UTOPIAS, POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE[1] (1963) Aldous Huxley

In 1930, H. G. Wells published a novel entitled *Men Like Gods*.[2] It was the story of the adventures, in a fourth-dimensional Utopia, of a party that included Arthur Balfour, H. J. Massingham, a society beauty and a middle-aged gentleman who was a cross between H. M. Tomlinson and Wells himself.[3] The inhabitants of this particular province of the fourth dimension were gods and goddesses, noble and nude, but not in the least antique; for they all had advanced degrees in science and cherished a most unclassical faith in indefinite progress towards some sublime but unintelligible consummation. "Some day," they believed, "some day, here and everywhere Life (with a capital L), of which you and I are but the anticipatory atoms and eddies, Life will awaken indeed, one and whole and marvelous, like a child awakened to conscious life. We shall be there then, all that matters of us, you and I. And it will be no more than a beginning, no more than a beginning ...."[4]

To utterances of this kind I have, from earliest childhood, been acutely allergic, and the reading of *Men Like Gods* evoked in me an almost pathological reaction in the direction of cynical anti-idealism. So much so that, before I finished the book, I had resolved to write a derisive parody of this most optimistic of Wells's Utopias. But when I addressed myself to the problem of creating a negative Nowhere, a Utopia in reverse, I found the subject so fascinatingly pregnant with so many kinds of literary and psychological possibilities that I quite forgot *Men Like Gods* and addressed myself in all seriousness to the task of writing the book that was later to be known as *Brave New World*.

Brave New World was published in 1932. Since then I have written two more Utopian fantasies. The first of these, *Ape and Essence*[5], was a cautionary tale about the consequences, in a grisly future, of nuclear warfare. The second, *Island*, is a longer and more elaborate essay in positive Utopianism – an essay to which some of its critics have reacted in much the same way as I myself reacted to Wells's *Men Like Gods*. This is a case of poetic justice and an illustration, at the same time, of the melancholy truth that, in the words of André Gide, "*c'est avec les mauvais sentiments qu'on fait de bons romans.*"[6] It is relatively easy to write a good book about misfortune, madness and the seven deadly sins. It is exceedingly hard to be interesting and convincing about happiness and rationality, about the common decencies and the uncommon ecstasies and illuminations.

From this brief account of my own excursions into Utopia I now pass to Utopia in general, Utopia in its historical manifestations down the centuries. Positive or negative, all Utopias belong to one or other of two main classes. There are the near-in Utopias, where people like ourselves have solved their social and psychological problems in ways which to us are unfamiliar. And there are the far-out Utopias, inhabited by creatures

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[1] Reprint of Huxley's Blashfield Address of 24 May 1962 in *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Second Series*. New York, 1963. The editor is grateful to the Academy for permission to reprint the text of Huxley's talk.

[2] *MLG* was first published serially in the Liberal *Westminter Gazette*, December 1922-February 1923 and published in book form in 1923 by Cassell.

[3] Arthur James Balfour (1848-1930). Influential Tory politician; served as Prime Minister (1902-1905) and Foreign Secretary (1916-1919). Harold John Massingham (1888-1952). Liberal journalist and author. Henry Major Tomlinson (1873-1958). Essayist and novelist. Wrote the *Sea and the Jungle* (1912). Wrote a favorable review of *MLG*. The society beauty was based on Lady Astor (1879-1964). First woman to sit in British House of Commons. Hostess for the Cliveden set.

[4] *Men Like Gods*. Cassell: London and New York, 282.

[5] Published in 1948; *Island*, 1962.

[6] The exact quotation is, "*C'est avec les beaux sentiments que l'on fait la mauvaise littérature*." Gide, "Dostoïevski, VI" (1923), rpt. in *Essais critiques*. Paris: Gallimard 1999, 637. Gide also refers to his Blakean proverb in his letter to François Mauriac dated 10 May 1928. See *Cahiers André Gide 2 Correspondance André Gide François Mauriac 1912-1950*, ed. J. Morton, Gallimard, 1971, 77.

unlike ourselves– creatures whose problems are either non-existent or so different from ours as to seem irrelevant.

The class of far-out Utopias may be divided in its turn into several sub-classes – the Idyllic, the Satiric, the Moralistic, the Anarchic and the Evolutionary. Thus, William Morris's *News from Nowhere* is a far-out Utopia of idyllic wish-fulfilment. No less Arcadian and remote are the many French eighteenth-century accounts of voyages to imaginary islands inhabited by virtuous savages. Far-out in a very different way is Butler's *Erewhon*, that straight-faced parody of Victorian life with its rich implications of satirical comment.[7] Far further out than *Erewhon* is the land of Swift's Yahoos, that Utopia of pure misanthropy and ferocious self-loathing. In the moralistic sub-class of far-out Utopias we find such fictions as Andreae's *Christianopolis* and Mercier's *L'An 2040*.[8] Over against the moralizers we meet with such amiable anarchists as Morelly[9], in whose Utopia love is free and there are no taboos even against incest. And finally we have the chronologically far-out Utopias of post-Darwinian speculation – the world, for example, of aged, loquacious, egg-laying monsters created by Shaw in *Back to Methuselah*[10], the nightmare world of cannibalistic Morlocks and cannibalized Eloys described in Wells's *Time Machine*,[11] the remote *Possible Worlds* of J. B. S. Haldane[12] and those wildly fantastic and yet curiously convincing future worlds created by Olaf Stapledon in *Last and First Men*[13]. Utopia is not the same as fairyland or paradise, and the writers of Utopian fiction are not permitted, by the rules of their game, to invoke the aid of djinns or gods or magicians. But time, if you allow enough of it to pass, can do practically anything you ask of it. The miracles which no self-respecting author of a near-in Utopia can permit himself are freely available to the far-out Utopist who thinks in terms of evolutionary change. Far-out Utopias can be very entertaining, very edifying (for those who like to be edified), very provocative of thought and self-criticism, very touching in their Arcadian innocence and occasionally (one thinks of Erewhon and Laputa) very funny. But the far-out Utopia can never be regarded as a blue-print, a plan of possible and desirable action. Near-in Utopias, on the other hand, are intended by their creators to be realistic and practical. The near-in Utopist takes himself seriously as legislator, sociologist and statesman. True, he is only an armchair legislator, a sociological amateur, a statesman without power or responsibilities. But, for the Utopist, these are negligible accidents. In essence, he insists, his ideas are realistic and could be made to work in practice. And as a matter of plain historical fact many once Utopian ideas have proved their worth by getting themselves realized. Many institutions which we now take for granted were first described and recommended in the Utopian fictions of men who, by their contemporaries, were regarded as idle dreamers. But though some Utopias have been shrewdly realistic and practical in patches, not one, I venture to say, has ever been realistic as a whole, practical in its totality. From More to Bellamy, from the Republic to the Phalansteries[14] and the world of 1984, there is no Utopian blue-print for a better world or an organized hell upon earth that could ever be fully actualized.

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[7] Huxley wrote a special introduction to a 1934 edition of *Erewhon*.

[8] Johann Valentin Andreae. *Christianopolis* (1619). Huxley referred to Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1771) in his introduction to Eric Sutton's translation of Crébillon fils' *La nuit et le moment*, *The Opportunities of a Night*, (1925), later reprinted as "Crébillon the Younger" (*Olive Tree*, 1936.)

[9] Morelly. *Code de la nature* (1755).

[10] George Bernard Shaw. *Back to Methuselah*, 1925 Huxley criticizes Shaw's oversimplified utopian idea of equal incomes for all in "A Disagreement with Mr. Shaw", *Vanity Fair*, May, 1929, reprinted in slightly altered form as "Revolutions", *Do What You Will* (1929).

[11] H.G. Wells. *The Time Machine* (1895). This utopia, unlike the later "open conspiracy" utopias which Huxley used as sources for *BNW*, is a decidely pessimistic utopia.

[12] J.B.S. Haldane. *Possible Worlds and other essays*. London, 1927.

[13] Olaf Stapledon. *Last and First Men* (1930). This novel depicts an Americanized world state in Book IV. Huxley referred to this novel in "The Problem of Faith", *Harper's Magazine*, 166 (January 1933). David Bradshaw argues convincingly that it "may well have contained the germ of *Brave New World*." *Aldous Huxley's Ideological Development 1919-1936* Unpub. Diss. Oxford 1987, 141.

[14] Charles Fourier (1772-1837), French utopian theorist, the basis of whose ideal community would be the *phalanx*, a group of 1600 persons who would be housed in a main building or *phalanstère*.

There are two cogent reasons for this state of things. In the first place, all writers – even the wisest and most highly gifted – are the victims of that Original Sin of the Intellect, the urge to oversimplification. In Utopian fictions the bewildering complexities of real life are reduced to manageable proportions by a process of selection and omission. Thus *The Republic* is completely non-psychological and even non-sociological. Plato never refers to the real motives of individual action and proposes no techniques for the realization of his social ideal. Unlike most Utopists, however, he recognizes the existence of the biological realities that underlie the constructs of civilization. The inhabitants of his republic are good Malthusians, who "have a care that their families do not exceed their means; for they have an eye to poverty or war." And in the *Critias* we find, along with his unfinished Utopian romance about Atlantis, a genuinely scientific account of deforestation, erosion and their disastrous consequences.

From Plato's time to the present the majority even of near-in Utopists have failed to do justice to individual psychology. They tend to assume that natural religion, moralistic education and a judicious reform of our social, political and economic arrangements will lead, inevitably and automatically, to universal happiness, permanent peace and generalized virtue. There have, of course, been Utopian writers who recognized the importance of individual psychology. But their more realistic appraisal of the human situation is spoiled in all too many cases by that other most common manifestation of Intellectual Original Sin – the lust for tidiness.

The lust for tidiness is the immoral excess, perversion and misdirection of that beneficent urge to order, which is at the root of all art, all philosophy, all science, all civilization. In the realm of thought the lust for tidiness is responsible for all our premature syntheses, all our too perfect, too rational, too dogmatic systems. In the realm of practical affairs the lust for tidiness is the principal source, along with the lust for power, of all tyranny, all regimentation, all the workings of Parkinson's Law. In the fictional limbo between scientific and philosophical theory on the one hand and political practice on the other, this same lust for tidiness has been the motivating drive behind the creation of almost all Utopias. Most Utopists have had the souls, but happily not the effective power, of drill sergeants and dictators. Cabet[15] and Bellamy[16] dreamed of organizing society along the lines of an army. Fourier took a realistic interest in psychology, but made nonsense of his insights by indulging a pathological lust for social tidiness. Plato's Guardians anticipated Hitler in their use of the Big Lie. "Our rulers," he says, "will have to administer a great quantity of falsehood and deceit for the benefit of the ruled." And in the *Laws* we find him advocating childhood conditioning, the censorship of books, stern punishments for religious heretics and unbelievers, compulsory virtue for everybody. Wells's *Modern Utopia* is less dismally puritanical than most of its predecessors; but here too the lust for tidiness results in a kind of totalitarian state under the rule of a class of Samurai, who think, feel and behave like a cross between the Boy Scouts and the Society of Jesus. More's *Utopia* is also blessedly unpuritanical; but its paternalistic state socialism is administered like an old-fashioned boarding school. Totalitarian control appears once more in Campanella's *City of the Sun*,[17] whose rulers enforce a system of eugenics scientifically based on the most approved astrological principles.

By their creators all these Utopias were intended to be positive. But in every case an oversimplified view of human nature, combined with the lust for tidiness, has reversed the sign and transformed these ideal states into negative Utopias which, in spite of their authors' underlying good will and sporadic good sense, are potentially as horribly inhuman as Orwell's *1984*. Which only shows, yet once more, how dangerous it is to hold incorrect views about the nature of reality. If hell is so often paved with good intentions, it is because good intentions are so often associated with bad social science and worse psychology. Luckily for humanity, the high-minded

[15] Étienne Cabet (1788-1856), author of *Voyage en Icarie* (1840), inspired by Fourier.
[16] Edward Bellamy (1850-1898), author of *Looking Backward* (1888).
[17] Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639). *La Città del Sole* (1602) was written while he was a prisoner of the Spanish Inquisition.

tyrannies of the Utopists have existed only on paper. What would have been our fate if the philosophers of the ideal had become, as Plato hoped they might, the kings of the real world? One shudders even to think of it.