# Negotiating between Dream, Reality and Nightmare: Utopian, Dystopian and Heterotopian Nineteenth-century British Poets

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From a reading of the major theoreticians in this field, it would appear that the general concept and status of *utopia* has suffered a transformation along the centuries. This probably reflects the disparate ways in which Man, as a social and creative being, tends to negotiate life perspectives and choices involving three major, though opposed, *loci* of human existence and agency – Dream, Reality and Nightmare. This paper intends to focus its analysis on the British nineteenth century; one that is rich in new philosophical and creative approaches to 'good', 'bad' and 'alternative' Places – for both man and woman to imagine and inhabit. Through the exploration of the poetry and the thought of poets like Blake, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, Morris and Wilde, it proposes to reflect briefly on the development of the concept of *utopia* along the successive literary movements that these poets have respectively embodied – Romanticism, Realism and Aestheticism. And it will argue that the concept, far from being dead or irrevocably reduced by the end of the century, indeed flourished and expanded in different ways – whether we interpret these products as *eutopian*, *dystopian* or else *heterotopian* versions of it, eventually suggesting that "Poetry dwells in a perpetual utopia of its own".
Keywords: British poets, nineteenth century, utopian, dystopian, heterotopian

Se partirmos de uma leitura dos principais teorizadores neste campo, parece que quer o conceito quer o estatuto de *utopia* sofreram uma transformação ao longo dos séculos, provavelmente refletindo as diferentes formas através das quais o Homem, como ser social e criativo, tende a negociar perspetivas e escolhas de vida, envolvendo os três *loci* principais, embora opostos, da existência e da ação humanas – Sonho, Realidade e Pesadelo. Este artigo pretende focar a sua análise no século XIX britânico – um período rico em novas abordagens filosóficas e criativas de lugares 'bons', 'maus' e 'alternativos', a serem imaginados e habitados quer pelo homem quer pela mulher. Através da exploração da poesia e do pensamento de poetas como Blake, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, Morris e Wilde, propõe-se refletir brevemente sobre o desenvolvimento do conceito de Utopia ao longo dos movimentos literários que estes poetas têm, respectivamente, encarnado – Romantismo, Realismo e Esteticismo. Argumenta ainda que o conceito, longe de estar morto ou irrevogavelmente reduzido no final do século, de facto floresceu e se expandiu de diferentes maneiras – quer interpretemos esses produtos como versões utópicas, distópicas ou heterotópicas do mesmo; eventualmente sugerindo que "A poesia habita uma utopia perpétua que lhe é própria".
Palavras-chave: poetas britânicos, século XIX, utopia, distopia, heterotopia

*A good poem helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone's knowledge of himself and the world around him.*

Dylan Thomas

From its Early Modern origins, in the sixteenth century, the word *utopia*, Thomas More's creative invention,[2] seems to express the tension between two different formulations or interpretations – a non-existent place and a 'good place', respectively suggesting a mere place of the human imagination and/ or a true earthly paradise. Thus, the crucial question of

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2 Thomas More's *Utopia* was first published in Latin in 1516, on the Continent, and in an English translation in 1552. The most important structural feature of the book is its split between a critical portrait of 16th-century England in Book 1 and a description of an imaginary island in Book 2. While Book 2 has garnered more popular attention, the focus in Book 1 on the failures of English government has also proved a rich mine for criticism.

whether utopia can also be conceived as, and transformed into, a real place, one that is truly achievable or realizable, has constituted a major debate within Western philosophy and social and political science.[3] Conversely, the reality or possibility of a 'bad place' or places is, unfortunately, well known to us, and we often equate it with 'nightmare', giving it a specific name – dystopia.

The contemporary canon of utopian writing, including primarily philosophical works and a great variety of popular narrative prose, does some justice to Plato, who famously eradicated the poets from his Utopia – the Republic.[4] But if we stick to the etymology, a 'no-place' is a place that does not exist, and one that in order to truly exist has first to be created. The question that logically arises is 'by whom?' And the one of 'how is it created?' ensues. The answer to both these questions lies in etymology again: the Greek root of the word 'poetry' (*poiein*) is 'to make' or 'to create', which was indeed extended to all the literature that is created by man. In this paper I aim, therefore, to show that in spite of what Plato and the canon say, great utopian writing has appeared in the form of poetry as well, and that different poets have provided major images of Other Places.

There have always been poets who have written about the 'good life' – notions such as the 'Golden Age' and 'Arcadia' are, for this reason, very familiar to us.[5] The great tradition of pastoral verse poems, describing in more or less realistic detail the joys of ideal country living, indeed goes back hundreds of years. Examples can be found ranging from the eclogues of Theocritus and Virgil to Tasso and Edmund Spenser in the Renaissance. But if most poets of all ages tend to focus either on the present or the past, some have also ventured to describe the future. Indeed, the categories of space and time in utopian writing tend to progressively overlap, and imaginative writers may conceive not just new spaces but also new eras.

If to concoct imaginary places or systems is a fundamental disposition of the humankind, especially if it realizes that it is not satisfied with the real places or systems that it knows, the Poet is perhaps the most disposed and the best equipped of all to do so. In the late nineteenth century, the time-span that I propose to explore, the decadent poet Edward Fitzgerald translated the eleventh-century Persian poem *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, who in turn voiced this attitude admirably:

> Ah, Love, could you and I with Him conspire
> To grasp this *sorry Scheme of Things* entire.
> Would we not *shatter it to bits* – and then
> *Remold* it nearer to the Heart's Desire! (quatrain 88, my emphasis)

Indeed, Khayyám interestingly associates here the revolutionary idea of social change to the impulse or motivation provided by human love and desire. But towards the end of the eighteenth century, a time of particularly great social and political repression in England, the poet, engraver and visionary William Blake had already expressed a very similar idea (through *Los*, his personification of imagination) in his famous dictum– 'I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's' (*Jerusalem*, f. 10, ll. 20–1.). His was obviously a major political statement, but one that enveloped several other dimensions of human

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[3] For Ernst Bloch (1959), utopia is not just a subject for rational construction and projection into the future, but also something very much present in the here and now. Thus utopia is not the 'no-place' of the word's Greek origins, but rather something present in the now, although available only in glimpses or image-traces. For Krishan Kumar (1987/1999), utopia is by definition a fiction as it presents possible worlds not real ones, and while distinct from 'utopian social theory', it is a literary form at the service of social criticism. It is also beyond the merely oneiric in the sense that it always establishes a relationship with the reality and with a possible future. Ruth Levitas (1990) claims, instead, that the concept incorporates a much wider range of forms, functions and contents (207) and is predicated on a largely inclusive notion of 'desire' for a different better way of being, which does not necessarily imply (radical) social change (209). Michel Foucault's lecture "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" (1967), had already introduced a new concept connected with the notions of space, stating that "the space in which we live […] is also in itself a heterogeneous space […] our set of relations delineate sites which are irreducible to one another and not superimposable on one another" (39); examples of such spaces/places would be cemeteries, museums, libraries, fairgrounds, etc.

[4] According to Plato, the poets help enslave even the best of us to the lower parts of our soul; and just insofar as they do so, they must be kept out of any community that wishes to be free and virtuous. The fundamental point was that poets misrepresent the nature of the subjects about which they write (e.g., the gods). They do not produce a true likeness of their topics. And the argument in book X cuts across all forms of 'poetry', whether tragic, comic, lyric, in meter or not.

4. 'Arcadia' is a concept originating in Greek mythology of a land of outstanding natural beauty unspoiled by human civilisation, free of war and pain and offering boundless pleasures both spiritual and physical. The idea behind the references to the 'Golden Age' in the literature of the ancients represents a nostalgic yearning for a kind of life which they imagined was free from the stresses of their more competitive, more commercial civilization.

endeavour and realization, namely the arts. Blake did practice that same idea in his writing, revolutionizing the poetic canon.

His *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789, 1794) is a double set of illustrated poems showing 'the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul', the childlike and pure versus the angry and disillusioned. Under the subtle disguise of beautifully engraved children's rhymes, Blake taught the average reader to understand not only what a Poet was, but also to distinguish the two opposite states of human existence, the brighter and the darker sides of life**.** He offered him representations of both 'good' places and 'bad' places for his reflection, symbolically extolling or denouncing them.[6] The poem "The clod and the pebble" symbolises this contrast well: The clay thinks that love "builds a Heaven in Hell's despair", but the pebble believes that love "builds a Hell in Heaven's despite" (ll. 4 and 12). For the first, the world is bad, but love makes an enclave of good; for the second, the world is good, but love makes evil spring forth from goodness. Blake's later elaborately engraved prophetic writings deal more directly with aspects of the biblical plot of the creation and the Fall, and the promise of a recovery of Eden and of a 'New Jerusalem'. In the Preface to his *Milton*, he included a hymn which is still sung nowadays at English schools:

> I will not cease from mental fight
> Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
> Till we have built Jerusalem
> In England's green and pleasant land. (ll. 13-16)

But Blake progressively saw historical revolution as a correlative with a radical change effected within the mind and imagination of the individual, a shift of emphasis from an apocalypse by revolution to an apocalypse by imagination (a restored unity of vision).[7] In particular, Los's construction of Golgonooza, the city of art, "among these dark Satanic Mills" (ll.7-8) would spell the end of mankind's subjection to the tyranny of time and the work masters.

Another Romantic poet, scholar and critic, who saw Poetry as a vatic art in the service of a general social revival was Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He had far-reaching ideas and the England of George III, in the aftermath from the shock of the American and French Revolutions, was surely prepared to listen. In 1794, he met Robert Southey at Oxford, an influential Scottish poet, and together they discussed Godwin's theory of publicly shared property, Joseph Priestley and the American emigration movement, as well as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the 'back to nature' movement. They then planned to establish an ideal democratic community, named "Pantisocracy" (from the Greek *pant-isocratia*, which means equal rule by all), one of the most spectacular experiments to emerge from the early Romantic movement.[8] The utopian scheme propounded immigration to America, where the group was to found a community on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania; it envisaged a society of commonly owned property, communal labour and equal government by both men and women, whilst all delighting in idyllic pastoral seclusion.The project involved mostly shared tasks and Christian selflessness (a form of servitude that they called 'aspheterism' or the abolition of private property).

There are two poems by Coleridge that directly address the plans that he and Southey were envisioning. The first, "Pantisocracy", was a sonnet sent to Southey in a letter (September, 1794), which describes the poet's expectations of a harmonious and joyful living that would grant him the much-needed inspiration for his writings:

> No more my Visionary Soul shall dwell
> On Joys that were! No more endure to weigh

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[66] In Blake, good places are associated with nature and with the free enjoyment of the senses, and bad places are connected with the city ("London") and the corrupted living that it causes, as well as with the repression of certain institutions, like the Church, on the young individual (a good example is "The Garden of Love").

[7] In *Europe: A Prophecy* Blake offered his representation of the Female Will and in his *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* he represented his idea of a utopian liberation of women.

[8] Pantisocracy was modelled on the early Christian communities of the first centuries, and it was seen as a means of escape from the hostility of anti-Jacobin England. Coleridge and Southey believed that contemporary society and politics were responsible for cultures of servitude and oppression. The Pantisocrats were also heavily influenced by contemporary travel accounts of the new world, which described a fresh and inviting country, whose inhabitants were untainted by the evils of society. Besides, they had assimilated Hartley's Unitarianism and psychological studies, in which he argued that by modifying the mind's influences the human race could progress towards moral and intellectual perfectibility.

The Shame and Anguish of the evil Day,
Wisely forgetful! *O'er the Ocean swell*
*Sublime of Hope I seek the cottag'd Dell,*
*Where Virtue calm with careless step may stray,*
*And dancing to the moonlight Roundelay*
*The Wizard Passions weave an holy Spell.* (ll. 1-8, my emphasis)

A second sonnet, "On the Prospect of Establishing a Pantisocracy", has also been attributed to Coleridge, and was first published in 1826. But many of Coleridge's other works of the time implicitly suggest the New World, and may owe a debt to his musings over the Susquehanna.[9]

Some of Coleridge's conversational poems, for instance, reflect this communitarian aspiration. For example, "Religious Musings" envisions the dismal historical world which they hoped to escape, as well as their wished-for place:

'Tis the sublime of man,
Our noontide majesty, to know ourselves
Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole!
This fraternizes man, this constitutes
Our charities and bearings! (I, ll. 23-7)

Nevertheless, "The Aeolian Harp" establishes the terms of an important conflict: While pantheism was associated with the progressive scientific culture, for which the empirical world of nature was simply reality itself, a personal God had no empirical reality. Unitarians and various sorts of deists adhered to a divinity which was known through sensation: a Nature God of sorts. Although this was Coleridge's intellectual milieu, the community espoused in the conclusion of this poem is not the egalitarian utopia of scientific aspiration, but the family of Christ.

Pantisocracy occupied Coleridge's energies and continued to influence his sense of vocation for some time after the scheme's collapse in 1795.[10] A communitarian ideal remained essential to his writing, as to the life he now proposed to live. While the scheme never produced an actual community, it did impact Coleridge's philosophical thinking, as his lectures of the time reflect his Pantisocratic thinking on social relations and wealth. Yet, with the failure of the French Revolution and Pantisocracy to establish 'paradise on earth', Coleridge seems to have sublimated his hopes onto Imagination, that faculty that he famously theorised and which might create the paradisal space of a poem. The perfect citizen of an ideal society was thus replaced by the poet of 'ideal perfection'. Indeed, in "Kubla Khan" – the poetic fragment of a dream, he inhabits a "dome in air" and he "on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of paradise." (ll. 46-54) [11]

The second and younger generation of Romantic poets would critique or complicate the aspirations and traits of this first generation. Although Byron, Shelley, and Keats are in different senses the true incarnation of the Romantic revolt, their 'tragic' generation is in many ways much more skeptical of those earlier hopes and schemes. Every age needs heroes, and for post-revolutionary Europe the concept of the poet-rebel was related to the notion of freedom, idealism and change, and was met with extraordinary enthusiasm. But economic hardship, as a result of war taxation, was followed by the post Napoleonic war unrest; and successive waves of agitation for major political reform eventually led to the passage of the first bill in 1832.

Not a political radical or an idealist, George Gordon Byron eventually occupied his inherited seat in the House of Lords, where he notwithstanding supported many liberal measures (he is known to have defended the unemployed workers and the Catholics). As Ian Dennis states: "No domes in air, for Byron, […] He will not teach us […] to love what he

[9] An early version of the poem "To a Young Ass" also makes mention of Pantisocracy.

[10] By 1795 Southey had serious doubts about the viability of the scheme and proposed moving the project to Wales. The two men were unable to agree on the location and on other issues, namely the need for servants, causing the project to collapse. When Southey ultimately backed out, Coleridge was not just disappointed but also angry and devastated. But besides their blatant lack of funds, other concerns challenged the Pantisocrats. Contrary to the glowing travel narratives that Coleridge pored over while researching the prospect of settling in America, other accounts of American life were less encouraging, and described a difficult and laborious existence.

[11] Unfortunately for Coleridge, the later part of his life would be plagued by disease, addiction to opium and constant nightmares, features that are vividly described in some of his poems, most notoriously in "Dejection. An Ode".

loves. Or to hate what he hates, or be what he is" (2009: 30). Byron's typically disenchanted or cynical posture, namely towards historical events, can be surmised from one of his poems (Canto IV of *Childe Harold*):

> There is the moral of all human tales;
> 'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past.
> First Freedom, and then Glory: when that fails
> Wealth, vice, corruption, barbarism at last. (cviii, ll.1-3)

Byron's realistically bleak view of the immediate prospects in reactionary post-Napoleonic Europe, may suggest, from his *Don Juan* above all, a prophetic-elegiac vision of a freer, if permanently transitional 'open' society (Dennis, 2009: 30). That is also visibly hinted at in his poem "Prometheus". Dennis argues that Byron has a "Whig [liberal] interpretation of history, which although programmatically vague in political terms, has incisive perception of ongoing change" (30). Exiled and estranged from his own country, Byron found in the Greeks' struggle for independence (from The Ottoman Empire) a substitute political cause, not to mention the symbolism of Greece as the 'utopian' birthplace of Civilization.

He came to see it as a moral obligation, part of his duty as a poet – and it is at this point that he strikes a common chord with Shelley and his defence of poetry's moral, humanising character. For, as Byron wrote in the *Prophesy of Dante*,

> Many are poets but without the name,
> For what is poesy but to create
> From overfeeling good or ill; and *aim*
> *At an external life beyond our fate,*
> *And be the new Prometheus of new men*. (ll. 10-14, my emphasis)

But Byron's rebellion did not really have a philosophical dimension, being drained of ideological content, to a degree that is remarkable in the literature of the period. His is a conglomerate of discordant images and a complex interlacing of hope and hopelessness. Along with his typical prophesy of doom and subjugation, he still praises an Italy which is painted in paradisiacal colours:

> Yes! thou so beautiful, shalt feel the sword,
> Thou Italy! so fair that Paradise,
> Revived in thee, blooms forth to man restored:
> Ah! must the sons of Adam lose it twice? (ll. 46-49)

Dennis mentions that "In the end, Byron's poetry discovers what all Romantic poems repeatedly discover: That there is no place of refuge, not in desire, not in the mind, not in imagination" (37). Byron's magnificent dystopian view, grounded for the most part in his Calvinistic Presbyterianism, is probably best seen in his long blank verse poem "Darkness" (1816), which presents one of the bleakest prospects in literature for human life on earth: an apocalypse originally caused by the extinction of the sun and ultimately aggravated by extremely unsocial human conduct, leading in turn to the extinction of humanity and of all life.[12] The poem has been read as a dream-vision with references to the Apocalypse and the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius. 'Darkness' becomes a new and tangible entity, capable of shaping the universe in her own image; the possibility of a new universal order is thus constructed upon the domain of the 'old world' that crumbles.

But Byron's friend and fellow Romantic (from the 'Pisan Circle') Percy Bysshe Shelley could not be more different. Although emerged from a conservative background (his father was an MP), he would become almost instantly a radical nonconformist, expelled from Oxford due to the publication of a pamphlet denying the existence of God, *The Necessity of Atheism* (1810). Soon after, in 1813, Shelley published a political epic called *Queen Mab*, in which the fairy queen takes the spirit of Ianthe on a time and space journey in order to reveal the ideal nature of humanity's potential. The poem attacks religious dogma and superstition, as well as the monarchy. Its utopian perspective suggests the great potential of the

[12] I have written elsewhere on Byron's dystopian views and namely on this particular poem, which was composed in the same context and site of other major Romantic texts, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). The title of my article is "'The sun shall be darkened': Eco-critical Byron and the Feminine Apocalyptic Sublime in 'Darkness' (1816)".

uncorrupted human soul, foreshadowing the apocalyptic and millennial vision of Shelley's later poetry.

Shelley's political ideology has been called 'philosophical anarchism', but it is one infused with an ethical idealism. Although the poet seems to accept politics as a process of gradual reforms, he has a preference for direct democracy; he was particularly attracted to the visionary radicalism of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft.[13] He thus wrote many political poems in which he elaborated his views on reform, his millenarian vision, radical philosophy and libertinism, concerning the replacement of old systems – political, social, moral – with new ones. His vision for Liberty was very Promethean and universal. On the other hand, Shelley's circle sensed the cultural crisis of the post-Napoleonic era and thought it proper to adopt timeless, enduring ideals, myths and classical tales in order to convey truths that would have an impact on the present time. In Shelley's poetry, the Wind is assumed as a symbolic element of political change and of poetic creativity (*Ode to the West Wind* is paradigmatic). Images and metaphors associated with the ethereal elements (wind, birds, breath, and song) are the symbols for or the messengers of Revelation / Revolution. Furthermore, the prophetic and revolutionary role of the Poet is emphasized in poems such as the utopian monodrama *Prometheus Unbound* (1820),[14] namely in the final words of Demogorgon:

> These are the spells by which *to reassume*
> *An empire o'er the disentangled doom.*
>
> To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
> To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
> To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
> To love, and bear; *to hope till Hope creates*
> *From its own wreck the thing it contemplates*; (Epilogue, my emphasis)

In the *Defence of Poetry* (1820-21),[15] Shelley not only makes extravagant political claims for poetry in all the important human concerns, but also proclaims the moral function of the poet as a guide and benefactor of humanity, supporting social advancement and humanitarian causes. Shelley's major thesis is that any moral and social betterment of man and the world is contingent on the imagination: "The great instrument of moral good is the imagination" which is "the organ of the moral nature of man" (*Prose* 283). Thus, a poet's essential task is to develop, enhance and sustain people's imagination, that is, the one and only humanising, civilising and creative faculty. Indeed, he adds that "a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others" (283). As a prophet and a legislator, the poet joins the ideal and the real, participating in both; thus, Shelley's concluding political metaphor is that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (297).

In the Continental nationalist revolts of 1820 and 1821, Shelley saw the outbreak and spread of a great revolution and the setting of a new world order. Therefore, the cause of liberty became identified in his mind with European liberation movements for independence, as is noticeable in *Ode to Liberty*, on the Spanish revolution, and in *Ode to Naples*, on the Neapolitan one. Shelley's enthusiasm over 'the lightning of the nations' that was about to electrify the universe was so great that, a few months after the revolution had begun, he even contemplated moving to Spain. Charting the progress of freedom through the centuries, he invokes and celebrates the Italian *liberi communi*, the city-states, to whose form of republicanism he attributed the flourish of the arts and culture. But Shelley also offered a more concrete alternative, which was not that distant from Coleridge's earlier utopian project: the idea for the creation of a Colony upon Italian ground, namely the colonisation of Pisa by a community of the Elect in terms of social status, education and taste.

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[13] Besides defending Feminism and Socialism, the radical couple believed in Perfectibility – a progressive change directed mainly by educational and cultural activity.

[14] *Prometheus* is also Shelley's answer to the mistakes of the French Revolution and its cycle of replacing one tyrant with another. Shelley wished to show how a revolution could be conceived which would avoid doing just that, and in the end of this play, there is no power in charge at all; it is an anarchist's paradise.

[15] *A Defence of Poetry* was written in response to Thomas Love Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry* and is a work greatly influenced by Platonism, in which Shelley proclaims his faith in the power and quasi-divine status of poetry.

The generation that followed the first Reform Bill (1830-1890),[16] a period including the most dynamic phase of the industrial revolution, characterised by a puritan work ethic of self-realization and the imperial or colonial instinct, even if the inheritor of the previous, could no longer be classified as Romantic, namely as it no longer yearned for the 'grand' Promethean dream of perfectibility that had moved the revolutionary generation. Nevertheless, many Victorians faced the new industrial and scientific developments of their era with a bracing enthusiasm for their 'brave new world', considering it a more immediate and more palpable dream of human improvement. They would be the first to put into practice the ideas that had been proposed by the former ones, by implementing the necessary social and political reforms, firmly believing in the progressive development of human society. Yet, the writers nursed a deep uneasiness or *malaise* about where such 'Progress' might lead (namely, the sage Thomas Carlyle),[17] because they saw their time, in many ways, as confusing, chaotic and bad. Facing an industrialized mass existence, as well as distress and oppression, many Victorian poets sought for escapism from this dismal reality in nature and the past, namely by restoring the pastoral and the legendary modes in their works.

One of the most representative dystopian images of this Victorian 'brave new world' is Charles Dickens's description of the industrial city that he renames Coketown, and which is based on the city of Manchester, in his social novel *Hard Times* (1854):

> It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next. (First Book, Chap. V, p. 28)

It conveys not only the city's outward or physical ugliness, but its tragic effect upon the lives of its inhabitants, especially the working class 'hands'. The apparent reduction of the workers to much-abused gears in a heartlessly churning industrial system is indeed reminiscent of Blake's 'dark satanic mills', thus indicating that urban settings are not ideal but rather non-deal places. Besides, Dickens's savage caricature of the Utilitarian philosophy that permeates both formal and informal educational contexts and affective relationships in the novel shows it to be conducive to dry and dysfunctional, if not degenerate, middle class families and individuals.[18] In fact, we can find a complex interplay between eutopian and dystopian contexts in the more realist literature of the period.

For the Victorian poets, in particular, the City came also to symbolise the site of social trauma, crime and mental pathology and, thus, its inhabitants constituted in some cases

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[16] Until the 1830s, Britain's elections were neither representative nor balanced. The first Reform Bill was necessitated chiefly by glaring inequalities in representation between traditionally enfranchised rural areas and the rapidly growing cities of newly industrial England. In its final form, the Reform Act of 1832 increased the electorate which was about 18 per cent of the total adult-male population in England and Wales. This effect of the bill, which allowed the middle classes to share power with the upper classes, was revolutionary in its import. Some historians argue that this transference of power achieved in England what the French Revolution achieved eventually in France.

[17] Thomas Carlyle's (1795-1881) review essay, "Signs of the Times," first appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1829. The Mechanical philosophy, as Carlyle understood it, had altered the state of science. Metaphysical and Moral Sciences were now in disrepute. Mechanical principles had become so pervasive that they had also affected politics – Society was now seen as a machine.

[18] Similar lessons can be learned from *Hard Times* and the life of British philosopher James Stuart Mill regarding the negative effects of a strictly academic education during childhood on people's emotional growth. The novel describes the lives of Louisa and Thomas Gradgrind, who experience no pleasure due to their father's utilitarian theories of education. This reflects Mill's exclusively academic education that failed to prepare him for adult life.

fascinating objects of detailed case studies, which they shared with another emergent professional class, the psychologists. Poets like Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning and Augusta Webster proposed to explore these undoubtedly new but tortured or tortuous subjectivities in their dramatic monologues (an experimental poetic form created for this purpose), thus showing through their speakers' avowed 'confessions' the true social, sexual and mental conditions that they were subject to. That is the case, respectively, of long poems such as *Pauline* (1833), *Maude* (1855), and *A Castaway* (1870), but also shorter ones like 'Mariana' and 'Porphyria's Lover' (to name but a few), which focus on deeply disturbed beings and minds – suggesting that the critical personal circumstances of their speakers, which indeed are not separate from a generally problematic social context, possess marked dystopian features or traits that we can identify as being 'bad' or 'diseased'. While Browning's speaker states "I felt a strange delight in causing my decay" (Stanza 4), Tennyson's is, as he says, "At war with myself and a wretched race, / Sick, sick to the heart of life, am I" (I, ll. 364-65).

Other poets, like Tennyson or William Morris, attempted an 'escape' from this dismal reality by literally proposing alternative places and ages (usually legendary or heroic ones) for their writing, as they felt that theirs was a 'deeply unpoetical age', already deprived of the cherished ancestral customs and values, especially those of heroism, honour and fidelity. And that would be the case, namely, of long narrative poems such as Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859-85) and Morris's *The Defence of Guinevere* (1858), which adapt the medieval Arthurian legends to specific Victorian issues and concerns. In fact, the so-called Cambridge 'Apostles', to which fraternity Tennyson and Arthur Hallam belonged, were interested in reviving the old communal values of this period of early English history, and the brotherhood of the knights of the Round table, whose high ideals of governance and conviviality they interpreted as having been disrupted or corrupted by a series of severe breaches in this harmonious society, namely by Queen Guinevere's adultery with Sir Lancelot.

Though often accused by his critics of only focusing on the Past, Tennyson also wrote important works that openly and creatively explore future possibilities. Indeed, a passage from his poem *Locksley Hall* (1842) is even quoted in Edward Bellamy's novel *Looking Backwards* of 1888, in order to prove that an artist may also envision and find inspiration in the future:

> For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,
> Saw the vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;
> […]
> For I doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
> And the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns. (ll. 119-20, 127-8)

Perhaps even more significantly, in Tennyson's mock-heroic epic poem *The Princess* (1847), evolving conversations between men and women keep discussion of political progress (and avoidance of revolution) bound to ideas of sexual progress and mutability. The poem surprisingly presents a radical politics that is both feminist and utopian in its discourse and events (the founding of a university for women or a gynotopia). And though Ida's political radicalism is revealed to be absolutist and separatist, being toned down at the end, the poem's speculative politics remain open; namely in the proposition of a shared future 'on mixed-sex negotiated exchange'.

On the other hand, Home was a particularly important space, as the realm of the 'domestic' had assumed very idealised proportions in the daily life of the Victorians. If some poets had found in this sphere a true 'heaven' or refuge from the din and strife of the city's professional world, and included even a 'sweet' guardian of their repose – the famous 'angel in the house' or the married Victorian woman (according to the poet Coventry Patmore in his famed poem with the same title), other poets, namely women poets, have represented that *locus* as being very far from ideal or idyllic – but rather as a very traumatic site, in which physical and psychological violence was recurrent. A paradigmatic narrative work that critically combines both perspectives is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), in which we encounter two opposing realms or Houses, and correspondent inhabitants, with very different features and sets of values. Certainly, 'home' could also mean confinement or even imprisonment, as is clear not just for Brontë, in her personal lyrics, but also in Tennyson's

*The Lady of Shallot* and "Mariana" poems, in turn leading to isolation and hysteria and, most frequently, to madness and death.

The mental escape from the ugliness and degradation of the industrial and urban Victorian worlds was also carried out by some poets through a particular devotion to the Beautiful, in terms of both the aesthetics of material objects and the human body. This is manifested in the artistic movement self-designated as 'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood' (whose major proponent was Dante Gabriel Rossetti) and also in the British Decadent Aestheticism of Algernon Swinburne and Oscar Wilde. In fact, specific forms of utopian aestheticism emerged at this time – suggesting that, in the future, the common Man would have more leisure to dedicate himself to literature and the arts as the highest forms of human endeavour.

For this reason, poets and artists like Morris developed projects connected with the democratization of the arts, namely in the field of architecture and decoration, which became part of the so-called 'Arts and Crafts Movement'. And, indeed, in his utopian narrative entitled *News from Nowhere* (1890-91), Morris proposes a new society in which workers are happy artisans and not mere anonymous 'hands'. In reality, his own work was meant as a refutation of Bellamy's *Looking Backwards.* Its narrator dreams that he finds himself in twenty-first century England and that the whole society is structured to the pattern of ideal communism: after a major revolution, the industrial system has been eradicated and all factories have been destroyed. As such, Morris's political involvement in the emerging English socialist movement predicts a brighter future for mankind. But, strangely or significantly enough for us today, it is a future *without* advanced technology.

Oscar Wilde, whose versatile work was frequently accused of being apolitical, stated in *The Critic as Artist* that "England will never be civilized till she has added Utopia to her dominions", and that "What we want are unpractical people who see beyond the moment, and think beyond the day" (1043). Like Morris and the Socialist League, Wilde rejects the use value of piecemeal reform and charity in his essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism" and endorses a complete utopian separation of art from the political reality of the present (Miller, 2013: 45). He also became very interested in the socialist art journal called the *Commonweal* because it shared his aesthetic vision. The journal published poems that were considered explicitly utopian, drawing on imagery of the 'dawn' and the 'morning of the day' after the revolution (Miller, 46). This persistent poetic trope or association between sunrise and the post-revolutionary future derived, in effect and in part, from Algernon Swinburne's own in his poetic collection *Songs Before Sunrise* of 1871:

> 'Is it time, is it time appointed,
> Angel of time, is it near?
> For the spent night aches into day
> When the kings shall slay not or pray,
> And the high-priest, accursed and anointed
> Sickens to deathward with fear. ('Mentana: An Anniversary', ll. 19-24)

Furthermore, the journal often referenced Thomas More's *Utopia* – undoubtedly in order to provide historical precedent; and, in his *De Profundis,* Wilde would meaningfully write of the individual as 'a potential fulfilment of a prophecy' (Miller, 46).

We conclude this foray into the poetic realms of Dream, Reality and Nightmare in the British nineteenth century with the essayist William Hazlitt's words – that artists and poets like Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Tennyson and Wilde indeed 'dwell in a perpetual utopia of their own' ('Poetical Versatility', 1816, No. XLIX). For them, Poetry was this Other space, a site of creative freedom, a space pregnant with myriad possibilities of realization. As such, they were only too conscious of the increasingly threatened position of the Poet or Artist in modern society – a society which, two hundred years later, unfortunately only values utilitarian objects or 'useful' information, and has great difficulty in imagining or projecting a better world.

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