers of Methodists followed her for a time.

[10] As one example among many, see the "Rapture Index" at http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html. Everything from a Democratic victory through to possible failure of the war in Iraq sends the index climbing.

[11] What we have a collection of odd pieces edited by Dorothy Thompson (Thompson 1997).

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Catholic Utopian Spaces:
The Essays of Christopher Dawson and Hilaire Belloc's *The Servile State*

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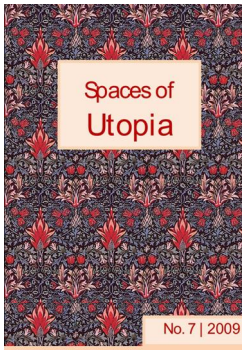

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Utopian spaces play a very important role in the work of the English intellectuals Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953) and Christopher Dawson (1889-1970). These spaces can be seen as inherently Catholic as their constitution is very much influenced by an idealised pre-industrial, pre-Reformation 'Catholic' Middle Ages. They are also clearly informed by contemporaneous Catholic and Papal thought. Their idyllic alternative spatiality consists of decentralised communities of individual households, localities, guilds and associations. And yet, a sense of Christian universalism, being part of a community of Christians, is also at the centre of these spaces. Thus, their utopian spaces, I argue, constitute a merging of two distinctive varieties of conservative, traditionalist idyllic spatial imagining. They encapsulate the spatiality of the Romantic Right, with its belief in 'natural', 'organic' communities that need to be allowed to 'grow' freely and to remain largely unbridled from the 'mechanisation' of modern life. These spaces also reflect the thinking of the

religious Right, with its claims of universalism and its notion of the universal Christian community of shared values and beliefs.[1]

Their alternative spatiality is presented, however, not as a utopia but as feasible and practicable. The authors emphasise that these spaces were once a reality in pre-modern times, before the advent of centralising nation-states and mass capitalism. But these spaces are, in fact, a highly idealised, subjectively imagined spatiality from the supposed empirical reality of the past, projected onto a utopian canvas representing, for the authors at least, an enhanced, superior alternative reality. These spaces are what Soja calls “Secondspace” (Soja 1996: 79) and Lefebvre calls “representations of space” or “conceptualized space” (Lefebvre 1991: 38). They are largely “ideational” and come from “conceived or imagined geographies”, which does not mean that there is no initial material reality, (in our case the initial material reality is also historic), “but rather that the knowledge of this material reality is comprehended essentially through thought”, so that these spaces comprise a subjective and highly individualized spatial imagining (Soja 1996: 79). Imagined geographies are “the primary space of utopian thought and vision” and may originate in the “purely creative imagination” of writers (*idem*, 67).

Thus, these imagined spaces are undoubtedly a type of utopia, yet one which has, or has had, ostensibly at least, a historical, empirical existence, giving the proponent of these utopias the chance to represent these thoughts as actually quite practical and realisable. Therefore, their utopian vision represents an alternative spatiality based upon the spaces of an idealised, subjective and

individualized past. The texts also represent a concrete and radical critique of foundational elements within the English society of the time. Both authors are dismissive of the modern nation-state system, seeing the nation-state as an element of 'modernity' that alienates the individual and damages 'organic' communitarianism. They are also highly critical of Protestantism and see the Reformation as an event that severely harmed the universal sense of Christian community. For the authors, localised spaces, based upon an ambiguous and loose state system and interacting (quite ideally without any awareness of problematic tension or conflict), with a sense of Christian universalism, of a wider Christian community, is the ideal resolution to the problems of 'modernity'.

Belloc and Dawson may undoubtedly be seen as part of a Catholicisation process among certain ranks of English literature and intellectual life during the Edwardian period. The work of the English historian and essayist Christopher Dawson has undoubtedly been, in recent years, and especially since his death in 1970, "comparatively ignored" (Schwartz 2005: 203). Yet, Dawson was widely read in his time, among academics and students, as well as in Christian and more general educated circles. This is the first time that his work has been reassessed in relation to Catholic utopian thought. Hilaire Belloc gained a relatively wide readership during his lifetime, as well as a certain amount of notoriety, especially as one part of the "Chester-Belloc", as George Bernard Shaw called his intellectual togetherness with G.K. Chesterton. The present literary reputation of Belloc rests largely upon his verse for children, his *Cautionary Tales*.

A large number of prominent thinkers chose to become Christians in the early decades of the 20th century, and, "even more striking, in view of its longstanding minority, persecuted, and oppositional status in British society" was the disproportionate number of these converts who journeyed to the Roman Catholic Church (Schwartz 2001: 12). The list of converts to Catholicism includes: Christopher Dawson, G. K. Chesterton, Eric Gill, Ronald Knox, Edith Sitwell, Sigfried Sassoon, David Jones, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark, Maurice Baring, Frederick Copelston, Malcolm Muggeridge and E. F. Schumacher. One could also include, among a list of Catholic intellectuals, 'cradle Catholics', such as Hilaire Belloc and Barbara Ward and the 'cradle convert' J. R. R. Tolkien. It is apparent then that, with this group of high profile exponents of Catholicism, one has a list of some of Britain's, in the first part of the 20th century at least, "most accomplished public intellectuals" (*idem*, 13).

The binding force connecting the disparate intellectual Catholic writers of the early 20th century was their antipathy to modernity and their "condemnations of modern mores were always intertwined with overt or tacit commendation of traditional options" (Schwartz 2005: 24). Becoming Catholic, however, in a country where 'Britishness', as Linda Colley has convincingly argued, was construed along the lines of a "common Protestantism" brought with it certain social perils (Colley 1992). Becoming a Catholic in Britain often resulted in "accusations of disloyalty to the nation, its Protestant heritage, even its sense of common decency", conversion usually resulted in a "loss of social status" and for intellectual converts "the material and prestige losses were considerable" (Allit 1997: 5, 6).

Christopher Dawson

Christopher Dawson was one of the last 'gentlemen scholars' and although a historian, if an 'amateur' one (not having, until very late in life, a formal academic position), he rarely undertook research on primary sources but instead busied himself with secondary material and "the strength of his method lay in his careful digestion of the work of other scholars, an amazing range of secondary works" (Hitchcock 1993: 117). Catholicism was the guiding light of Dawson's writing and upon becoming a Catholic "his religious beliefs also became his hermeneutic" (Schwartz 2005: 230).

Dawson was also a learned, engaging, if, at times, less than lucid, essayist and his essay writings deal with a very wide variety of subjects, from medieval culture and historical reflections to contemporary issues in politics and education. He published collections of essays and numerous articles, which appeared in Catholic newspapers and magazines such as *The Catholic Times*, *The Dublin Review* and the *Commonweal*, in academic journals, such as *The Sociological Review*, in literary magazines, such as *The English Review*, as well as working occasionally for the BBC. Dawson's overall readership and audience was, thus, probably not extremely large, yet not insignificant either.

Dawson's utopian spaces are familial, rural, and regional and incorporate a type of professional guild organisation, as well as being, of course, intently Christian. They are greatly influenced by his total antipathy towards 'modern' culture and he is highly disparaging of nationalism and its spatial correlation, the nation-state, which he perceives as facets of modernity. His utopian spaces are

based upon an idealised pre-industrial, pre-Reformation Middle Ages of feudal local attachments and Christian universalism, as well as the Catholic subsidiary principle, as detailed in the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* from 1931, which also constitutes the search for a Catholic third way between Capitalism and Socialism.[2]

For Dawson the "modern cult of nationalism" "has been one of the most destructive forces that have threatened the existence of Western Culture" and "even in its milder forms" it has shown itself to be "unfavourable to the cause of civilisation" (Dawson 1968 [1954]: 5). Christian universalism, seen in an unproblematic fashion as a sense of Christian community, is more "truthful" and appropriate than narrow national forms and "it is impossible to treat the various national traditions and national cultures as self-sufficient and self-explanatory entities, for they are all rooted in the common tradition of Christendom" (*idem*, 8). The Reformation "destroyed the unity of medieval Christendom" and is "closely related to the growth of the sovereign state" (Dawson 1971 [1965]: 69, 175). Dawson is distrustful of the "modern state" as it "claims to dominate and control the whole life of society and of the individual" (Dawson 1935: xxii). Dawson's utopian spaces may be seen principally as a form of anti-modern, 'aristocratic regionalism', in which an idealised 'traditional' spatiality of rural "miniature monarchies", made up of "households" and with a 'natural' ruling class, form an English and a "Christian Commonwealth".

In "The World Crisis and the English Tradition", first published in *The English Review*[3] in 1933, Dawson ruminates on the "essential condition of

England's achievement" prior to industrialisation, when "there was no need" for "rigid centralisation" or "bureaucratic organisation", but there still existed "a general relaxation of tension in the social organism" as English culture "spread itself abroad over the open country" and "a civilization grew up that was not urban" but "essentially rural and based upon the life of the family" (Dawson 1956 [1933]: 215).

Dawson emphasises the rural nature of his utopian spaces and the whole of English culture, he maintains, "has been a rural culture", the figure of the local squire was nothing more than a "glorified yeoman", although also "sometimes an oppressor" "he was never a stranger" and "thus the English culture and the social discipline that went with it were not a civilization imposed from above but grew up from below out of the very soil of England" (*idem*, 215, 216). But with industrialisation Dawson's rural idyll comes under attack as "the centre of gravity shifts from the village and the country house to the industrial town, the mine and the factory". The family and the home disintegrate into "a number of individual wage earners" and "a workers' dormitory" (*idem*, 218, 219).

Ownership of land is central to Dawson's utopian spaces and the disappearance of the landowning class has left "an immense gap in the social and cultural life of the countryside" and "all the vital forces of the nation" are becoming concentrated "in the great cities". He sees a need for "the restoration of social equilibrium by a measure of cultural de-centralisation and a more even distribution of the non-economic resources of the nation between city and countryside" and, although the process of centralisation is well advanced, "there is no a priori reason why a society should not recover its health and social stability by reversing the drift

towards centralization and deliberately strengthening its foundations in the life of the family and the country" (*idem*, 224). Dawson, thus, advocates a process of "cultural de-centralisation", and, while it is unclear exactly what this constitutes or how it could be achieved, he undoubtedly calls for the reinvigoration of rural life, and for an idyllic interconnected structure of family, country house and village, as well as the empowerment of a rural landowning class.

Dawson also discusses the organisation of his idyllic spaces. In *Beyond Politics* from 1939, he argues for "the need for a higher degree of social organisation and a deeper sense of community", while also emphasising that English democracy "must preserve vital elements of the aristocratic tradition", as well as the "aristocratic principle of leadership", which is "most effective at short range and among a limited circle" (Dawson 1939: 37, 48, 53). Thus, Dawson espouses a utopian 'aristocratic regionalism', based upon supposed traditional forms of authority and small-scale organisation, whose rulers formed the English elite. Dawson's utopian spatiality is based upon his idea of a spatial pre-modernity in which "England consisted of thousands of miniature monarchies – often highly autocratic ones – ruled like the medieval state by the temporal power of the squire and the spiritual authority of the parson" (*idem*, 69-70). While Dawson does not openly argue for a return to this imagined pre-modern spatiality, his emphasis upon its advantages, and his criticisms of the modern state and its lack of rural based authority and scope, constitute an implicit suggestion for change.

In *The Judgement of the Nations* from 1943 he maintains that the "disintegration of Western culture" is connected to the establishment of large states,

as both “Western culture” and “freedom” (both remaining unclear and undefined), were cultivated in small-scale societies and have had difficulty adapting to the larger spaces of centralised states. “Western culture and freedom has been developed by the privileged or citizen classes of the relatively small-scale societies of the European state system”, but, he insists, “our problem arises from the difficulty of adapting the cultural ideals and the political institutions that had developed in this restricted field to the new world of large-scale mass states” and, as a result, we see a “tendency of culture to deteriorate in quality as it increases in quantity, and for the cruder and less highly developed political traditions to reassert themselves over the more delicate and civilized ones” (Dawson 1943: 22, 23).

He argues for the virtues of private property, as well as the independence of the family and household. “In the past personal freedom has always been grounded on private property”, which brought with it “the right of freedom in the choice of an occupation” and was “bound up with the existence of a small primary group – the family (…) under the rule of the father” and “the base of the social edifice was constituted by the family as the primary social and economic unit” (*idem*, 130).

In what Dawson sees as the pre-modern form of societal and spatial organisation economics was “the Law of the household”. Thus, the “household”, which he describes as “a minute communist monarchy” under patriarchal rule, existed independently, with its independence based on property ownership. In this environment the “spiritual freedom of the past existed”, but the “old personal individual conception of property” was destroyed “by the coming of the new order

of industrial capitalism and socialism which has mechanized and de-personalized the economic basis of social life" and, thus, "the economic unit has grown larger and larger" (*idem*, 130, 131).

Formal economic organisation is also central to Dawson's utopian spaces and he argues for the introduction of an updated form of medieval guilds. He calls for the introduction of "the freedom of association", "the principle which has always distinguished the free citizen community of classical antiquity and modern Europe from the servile state in which the individual is regarded merely as a subject", as well as "the freedom of vocation", which is "the condition of personal responsibility" (*idem*, 133). He argues that "the freedom of association", which he defines as the "spontaneous creation of new groups and organizations to meet new social needs", needs to be "informed by the spirit of vocation and individual responsibility" "so that instead of a dead bureaucracy controlling a formless mass activity we have the organic form of a living community" (*idem*, 136).

Dawson's nostalgic, romantic autobiographical fragment from 1949, *Memories of a Victorian Childhood*, first published as *Tradition and Inheritance* in the magazine *The Wind and The Rain*[4], depicts what is, for Dawson, the perfect example of a highly utopian 'aristocratic regionalism', with its familial interconnectedness, peasant proprietorship, 'natural' authority figures from the local noble household and regional distinctiveness. Dawson emphasises the importance of Pietas, "the cult of parents and kinfolk and native place as the principles of our being" and he links this honouring of native place to Christian universalism, as "the cult of the family and the native place is not a form of

snobbery or false romanticism but the first debt we owe to society and to the Christian commonwealth" (Dawson 1989 [1949]: 10, 11).

In Craven, Dawson's home area in Yorkshire, the "real social unit" was "the dale or the region", yet "every farm and household" was also a "separate unit" and "everything depended on the family, which was a true economic society" (*idem*, 22, 25). Dawson then writes of how the remnants of traditional English spatial organisation were still to be seen in Craven, as in "outlying regions like Craven something of the old spirit still survived", in which "noble households" "formed a little court" and, he implies, governed the local "peasant household(s) of the yeoman farmer", which formed "the basic unit of the English commonwealth" (*idem*, 25, 26).

A sense of Christian universalism pervades the work of Dawson and is usually interchangeable with the idea of 'Europe'. While universalism is constantly seen as a sense of community, it is something that, ultimately, should and could, according to Dawson, attain institutional form and for the Catholic convert European unity, in institutional form, can only be based upon a sense of Christian universalism. European unity, according to Dawson, should be based upon the now submerged yet still commonly held sense of "spiritual universalism", which is "more than an idea" "because it was embodied in the superpolitical society of the Church" (Dawson 1943: 141). 'Europe' was, in pre-Reformation times, essentially a "spiritual unity" and European unity, if it is to be realised again, requires a spiritual reinvigoration (*idem*, 145). European union, according to Dawson, must be consistent with Christian universalism in the sense of Europe as a "commonwealth

of Christian nations" sharing "a common way of life" and constituting a "community of culture" (*idem*, 150).

Thus, Dawson has a distinct utopian vision, distributed among various essays and works, informed by the Catholic subsidiary principle, as well as the idea of Christian universalism. In Dawson's 'aristocratic regionalism' the region is of an ambiguous and unspecified scale but consists of an organic unit made up of property owning independent family households, where each household is a "miniature communist monarchy" run in a patriarchal fashion, and overseen regionally by the 'natural' authority figures of the parson or priest and the noble, who then runs the region in a similar fashion to the household. Dawson also argues for medieval type guilds so that people of the same occupation may associate freely with one another. Dawson concedes, however, that his pre-modern, highly utopian aristocratic regional space has largely vanished, although aspects can, seemingly, still be detected, and he argues directly for the re-introduction of rural authority and leadership, the re-invigoration of country life and, in a quite vague way, de-centralisation. The last unit within his scale of utopian spaces is a medieval inspired "Christian Commonwealth", understood as a sense of Christian universalism and common European culture.

Hilaire Belloc

The Anglo-French author Hilaire Belloc also depicts utopian spaces of a distinctly Catholic nature, inspired as well by the subsidiary principle and the idea of Christian universalism. Belloc's universalism is more markedly and exclusively

Catholic than that of Dawson, and he occasionally partakes of a repugnant anti-Semitism, as well as being continuously and vociferously anti-Protestant. Belloc was an essayist, poet, travel writer and popular historian and, especially in the Edwardian period, was well known for being highly opinionated and a pointedly provocative Catholic controversialist. Often associated with his friend and fellow Catholic G.K. Chesterton, he fought intellectual running battles with the secularists of Edwardian times, especially H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw.

Belloc's best-known engagement with political idea making was Distributism. It was also the brainchild of G. K. Chesterton, the artist Eric Gill and the Irish Dominican priest and Philosophy lecturer Vincent McNabb and, rather than being a formal political 'movement', it existed largely within the writings of these authors, and especially within the pages of Chesterton's magazines *New Witness* (1913-1923) and *G. K.'s Weekly* (1925-1936). It was based upon a highly utopian system of economic and political localism and proprietorship, and was very much influenced by Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and the principle of subsidiary, as well the idea of a Catholic Christian universal community. Distributism was both anti-Capitalist and anti-Socialist, believed in small communities, "independent peasant proprietorship", was pro rural and anti-urban, emphasised the importance of "regional dialect", "folklore" and "local diversity" and demonised "unification, regimentation and centralization", as well as the nation-state (Quinn 1993: 164).

Distributism never managed to make the transformation from utopian ideal to reality and made "little practical headway" (Allit 1997: 207). As a political idea,

however, it occupied the minds of thousands of people and was a mainstay within Catholic social thought in Britain during the 1920s and 30s and later travelled across the Atlantic. In the United States it even provided the model for two attempts at utopian community building. The Catholic social activist Dorothy Day attempted to put it into practise on the Catholic Worker Movement's rural communes, as did the Marycrest communards of rural New York in the late 1940s (Hoyt, *The Catholic Counterculture in America 1933-1962*). Both utopian experiments were, however, in "practical terms" a failure (Allit 1997: 207).

Belloc's *The Servile State* from 1912 is the central text of Distributism. The modern state is servile, argues Belloc, in that the majority of individuals and families are in a slave-like condition, as they are un-free and forced into being un-propertied wage earners, while the powers of the state are used to maintain a capitalist, property owning elite. This is contrasted in the work by Belloc's model society, from a decidedly idealised Middle-Ages, in which local areas and free, property-owning workers associated freely with one another for mutually advantageous reasons. This medieval society contained a landowning peasantry, whose associate bodies and guilds safeguarded "the division of property", thus, prohibiting the growth of a "proletariat upon the one side" and a "monopolising capitalist upon the other", "by binding men of the same craft or the same village together; guaranteeing the small proprietor against loss of his economic independence" (Belloc 1912: 49, 50). The guild was "a society partly co-operative, but in the main composed of private owners of capital whose corporation was self-

governing, and was designed to check competition between its members: to prevent the growth of one at the expense of the other" (*idem*, 49).

The highly utopian, idealised medieval state is imagined by Belloc as an ambiguously organised, interconnected chain of local families: "The state, as the minds of men envisaged it at the close of this process, was an agglomeration of families of varying wealth, but by far the greater number owners of the means of production" (*idem*, 50). "Every action of medieval society" was "directed towards the establishment of a state in which men should be economically free through the possession of capital and of land" (*idem*, 51). The local "distributive state" of the Middle-Ages was, however, destroyed by the "dreadful moral anarchy" of Capitalism, whose turning point in Britain was the Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries, and which introduced a "new land owning class" (*idem*, 52, 65). This new class consisted of "a mass of new families", which became "wealthy out of all proportion to anything the older England had known" (*idem*, 65). Thus, a "few wealthy families" acquired "hold of the bulk of the means of production" and it is this supposed post-Reformation wealth grab and "not the so-called Industrial Revolution" which "accounts for the terrible social condition in which we find ourselves today" (*idem*, 67, 68).

Belloc calls the supporters of the Distributive State "Conservatives and Traditionalists" who respect "the old forms of Christian European life", thus emphasising the supposed 'European ness' of the Distributive system (*idem*, 105, 106). They are people who know that "property was distributed throughout the State during the happiest periods of our past history" and "where it is properly

distributed today, you have greater social sanity and ease than elsewhere" (*idem*, 106). Those "who would re-establish, if possible, the Distributive state" in place of Capitalism are "men concerned with known realities" and who have "for their ideal a condition of society which experience has tested and proved both stable and good" (*idem*, 106). They are, therefore, "more practical than the Collectivists as they deal with things, which either are or have been in actual existence" (*idem*, 105, 106).

The man who desires "to re-establish property as an institution normal to most citizens" is the most radical as he is "working against the grain of our existing Capitalist society", while he (Belloc's language is consistently patriarchal) "who desires to establish Socialism – that is Collectivism – is working with the grain of that society" (*idem*, 108). The "Collectivists" are not only attacked due to the impracticality of their system, by suggesting something which has never before been in existence, but they also help maintain "the Servile State" by working within its system. Thus, Belloc uses the supposed historical existence of the utopian spaces he describes to emphasise their feasibility and practicality and simultaneously attacks the impracticality of the "Collectivists", while also, indeed, acknowledging the difficulties inherent in his proposed property distribution (*idem*, 110-117). Belloc, thus, imagines, and argues for, a society based upon independent property owning families and localities, linked together through guilds, rather than collectivist, mass and "servile" states.

Belloc is also of the opinion that what he has proffered as an alternative to the "servile" state is the true form of the "old Christian state" (*idem*, 163), by which

he really means the Catholic Christian state. According to his analysis the pre-Reformation world existed in a kind of spiritual-state equilibrium, in which statehood was small and local, and consisted of independent peasant proprietors, and these 'state-lets' were united at European level by the sense of Christian universalism. But with the Reformation the English Catholic Church was nationalised, Church property was sold, a number of families acquired extraordinary wealth and "after the Reformation there began to arise all over England those great "country houses" which rapidly became the typical centres of English agricultural life" (*idem*, 65). With this action England became Capitalist and "permitted a vast section of her population to become proletarian" (*idem*, 68).

Belloc sees the Reformation as the most important event in European history and he is convinced that it is the ultimate cause of all the cultural, economic, social and political problems of Western society (Ker 2003: 59). Belloc's idea of 'Europe' is invariably connected to Catholicism, as his notorious phrase from *Europe and the Faith* from 1920 would suggest: "the Faith is Europe, and Europe is the Faith". He sees the denial of unity as the essential principle of Protestantism (Ker 2003: 59) and his utopian distributive space is perceived as a return to the "old Christian state" and, thus, a return to Catholic Christian universalism. Belloc's distributive 'state' is, therefore, part of an almost state-less world where bonds are local and this sense of locality interrelates effortlessly, and in an unproblematic fashion, with a universal sense of a Catholic Christian community.

Belloc emphasises the virtues of utopian localised 'state-lets' of independent peasant proprietors; and a return to a medieval type Christian universalism. Distributism was "an expression of subsidiarity, the Catholic social teaching which may be defined as the belief that the state should not arrogate to itself powers which could be perfectly adequately exercised by the individual, by the family, or by local authorities" and "notions of subsidiarity suffuse *The Servile State*" (Quinn 1993: 171). *The Servile State* is also permeated by the utopian spaces of an idealised Catholic Middle Ages and the Reformation is seen as the defining occurrence in European history. The Distributive state, as imagined by Belloc, would necessitate a return to supposed pre-Reformation forms of societal existence.

Thus, the essays of Christopher Dawson and Hilaire Belloc's *The Servile State* undoubtedly depict what may be termed distinctly Catholic utopian spaces. The adversaries of both authors are represented by Capitalism, Socialism, centralisation, mass states, as well as the Reformation, which is seen by both writers as directly related to nation-state formation. The loss of a sense of European unity, perceived as the feeling of Christian universalism and spiritual community, is deemed also by both authors to be largely the fault of the Reformation and Protestantism. Dawson and Belloc do not foresee any tension existing between the regional spaces they idealise and the sense of European universalism, which they both see as inherent to Christianity. Their utopian spaces also serve the function of criticising, fairly radically, specific, and indeed foundational, elements within their society. They criticise state centralisation,

Protestantism and 'modernity', the 'real' England for both writers being the localised, pre-Reformation and pre-industrial England, the medieval, Catholic England of Chaucer rather than the industrial, urban England of Dickens.

The utopian 'solutions' both proffer include independent property owning families and households, general decentralisation, guilds and associations based upon occupation and a sense of locality, as well as a reinvigorated sense of spiritual unity. Belloc's basic unit, above that of the family, is the 'village' made up of independent proprietors, while Dawson's is that of the 'region', in which 'traditional', 'natural' leader figures from the local aristocracy reign supreme. The utopian spaces are depicted as practical and feasible due to their supposed historical existence, but are really pseudo-historical utopian spaces, projections of a supposed empirical past truth, which may be, they argue, re-instated to help mould the reality of the future. They also constitute a coming together of two distinct kinds of conservative spatial imagining, that of the Romantic Right, with its belief in 'organic', 'naturally' developing communities, and the Christian universalism of the Religious Right.

Notes

[1] For a discussion of the idyllic spaces of conservative thought, see Maier 2006: 34.

[2] Pius XI's encyclical reinforces the importance of private property, decentralised power and medieval type guilds and associations based upon occupation. The state "should leave to smaller groups the settlement of business of minor importance, which otherwise would distract it" and those in power should be convinced that "the more faithfully this principle of subsidiary function be followed, and a graded hierarchical order exist between various associations, the greater will be both social authority and social efficiency, and the happier and more prosperous the condition of the commonwealth" (Pius XI 1931: 35).

[3] *The English Review* was established by Ford Madox Ford in 1908 as a political and literary monthly magazine, staying in business, although regularly changing editors, until 1937, when it merged with *The National Review*. It started as an organ of the "liberal left" then changing to the "illiberal right". Under Ford the magazine published work of a very high quality, including that of Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats and D.H. Lawrence. While the literary quality nosedived after Ford left the editorship, by 1933 Douglas Jerrold was editor and the magazine, although now quite conservative, was able to regain some of its literary quality, containing, for example, in one addition three reviews by T. S. Elliot. The magazine's circulation remained quite limited and never rose above 1,000 copies a month. See White 1984: 125-129.

[4] *The Wind and the Rain* was started by Michael Allmand and Neville Braybrooke in 1941 and ran, with an irregular output, until 1951. It was ideologically "anti-left" and "tried to hold on to spiritual values, especially those with a Catholic orientation, in a world of chaos, turmoil, and change" (Baker 1986: 497, 499). "Contributions by important post-war British thinkers" include that of Dawson, "the only autobiographical statement Dawson ever published" (*idem*, 498), as well as W. H. Auden on Graham Greene and some of the first translations of August Strindberg into English.

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