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## ‘From Flatland to Utopia at the *fin de siècle*: a leap of faith’

At the end of *A Modern Utopia* (1905), H. G. Wells locates the limitations of his vision in the dichotomy between individuality and totality. He apologises: ‘in that incongruity between great and individual inheres the incompatibility I could not resolve’.<sup>1</sup> These are the perennial problems of any utopian project: how all-encompassing can a community grow while retaining a unity of part and whole? And how can we get to utopia when that leap requires mass co-operation? In the great surge of utopian writing that was produced during the *fin de siècle*, therefore, Edward Bellamy, William Morris and H. G. Wells among others imagined utopias that were global in scale, and located in the future.

These writers made a radical shift in utopian thinking by drawing a historical trajectory between their own time and that of utopia: Bellamy’s *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (1888) and Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890) are narrated from an imagined future, and Wells’s *A Modern Utopia*, though nominally set on a ‘distant planet’, is nonetheless preoccupied with how to make the transition from this world to that. Unlike the static and self-contained utopias of earlier writers (from Plato in the fourth century BCE and Thomas More in 1516 to Samuel Butler in 1872) these are dynamic societies, offered as aspirations for our – or at least their first readers’ – future. A contemporaneous text that might seem to have little in common with these ‘historical utopias’, therefore, is E. A. Abbott’s *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884), set in an apparently two-dimensional world peopled by polygons. *Flatland* is also, however, a satire on the blinkered nature of Victorian society, and a reflection on the preconceptions that prevent us stepping beyond our everyday reality to a higher (utopian) plane.

*Flatland* has been viewed primarily as an intriguing text in the history of science.<sup>2</sup> In the wake of Einstein’s 1917 theory of General Relativity, a *Nature* article recognised it quite rightly as a valuable precursor in conceptualising time as a fourth dimension.<sup>3</sup> However, if we return *Flatland* to its 1880s context, its ramifications go far beyond the mathematical sphere. It has received brief attention from scholars of Science Fiction and of Victorian culture: most notably, Rosemary Jann has traced its attempt to bring into alignment the faith in intangible

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<sup>1</sup> H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Everyman, 1994), 222.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas F. Banchoff, “From Flatland to Hypergraphics: Interacting with Higher Dimensions,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 15, no. 4 (1990): 364–72; Edwin A. Abbott, *The Annotated Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, ed. Ian Stewart (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Publishing, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> W. G., “Euclid, Newton, and Einstein,” *Nature* 104, no. 2624 (February 12, 1920): 627.

dimensions necessary for both scientific and religious practice.<sup>4</sup> In this slim ‘romance’, influenced by the ‘scientific romances’ of Charles Howard Hinton, Abbott advocates both a ‘natural Christianity’ informed by Higher Criticism, and the crucial principle that ‘scientific “reality” rest[s] no less upon a leap of faith.’<sup>5</sup> In this article, I will show how closely its ideas and concerns, and even its means of transition between our world and the next, can bring into focus those of the specifically utopian texts being written alongside it at the *fin de siècle*. As this article will show, *Flatland* breaks the conventions of utopian narrative by removing the reader from the narrative plane – quite literally – and situating us instead in the ‘impossible’ third dimension. The leap of faith necessary for scientific or religious revelation is simultaneously invoked as the route to utopia.

The notion of a collective ‘leap of faith’ sits in tension with any chronological account of utopian transition. It retreats from any logical step-by-step or evolutionary process, calling instead upon our non-rational, quasi-religious faculties. It can thus be seen as an evasive solution. On the other hand, as envisaged by the utopian writers of the *fin de siècle*, it is also the most difficult thing to initiate. As in Thomas Kuhn’s theory of the paradigm shift (1962), our inferences are constrained by the rules and expectations of the current version of ‘normal science’.<sup>6</sup> Until the point of crisis, and the ensuing paradigm shift, we cannot conceive of any serious challenges to the current paradigm. This model demonstrates one of the most serious obstacles to the enactment of a utopian system: our persistent inability even to envisage the things that have not yet been discovered. This essay argues, therefore, for the leap of faith as both an evasion – an acknowledgement of ‘incompatibility’ – and these utopias’ greatest strength, since they allow for the agency of the reader to come into play, both imaginatively and in future activism.

The relationship of utopian writing to practical action has long been a subject of debate.<sup>7</sup> As Darko Suvin has pointed out, utopian studies encompasses two rather disparate groupings – social scientists whose focus is utopian communities, and literary scholars interested in utopia as text – making the field sometimes seem, in Suvin’s words, ‘a two-

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<sup>4</sup> Darko Suvin, “Victorian Science Fiction, 1871–85: The Rise of the Alternative History Sub-Genre,” *Science Fiction Studies* 10, no. 2 (July 1, 1983): 162–63; Rosemary Jann, “Abbott’s ‘Flatland’: Scientific Imagination and ‘Natural Christianity,’” *Victorian Studies* 28, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 473–90; Matthew Beaumont, “*News from Nowhere* and the Here and Now: Reification and the Representation of the Present in Utopian Fiction,” *Victorian Studies* 47, no. 1 (2004): 40–41.

<sup>5</sup> Jann, “Abbott’s ‘Flatland,’” 474.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Fourth edition (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Marx and Engels disavowed utopia because they saw it as impractical. See Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, ed. by John Rees [1880; first English translation 1892] (London: Bookmarks, 1993).

headed monster’.<sup>8</sup> In this essay, I consider both monstrous heads together, analysing these texts both as literary fictions – with all the open-endedness celebrated by Ernst Bloch and those inspired by him – and as tools for change, which seek to lead the world of their readership towards real social transformation.<sup>9</sup> First, I examine how these utopias negotiate *fin-de-siècle* debates about the relationship between individual and society, the particular and the general. Their stances on this question unsurprisingly raise more questions, the subject of Part II: how do you reconcile depersonalised, collective agency with the need for *someone* to start, lead and carry out the necessary revolutionary transformation? How do you create collectivity without its potential corollary: inertia? The answer they all turn to is a leap of faith. As I suggest in Part III, this might not be the deluded or hopeless response it first seems.

## I. Society and the ‘unhistoric’ individual

Two different ideals of the relationship between individual and society jostled for position in the 1880s and 1890s. This drew on, and found expression in, biological debates of the previous two decades. While Hebert Spencer asserted that all progress was a development from ‘homogeneity ... to heterogeneity’, using so-called compound organisms as a model for society’s functioning, T. H. Huxley instead insisted that any organism needs a central nervous system.<sup>10</sup> This mirrored debates in the economic sphere, between prevailing laissez-faire individualism and the state interventionism of New Liberalism. Socialist movements were no more united on the issue. As Regenia Gagnier has recently highlighted, these *fin-de-siècle* decades saw repeated avowals of Socialism in paradoxical tandem with avowals of extreme individualism, including Oscar Wilde’s famous 1891 declaration that ‘Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism’.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Darko Suvin, “Locus, Horizon, and Orientation: The Concept of Possible Worlds as a Key to Utopian Studies,” in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, ed. Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (London: Verso, 1997), 125.

<sup>9</sup> See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, vol. 1, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986); Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1990); Richard Toby Widdicombe, “Eutopia, Dystopia, Aporia: The Obstruction of Meaning in Fin-de-Siècle Utopian Texts,” *Utopian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1990): 93–102.

<sup>10</sup> [Herbert Spencer], “Progress: Its Law and Cause,” *Westminster Review* 67, no. 132 (April 1857): 446; James Elwick, “Herbert Spencer and the Disunity of the Social Organism,” *History of Science* 41, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 35–72. On the interrelating biological and social debates, see Matthew Wraith, “Swarming and Multiplying: H.G. Wells, War and Swarm Intelligence,” *The Wellman*, no. 39 (2016).

<sup>11</sup> Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859–1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1; Oscar Wilde, *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 5th ed (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), 1174.

This tension between individual and mass visibly imbued – and fuelled – social reforming work. One of the largest such projects undertaken in Britain at the *fin de siècle* was Charles Booth’s mammoth study of poverty in London, written up with the eventual title of *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1889–1902), which Beatrice Webb was involved with as an assistant. Booth has been viewed by Gertrude Himmelfarb as the first to re-evaluate poverty not as a perpetual given but as a social problem in itself, and one that should – and could – be eradicated.<sup>12</sup> We might thus see his project as utopian in scope and aim. In common with the more conventionally utopian writing of the *fin de siècle*, it raises that perennial question about whether centralisation can be a means to individual expression. At the conclusion to his study, Booth drew up a series of proposals to deal with the extent of poverty he had discovered. He suggested that the best way to deal with the ‘very poor’, Class B, would be to remove them from the capitalist system, and take them under state supervision. In making this proposal, he admitted that he was working predominantly for the sake of the ‘respectable’ working poor, Classes C and D. He explains: ‘Class B ... is *du trop* [sic]. The competition of B drags down C and D ... industrially we gain nothing from B.’<sup>13</sup> Flying in the face of his liberal instincts as a successful businessman, Booth famously concluded – in an echo of Wilde – that ‘Our Individualism fails because our Socialism is incomplete.’<sup>14</sup> He advocated a highly centralised solution as a means to a contrary end. By granting agency to the State, and placing Class B under its control, therefore, Booth sought to protect the rest of society from the threat of uncontrollable Socialism.

This tension – even contradiction – between means and ends permeates the intellectual culture of the period. Bellamy, Morris and Wells, however, repeatedly reject the kind of two-tier system advocated by Booth, and instead of apportioning centralisation and individualism to separate groups, divided by social class, they seek to draw a line of causation from the former to the latter. The starting-point for all three writers is a shake-up of the value-systems by which individuals are judged, at once developing an existing tradition that had been key to the nineteenth-century novel, and going far beyond it. [Alex Woloch has proposed that in the novel genre, people – who we conventionally discuss as ‘characters’, but are encouraged to think of as ‘individuals’ – need to be seen in a ‘character-system’, where](#)

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<sup>12</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1992), 102.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1902), 162–63.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 167.

what matters is their ‘relative position vis-à-vis other characters.’<sup>15</sup> The realist novel suggests that even quite ordinary individuals can be valuable and have agency, but Woloch argues that the genre is ‘structurally destabilized ... by *too many people* ... who are incompletely pulled into the narrative’, who cannot have the ‘character-space’ that we (or they) believe themselves to deserve.<sup>16</sup> As Patrick Brantlinger and more recently John Plotz have highlighted, utopian fictions do not conform to this model, and Morris’s project in *News from Nowhere*, for example, is to ‘reject ... the logic of “character-space”’, and produce characters who are ‘systematically flat’.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, as Plotz highlights, this involves rejecting ‘even the idea of minoriness’, insisting instead on valorising ordinary individuals, subsuming and subordinating conventional notions of heroes.<sup>18</sup>

These utopists all suggest that the relative ‘historic’ and ‘unhistoric’ status of individuals in our world is only the result of worldly circumstances, and would be entirely different in a utopian setting. They all take the philosophical position that circumstances can determine character as well as experience. This is one point at which their utopian socialism intersects with that earlier form of Robert Owen (1771–1858), who declared in his first published work, an ‘Essay on the Principle of the Formation of Character’ (1813), that judges and criminals only find themselves in this relationship as a result of their respective circumstances. If the former had had their upbringing ‘among the poor and profligate of St Giles’, they would doubtless ‘have already suffered imprisonment, transportation, or death’, and vice versa.<sup>19</sup> Wells develops this type of hypothetical scenario in *A Modern Utopia*. Historicity is still a subject of concern, but historic status in our world does not match up with its utopian equivalent. Wells’s narrator asks rhetorically,

What, for example, will Utopia do with Mr Roosevelt? ... But, indeed, it is doubtful if we shall meet any of these doubles during our Utopian journey, or know them when we meet them. I doubt if anyone will be making the best of both these worlds. The great men in our still unexplored Utopia may be but village Hampdens in our own, and earthly goatherds and obscure illiterates sit here in the seats of the mighty.<sup>20</sup>

The most obvious allusion here is to Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), which imagines the graves holding men such as ‘some village-Hampden’, who might,

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<sup>15</sup> Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, “‘News from Nowhere’: Morris’s Socialist Anti-Novel,” *Victorian Studies* 19, no. 1 (September 1, 1975): 35–49; John Plotz, “Nowhere and Everywhere: The End of Portability in William Morris’s Romances,” *ELH* 74, no. 4 (2007): 933.

<sup>18</sup> Plotz, “Nowhere and Everywhere,” 933.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Owen, *A New View of Society and Other Writings* (London: Everyman, 1927), 16.

<sup>20</sup> Wells, *Modern Utopia*, 18.

had circumstances been different, become historic figures. But this passage also contains echoes of the final sentence of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2), which states that 'the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts ... [by those] who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs'.<sup>21</sup> This echo is further heightened in *A Modern Utopia*'s finale. Here, the narrator, having glimpsed a girl with 'eyes that dream' of high ideals, reflects that

After all, after all, dispersed, hidden, disorganised, undiscovered, unsuspected even by themselves, the *samurai* of Utopia are in this world, the motives that are developed and organised there stir dumbly here and stifle in ten thousand futile hearts...<sup>22</sup>

Just as Eliot uses the term 'unhistoric' to undermine its very meaning, these repeated adjectives of negation offer hope by implying their opposites. They evoke an entire mysterious world, whose 'undiscovered' status does not prevent it being real. Wells reveals his utopia's Platonic roots in this gesture towards a realm of ideals that exists whether we have realised its existence or not. For Wells, as his narrator's encounter with his own 'better self' demonstrates, a utopian character lies immanent within many of us, merely repressed by circumstances.<sup>23</sup>

Morris and Bellamy take similar positions in their utopias, proposing that circumstances determine character and even morality. In *News from Nowhere*, wise old man Hammond is outraged at time-traveller Guest's suggestion that 'political strife' is inherent and inevitable, and ridicules the essentialist definition of 'human nature' it entails.<sup>24</sup>

Expanding upon this paradigm, in *Looking Backward*, the minister Mr Barton comments, in his Sunday morning sermon,

My friends, if you would see men again the beasts of prey they seemed in the nineteenth century, all you have to do is to restore the old social and industrial system, which taught them to view their natural prey in their fellow-men, and find their gain in the loss of others.<sup>25</sup>

Rewriting Christian doctrine, he laments the struggles of poor misguided 'ministers of religion': 'Looking on the inhuman spectacle of society, these worthy men bitterly bemoaned the depravity of human nature; as if angelic nature would not have been debauched in such a devil's school!'<sup>26</sup> The message is clear: their efforts are utterly in vain given society's present

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<sup>21</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. W. J. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 896.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>23</sup> Wells, *Modern Utopia*, 147.

<sup>24</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin, 2004), 118.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 162.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

form; but it would only require a change of medium for human nature to be revealed in its true radiance.

When *Looking Backward*'s protagonist Julian West returns (in a dream, as it turns out) to the Boston of 1887, he experiences a hallucination at once horrible and hopeful.

[A]s I observed the wretched beings about me more closely, I perceived that they were all quite dead. Their bodies were so many living sepulchres. On each brutal brow was plainly written the *hic jacet* of a soul dead within.

As I looked, horror struck, from one death's head to another, I was affected by a singular hallucination. Like a wavering translucent spirit face superimposed upon each of these brutish masks I saw the ideal, the possible face that would have been the actual if mind and soul had lived.<sup>27</sup>

This passage works through a series of successive reversals. Having taken the reader from utopia to reality, Bellamy now takes us from reality to horror and back, and again to utopia, in the space of a few lines. Returned to his readers' own world, we expect to find ourselves somewhere familiar, but we are faced with a sudden revelation: we are in a charnel house. 'They were all quite dead'. From this lowest point of horror, we are then returned to reality, although one changed by utopian experience: it is 'only' their souls which are dead. From there, we are again offered a fleeting glimpse of utopia, in a Platonic 'ideal ... spirit face', the one they would have possessed had they lived in a transformed world. Of course, this pitiful vision does not last long within *Looking Backward*: at the nadir of despair, West awakes to find with relief that his return to the nineteenth century was merely a dream, and he is still in utopia. For us, however, there is one more reversal. We have to awake from the fiction of the novel, for his first readers to remember that they still live in the nineteenth century, and for us to remember that our civilisation still has not reached Bellamy's state of harmony. It is in this final double reversal – for West, from horror to utopia, and for us, from horror to utopia and out again – that Bellamy situates his final impetus for concrete action. Individuals who barely fulfil the definition – as 'so many living sepulchres', they are utterly undifferentiated – could in utopia become people with a place in history.

Each of these writers struggles in their respective utopia to reconcile the drive to diffuse historical agency more widely across society, with the concomitant desire to retain opportunities for individual freedom and diversity. In *A Modern Utopia*'s bracketing prologue and epilogue (as in the philosophical paper he added as an appendix), Wells insists that his utopia prioritises the fragmentary and individual.<sup>28</sup> While in our society, 'to behave "oddly" ... is to give offence and to incur hostility', utopia will accept no discrimination

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>28</sup> Wells, *Modern Utopia*, 8, 228.



against eccentricity.<sup>29</sup> The first inhabitant we meet is a dissident, who is free to agitate for an alternative way of life. Our narrator declares that ‘The State is for Individuals, the law is for freedoms, the world is for experiment, experience, and change: these are the fundamental beliefs upon which a modern Utopia must go.’<sup>30</sup> This list of pairs holds an echo of Wilde’s – and Booth’s – notion of Socialism *for* Individualism: it is only a means to a contrary end. Even Wells’s order of the Samurai will eventually render itself meaningless. As Krishan Kumar characterises it, as Utopia develops and works its magic, ‘more and more people are fitted to join the samurai order. All citizens eventually will share in rule – or, to put the same point differently, there will no longer be a ruling class or elite.’<sup>31</sup> In this framework, any hierarchy of historicity is eventually destined to disappear. There will ultimately be no ‘great men’, because there will be no downtrodden ones.

In the content of his utopia, however, Wells’s vision comes across as extremely ordered and regulated, more concerned with categories and rules than with individuals. He insists that ‘no less than a planet will serve the purpose of a modern Utopia’: his state is insistently global, all-pervasive and all-encompassing.<sup>32</sup> Our narrator’s companion, the ‘botanist’, is the only persistent exception to this totality. While I. F. Clarke saw the character as ‘petulant’, ‘prejudiced’ and ‘deplorable’,<sup>33</sup> it is more constructive to view him as a foil who highlights the flaws in the narrator’s schematic plan. As the botanist explains, ‘You mustn’t mind my saying it, but there’s something of the Gradgrind –’.<sup>34</sup> Wells pre-empts his readers’ potential objections by interpolating his own self-criticisms. As Kumar suggests, Wells ‘insists ... that the scientifically planned and ordered world-state is an empty shell without a personal and individual life that matches it.’<sup>35</sup> This is, however, difficult to put into practice. The utopia eventually collapses in a dispute between the pair, in which our narrator pronounces against the botanist’s valorisation of personal relations. The botanist ‘waves an unteachable destructive arm’, and ‘my Utopia rocks about me’.<sup>36</sup> Whether this is a failing in the botanist or in the utopia, however, is debateable.

Morris’s stance on individual agency is more radical. In *News from Nowhere*, individual agency is meaningless outside its collective context. Although he represents the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 53–4.

<sup>31</sup> Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 218.

<sup>32</sup> Wells, *Modern Utopia*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> I. F. Clarke, *The Pattern of Expectation, 1644–2001* (London: Cape, 1979), 209.

<sup>34</sup> Wells, *Modern Utopia*, 149.

<sup>35</sup> Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, 207.

<sup>36</sup> Wells, *Modern Utopia*, 212.

transformation to utopia as enacted by working men, his narrative of events includes no named individuals: all the actions are those of massed groups of people. As John Crump reminds us, Morris's view of 'collective' action follows that 'encapsulated in the maxim of the International Working Men's Association', that, in Marx's words, 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.'<sup>37</sup> Change imposed from above can never by itself be sufficient. In fact, the only named individual in the entire chapter is 'one Gladstone, or Gladstein', whose misidentification demonstrates just how unimportant individuated historicity is to this new civilisation. As Plotz emphasises, 'Morris ... recoils against the notion that an investment in poignant particulars is the best avenue towards the universal.'<sup>38</sup> Morris effectively challenges Woloch's notion that characters can most clearly be understood in their 'relative position vis-à-vis other characters': the primary role of Dick, Clara and Boffin is as 'representative' utopians.<sup>39</sup> They may have individual stories, but there is no tension between them, since their agency is entirely invested in the collective.

This, however, raises the question of how the transformation to utopia can be enacted. These future-based utopias all stumble at the question of *how* the change came; or rather, *by whom* did it come? In Morris's earlier attempt at a quasi-utopian dream-vision, *A Dream of John Ball* (1886–87), the narrator encourages Ball to see beyond the imminent failure of the Peasants' Revolt with a promise of 'the change beyond the change'.<sup>40</sup> Even in *News from Nowhere*, however, the chapter narrating the revolution is entitled simply 'How the Change Came', making transformation a depersonalised process with an agency of its own. In *Looking Backward*, the locus of historical agency is even less clear, as Bellamy turns revolution into evolution.

A struggle, resulting in a still greater consolidation, ensued. ... the tendency toward monopolies, which had been so desperately and vainly resisted, was recognised at last, as a process which only needed to complete its logical evolution to open a golden future. ... The industry and commerce of the country ... were entrusted to a single syndicate representing the people. ... The nation, that is to say, organized as the one great business corporation in which all other corporations were absorbed.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> John Crump, "How the Change Came: News from Nowhere and Revolution," in *William Morris & News from Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, ed. Stephen Coleman and Paddy O'Sullivan (Bideford, Devon: Green, 1990), 64; Karl Marx, *Selected Works*, ed. I. B. Lasker, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1947), 107.

<sup>38</sup> Plotz, "Nowhere and Everywhere," 931.

<sup>39</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 18.

<sup>40</sup> William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball and A King's Lesson* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1892), 95.

<sup>41</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 32–3.

Jonathan Auerbach highlights the ‘passive voice constructions’ and ‘noun abstractions’ in this passage, which ‘seek to dispense with historical agency altogether’.<sup>42</sup> Wells, meanwhile, never even attempts to describe how his utopia might have come about. Although he gestures cryptically to ‘turbulent times’ in its past, he also seems to imagine it as a parallel world with a mirror-image history, where ‘Jesus Christ had been born into a liberal and progressive Roman Empire’ (and thus was presumably not crucified?).<sup>43</sup> That closing passage describing the utopia ‘just out of reach’, behind a veil, reinforces the notion of the utopia’s synchronic, rather than diachronic, existence, drawing on a Platonic eternal realm of ideal Forms. Wells’s emphasis on individuality and dissent acts as a critique of Platonic ideals, but his utopia nonetheless shares a great deal with Callipolis, most visibly in the ‘Samurai’, who Wells admits ‘reminded me more and more closely of that strange class of guardians which constitutes the essential substance of Plato’s *Republic*’.<sup>44</sup> Even this order of ‘guardians’ is the result, not the initiator, of the utopian world.

Matthew Beaumont characterises ‘utopian fiction’ as ‘dream[ing] that the diffusion of its ideas in the present will create the conditions necessary for instituting its ideal society in the future. In this way, it can conceive a revolutionary transformation by evolutionary means.’<sup>45</sup> In this sense, utopian writing aims to facilitate a change that might otherwise seem impossible, by creating a bridge – both in terms of a practical model, and in inspiring new critiques – over the divide between existing and utopian society. In all three texts, the writers deliberately disperse agency in an attempt to make utopia fulfilling for everyone. Change only comes about when the time is right, they suggest, through a mass consciousness and collective desire, all pulling in the same direction. How can we reconcile this dispersion of agency, however, with its corollary: inertia?

## II. Collectivity and how to find it

If a utopia is going to offer a model for present and future action, its writer needs to explain how their imaginary society came into being, in such a way that they can offer a template – or at least an inspiration – for their readers. In order to narrate the necessary transition from multifarious individual desires to a collective desire, and from that to an achievement of this

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<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Auerbach, “‘The Nation Organized’: Utopian Impotence in Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*,” *American Literary History* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 30.

<sup>43</sup> Wells, *Modern Utopia*, 154.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 153. For Wells’ critique of Plato, see Michael Sherborne, “Wells, Plato and the Ideal State,” in *The Wellsian: Selected Essays on H. G. Wells*, ed. John S. Partington (Oss, Netherlands: Equilibris, 2003), 189–98.

<sup>45</sup> Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.*, p. 194.

desire in utopia, *fin-de-siècle* writers end up reaching for a perhaps surprising motif: the leap of faith.

Incongruous though this might seem – especially in the case of avowed atheists Morris and Wells – it was a surprisingly common trope in *fin-de-siècle* idealist and quasi-utopian social thinking. Beatrice Webb’s famous characterisation of the Victorian ‘transference of the emotion of self-sacrificing service from God to man’ was applicable in a heightened sense, I would argue, in the closing decades of the century, when much social action came to be imbued with a sense of mission.<sup>46</sup> This was not just undertaken *in the service of* religion, but as a religion in itself. Stephen Yeo has detailed the extent to which ‘conversions’ to socialism were often seen as quasi-religious experiences, and reminds us that in the peroration to the Socialist League’s 1885 manifesto, Morris described his cause as the ‘religion of Socialism’.<sup>47</sup> More recently, Thomas M. Dixon has demonstrated how pervasive was the discourse of ‘altruism’, on the borderline between established religion and anti-religious feeling, appropriable by both and claimed by both.<sup>48</sup> This finds its epitome in Arnold Toynbee’s last lecture, given in 1883 in St Andrew’s Hall, Newman Street, London, and addressed in its final section to ‘the workmen’ present:

You have to forgive us, for we have wronged you; we have sinned against you grievously – not knowing always; but still we have sinned, and let us confess it; but if you will forgive us – nay, whether you will forgive us or not – we will serve you, we will devote our lives to your service, and we cannot do more.<sup>49</sup>

In this lecture, social work becomes more than a Christian religious mission: the locus of devotion is transferred from God to the working class itself. The rhetoric of remorse and forgiveness is directed at the poor, and the poor themselves are invested with the power to forgive and purify. In return, however, Toynbee calls for a reciprocal moral elevation: both classes are to find utopia together, in an ongoing spiral of ascendance. Transcendent religiosity is transmuted here into a socially inflected abstraction, the collective. This is, however, a difficult abstraction to create. It can only be achieved by a shift from dispersed, diffuse and contradictory desires, via a leap of faith into a singular and united vision. How do we make that leap?

As we have seen, all these utopists reject (or at least recognise the impracticality of relying on) a hero-figure to initiate that much-needed change. Allowing people to rely on the

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<sup>46</sup> Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (London: Longmans, Green, 1926), 112.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Yeo, “A NEW LIFE: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883–1896,” *History Workshop Journal* 4, no. 1 (September 21, 1977): 6.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas M. Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 348.

<sup>49</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *'Progress and Poverty': A Criticism of Mr Henry George* (London, 1883), 54.

imminent appearance of a messiah is, in their view, a likely way to stymie any potential change. What is needed instead, they suggest, is a mass change of heart. This is where Abbott's 1884 'Romance of Many Dimensions', *Flatland*, can illuminate our discussion. This utopia, by the headmaster of the City of London School, shares a great deal with those already examined here. Its narratorial set-up is different, however, in one crucial way. It does not claim to be written by one of us, who has made an unexpected visit to utopia (as do *Looking Backward*, *News from Nowhere* and *A Modern Utopia*). Nor does it claim to be written in the future (as does *Looking Backward*). Instead of using temporal hindsight or a geographical remove to distance us from the action, it removes us from the narrative plane – quite literally – by situating *us* in the utopian dimension. *Flatland* is crucial for my analysis because it flips the paradigm. In this text, our world is, at least in relative terms, a utopia. As a result, it forms a dramatic attempt to get us to believe in the possibility of utopia. Since we are already in it without realising, there is no logical reason why we cannot push back our own illusory boundaries. If we look with pity and condescension on inhabitants of two dimensions (whether that be polygons or Plato's cave-dwellers who think those 2D shadows are all there is), we should be able to make the leap to 4D. The fact that, despite its arguments, we do not make this leap, demonstrates the difficulty of changing fundamental assumptions and initiating wholesale social change.

While *Looking Backward* and *News from Nowhere* depict a successful leap of faith, *Flatland* is the story of its repeated failure. It reminds us, in a way that Morris and Wells only touch on via occasional dissident voices, of the painful extent of the overhaul necessary for a utopian transformation. Although the Circles of the High Council are repeatedly shown evidence of the third dimension on each 'millennial commencement', they deliberately ignore the evidence the Sphere places before their eyes. Enough of the structures and conventions of Flatland civilization would be lost, in such an overhaul, that fear as to its consequences repeatedly outweighs anticipation of its potential benefits.

Flatland is in part a satire of contemporary Victorian society, and one which allows no space for individual agency or historicity, thus forestalling change. In this society, your sex and social position is utterly determined by geometry: the more sides you have (and the more regular they are), the higher your status. Geometrical shape, moreover, is passed down through heredity, and an absolute correlation is assumed between geometrical shape and moral character. Giving brief voice to the Owenite position championed by Bellamy, Morris and Wells, the Square admits that some

maintain that there is no necessary connection between geometrical and moral Irregularity. 'The Irregular,' they say, 'is from his birth scouted by his own parents, derided by his brothers and sisters, and excluded from all posts of responsibility, trust, and useful activity. ... what wonder that human nature, even in the best and purest, is embittered and perverted by such surroundings!'<sup>50</sup>

Our narrator and hero, the Square, responds to these dissensions with a po-faced reinforcement of the status quo, this time grounded on a doctrine surely derived from Benthamite utilitarianism:

Doubtless, the life of an Irregular is hard; but the interests of the Greater Number require that it shall be hard. If a man with a triangular front and a polygonal back were allowed to exist and to propagate a still more Irregular posterity, what would become of the arts of life?<sup>51</sup>

However, Abbott reveals these 'arts of life', so revered in Flatland, to be no more than an elaborate series of conventions and contrivances, primarily focused on establishing an individual's number of sides via the most obscure, elaborate and difficult means possible, in a world which has wilfully refused either colour or height. If they opened their eyes to the third dimension, all the elaborate exclusivist paraphernalia of their society would be rendered meaningless. And this is precisely why they refuse to countenance it. Flatland demonstrates why a society might resist utopian transformation. *Abbott's acute social critique (pun intended) recognises that the potential for lowly isosceles triangles to beget an 'Equilateral' 'serve[s] as a most useful barrier against revolution from below'.*<sup>52</sup> Both the elite and the aspiring lower classes have invested too highly in the status quo to risk overthrowing it.

What *Flatland* highlights, in a way that also applies to our other utopian texts, is the very religious quality of the faith needed to turn utopian vision into reality. It thus makes a mockery of the evolutionary trajectory Bellamy claims for the transition to utopia in *Looking Backward*, and expands upon the struggles Morris depicts as necessary in *News from Nowhere*. The revelation *Flatland* offers us is one which, although understandably ludicrous and mind-boggling to its inhabitants, we know to be undeniably true. Nonetheless, the revelation by the miraculous 'Sphere' is presented as the millenarian gospel of a messiah figure. When faced with the Square's initial closed-minded suspicion, the Sphere laments, 'I had hoped to find in you ... a fit apostle for the Gospel of the Three Dimensions, which I am allowed to preach once only in a thousand years: but now I know not how to convince you.'<sup>53</sup> As Jann has demonstrated, Abbott (like Henry Sidgwick, Frederick Myers and, at times, John

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<sup>50</sup> Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, ed. Alan Lightman (London: Penguin, 1998), 37.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

Tyndall) sought to reconcile scientific discovery and religious faith.<sup>54</sup> Situating the Sphere's message in the discourse of religion, Abbott begs the question: if this, which seems to defy sense, is evidently truth, why should the same not be the case with other such gospels (including those of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John)?

Once the Square has been converted, he becomes a fundamentalist. He pushes the doctrine of Three Dimensions to its logical conclusion, which we are afraid to countenance, but which this zealous convert eagerly anticipates. When the Sphere dismisses 'the land of Four Dimensions' as 'inconceivable', the faithful Square replies: 'Not inconceivable, my Lord, to me, and therefore still less inconceivable to my Master.' He concludes, 'And that it must exist my Lord himself has taught me. Or can he have forgotten what he himself imparted to his servant?'<sup>55</sup> As Simon James has emphasised, by the late nineteenth century the fourth dimension was widely conceived as time, and so 'this geometry of Four Dimensions' fuels Wells's *Time Machine*, and all the time travellers of our historically situated utopias, as well as *Flatland*.<sup>56</sup> This exchange between Sphere and Square forces Abbott's readers – living in an insistently three-dimensional world – into precisely the position the Square had previously held. Unlike him, however, we fall at the crucial hurdle. When it comes to pushing the boundaries of the status quo, we revert to blind creatures, fearful of what we do not know and cannot conceptualise.

The implication of Abbott's text, therefore, is that just because something is inconceivable to us, that does not inevitably make it false. As Jann characterises it, science as well as religion obliges us to adjust our rationality to 'the illusoriness of the seen and the reality of the unseen.'<sup>57</sup> Just because we can barely envisage the consequence of a social transformation, that doesn't mean we shouldn't take that leap of faith and make it happen. Abbott mocks the complacent reader, who thinks the world can only ever consist of the things he can hold within his limited mind, by transporting the Square in a dream to 'Pointland, the Abyss of No dimensions.' Its solitary inhabitant, as the Sphere explains, has no 'thought of Plurality; for he is himself his One and All, being really Nothing. Yet mark his perfect self-contentment, and hence learn this lesson, that to be self-contented is to be vile and ignorant, and that to aspire is better than to be blindly and impotently happy.'<sup>58</sup> Abbott thus reveals,

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<sup>54</sup> Jann, "Abbott's 'Flatland.'"

<sup>55</sup> Abbott, *Flatland*, 103.

<sup>56</sup> Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia: H.G. Wells, Modernity, and the End of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 39, 52; H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine: An Invention*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), 5.

<sup>57</sup> Jann, "Abbott's 'Flatland,'" 474, 486.

<sup>58</sup> Abbott, *Flatland*, 108.

more specifically than Bellamy, Morris or Wells, but with similar intention, the proximate and tangled relationship between attaining collective action and attaining religious faith. Both rely on a trust in something that cannot be proved, merely desired.

As Abbott highlights, attachment to the status quo, even one patently in need of overhaul, is a problem that all these utopists have to face. Even Bellamy, the one writer who asserts a smooth evolutionary trajectory between contemporary and utopian society, occasionally confronts this problem. At the opening of his sequel to *Looking Backward*, *Equality* (1897), Julian West's new fiancée Edith muses,

Suppose you had gone forth just as you did in your dream, and had passed up and down telling men of the terrible folly and wickedness of their way of life and how much nobler and happier a way there was. Just think what good you might have done, how you might have helped people in those days when they needed help so much.<sup>59</sup>

What Edith fails to recognise, however, with the naivety of the native of utopia, is that they would have dismissed him as mad. Indeed, that is precisely what happens when West does return to the Boston of the nineteenth century (in a dream, as it turns out) and attempts to open the eyes of his peers to the fatal flaws of their society.

When I had expected now surely the faces around me to light up with emotions akin to mine, they grew ever more dark, angry, and scornful. ... 'Madman!' 'Pestilent fellow!' 'Fanatic!' 'Enemy of society!' were some of their cries ...<sup>60</sup>

As Jean Pfaelzer has delineated, even though 'ostensibly the book ends happily' (West wakes up in the year 2000 and discovers that his return to 1887 was only a dream), 'within the text, the experiment has failed', and 'Julian is powerless', unable to convince those who hold the reins of power in late-nineteenth-century Boston that anything could ever be otherwise.<sup>61</sup> In these texts, the prophets of utopia – the Square, Julian West, William Guest, Wells's narrator – are actually relatively powerless once they return to their present.

Bellamy's text is weakened by his failure to credit these voices with anything other than selfishness. In Wells's *A Modern Utopia*, the fear factor involved in preventing the necessary leap of faith is more effectively incorporated. Unlike Bellamy, he both calls for a leap of faith, and recognises its near impossibility. In the passage already quoted earlier in this chapter, he declares that

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<sup>59</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Equality* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897), 1.

<sup>60</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 192.

<sup>61</sup> Jean Pfaelzer, "Immanence, Indeterminance, and the Utopian Pun in Looking Backward," in *Looking Backward, 1888–1888: Essays on Edward Bellamy*, ed. Daphne Patai (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 65.



After all, after all, dispersed, hidden, disorganised, undiscovered, unsuspected even by themselves, the *samurai* of Utopia are in this world, the motives that are developed and organised there stir dumbly here and stifle in ten thousand futile hearts ...<sup>62</sup>

While earlier I focused on the echoes here of George Eliot's term 'unhistoric', offering hope of the Samurai's existence, it is also important to draw attention to the repression all-too present in this statement. Not only are the utopian impulses 'dumb', but they are immediately 'stifled' by the very people who possess them, eventually proving 'futile'. Most tellingly of all, Wells presents his narrator as subject to the same selfish and world-weary habits that contribute to the prevention of Utopia. A 'pinched and dirty little girl' tries 'pitifully' to sell him a penny bunch of violets, but "'No!" I say curtly, hardening my heart.'<sup>63</sup> He thus falls into his own trap, preventing Utopia from coming to fruition just as much as anybody else. As he comes to recognise, 'the Strand, and Charing Cross corner, and Whitehall, and the great multitude of people ... is apt to look a world altogether too formidable. It has a glare, it has a tumult and vigour that shouts one down.'<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, so did Utopia. Once he and the botanist were immersed in that world, they could not resist becoming part of it. The narrator comments that although 'I had always imagined myself as standing outside the general machinery of the State – in the distinguished visitors' gallery, as it were', Utopia 'is swallowing me up'.<sup>65</sup> Towards the end of the book, he declares:

Indeed Will is stronger than Fact, it can mould and overcome Fact. But this world has still to discover its will, it is a world that slumbers inertly, and all this roar and pulsation of life is no more than its heavy breathing. ... My mind runs on to the thought of an awakening.<sup>66</sup>

Despite all the inertia acting to the contrary, he refuses to lose hope of harnessing this 'will' and using it as a force for transformation.

### III. Action beyond reading

This leap of faith does not, however, have to be taken blind, or cut off from creative agency. Suvin has argued that there are two branches of utopian thought: 'closed' and 'open'. The latter is most valuable to the reader, because it acknowledges its own provisionality, and recognises its own subsequent supersession. He suggests that 'if utopia is, philosophically, a

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<sup>62</sup> Wells, *Modern Utopia*, 215.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

method rather than a state it cannot be realized or not realized – it can only be applied.<sup>67</sup> He ultimately characterised utopia as ‘a method camouflaging as a state: the state of affairs is a signifier revealing the presence of a semiotic process of signification which induces in the reader’s imagination the signified of a possible world, *not necessarily identical with the signifier*.’<sup>68</sup> The utopian worlds discussed here – from nationalised Boston to Nowhere, from a planet beyond Sirius to an immanent fourth dimension – are all self-confessedly personal visions. They may have an instrumental value, but they present themselves as exemplars rather than blueprints: they are the specific ideal only of their creator.

Wells epitomises this most explicitly, voicing the hope that ‘surely, in the end’, Utopia will come to fruition.

First here, then there, single men and then groups of men will fall into line – not indeed with my poor faulty hesitating suggestions – but with a great and comprehensive plan wrought out by many minds and in many tongues. It is just because my plan is faulty, because it mis-states so much, and omits so much, that they do not now fall in. It will not be like *my* dream, the world that is coming. My dream is just my own poor dream, the thing sufficient for me.<sup>69</sup>

He suggests that the fundamental reason why his ‘modern utopia’ has not come into being is ‘because my plan is faulty’: because it is ‘just my own poor dream’. Calling on the kind of collective leap of faith we have charted here, he suggests that transition from solitary utopian visions to a joint vision is the vital step required to bring it to fruition. Readers from Morris himself onwards have viewed *News from Nowhere* as similarly personal.<sup>70</sup> Marcus Waithe has even argued for ‘the limited nature of Nowhere’s openness’, since Morris excludes ‘what displeases him’.<sup>71</sup> Morris’s experience of factionalist struggles within the Socialist League – eventually tearing it apart – made him all the more reliant on a leap of faith to escape these petty disagreements and reach a collective goal. They also, however, made him all the more aware of the variety of individuals’ ‘dreams’. His utopia is designed to inspire its readers with ‘visions’ of their own, as much as to persuade them of the validity of his own.<sup>72</sup>

Only Bellamy’s utopia does not fit this paradigm. By ‘awaking’ in the nineteenth century, only to be followed by a ‘re-awakening’ in the twenty-first, Bellamy refuses us the right to view his vision in the personal framework that Morris’s ‘dream’ mode offers us. His

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<sup>67</sup> Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 52.

<sup>68</sup> Suvin, “Locus, Horizon, and Orientation,” 128. Italics in original.

<sup>69</sup> Wells, *Modern Utopia*, 220.

<sup>70</sup> See E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955), 806.

<sup>71</sup> Marcus Waithe, *William Morris’s Utopia of Strangers: Victorian Medievalism and The Ideal Of Hospitality* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 144.

<sup>72</sup> Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 228.

utopia is the least 'open', in Suvin's terms. Ironically, this enabled it to have the most instantaneous and direct political impact. *Looking Backward* partly inspired the foundation of the People's Party in 1891, which wielded some substantial influence before partially merging with the Democrats in 1896, and thereafter losing steam. On the other hand, this makes Bellamy's vision the least long-lasting, and offers us now the least utopian inspiration.

Perhaps, therefore, in reading a utopia, our desire for its enactment is generated in proportion to its unavailability. Wells's *Modern Utopia* was been more attractive to its first readers than it is now to us, especially in the aftermath of cataclysmic wars enabled and facilitated by the very technology he so zealously imagines. Perhaps part of the reason why, for us now, Morris's utopia is so much more evocative than Wells's, is the power of the 'not yet', in Bloch's terms: it *has not yet* happened.<sup>73</sup> It thus retains an element of mystique, whereas many of the technological, practical and bureaucratic elements of Wells's utopia have since come into being. The overall structure that enabled these thus holds less attraction. By contrast, Morris's world still seems at least as out of reach as it did in 1890, so it retains its power to bewitch.

So how can we get to utopia? All these writers suggest we need a quasi-religious conversion to enable a collective leap of faith: one effected in part, they hope, by their visions of a historically located, future utopia. They acknowledge the enormous and daunting scale of the paradigm shift necessary for such a leap. *Flatland* in particular, by situating the reader in a utopian dimension, at the same time as holding up a mirror to the dystopian elements in human society, makes us reflect upon our own limits of imagination. All these writers defy the clash of means and ends inherent in Booth's or Wilde's 'Socialism [for] Individualism'. If society is motivated by a collective *desire*, collective action and collective agency are fulfilling both at the general and the particular level. Or, to put it another way, that distinction no longer exists.

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<sup>73</sup> Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, I, p. 119.