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From Terror to Grace

Utopia as desire

The very term utopia is fraught with difficulty. Its meanings are various and contested in both academic and lay discourse. Thomas More coined the word as the title and locus of his 1516 *Utopia* in a pun which conflates *outopos* or no place and *eutopos* or good place. Consequently utopia is widely understood as an imagined perfect society or wishfully constructed place which does not and cannot exist. Such imaginings are held to be unrealistic so that utopia has connotations of impossibility and fantastical dreaming, divorced from the hard and the joyful realities of the world and life we actually inhabit and where, as Wordsworth put it, 'we find our happiness, or not at all'.[1] New generations are inducted into the view that utopia is dangerously escapist through popular children's literature. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Harry spends two nights gazing at his lost family in the Mirror of Erised, around which runs the inscription 'Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi' (I show not your face but your heart's desire). On the third night, Professor Dumbledore intercepts Harry and tells him that the Mirror of Erised 'shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. ... However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible'. The mirror will be removed and hidden, and Dumbledore counsels Harry that '[i]t does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live'.[2] Defending utopia entails insisting that the identification and expression of the deepest desires of our hearts and minds, and those of others, is a necessary form of knowledge and of truth.

R. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*
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The relation between desire and utopia can be read more positively. *The Concept of Utopia* explores the ways in which social theorists and utopists have used the term, revealing quite contradictory positions.[3] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (and indeed Lenin) were less hostile to social dreaming and imagination of better worlds than is often supposed, but the contrast between utopian and scientific socialism is unequivocally in favour of the latter: utopia is ascribed the function of distraction from political engagement in transformative class struggle, thus unwittingly supporting and preserving the status quo. In contrast, Karl Mannheim contended that utopia was the proper description of ideas which when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, partly or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time. Both Herbert Marcuse's work and Edward Thompson's reformulation of the relationship between Marxism and utopia complicate matters. I concluded that most definitions rested on one of the form, or the function, or the content of utopian expressions, and that this placed unsatisfactory limits on understanding the historical shifts in the utopian imagination. I argued for greater clarity about usage and in favour of the more open definition of utopia as the expression of desire for a better way of living and of being. This analytic rather than descriptive definition reveals the utopian aspects of forms of cultural expression rather than creating a binary separation between utopia/non-utopia. It allows that utopia may be fragmentary, fleeting, elusive. It mirrors an existential quest which is figured in literature, music, drama and art, and which, as we shall see, Dennis Potter described as looking for the blue.

If utopia is understood in this sense, its forms and functions as well as its explicit content are historically variable. Those functions may include compensation (or consolation), critique or change; but one element in the transformative process is what Abensour calls the education of desire. Where utopian literature is concerned – and this may be equally true of other artistic forms – Abensour sees the main function as estrangement or making the familiar unfamiliar. The utopian experiment disrupts the taken-for-granted nature of the present. It creates a space in which the reader may, temporarily, experience an alternative configuration of needs, wants and satisfactions. As I argued in *Concept*, the claim here is that utopia works towards an understanding of what is necessary for human fulfilment and towards a broadening, deepening and raising of aspirations in terms different from those dominating the mundane present. Or, as Thompson glosses Abensour:

> And in such an adventure, two things happen: our habitual values (the "commonsense" of bourgeois society) are thrown into disarray. And we enter into Utopia's proper and new-found space: *the education of desire.*