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Utopia

Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor

For much of the twentieth century, looking back on failures of visionary political revolutions and regime building, utopia was discredited. As long as social harmony is construed as sameness, and perfection defined in terms of an achieved teleology, utopian experiments in the world, and in the worlds of literature and art, will tend toward the disciplining of difference. Utopia's final solution is dissolution of difference. Exclusion rather than inclusion is the ideological motive: "Utopias are designed to keep people out" (Farnsworth, 1998) is what Toni Morrison reminded us of with her novel, *Paradise* (1997). As that narrative shows us, a social body that becomes hardened, inhospitable, and intolerant is a dying body. Without a theory of difference, can utopia be anything but dystopia?

Yet, Oscar Wilde, who knew about the ways in which power disciplines and punishes otherness, will always remind us that a map without utopia on it is not worth looking at. Utopia's rehabilitation – or, more positively, its conceptual resiliency – lies in its essential radicality. What is the nature of that radicality? Darko Suvin's notion in the 1970s of the *novum* as the radical momentum of the utopian imaginary (Suvin 1979) is fallen out of use. It should be revived and refreshed, because it illuminates the importance of understanding utopia not as a political pursuit for that final solution, or perfect static state, but as a politically radical

234 **process** of ongoing critique. The function of the *novum* might be compared to the function of the immature stem cell in a living body: It does not contain but is itself the capacity to take on the form and function of any one of the many specialized cells that self-organize into living being. The virtue of the stem cell is its **plasticity**, containing, as it were, the potentiality for generating, repairing, and regenerating the body.

Like all metaphors, the comparison of *novum* and stem cell eventually falls short, at which point the difference between them is exposed. In this case, the difference lies in the distinction between replication and (re)generation or (re)production. The regenerative function of the *novum* goes beyond simply repairing a political or social “body” and bringing it back to its putatively whole or healthy form; this is replication of a particular ideologic formation. This is status quo. But the *novum* does not close off the possibility of alterity, but introduces it continuously. Therein lies the capacity for critique that defines utopia’s political and formal energies. If there can be such a thing as a stem cell for alterity, then it is, in that sense alone, that the *novum* is a conceptual stem cell. The *novum* is the paradoxical point in Catherine Malabou’s description, in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2008), of plasticity’s contradictory nature at which “possibility, the wholly other version” is held off by “the expectation of the arrival of another way of being,” or “a possibility of waiting” (87). Possibility awaits then, now, then again.

For this reason the notion of utopia as representing a “blueprint for the future” is rejected by recent theorists. A static-state utopia is relevant only to an “end-stop” world, as contemporary fiction-writer Jeanette Winterson puts it in *Art Objects* (1997); without the possibility of difference and change, utopia tends toward the fascistic or the dictatorial. A process utopia requires possibility, awaiting. To quote Winterson’s entire sentence:

Process, the energy in being, the refusal of finality, which is not the same thing as the refusal of completeness, sets art,

all art, apart from the end-stop world that is always calling
“Time Please!” (1997, 19)

That refusal of finality (the blueprint model) marks the radical correspondence of process-utopia to critique. What sets utopia apart is its pro-visionality, its looking forward toward a horizon (landmark or boundary) that constantly recedes as any traveler, especially a utopian traveler, will experience. Thus the brilliance of Wilde’s epigraph to *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias. (2001, 139)

Utopia is a state of deferral *and* difference, as the identical etymology of both words indicates.

The real state of utopia is a form of virtual reality, in the several senses of the word *virtual*. Toni Morrison knows and shows us this. The town of Ruby, Oklahoma, is the paradise lost in *Paradise*. Founded during the post-Reconstruction emigration of freed slaves from the U.S. South, Ruby is not a light on the hill but a purposely hidden jewel, one place on the American map where former slaves can thrive free of bigotry, cruelty, and disenfranchisement. Over one hundred years on, however, the utopian town has bred its own forms of intolerance and hatred. Ruby’s fatal flaw is its almost absolute intolerance of *any* form of difference, much less anything so challenging as critique. So much the worse for the newly generated community of women at a former convent, where a diverse set of strangers find themselves at home for the time: at home with, in and through their own differences. Their community is open, generous, hospitable—the opposite of what Ruby has become under the leadership of its male leadership: insular, suspicious, inflexible, and gracelessly narcissistic. And so again: without a theory of difference, can utopia be anything but dystopia?

236 By 1976, when the novel is set, this insular town is at a historical dead end, quite literally: its babies cannot seem to stay alive, either in the womb or outside it; its young people either leave, or stay only to fester in its toxic spiritual environment. The culmination of this toxicity is the July 4th mass homicide that opens the novel. Explained retrospectively over the next several hundred pages is the etiology of the dis-ease that expresses itself in the armed midnight attack on the Convent women. But from that horrific event emerges a certain clarity: that “pre-lapsarian” Ruby is a simulacrum of the town’s imagined mythic past. Now, the town appears as it really is, eaten by a cancer in part of its own making, and in full collapse. To this present reality, however, is offered a possibility other than death, thanks to Rev. Misner and his partner Anna, both outsiders, who witness the town’s social pathology and remain after the crime as the only possible guides beyond it:

It was when he [Rev. Misner] returned ... that they saw it. Or sensed it, rather, for there was nothing to see. A door, she said later. “No, a window,” he said ... What did a door mean? what a window? ... Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth? (Morrison 1998, 305).

What on earth, indeed? Misner’s return, which comes only after the community expresses its wish for him to stay, is the turning point toward that future. In doing so, they acknowledge that Ruby is no utopia; what Ruby-ites do not know yet is that they have not even set out for utopia. For the moment, no horizon is visible, as they cannot see past themselves. But Misner is reminded just here that his decision to return is the arrival that generates both “the sign” and “the event” of future possibility.

As Misner buries the dead, with a sermon that begins the critical process of examining individual and communal histories, he

receives a second affirmation. Even as he closes a coffin, a window appears in the nearby garden, “beckon[ing] toward another place – neither life nor death – but there, just yonder, *shaping thoughts he did not know he had*” (307, emphasis added). This is a brilliant description of what utopia does to us and for us. Utopia makes possible the shaping, the realizing of what was not “known” in any objective sense, but that was there already as potentiality. This process informs philosopher Catherine Malabou’s notion of the “possibility of waiting,” (2004, xxxii) an achievement in itself: The waiting enacts the process of imagining possibility, the shaping of thoughts we do not know we have, new thoughts, different framings and representations, that take shape as we think and expect other-wise. This plastic process of shaping constitutes the virtual reality that is utopia, as we stand expectant, waiting, worlding. Finally, utopian process effectively performs “the principle of Hope” (Bloch 1995). These performances are forms of *transitive* imagining, and not immobile ideologic constructions. Utopia is plastic, mobile, performative, and inviting: it invites us always *to wonder*, the most reliable and objective sign of hope.

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