

Utopias

When Thomas More conceived his great classic, the title he gave *Utopia* in 1516 translates most readily as 'The Good Place', and in so imagining his amazing geography, More gave the world an immortal genre for the exercise and practice of hope. At a time like the present, when the streets are packed with people drunk upon the dreams of money and the dismal clichés of its expenditure, it is worth recollecting More's conviction that if private property is the source of our present discontents, then private property will have to be abolished.

In the half-millennium since, the imagining of utopia has thrived and waned, but always remained visible, as that mournful *flâneur* Walter Benjamin noticed, in the collective expressions of culture, "leaving their traces in a thousand configurations of life, from permanent buildings to ephemeral fashions". Stretching out a hand in an improbable comradeship with More across the centuries, Benjamin also remarked (while discussing – where else? – Paris, still the original utopian city) how every epoch dreams the future by way of its popular imagery, a future compounded with the elements of a mythic history wholly free of the hateful oppressions of social class.

Class consciousness as the motor of politics was entirely ignored in the recent combat of the Three Parties, and its defining and absolute certainties have dissolved into the dreadful drivelling of policy documents about the (bleurgh !) 'aspirational' society. But the written classics of the utopian genre are pretty well all alike in sharing a picture of the good society as classless and private-propertyless, one where happiness is conferred by easy, courteous and uncompetitive relations between equal citizens.

The *unalikeness* of utopias then reposes in the differing delights of their precise locality. In William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, first serialised in 1890, Morris envisioned the coming of the socialist paradise quite without mitigating such necessities as "war from beginning to end: bitter war, till hope and pleasure put an end to it", before making the settlement of hope and pleasure along the valley of the Thames restored to Maytime greenery all the way from Hammersmith to Kelmscott House, the ghastly villas of "stockbrokers and other such" all gone, Hampton Court the property of the people, the healthy, handsome, well-built lovers mowing hay in perfect equity and contentment.

One principal reason for the disrepair into which literary and theoretic utopias fell after the middle of the twentieth century was that certain deeply horrible versions of utopianism had been actively attempted in the Third Reich and Stalinist Russia. *1984* was published punctually to compel upon us in all its stony completeness the fearful inescapability of its vision of assented-to totalitarianism. The latter concept bred an enormous theoretic progeny as well as (in the neologism of the day) its late-dystopian realisation in the dozens of movies sired by *Blade Runner*. Isaiah Berlin came to the rescue of the honoured name of liberty by confining it to the individual's "freedom to ..." and "freedom from ..." and left the ideological highway wide open for the consumer juggernaut to sweep the self-governing citizen off the tarmac.

Theoretic utopianism didn't give up its ghosts entirely. The members of the Frankfurt school who, God knows, had more than enough good personal reasons for waving the idea goodbye, kept up their communication with a future good society by trusting in an unlikely alliance between Freud and Marx to reconcile Eros and civilisation, and Ernst Bloch brought out in the mid-1950s his mighty trilogy, including in its triptych 'Brief Daydreams' and 'Outline of a Better World', entitled *The Principle of Hope*.

Since the fall of the Wall, however, since the frightening advent of the Big Heat and now the disgrace of the humiliated Money Men, academic vision has darkened into a night of the last days in which, as the *Second Epistle to Timothy* relevantly puts it, "perilous times shall come, for men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters ... unholy ... incontinent ... despisers of those that are good". John Gray's truthful and admirable *Straw Dogs* is the bell that tolls most awfully in this latest campanology.

II

Good old hopefulness retains nonetheless its unkillable stamina, and our imagining of utopia is carried gamely on in Benjamin's "thousand configurations of life", never more so than when we are on holiday.

Never mind the cold statistic that holidays and Christmases put in train more divorces than any other seasons of the year. Looking forward to the hols, right now in early summer, is to

be looking forward to the time when there will be enough time, time which will not be spent, but will be free, time which will be ours, unearned except by the toil of the rest of the year, unrewarded except by virtue itself, which is to say the delightful coincidence, to which stern old Kant denied house-room, of doing right and living well.

For on holiday as we dream it, and as it often enough is, we will restore old comities, and we shall discover them in the ideal landscapes of the seaside or of the perfect village, the imagery of each shaped by the prehistoric and classical Mediterranean: the promenade and pier, or in Larkin's lovely glimpses of an ideal sea- or- landscape, "the small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse", "the meadows, the lanes, the choirs". On holiday we may only work at work we do not do for the rest of the year; we are free from profit and productivity and all that frightful burble about performance. The good place must be at once strange and familiar so that, as we did as lucky children, we find, unchanged but surprising, the precious landmarks which make up the configuration of happiness: the village shop, the small harbour, the path through the stand of oaks to the picnic spot, the long horizon with the drone of a distant aircraft in the sky.

In the good holiday place, old roles and the old social order are restored by cordial strangers; we formally greet, as we never would at home, the shopkeeper, the postmistress, the farmer who is our landlord, the coastguard, the vicar. Old appellations revive (Doctor, Officer, M le Curé, Signora, Effendi), lapsed and local ceremonies quicken again (the cricket match, the jazz cellar, the village fête, the church service, the lecture on the Jurassic period).

The good place restores us to the fresh bosom of an undamaged mother Nature. It is *natural*, at its best luxurious and beautiful of course, but also as its best just touched here and there with a whiff of danger (climbing the cliff, braving a choppy sea beneath a small sail, letting a toboggan go at a sheer white slope).

Finally the good place will be good for us in virtue of being educative and self-improving. We will pay our proper tribute to art in our visits to the frescos in the churches, to the massive and changeless castle on the hill across the valley, to hear the little orchestra play Haydn in the market place.

Paradise is both puritan and licentious. It is off the edge. The perfect holiday allows us to wear what we like, our favourite attire the birthday suit, drink more than we can at the wooden table under the lime trees ,happily dispute the meaning of life, delight in fact and fantasy in easy, edenic and guiltless sex, complete the time with a vast, gregarious and unforgettable meal ... collect and cherish an unerasable album of memories.

It is natural that children should feature so largely in images of utopia. Of course, our imaginings of these visions is sure to be powerfully misled by the shining houses and gardens pictured in such irresistible but nonetheless poisonous weapons of the advertising industry as *Homes and Gardens*. Such journals draw no doubt on the myths of history – ancestral houses and all that, but they merely corroborate the psychosis of the advertisement, the unbreakable cycle from desire to envy to disappointment to rancour, and back to desire again.

The safest house of present-day utopias is however to be found in the fifty- year- or- so history of television tales for five year olds. *Trumpton* and its sister villages, *Chigley* and *Camberwick Green*, all still easily available on DVD, plus the work of the recently died but always immortal Oliver Postgate and his utopian planet-home for *The Clangers*, these noble classics together with *Bob the Builder* and *Postman Pat*, have for two generations taught their solemn audiences the lineaments of the good place.

The eponymous villages are assembled out of the best moments of European political and technological history of the past two centuries. The architecture belongs to the pastel-painted Georgian high street, the Town Hall to Northern France, like the Mayor, a prominent emblem of gentle authority. The cobbled square is all set about by arcaded shops kept by toytown versions of exactly those indestructible craftspeople nowadays strenuously resurrecting themselves in the prettiest old towns: pastry cooks, clock repairers, cheesemakers, carpenters, sausage specialists, plumbers.

The only officials of state, apart from the Mayor, are the endearing chief fire officer, Captain Flack and his crew - Pew, Pew, Barney McGrew, Cuthbert, Dibble and Grubb - and the toy soldiers, dressed in the uniform of the Crimea, the only function of either body of men being *helpfulness*, their duties to rescue stranded cows and retrieve forgotten paintpots from the intestines of the Town Hall clock.

The town is classless and uses no currency. Lord Barleycorn may live in a Palladian house, but he will drive the steam train when his friend the engine driver goes on holiday. Windy Miller, who indeed keeps the windmill, shares a passion for natural history with the GP, Dr Mopp, who carries a Gladstone bag and drives a stately 1906 vintage car.

The technology of this utopia is taken from any contemporary toyshop, where we will always find a tamed and beatified version of industrial progress carried by such mythic vehicles as the vintage car, the electric milk float, the shining steam train with polished brass, the helicopter (but *not* the 747), the forklift truck.

These ambulatory conveyances cannot damage the green and comely nature they inhabit. Their occupants address one another with a sort of Quaker courtesy. At the end of an episode, men and women workers leave the factory and celebrate the end of the day with a sort-of Morris dance. The townsfolk, one might wistfully say, are herbivorous socialists.

These tales all corroborate the news from nowhere. Postgate's mouse-people on their distant planet do the same. Nature and industry combine in the harmonious provision of nurture (the Soup Dragon, the Iron Chicken), the denizens of the planet, speaking a language of melodious whistles perfectly endorsing Chomsky's deep-structural theory of meaning, are impelled in all their doings only by kindness and curiosity. Their planet dances also, to the music of the spheres as played by little orchards of bell-bearing trees... and hardly any lower in the nursery ratings, Bob the Builder and Postman Pat ply the politics of politeness with their unfailing kindness and consideration in the perfect landscape of the Yorkshire dales.

In these places, and in their many descendants, the companion books often including their own DVD, the idea of Utopia lives staunchly on. Indeed, it is an agreeable and rational place for it to do so, for what are the stories we commend to our children and grandchildren *for*, if not say implicitly and unplonkingly, "Here is how the world ought to be. We grownups haven't managed to make things come out like this. Remember these tales and see whether you can do better. One day, they will give you occasion for thinking the best possible thoughts".

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