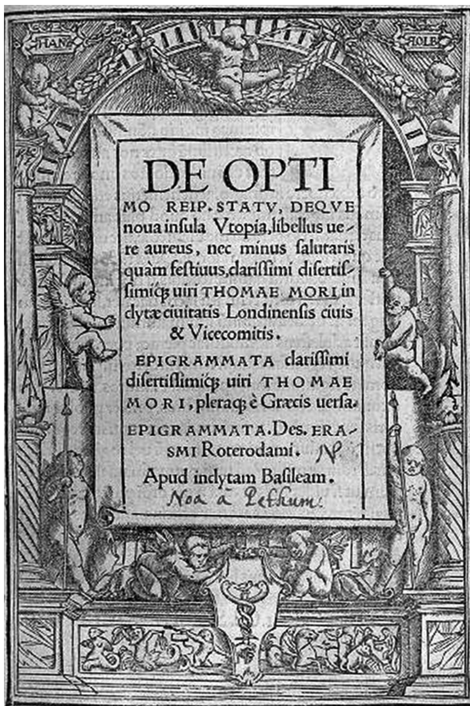
Lucian-Vasile Szabo

Utopia and Uchronia
From Thomas More to H. G. Wells


DE OPTI
MO REIP. STATV, DEQVE
noua insula Vtopia, libellus ue-
re aureus, nec minus salutaris
quàm festiuus, clarissimi disertis-
simiq; uiri THOMAE MORI in
clytæ ciuitatis Londinensis ciuis
& Vicecomitis.

EPIGRAMMATA clarissimi
disertissimiq; uiri THOMAE
MORI, pleraq; è Græcis uersa.

EPIGRAMMATA. Des. ERA-
SMI Roterodami.

Apud inclytam Basileam.

Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516)

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Possible Worlds, Utopic Worlds

Utopic universes (and dystopian ones as well, undoubtedly) have their own set of characteristics. Utopia, seen as the projection of a better life, highlights human existence and the active person, capable of sustaining the functional system of the best of all possible worlds one can live in. Dimension-wise, these worlds of happiness can be of various sizes, ranging from small, self-sustainable communities (a village, a colony) to intergalactic human conglomerates. These are worlds that can be placed either: 1) spatially (synchronically), compared to other worlds taken as a reference point, or, 2) temporally (in a diachronic manner), in succession with the observer's world. Thus the temporal utopia is often called uchronia. Furthermore, utopic universes can be pictured, as the genre's classics have imagined them, as 1) isolated, with no links to, or minimal links to the other world, the normal one, and 2) connected to contending civilizations, a situation that can be

represented in various manners, on condition that the utopic society maintains the characteristics individualizing it.

The existence of a world (or a community) that could be called, when exhibiting certain traits, ideal—such as described in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516, in Latin), or life on a deserted island in the case of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the adventures of H.G. Wells' traveler to the future, or doctors Honigberger and Zerlendi's preparatives to enter Shambala, in Mircea Eliade's case—comes to underline the challenges faced by those who find themselves in exceptional situations. There are various types of experiences, such as those that put humans face to face with the messengers of other worlds. The contact with extraterrestrial beings has often been imagined as delicate and emotionally charged. These are "on-the-edge" experiences, as are the ones in relation to the past or to the future, following planned or accidental time travel.

The relationship between utopia (dystopia) and uchronia is complex, but one element is evident: utopia can be constructed as a distinct topos—as a functional society—based on the three spatial elements: length, width and height. The uchronic topos is completely dependent on the spatial dimensions, exactly as the utopic one, but in order to construct a uchronic topos the utopic (dystopian) perimeter needs to have already been established. This is a linear narrative structure: one identifies the spatial elements, and afterwards fixes the narrative on a temporal scale (without it being mandatory). It is a process leading to a doubly augmented reality: 1) the data the narrator is already familiar with is to be identified and compared to the data in the utopic universe; 2) having a referential present as a starting point, the utopian world is presented as augmented reality. Considering all this, "utopia is not reality but a possible reality" (Fortunati 2000, 635). This synthetic phrase defines utopia as a potentiality that can come into existence based on spatial coordinates, but also on a temporal scale, in terms of evolution (progress or regress).

Sargent (1994) tried to bring in some terminological clarifications by introducing terms such as eutopia (the positive utopia), encountered in Plato's or More's works (Braga 2017). Although the gain is obvious in terms of methodology and interpretation, Sargent would have some difficulty to differentiate between dystopia or negative utopia and anti-utopia. The former presents a bleak image of the society where the reader lives, whereas the latter is a critique of an ideal world, particularly eutopia (Sargent 1994; Fitting 2009). Gregory Claeys then noticed that a dystopia is not merely a negative utopia. Furthermore, this subgenre originates both in More's work and outside of it, thus having the status of an autonomous cultural and sociopolitical field (Claeys 2013). Mircea Opriţă believed that the distinction between terms and their referential field is rather a question of nuance. Still, when analyzing the manifestation of dystopia

in H. G. Wells' work, he introduced the term of counter-utopia, admitting, though, that it is often confused with dystopia (Opriţă 1983, 193). In fact, Opriţă saw counter-utopia as a subgenre of dystopia, its main function being to warn, to describe negative scenarios regarding the future of mankind. Thomas Osborne also felt the need to use the notion of counter-utopia and to differentiate between counter-utopia and anti-utopia. In his opinion, counter-utopia represents a supporting element for the utopic narrative, and constitutes a critical view upon any ideal city. "If anti-utopia is opposed to the very idea of utopia, counter-utopia—for all its apparent negativism—is actually a critical *adjunct* of such an ideal" (Osborne 2003).

In the *Republic*, Plato's well-known dialogue, the philosopher offers a prototype and the general framework for each utopia. Plato's ideal city-state is portrayed both spatially, referring to an actual place where it could exist (be it Athens, Sparta, Crete or another place known during Plato's lifetime) and from the point of view of time, in a nearer or more distant future. From this point of view, Plato's ideal city-state is a project, or even a "hypothesis" (Cheney 2007, 203). Utopia, as one can understand the term (meaning the place "in the middle of nowhere"), remains a construct of the imagination, an ideal to look for and try to attain. But as Plato saw it, and as we would explicitly see in the work of Thomas More, the one who made the term *utopia* famous, the ideal city is not perfectly isolated, since it maintains a relationship, albeit fragile, with the rest of the world, trading or waging war. And in order to do so the island of happiness imagined by More needs to be a place with some distinctive elements.

Utopia and Tale

Utopias are constructs of the imagination presented in the form of a narrative. They are, in other words, tales. Considering this framework, one needs to investigate the two segments that allow them to function: 1) the coherence of a discourse presenting an ideal world; 2) the coherence of the perfect society being presented. It is necessary to identify a working definition of utopia, thus highlighting some constitutive elements. Sorin Antohi analyzed the characteristics of the genre in order to establish its general traits. According to him—and following Northrop Frye's suggestions (1965)—one is in the presence of a classic utopic universe when the narrator is being guided through the ideal land by a local. The presentation becomes a dialogue and the visitor receives answers to his questions. Thus a standard social pattern is revealed, as it is a key requirement for the ideal city to function (Antohi 1991, 20). The narrator is a traveler who moves either in space or in time (or possibly

both). Both situations suppose a return trip or the transmission of messages from/about the (newly discovered) utopian universe. Travelling through space (as opposed to time), as depicted in Thomas More's *Utopia*, or to outer space, represent subgenres of "Imaginary Voyage" (Fitting 2009) genre. One can also travel in time, as William Morris', H. G. Wells' or Isaac Asimov's works show. The conceptual delimitation between space and time represents an instrument of critical analysis, successfully employed by Paul K. Alkon (among others) in the analysis of futuristic fiction (2010).

Another characteristic of the utopian narrative is the fact that the discourses describing the newly discovered worlds, the references to their government (be it good or bad), social balance, anarchy, confrontations (or lack of) are in the first person. Raphael Hythloday,[1] Thomas More's traveler in *Utopia*, recounts in the first person, and so does H. G. Wells' Time Traveler. As Arthur F. Kinney underlines, there are several points of view to be considered when interpreting the text. He gives More's work as an example of having several ways of reading and understanding: "More's *Utopia*, for instance, is about a land and a people seen, simultaneously, by Hythlodaeus, Peter Giles, the More-persona, More the author, and the reader (who might attempt to consolidate some or all of these views)" (Kinney 2007, 5).

The starting point for all utopic and dystopian models is Plato's *Republic*. Two models are being outlined. The first one is a social model with a simple organization, the inhabitants being busy fulfilling their basic needs. The inhabitants of such a country are farmers, shepherds, builders, artisans (weavers, tailors and shoemakers) and merchants. They dress in a humble manner and eat whatever is readily available, such as—Socrates explains—wheat and barley cakes, olives, cheese, onions and other simply cooked vegetables. Their dessert consists of figs, myrtle, chickpeas, and they drink wine (Plato 1991, 49). From the social and existential points of view it is an archaic world that can be considered perfect and happy. According to some specialists, this type of society is not utopic, but belongs to Arcadia (Trousson 1979, 28). Plato's description of the second type of society is both more elaborate and more controversial, as it excludes democracy and favors an autocratic model. In fact, it excludes poets (writers, actually). This type of ideal city allows for composers and singers to be a part of society, as their role is a more concrete one: to reduce the emotional stress of the guardians, who are essential citizens of the perfect city!

Thomas More studied Plato's *Republic* and it inspired him when writing *Utopia*, his most original work. There are some similarities between the two, but also many differences that contribute to the variety of these spaces of perfection. Plato had outlined a model of the ideal city, but More changed perspective and established a utopic state set during his own age. He fixed it from a spatial point

of view, describing its geography and cities and mentioning elements of human geography, or rather of ethnography. As Raphael Hythloday points out, the narrator (the author's double and voice, of course) mentioned, in the second part of the book, that the island of happiness was "at the antipodes," in fact somewhere close to South America (More 1684, 5). The island of Utopia is not isolated, for it is a part of an archipelago. The communities living there have good relations. The imaginary link between Europe and the New World (where the island of Utopia is) is supported by other scholars as well: "Once again the myth of the primitive happier state is drawn upon, with some suggestions of accounts of the primitive economies seen by Vespucci and others in the new world" (Williams 1973, 44). Several presentation strategies are being used in order to give veracity to the story. The *mise-en-scène* allows the author to act as a reporter who wishes to get detailed information and report various events in a most precise manner (Cheney 2007, 203).

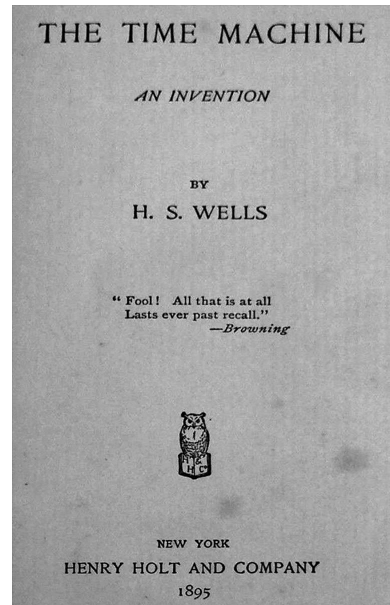
Images from the Future

When publishing *Utopia* More opened the door to a series of literary works with a sociopolitical angle. The genre developed with the contribution of some important authors that would broaden the thematic area and improve narrative forms. Dystopian visions became more and more present, though masked by the motif of time travel and by satirical writing. An English scholar would summarize this change: "Satire seems to have taken over in the case of many—perhaps most—of the descriptions of the fantastic world between More's *Utopia* and Swift *Gulliver's Travels*; that, indeed, is the reason why the boundaries between utopia and dystopia are so often blurred in these works" (Malcolm 1997, 84). It was also the moment when uchronia emerged as a utopia containing the temporal element as well. This is a clear reference to Louis-Sébastien Mercier, the French author who, in 1770, published *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais*, meaning *The Year 2440: A Dream If Ever There Was One*.[2] From a literary point of view, the work belongs to the oneiric-fantastic genre, in spite of the fact that the theme of time travel is a science fiction theme. But it lacks the other criterion of science fiction, namely, a scientific base, a mechanism that could make time travel possible. We are thus presented with a uchronia, as the sleeping character of the work wakes up to find himself in the Paris of 2440 (Mercier 1772).

Mercier inaugurates the futuristic utopia. He outlines a possible future as a counterweight to the realities of the time period he was living in. He also respects the canon of rather in-the-open controversy (something that More could not do,

as he had to avoid censorship), highlighting the unsatisfying state of affairs at the time. The future is incontrollable, thus more spectacular, the author inaugurating "a new paradigm for utopian literature not only by setting action in a specific future chronologically connected to our past and present but even more crucially by characterizing that future as one belonging to progress" (Forsström 2002, 127).

By introducing a large number of fictional elements and breaking off with factual historical data we end up in the realm of literature, of uchronias (utopic or dystopian ones) about the past. History is rewritten and becomes counterfactual, an element specific to utopia, but also to political sciences. In this context uchronia can be: 1) futuristic, based on the image of a future that can only be built—in accordance with its initial design—in fiction; 2) counterfactual, rewriting a past that was altogether different. The following two examples should better clarify what I have stated. H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) is a futuristic uchronia, as the Time Traveler navigates through a hypothetical future. The situation is different in the case of Ray Bradbury's *A Sound of Thunder* (1952), as the plot unfolds in the past. These observations allow us to notice another difference: travelling into the future rarely has an effect on the present described as a reference point in the narrative (particularly when the main character does not return, or returns as a changed person), whereas travelling to the past can be a lot more dangerous, as it could alter the present in the narrative. In the case of Bradbury's work, the accidental killing of a butterfly in Prehistory transforms the United States presented in the narrative into a fierce dictatorship (Robu 2006, 27).


THE TIME MACHINE

AN INVENTION

BY

H. S. WELLS

" Fool! All that is at all
Lasts ever past recall."
—Browning

NEW YORK
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
1895

H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine: An Invention* (1895)

Uchronias built around the technological advances of the future became very fashionable at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. This contributed to the literary genre becoming more dynamic, especially in the case of positive utopias and dystopias. Raymond Williams (1973, 273) would highlight the differences between William Morris' and Herbert George Wells' works, as they were contemporaries. The former developed his utopic vision in *News from Nowhere* (published in 1890). H. G. Wells wrote several volumes on this theme, the most important ones for this subject matter being *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), *A Modern Utopia* (1905), *The World Set Free* (1914), *The Shape*

of Things to Come (1933). Both focus on the industrialized society of their time, providing scenarios about the future deriving from the evolution of the current state of affairs. Morris presents a happy world. A character wakes up in the London of the future, where the socialist utopia is fulfilled. Heavy industry, based on coal, has disappeared, overcrowding is no longer an issue, and the mood and surroundings are rather rural.

Wells was also preoccupied with socialist ideas, the effects of fierce capitalism and the consequences of industrialization. We do not see the same happy future in his case, as his *The Time Machine* (1895) is a brutal dystopia. This work can be included both in the science fiction genre (one encounters the scientific premise of building a time machine) and in the utopic genre, as it foreshadows a coherent world of the future. This declining world is counterbalanced by Wells' more optimistic *A Modern Utopia*. This is not a fiction work, but a collection of essays on the future, without the filter of a literary character. This proves to be a risky endeavor, as, in spite of abundant arguments, the suggested scenarios become inconsistent at times. Wells the journalist seems to be less convincing than Wells the novelist. Even the future of utopia is utopian: "There will be many Utopias. Each generation will have its new version of Utopia, a little more certain and complete and real, with its problems lying closer and closer to the problems of the Thing in Being. Until at last from dreams Utopias will have come to be working drawings, and the whole world will be shaping the final World State, the fair and great and fruitful World State, that will only not be a Utopia because it will be this world. So surely it must be…" (Wells 2009, 410–411). The future means a world-state, harmonious and happy. This is not a utopia, but only a dream. The fact that Wells alternated optimistic and pessimistic visions should not surprise us, as the general impression is that he believed in a harmonious future for mankind. As S. Antohi (1991, 227) states, other authors of utopic works—such as Aldous Huxley or Ray Bradbury—had a similar evolution.

Wells's uchronic dystopia presents the world of the year 802701, when social division is radical. On the surface—only in daylight—one sees a paradisiacal space inhabited by the Eloi. The Morlocks live underground, their universe resembling hell (as traditionally perceived at that time). The Eloi benefit the work of the degenerate creatures living underground, as they are provided with food and clothes. The terrestrial Paradise is delusive and temporary, as death lurks in the shadows of each night. The Morlocks enjoy eating the flesh of the delicate Eloi, whom they hunt at night! Wells's vision can be explained in the framework of contemporary studies on posthumanism. The English author himself suggests the Morlocks lost their human characteristics: "But there was an altogether new element in the sickening quality of the Morlocks, something inhuman and malign" (Wells 1895, 134).

W. Morris was proposing a simpler way of life achieved by means of mental relaxation. In the utopic London he imagined people were no longer prone to violence and confrontation, and their spiritual preoccupations were rather common sense issues that focused on the common good. There is a dose of naiveté in all this construction (coming from both the author and his characters). An Edenic, rudimentary world overlaps with socialist utopia, though, obviously, the former type of society acknowledges the existence of divinity, whereas the latter rejects it. This is a form of "regressive utopism" as Antohi (1991, 229) calls it, as it rejects technology and praises the return to nature and the simple life. This social model is in accordance with the first type of ideal city imagined by Plato, without the elaborate structure he would use to define the ideal state in the *Republic*. However, Wells is not a consistent anti-technologist, considering that *The Time Machine* itself is based on top technological development.

Reinventing the Canon

AS FOR the spatial characteristics Wells imagined, one notices he does not much stray from Plato, More or Campanella, although his city is rather degenerate, not ideal. His world has material concreteness and the contours of an island dominated by a citadel, as in the case of More, Campanella and other utopists. In Wells' case the limits of the island are not clearly described, but we can suppose that other inhabited (civilized) spaces are at great distance, neither the Eloi not the Morlocks having contact with anyone outside their universe. The location is similar to the one imagined by Campanella (2007, 2), who had placed his City of the Sun beyond a forest, on a mountain standing in the middle of an endless plain. As in classic spatial utopias, the traveler in Wells' uchronia arrives there by accident. This is a key element of this type of narrative. The traveler is expected to return to his initial world, where he is to recount his adventures in front of a select, educated public. Another element that classic spatial utopias and *The Time Machine* uchronia have in common is the fact that this traveler (navigator) has no name. In the case of More's Hythlodeus we have a transparent pseudonym, T. Campanella's The Genovese is a generic name, and so is Wells' Time Traveler.

Still, by writing various kinds of works on the possibilities of the future, some literary (tales and novels), some in an essayistic style, H. G. Wells does not construct distinct imaginary worlds, but rather redefines and makes the same utopic scenario more complete (Opriţă 1983, 94). *Anticipation of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought* (1902) is an important work in this context. It represents both a utopic and uchronic en-

deavor, also containing some dystopian elements. It presents the road leading to the New Republic, meaning the World State, a new ideal city which is also a "secret society" (Wells 1902, 276). Evidently, the transformation is not an easy one, the author himself admitting mankind would go through difficult periods, periods of confrontation and moral degradation, including sexual deviation. The new ideal city would be built using reason and the capacity to think (and to choose what is good), and this is, in itself, utopic and somewhat naive! Liedl (2015) convincingly showed that it was technological progress and a better social organization that contributed to Wells' more optimistic view on the future of mankind.

In his utopic adventures (utopic meaning here the literary genre, including all of its subgenres) H. G. Wells follows the classic narrative scenario that More had set up, that of the traveler (or time traveler) that accidentally discovers new worlds, different societies that could be either an example or a counterexample for the society the explorer originated from. Of course, the classic structure would successively be improved or degraded by the contamination with the science fiction genre, particularly during the 20th century (Fortunati 2000). More lived in a time when human rights and individual liberties were not yet an important topic and the Church had great power, a fact that determined an equally ambiguous and transparent shift of the critical accents from the English society of those times to the island of Utopia. Five centuries later, scientific advances and civil rights provided the background of Wells' work. Thus his earlier novels were grim dystopias, assuming the role of warning signals. At the same time, Wells' optimistic view begins to emerge, as the author exhibits a stubborn, almost fundamentalist faith in the bright future of mankind and the Modern State. This attitude is surprising and it constitutes a break from More's initial model, as More was subtly ironic even towards his great creation, *Utopia*. Wells would not have the strength to submit his own utopic constructions to critical examination.
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Notes

1. Hythloday is the English name. Some translations use the Latin form of the name, Hythlodeus. It is a compound name, originally coming from Ancient Greek and meaning "someone talking gibberish." This fact further highlights the fictitious nature of both the character and the narrative.
2. The 1772 English title was *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*.

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Abstract
Utopia and Uchronia: from Thomas More to H. G. Wells

The purpose of this study is to identify some general characteristics of utopia (or dystopia) as compared to uchronia. While Thomas More succeeded in giving firm contours to the spatial utopia, H. G. Wells was the author who reconfigured the geography of possible worlds in a temporal succession. Both authors would make use of the theme of travel, thus giving the readers the opportunity to understand their works as both a literary adventure and as an adventure of knowledge. The relationship between utopia (dystopia) and uchronia is a complex one, but one characteristic is evident: utopia can be constructed as a distinct topos, as a functional society, by making use of spatial elements. The uchronic topos is completely dependent on the spatial dimensions, as is the utopic one, but in order for it to take shape the utopic (dystopian) perimeter needs to have already been established, and then placed on a temporal axis. The contextual analysis of the ideas developed in *Utopia* and *The Time Machine* reveals elements that indicate interferences between two genres: utopia and science fiction. Thus the capacity of utopia (and also dystopia and uchronia) to function as a space of debate and reflection on the problems of today (the curent present) becomes evident. Yet the imaginary worlds (some of them can also be ideal), parallel or chronological, are coherent as convergent or divergent narratives.

Keywords
utopia, dystopia, uchronia, Thomas More, H. G. Wells, science fiction