No Place for Women? Anti-utopianism and the Utopian Politics of the 1890s [1]

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Introduction

'Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible', and 'Take Your Desires for Reality' went the 1968 Situationist slogans. This article examines some of the ways in which the polarisation between the realistic and the impossible gets set up: the move from utopia as a place that does not exist, to one which cannot exist. It also raises the questions: Whose desires? Whose reality? Examples of women's writings about utopian politics in late nineteenth century England show constructions of the relationship between utopian and non-utopian space which render utopia as always elsewhere. Meanwhile utopian space is often represented as masculine or asexual, suggesting that it is no place for women.

Utopias, whether fictional or real life instances, are amongst other things experiments — with imagination as a method, hope as a motivation, and social change as a goal. As Vincent Geogehan argues: 'An impractical, unrealistic utopianism cannot be counterposed to a practical non utopian realism, for utopianism can issue forth in both practical and impractical forms.'[2]

How, then, has the common sense belief that utopia is self-evidently impossible been produced? Although many theorists of utopia point out the ambiguity of the word itself ('utopia' in its derivation meaning both good place and no place), this kind of terminological point does not

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[1] This is an earlier, longer version of the article published in *Geografisker Annaler 84 B, 2002, 3-4:31-39* Minor errors in the published version have been corrected here, and some additional material appears in the appendices.

[2] Geogehan, p.6.

explain why the ambiguity exists.[3] The appeal to realism and reality similarly begs the question — after all, much of what seemed impossible in the past has become the taken-for-granted reality of the present.

I argue that the everyday notion of utopia as inherently impossible is produced and reproduced through the repetition of narratives and imagery which construct a time that is not now, but once upon a time; a place which is not here, but somewhere over the rainbow.[4]

For example, in utopian fiction, the story usually starts off in a non-utopian here and now assumed to be shared by the readers. We then accompany a narrator, both explorer and anthropologist, to a utopian world characterised by its otherness, its spatial and temporal distance from our own. The detailed descriptions and explanations make the utopian world appear realistic but at the same time emphasise its difference (and distance). The story usually ends with the traveller's return home, perhaps bringing back some utopian ideas for change, but in any case leaving utopia behind. Whatever the author's intentions, the narrative structure has a distancing effect on the reader, and to that extent feeds into existing anti-utopian ideas.

A similar kind of effect can be seen in autobiographies, where former engagement with utopian ideas and practices is distanced by telling the story in such a way that past hopes become almost inexplicable — at best the product of ignorance and naivety. Characteristically, a now older and wiser narrator recounts the past as the space of youth, dream and fantasy, a place and time somehow outside the real world of political maturity and adult gender relations.

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[3] Almost all utopian theorists make the point about ambiguity: see e.g. Geogehan and Kumar*.*

[4] I develop this point further in Greenway, 2000.

Anti-utopianism is ideological: in Geogehan's words, 'a conflict between dreams masquerading as an attack on dreaming'.[5] Anti-utopianism uses fatalism as a method, pessimism as (de)motivation, with disengagement, passivity or resistance to change as the goal. Instruction in anti-utopianism is not just by means of repeated reminders of seemingly intractable dystopias such as war, terror, oppression, and environmental degradation, but by the endless reiteration of narratives of the inevitable failure of utopias.

This can be seen in histories of utopian experiments, which are often told in such a way that lack of success seems predetermined. Ending is conflated with failure, and explanations of failure become not a challenge to think how to do things better, but a demonstration that utopias will inevitably fail. Often there is a double standard, so that the failure of a non-utopian project is seen as particular; that of a utopian project, typical.[6]

In these ways the narrative conventions of utopian fiction, autobiography and history serve to locate actual as well as fictional utopian experiments in a world not just imaginary but always elsewhere, unreal and unrealistic, implicitly or explicitly impossible. In this context even sympathetic representations lend themselves to negative interpretation.

Such processes can be seen in contemporary accounts of utopian politics in 1890s England. The term 'utopian' was used at the time as a pejorative description of attempts to change society by transforming personal relationships, especially those between men and women. Critics from the right used the word in its everyday sense of hopelessly unrealistic; those from the left drew also on Engels' contrast between 'utopian' and

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[5] Geogehan, p.7.

[6] Of course, many 'non-utopian' projects also have utopian aspects to them, though this is not usually recognised or acknowledged.

'scientific' (i.e. Marxist) socialism.[7] People described as utopians might accept the term and seek to redefine it positively: more often they would argue that they were not utopians, but that their beliefs were scientifically based and/or practically attainable. I use 'utopian politics' and related terms here to refer to ideas, movements and practices which sought to try out new kinds of social relations. Such experiments were part of what Ruth Levitas calls 'the education of desire ... for a better way of being and living'.[8] In this sense, utopian politics is about creating spaces that can be rehearsal rooms for change. Such spaces may be textual, spaces for the imagination; or physical, a making of literal spaces where social relations can be reconfigured.

As the twentieth century approached, the growing anarchist and socialist movements shared a widespread optimism about the future, reflected in the abundance of rhetoric about the coming New Age or New World, to be inhabited by New Women — and even perhaps New Men (though the latter term was less common). While the burgeoning of 'New Woman' fiction generated new literary spaces, this period also saw the flourishing of numerous attempts to create both rural and urban utopian communities, places where new ideas could be tried out in practice.[9] Amid fierce debates about the transformation of society, about the boundaries between public and private, personal and political, male and female worlds, some groups of men and women determined to live out their politics.

The four books which I will discuss here were all written by women who were directly involved in this milieu. I have chosen them not because they or their authors are particularly well known or influential, but as signs of the times, historical clues to the varied ways in which a particular kind of politics was lived through and represented. Thus although the main focus

[7] Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, was published in English in 1892 in a translation by Edward Aveling.

[8] Levitas, p.6-7.

[9] See Hardy, Coates, for examples.

of my analysis is on the processes of representation within the texts themselves, I also discuss aspects of the lived experiences of the authors.

I look first at three novels which fictionalise the authors' experiences in order to comment on the possibilities of personal and social change.[10] *A Girl Among the Anarchists*, by Isabel Meredith (pseudonym of sisters Helen and Olivia Rossetti), deals with the making of spaces for the practice of politics, the relationship between domestic and political space, and the ways in the latter denies or excludes issues of gender and sexuality. *Attainment*, by Edith Lees (writing under her married name of Mrs. Havelock Ellis), is about an unsuccessful attempt to merge the domestic and the political by setting up a co-operative household of men and women. In both these novels, the heroines are unable to develop themselves freely, and abandon the experiments. *The Image Breakers*, by Gertrude Dix, critiques conventional domesticity as well as various forms of utopianism, while dealing more centrally and explicitly with gender and sexual politics. Textually, at least, a new space is created for female desire. But as in the other novels, neither 'real' (that is, socially conventional) life nor utopia can provide this. The fourth book discussed is *Whiteway*, by Nellie Shaw, a non-fiction account by a member of a successful utopian community in which gender politics has played a central part.

A girl among the anarchists

A Girl Among the Anarchists, published in 1903, is based on the Rossetti sisters' involvement in the anarchist movement, in particular their experiences from 1891-6 as editors and publishers of a journal called the *Torch*. Although they were not directly involved in setting up a utopian community as such, the *Torch* and its offices provided textual and physical space for the development of a political community, out of which such experiments could develop.

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[10] A fourth novel, *The Prophet's Mantle*, is discussed in Appendix A.

When they began the paper, assisted by their fourteen-year-old brother Arthur, Helen was twelve, and Olivia sixteen. They were part of an actively political and artistic household, and their bohemian parents reluctantly tolerated their anarchist activities as something they would grow out of. Others took them more seriously — contributors included writers George Bernard Shaw and Ford Madox Ford, anarchist feminist Emma Goldman, and the artist Lucien Pissarro. Initially, the *Torch* was hand-produced in the study of the Rossetti home near Regent's Park in London. The paper was sold at outdoor political meetings, at railway stations, and in the street; as its circulation grew, necessitating the purchase of a printing press, Mrs. Rossetti insisted that production be moved to the basement, which became an anarchist meeting place as well as an office. As historian Barry Johnson comments, 'Consigned to a region of the house normally frequented only by servants, the young comrades were able to disport themselves in a way which would have been impossible upstairs.'[11]

After their mother died, their father insisted that the whole enterprise be cleared out of the house, and it was moved to rented premises; there ceased to be any significant overlap between the spaces of political and domestic life. Although they continued their involvement for another two years, they no longer wrote for it, and by the time the paper eventually collapsed in 1897, both sisters had already moved on to other things. [12]

In their early twenties when they wrote *A Girl among the Anarchists*, they represent their activities of less than a decade before as immature idealism. The book parallels the structure of many utopian novels, written in autobiographical style with a first-person narrator, the plot taking second place to detailed expositions of the physical characteristics and belief systems of an unfamiliar world. The reader is thus positioned as someone from the 'real' or non-utopian world.

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[11] Johnson, p.251.

[12] Garnett (1993); Garnett (1989).

As the novel opens, the narrator, eighteen-year-old Isabel, is conveniently orphaned. She begins to attend political meetings and is swept up in the pleasurable excitement of challenging convention. Becoming morally and intellectually committed to social change, she decides to abandon class prejudice and 'throw myself into the life and the work of the masses'.[13] Her way of doing this is to learn typesetting and printing so that she can join a group of anarchists in starting a journal, the *Tocsin*.

The space of anarchist practice is exoticised, described in language more reminiscent of travel writing or ethnography:

> To the ordinary citizen whose walk in life lies along the beaten track there is a suggestion of Bohemianism about the office of any literary or propagandist organ; but I doubt whether the most imaginative among them in their wildest moments have ever conceived any region so far removed from the conventions of civilised society, so arbitrary in its hours and customs, so cosmopolitan and so utterly irrational as the office of the *Tocsin*.

Its inhabitants include, as well as 'genuine Anarchists', a 'strange medley of ... tramps, désoeuvrés cranks, argumentative people with time on their hands, and ... downright lunatics. Foreigners of all tongues ... '[14] The office, as well as being a place for printing and publishing the paper, 'rapidly became a factory, a debating club, a school, a hospital, a madhouse, a soup kitchen and a sort of Rowton House, all in one'.[15]

This unboundaried world, this anarchic space of anarchism, i*s* constructed within the novel as simultaneously masculine and asexual. There are few other women characters, and Isabel carefully disassociates herself from them. One man tells her, 'You are not a woman: you are a Comrade', and this de-gendered persona allows her, for example, to sleep on the office floor beside the men after working late, without this having any sexual

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[13] Meredith, p. 56.

[14] Meredith, p.131.

[15] Meredith, p.133. Rowton Houses provided cheap lodgings for working men.

connotations.[16] The most politically dedicated of the men reject any kind of domesticity, seeing sexual or emotional relationships as a distraction from the Cause. When Isabel declares her love to one of them, he responds by telling her that 'An Anarchist's life is not his own. Friendship, comradeship may be helpful, but family ties are fatal ... I thought of you as a comrade and loved you as such'.[17] This rigidity of approach is presented as masculine adherence to abstract principle, and eventually Isabel can no longer accept it.

In her introduction to the 1992 reprint, Jennifer Shaddock says that at the end, Isabel 'is engulfed by the ubiquitous bourgeois metaphor of Home'.[18] But the conclusion is more ambiguous than that. In the final chapter, echoing the complaints against domesticity made by other rebellious middle-class women of the period, Isabel says,

> I had allowed myself to be strangely preoccupied and flustered by trifles. What were these important duties which had so absorbed me as to leave me no time for thought, for study, no time to live my own life?[19]

But for her it is not domestic duties, but political commitment that distracts her from the real business of living her own life. Her comrades have been shown to be either noble but deluded men who suppress all human instinct or all too human grotesques. Already suffering from a sense of political futility and depressed by tensions within the group, Isabel goes to the *Tocsin* office, only to find it occupied by the police. The forces of order have thrown it into a state of 'wild disorder', and the landlord gives them notice to quit.[20] Disillusioned with the possibilities for social change or personal happiness, she decides to leave the anarchist

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[16] Meredith, pp. 101, 114.

[17] Meredith, p.268.

[18] Shaddock, p.xv.

[19] Meredith, p.287. The phrase 'living my life' seems to have been current among radical women of the period trying to rethink what was possible for them; Emma Goldman chose it as the title for her autobiography.

[20] Meredith, p.295.

world she has helped create. Its physical and mental spaces have become uninhabitable. But Isabel does not go home. She says goodbye to her comrades and walks out into the London streets. If anarchist space is impossible space, so too is 'home'.

Attainment

The attempt to politically reconfigure 'home' is a central issue in *Attainment*, by Edith Lees, which is closely based on her involvement at the beginning of the 1890s in the utopian socialist Fellowship of the New Life. Calling in its constitution for personal as well as social transformation, the Fellowship's main aim was 'the cultivation of a perfect character'; its methods included simplicity of living and 'the introduction as far as possible of manual labour in conjunction with intellectual pursuits'.[21] The constitution was written in the early 1880s; by the end of that decade gender was playing a more important part in ideas about what personal and social transformation might involve.

Although characterised by their critics as idealists who set themselves the hopeless task of achieving personal perfection before social change could come about, Fellowship members and others involved in setting up experiments in community living saw themselves as the practical ones, involved in working out at a personal level what a new life could be like. For women in particular, such enterprises involved a rethinking of the relationship between domestic and political space, and the ways in which such spaces were gendered.

These issues were addressed directly in Edith Lees' life and writing. Lees became secretary of the Fellowship in 1890, and the following year she joined a few of its members in setting up Fellowship House, a co-operative boarding house in London's Bloomsbury, then a relatively cheap bohemian area. Its heterogeneous inhabitants included: Ellen Taylor, who was Lees' companion/servant; Agnes Henry, who irritated everyone by discussing

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[21] Briggs, p.64.

anarchism over breakfast (I will say more about her later); Sydney Olivier, then working at the colonial office; and future Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. It was an experiment in collective living that ran into familiar problems over money, housework, and personal incompatibilities.[22]

Years later, in a parody of William Morris's slogan, 'Fellowship is Life', Edith Lees would comment that 'Fellowship is Hell'.[23] After eighteen months, she left to embark on an unconventional marriage with Havelock Ellis, a founder member of the Fellowship of the New Life who had never been tempted by community living. Although she had rejected that particular experiment, Edith Lees was one of a small number of women at the time advocating 'semi-detached marriage', where the wife was economically independent and had separate living space if not a separate household.[24] Lees had passionate sexual relationships with women before and after her marriage, and although she and Ellis believed in sexual freedom, living up to their principles was to prove difficult for both partners, emotionally and financially.[25]

Attainment, published in 1909, centres on a humorous critique of Fellowship House. Twenty-two-year-old Rachel, the first-person narrator based on the author, leaves her Cornish village and travels to London with her maid Ann (based on Ellen Taylor) to learn about life and politics. After attending Christian socialist sermons and involving herself with social work, Rachel studies Marx at the British Museum, before rejecting dry political theory in favour of the idealistic approach of a group calling itself The Brotherhood of the Perfect Life. They decide to live, men and women

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[22] MacDonald, passim, Greenway (1993), pp.39-45.

[23] Tracy, Marguerite (1921): 'Introduction', in Mrs. Havelock Ellis, (1921): xv-xxxvii:p.xxx.

[24] Ellis (1921) 'Semi-Detached Marriage' in Ellis (1921): 23-31.

[25] Grosskurth; Havelock Ellis (1967).

together in comradely fashion, 'an ideal life under one roof with all the obligations of a family without any of its drawbacks'.[26]

Class and gender tensions emerge in the running of the household. Although they all praise the simple life and the delights of manual labour and, apart from Ann, disagree with having servants, the housekeeping and bookkeeping eventually fall to Rachel, while Ann's practical experience and common-sense approach mean that she ends up doing much of the housework. Meanwhile, the men discuss the 'boundless ... courage' they need to clean a doorstep. One says, 'I literally blush all down my back and look up and down the street as if I meditated burying my grandfather under the step.'[27] The problem is not just that the men are transgressing gender and class boundaries with this kind of work, they are doing so in public. Inside the house, the aesthetic heterogeneity of its arrangements and furnishings symbolises the political heterogeneity of its inhabitants. As Ann says, 'It's more like a theatre than a house!'[28] The use of humour positions Rachel, and through her the reader, as able to predict that the venture is doomed to fail.

After her mother dies, Rachel leaves the collective household, rejecting the merger of domestic and political space, and returns home to Cornwall before deciding to marry. 'I dare now,' she says, 'to live out what is real within me.'[29] A rule-bound way of life based on narrow idealism is implicitly suggested to be unnatural. Rachel comments that Brotherhood House

> was frankly mere experiment, and was so involved in spiritual speculations and the grammar of living ... that it rarely got to the marrow of me. [30]

[26] Ellis (1909) p.167.

[27] Ellis (1909) pp.226, 227.

[28] Ellis (1909) p.184.

[29] Ellis (1909) p.309.

[30] Ellis (1909) p.300.

For Edith Lees, as *Attainment* and her subsequent writings make clear, 'the real' meant the expression of 'natural womanliness', however contradictory this enterprise may have been in her own life.[31] Although the novel suggests that Rachel's marriage will be based on freedom, the implications of this are not discussed. Instead, Rachel and her lover are described as 'Nature's children, reading her simple fairy stories', before the book ends in a welter of metaphors.[32] Lees has shown the space of communal living as an impossible space and is unable to describe a new kind of relationship between men and women as anything other than a fairytale. Love between women is not even hinted at as a possibility.

The Image Breakers

The problem of achieving a liberated womanliness recurs in *The Image Breakers* by Gertrude Dix, published in 1900. Like Lees and the Rossettis, Dix had first-hand knowledge of the utopian politics of the day. She was active in labour politics in Bristol, and knew the Rossettis in their 'Torch' days, possibly while she was working as a governess to Sydney Olivier's children following his time at Fellowship House.[33] Her book, featuring a range of socialist and anarchist groups, relates a number of incidents and debates that closely parallel actual events. In the novels previously discussed, the characters move between spaces implicitly or explicitly characterised as utopian or non-utopian. The construction of *The Image Breakers* is more complex. The story centres on Lesley, a young socialist artist in search of economic and sexual independence. She is contrasted with an older woman, Rosemary, who sacrifices sexual and maternal fulfilment for revolutionary politics, only to be left isolated and entrapped by the futility of her own principles. Throughout the novel, 'the little home' is an image for women's domestic servitude, and various alternatives are discussed, from urban communities similar to Fellowship House, to rural utopias. Rosemary's unrealistic utopianism is contrasted with Lesley's

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[31] Ellis (1921).

[32] Ellis (1909) p.315.

[33] see Garnett (1989); Garnett (1993); Thompson.

more hard-headed approach. For instance, Rosemary predicts that her own experimental way of life will develop into a communal village of the future, with:

> The houses nestled cosily together in their gardens, sweet with flowers ... I can imagine the healthful day's work and the homecoming at night to supper in the wide halls with musicians ... *there* would be peace, security and harmony ...[34]

Lesley rejects such attempts to build little heavens on the edge of hell. Yes, she thinks: within, utopia; outside, the real, brutal world of industrial capitalism. Although Lesley turns her back on Rosemary's doomed idyll, she does not return to conventional life; instead she enters a sexual relationship with political pragmatist Jack, while refusing his desire to make her the little wife in the little house. It is in this context that the binary oppositions of real versus unreal, pragmatism versus utopianism begin to break down, with new metaphors and images suggesting a different sort of utopian space.

Lesley could take Jack 'a little way into her own fairyland' (her internal world of creativity and imagination). Jack could 'pilot her' into the real world of men and women, which has been rejected by the misguided Rosemary. But 'the more subjective region, the land of the "you and me", was as yet an undiscovered country'.[35] This is a place where gender and sexual relations are transformed, and it is Lesley who represents change and guides Jack towards this new world. Eventually, through painful struggle, they forge a new kind of free relationship — on her terms. Problematically, though, the key moments of resolution take place not in the 'real, ugly' world Lesley counterposes to Rosemary's dreams, but in an Arcadian countryside of such clichéd artifice as to seem itself a dream, thus casting doubt on the possibility of such a synthesis of ideals and realism.

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[34] Dix, p.39.

[35] Dix, p.102.

The *need* for women to free themselves from the confines of domestic space in order to attain psychological, sexual and social liberation is made clear, but *how* they might do this is not clearly addressed. This point applies to all these novels. While rejecting utopianism (as defined by the authors) as well as the restrictions of conventional life, they supply as alternatives only vague appeals to Nature, reality, maturity and womanliness. Yet given that the novels, especially *Attainment* and *A Girl among the Anarchists*, bear a close relation to the writers' own lives, what is striking is what is omitted.

Attainment, though commenting on the problems of the theory and practice of its characters around sexuality, leaves heterosexuality unchallenged. In Lees' life as well as in the novel, a utopian community is abandoned in favour of marriage. But nothing in the novel enables us to understand why, in her own life, Lees felt marriage to be her best option: whether it was in fact where she felt she could best live out 'what was real' in her. Nor is there any discussion of issues centrally important to her feminist politics, such as women's financial independence. The latter is discussed in *The Image Breakers*, where Lesley is unable to carry on her work as a commercial artist when she becomes for a time dependent on Jack; economic dependence is seen as inimical to psychological and creative freedom. (After her own marriage, it seems, Gertrude Dix stopped writing.)[36]

In the absence of direct evidence about these silences, any comment can only be speculative. It may be that these writers simply felt it was too transgressive to write positively about unorthodox sexual and marital arrangements. (It was to be several years after *Attainment* was published before Lees felt able to acknowledge her lesbianism publicly.) Dix is unusual amongst English women novelists of the period in giving not just a positive account of free love, but in showing that it could be initiated by and in the interests of women.

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[36] Garnett (1993) p. 139.

Unorthodox familial relationships are also sidestepped in various ways. In *A Girl Among the Anarchists*, Isabel is an orphan, and her siblings play almost no part in the story. The elimination of parents who might interfere with the action is a common strategy in children's adventure stories — and it also generates financial and emotional independence, particularly important for a female character. In the novel, then, the absence of familial relations makes the political journey possible, and the narrator's positioning in the uneasy space between childhood and adulthood makes it credible. In reality, family relationships and domestic space were a crucial foundation for the Rossetti children's political activities.

A Girl among the Anarchists also suggests that growing up and growing out of anarchism is necessary to achieve (hetero)sexual womanhood. In reality, while working on the *Torch*, Olivia Rossetti met and formed a liaison with an Italian anarchist, Antonio Agresti, whom she later married. Agresti already had a young daughter by another woman; his relationship with Olivia Rossetti was facilitated when Agnes Henry adopted this child.[37] These more complex stories and possibilities remain for the Rossetti sisters untold and untellable.

If Dix and the Rossettis found no place for women in utopia or utopian politics, Edith Lees spent the rest of her life in writing, public speaking, and experimenting with new ways to live. Agnes Henry remained involved all her life with experimental living, radical and feminist politics. Her struggles to do this while bringing up her adopted daughter make a fascinating, and as yet untold story.[38] But in *Attainment*, as well as in Edith Lees' private letters, Henry appears as a caricature, an unnatural if not unreal figure; we get no sense of the complexities and contradictions of an ongoing commitment to utopian politics.[39] *A Girl Among the Anarchists* similarly caricatures or erases the stories of women who made different choices from those of the authors.

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[37] See Johnson, and Henry correspondence. 1894-1911.

[38] See Henry correspondence 1894-1911 passim.

[39] Lees correspondence, Sept 25, Sept. 27, 1891.

Whiteway

Nellie Shaw's non-fiction book *Whiteway* makes an illuminating comparison with the novels. Published in 1935, it documents how as a young woman in 1898 she and a small group of friends founded Whiteway, a Tolstoyan anarchist community which they built from scratch on unpromising land in rural Gloucestershire, and dedicated to the simple life, practical communism, and sexual equality.[40] During the 1890s Shaw had been a member of the Fabians and the Independent Labour party as well as the Croydon Socialist Society. In search of 'something warmer, more vital, more appealing to the idealistic side of our natures than mere economics', she and some friends started the Croydon Brotherhood Church and associated co-operative businesses.[41] Seeing agriculture as 'the basis of all constructive work', some members of this circle then began a farming community in Purleigh in Sussex.[42] Soon after, feeling that the community was affected by class prejudice, and disagreeing with its anti-sex (and anti-woman) ideas, Nellie Shaw and a few others left to found Whiteway.

From the beginning, it was conceptualised as a space for women and men together, where their 'natural instincts' could develop. Conflicts over how this worked in practice played a major part in the restructuring of the physical space there, most strikingly a gradual retreat from shared living quarters into separate households, as the community grew and women rebelled against having to do housework for many men rather than just one. (It could be argued that it was the shift to more flexible and individualised living arrangements that made it possible for Whiteway to develop and expand, eventually becoming a small village with a wide variety of inhabitants and visitors from all over the world.)[43]

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[40] Shaw.

[41] Shaw, p.20.

[42] Shaw, p.31.

[43] Thanks to Helen Lowe for this suggestion.

Shaw recognises and describes with humour some of the inadequacies and impracticalities of the initial settlers, but commends compromise in a spirit of freedom, and gives a sense of an ongoing process of change and adaptation, rather than a checklist of successes or failures. As in the novels, humour is used to suggest a perspective of realism contrasted to impossible idealism, but in this case the implication is that successful utopianism constantly renegotiates what is possible. However, some of the humour also plays into mainstream notions of the impossibility of utopianism. For example, insofar as her descriptions of some of Whiteway's inhabitants and visitors draw, as the novels do, on familiar stereotypes of cranks, opportunists and poseurs, so these stereotypes distance us from the characters, and remind us of the associated narratives of impossibility and failure.

Nellie Shaw remained at Whiteway all her life. (The village, still in existence, celebrated its centenary in 1998.) Writing from within the community over thirty years after it was started, she argues that it is in danger of forgetting the spirit of the early pioneers. Thus the book functions as a history which is being used to critique a present degeneration from an Arcadian past. At the same time, though, the space of the past is imagined continuously with the space of the present, a temporal and geographical connection which can and should unite later settlers in a shared sense of community purpose.

So Shaw does not intend to distance herself from utopianism in the same way as the other writers discussed here. Nevertheless, she sometimes uses language and imagery which have that effect. For instance, the book includes a copy of a talk about Whiteway which she gave to a young women's group in Croydon in the summer of 1899, only a year after the first settlers arrived. She paints an Arcadian picture. On the hilltops, she tells them, six miles from the nearest railway and town,

> Whiteway is reached by a most picturesque road, ascending with many twists and curves between delightful valleys and well-wooded hills ...

She goes on to refer to 'lovely' views, 'charming' villages, and 'cosy' cottages, with a recurrence of the 'picturesque'.

> The cooking, washing and cleaning ... are done by Jeannie, Lucy and Nellie. Most of the meals are taken out of doors, under a tree by the roadside. The washing, too, is done out of doors, for these three believe in being indoors as little as possible ... Time not occupied in this way is spent on the land ... The women do exactly the same kind of work as the men, and do not find it too tiring.[44]

This romantic picture is tempered with a caution.

> Of course, there is another side to all this. Wet days, especially wet washing days, are very trying. Endeavouring to make old trousers into new knickerbockers, darning impossible socks, running out of some necessary item of food ... but worst of all ... finding in ourselves unexpected weak places, being impatient of other people's failings, forgetting our own ... But we must have patience and learn.[45]

Again we have the combined exploration and exposition of the utopian novel, but Shaw is also using the language and imagery of fairy tale and adventure story. Even while speaking from within a continuum of utopian time and space, she makes it seem distant, unreal, unrealisable.[46] Reading the passage from the perspective of modern feminisms, the inequalities in gender roles leap from the page.

Working out ways in which men and women could live and work together is a recurrent theme in all the texts discussed in this article. In *Attainment*, although it is the men who are discomfited by being publicly visible doing 'women's work', for women it is not work but sexuality which is problematic. Outsiders can only conceptualise Brotherhood House as immoral, sexualised space; the narrator's response is to suggest she can only develop her true sexuality somewhere else. The inhabitants of

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[44] Shaw, p.53-55.

[45] Shaw, p.58.

[46] See Appendix B for a development of this theme.

Whiteway also had to deal with the fantasies of outsiders. There was constant rumour and speculation, and when a local bus route passed nearby, passengers would crane their necks attempting to see what went on there. Rumours of nudity and sexual orgies brought journalists and sightseers as well as hopeful applicants to live there, all demanding to 'see the women' - who unsurprisingly tended to make themselves scarce on such occasions.[47]

On the other hand, as Nellie Shaw suggests, the Whiteway women were proud to be seen doing 'men's work', even though the converse does not seem to be true. Of course this asymmetry between male and female concerns is not specific to utopian communities, but relates to the different gender ideologies of the period, which a newly emergent feminism was only just beginning to challenge.

Yet in terms of contemporary attitudes and the possibilities then available for women, Whiteway was in both intention and practice a place where women could at least begin to take their desires for reality. For instance, from the outset many men and women rejected legal marriage as 'chattel slavery' for women, and formed 'free unions' instead, based, as Nellie Shaw says, on love, not law.[48] That this could be difficult in practice, and meant different things to different individuals, is clear; and some couples did choose conventional marriage. Whiteway is shown as a place which offers not a model of perfection, but opportunities to try out different ways of living within a supportive framework.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I asked: Whose desires? Whose reality? All the novels discussed here suggest that 'real women' do not belong in utopia. The writers distance themselves from their own pasts by strategically positioning themselves and the readers in the 'reality' of the

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[47] Shaw, p.61.

[48] Shaw, p.28.

present, explorers returned from a fantasy world which could not sustain them. They contrast utopian space structured in accordance with rigid masculine principles, with a real world in which their women protagonists can negotiate a place for the feminine qualities of passion and pragmatism.[49] Yet how this might work in practice is excluded from the imaginative space of the text. Nellie Shaw's *Whiteway* is a rare example of a woman writing of (and with) passion and pragmatism from within a utopian space, even though she too uses imagery, humour and narrative techniques that make it all too easy to keep utopia at an ever-receding distance.

But to end the argument at that point perhaps produces yet another anti-utopian narrative. To draw attention to and analyse the negative ways in which utopia is represented, as I have done here, can begin to challenge that negativity, and allow for a more complex response. A positive direction for future research would be to place the texts in fuller historical context, as part of ongoing debates about the relevance of utopianism. If we see the fictional works in particular in relation to contemporary utopian experiments, we can understand them as part of the experimental process. Going beyond endings (of books, of utopian communities), we can also trace continuities, of themes, of place, and of women who remained engaged all their lives with the project of social transformation. In these ways we create another kind of imaginative utopian space, where new connections can be made, and old impossibilities may become tomorrow's realities.

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[49] Of course, 'the real world' was also structured according to masculine principles, as feminists were increasingly pointing out.

Appendices

Appendix A: The Prophet's Mantle

By the early eighteen-eighties, the labels 'anarchist', 'nihilist', and 'communist' were just beginning to be widely used, and not always consistently. Boundaries between different political groups were relatively fluid. Socialist groups such as the Fabian Society, which would later come to stand for a bureaucratic and elitist form of parliamentary socialism, were in their early days meeting places for people from a wide spectrum of political viewpoints. Several of the writers discussed in this article had some involvement with the Fabian Society or its predecessor, the Fellowship of the New Life, founded in 1883.

One of the Fellowship's founders was journalist Hubert Bland, husband of the writer Edith Nesbit (later to become famous as children's author E.Nesbit). The Blands subsequently joined the breakaway group which became the Fabian Society. The Fabians saw themselves as pragmatists rather than utopians — a division that was to re-emerge in the Society itself.[50] However, there continued to be an overlap in membership between the Fellowship and the Fabians, and friendship circles reached wider still, as groups continued to divide and proliferate.

All the novels discussed above are set in the 1880s and 90s, but the earliest to be written was *The Prophet's Mantle*, co-written by Edith and Hubert Bland under the name Fabian Bland, and published in 1885.[51] The Blands belonged to what Edith described as the practical rather than the visionary element of the Fabian Society, and their novel is set in and based on their first-hand knowledge of the newly emergent anarchist and socialist movements.[52] The book has comic elements, with the humour aimed at parlour socialism and middle-class hypocrisy, at those who

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[50] See Briggs; MacKenzie

[51] All quotations in this article are from the 1889 edition.

[52] See Briggs.

profess ideals which they do not practise. For the most part, however, it is a complicated political thriller with a full complement of disguises, mistaken identities, unlikely coincidences and violent deaths, one of which sees the main heroine, Clare, left an orphan with an inheritance which she uses to further her literal and metaphorical journey towards revolutionary utopianism.

Clare begins her travels into the physical and mental spaces of utopian politics when she goes to a meeting at a working men's radical club in London's Soho, where she hears a speech by an exiled Russian Nihilist, a character based on the well known anarchist geographer Peter Kropotkin. He describes oppression in tsarist Russia, and his utopian vision of the future, 'a dream of a time', when workers will get the fruits of their labours, 'rulers would be no more ... when every man would do as he liked, and every man would like to do well'.[53] Clare then attends meetings with a group called Cleon (a thinly disguised Fabian Society, complete with broad caricatures of some of its members). Here she travels further on the road to revolutionary politics when she attends a lecture given to the group by another Russian, who stirs her emotions and convinces her with his arguments. With his guidance, she begins to educate herself politically with a programme of reading.

In a central passage, Clare and women like her are compared to Sleeping Beauty. For them 'the fairy prince's awakening kiss' can be a book, a speech, love, or suffering, which rouse them from the slumbers of received wisdom and conventional morality. For Clare, it is books: her spell is broken courtesy of the rather unlikely pair of fairy princes, Bakunin and Matthew Arnold.[54] A passage similarly reminiscent of a fairy tale, or perhaps *Alice in Wonderland* (first published in 1865), appears in another key scene, when the Nihilist tells Clare that despite the messages in his own youthful writings, she should aim for the practicable, not the visionary. Although this seems to have been the Blands' viewpoint, it is

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[53] Bland: p.65.

[54] Bland: p.276.

not their heroine's. She is shocked at his apparent betrayal of his principles: he 'now seemed to her like a dissolving view ... through the wrong end of a telescope. He lacked the definiteness of outline, the depth of tone, the intense reality' of the true revolutionary.[55] In both images, it is the non-utopian world which is seen as unreal, the elsewhere, the bewitched sleep, the dissolving view.

The secondary heroine, Alice, is a mill worker led by love into the same radical circles as Clare. Initially seduced and abandoned by an unscrupulous revolutionary preaching free love, Alice meets him again towards the end of the novel, in an outdoor setting described as a paradise, where he proposes to her. (As in *The Image Breakers* and *Attainment*, the countryside represents Nature, and is the place where human nature reaches its truest expression, heterosexual love, in the most purple prose.) After they marry, she goes with him to Russia — prepared, out of love, not principle, to 'follow him to the world's end, believing in him unquestioningly.'[56]

Although the sexual politics are relatively underdeveloped compared with the other novels discussed here, the theme of tensions around the theory and practice of free love must have had particular resonance for the authors — Edith was already pregnant when she married Hubert Bland, and was later to live in an uncomfortable ménage-à-trois with him and another of his lovers.[57]

For the utopian Clare, love has a place, but revolution comes first. She wants a man who will love her, but love Liberty more, one who will be at her side, not at her feet. At the novel's finale, she sets off with her lover for Russia, dedicating her life to a more dramatic political struggle than conventional class-ridden England can offer.[58] Even there, they do not

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[55] Bland: p.284..

[56] Bland: p.309.

[57] see Briggs.

[58] Bland, pp.277, 320.

expect to see change in their own lifetimes. 'Russia' is never actualised in the book; it is the absent place where true idealism is born, where true idealists must return. The narrative structure thus suggests that ultimately utopianism belongs somewhere else, not to the here-and-now of the English reader. And both Clare and Alice are sent 'to the world's end', implying that any transformation in gender relations will also happen elsewhere.

Appendix B: Whiteway and the Journalists.

Over the years, journalists also used the language of fairy tale and exploration to describe visits to Whiteway, reiterating the strange appearance of people and houses.

> Through avenues of beech and larch we drove to the roof of Gloucestershire, and then ... came suddenly upon bungalows and shacks, wonderfully variegated, and apparently dumped down haphazard over an area of 40 odd acres. It was like stumbling on a No-Man's-Land of civilisation.[59]

wrote one in the 'Daily Chronicle' in 1924, telling in anthropological detail how he encountered a 'picturesque young giant', and:

> another bearded, sandalled man of striking appearance. Books were upon the table, which was covered with a cloth of fine sacking ... in that centrally heated frugally furnished shack, its walls lined with bookshelves and adorned by handicraft ornaments ... [60]

The article inspired letters from numerous unsuitable people wanting to come and live in this slightly comical, and distant — yet fascinating and exotic — 'No-Man's-Land'.[61]

This style of journalism is parodied in an unpublished anonymous short story, written by a Whiteway resident in the late nineteen-twenties or early thirties.[62] 'Alice's Adventures On Whiteway Land' opens with Alice reading from a newspaper article:

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[59] As some of my students perceptively pointed out ,the metaphor of No-Man's-Land must have had a particularly powerful resonance so soon after the ending of the First World War.

[60] *Daily Chronicle*, November 11, 1924. Thanks to Joy Thacker for this reference.

[61] See Thacker, p. 103-5.

[62] Anon, [probably either Rhoda Desmond or Jim Hobson], (n.d.), [probably late 1920s or early 1930s]: 'Alice's Adventures On Whiteway Land', unpublished ms.: unpaginated. Thanks to Tessa Marin and Rae

> I have found the most thrilling, mysterious place in England ...
> where a strange and mysterious body of people ... have eschewed
> ... all contact with civilisation. Nudism and barter are among the
> strange rites practised ... Whiteway is surely a place of magic.[63]

Alice is then miraculously transported to this fairy village where she is told 'everything's possible'.[64] She investigates its geography, and meets characters who are comic versions of actual inhabitants. The Whiteway reader is invited to laugh simultaneously at the journalistic fantasies and at what is fantastic in the real place.

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[63] Anon [unpaginated].

[64] Anon [unpaginated].

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