The City in 16th and 17th Century English Utopias

Larry L. HANSON

Tokyo University

The period I have chosen produced an immense number of fictional and programmatic utopias many of which center on visions of the ideal city. Urban planning and the description of imaginary urban spaces can also be found in satiric fiction, imaginary voyages and picaresque novels of this period. In my opinion these genres also need to be considered in connection with utopian fiction since they share the common feature of presenting imaginary constructions which are implicitly or directly compared to an actual state of things, they are all concerned with the description of an other place 'over there' which is only made possible by the assumption of a postulated 'here', and the question of fictional distance, comparison of here and there, the intimate relation of utopia and satire, the literary techniques of floating or jumping viewpoint, etc. are much easier to analyze if we broaden the range of fictional works we consider to include what are normally classified as non-utopian works. All of these works rely on the tension between the two levels of reference ('here' and 'there') which have to be somehow incorporated in the text and then have to be used to guide the reader to an understanding of the status of the fiction. The primary advantage in the context of comparative studies for adopting this broad definition of 'utopian' discourse to include reference to satire and fantasy is that it makes possible a more constructive and meaningful comparison of say western and eastern traditions since it permits a more nuanced delineation of what is similar and what is different (especially in the case of a comparison with Chinese, Korean and Japanese literature since we cannot assume that the contours and topology of the concept of Utopia will necessarily fit the Western term).

I have therefore chosen three works which illustrate differing approaches to the description of imaginary cities; *Utopia* (1516) by Thomas More, *Mundus Alter et Idem* (1605) attributed to Joseph Hall, and *The Blazing World* (1666) by Margaret Cavendish. These works illustrate the three ways in which fictions describing imaginary countries act as mirrors to 'reality' (defined explicitly or implicitly in the fictional text as the intertextual 'here and now' of either the text or the implied reader). The mirroring function which exists inside the text between the 'here' and

the 'there' spaces can be seen to have three aspects; idealization, deformation and finally literary projection or doubling. Of course all three aspects are usually present and an infinite variety of mixtures and nuances is possible. Just as a mirror presents the illusion of depth in its flat surface so the work of fiction presents illusions of distance, reflection, and otherness which allow the writer to move his implied reader inside the illusory space. The imaginary topos which is thus created can be presented as a model or blueprint for reality, as a satiric distortion of reality or as a playful alternative or doubling.

In Thomas More's *Utopia* Hytholoday introduces the imaginary city of Amaurote describing the city as a model of harmony, geometric perfection, uniformity, rationality and technical planning. He explains that this geometric perfection (the city is a nearly perfect square divided into four equal sections) was made possible because the original blueprint for the city was laid down by one man—the King Utopos. Here *Utopia* echoes the actual urban programs commissioned by Renaissance rulers and despots such as the plans for Sforzinda (imagined by Filareti for Francesco Sforza) or the City of the Sun planned by Cosimo de Medici as well the actually realized urban programs for redevelopment of Ferrara or the construction of Palma la Nova and Portoferraio in which the real city was seen as the embodiment of a utopian dream.[1]

The uniformity and standardization which characterize such global urban planning are reflected in the fact that all cities are built to the same plan, being mirror copies of each other; Amaurote is chosen as capital for the extremely practical and yet suggestively symbolic feature of its centrality—centralization being another trait of such programmatic utopian discourse. Utopian architecture is described or rather catalogued and we are told that all buildings are three stories high, have flat roofs for use as terraces, are backed by communal gardens and so similar that the rows of houses resemble the teeth of a comb. The layout of roads and canals similarly stresses order, rationality and convenience while the place of technology and technical progress is emphasized in the description of automatic doors, sophisticated plumbing systems, the use of incombustible roofing, glass and automatic incubation.

The result of this rationalizing and standardizing urbanism is an extremely centralized, authoritarian and bureaucratic system which gives little place to individual freedom or happiness except in terms of overall patterning. The utopian space thus created reflects the perspective of the dominating, intellectual discourse of the all seeing eye (the panopticon in Foucault's Benthamite terminology). Such a position shares much in common with works such as Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (1532), Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528), Antonio de Guevara's *Reloj de los principes* (1529) or Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Governor* (1531). These works interestingly

grouped under the title of "miroirs des princes" (fürstenspiegeln) reveal the same correspondence between the concepts of ideal reflection (utopia as mirror), edification of the enlightened ruler and the reconstruction of reality on the basis of a centralizing, rationalizing authority. The utopia described by Hytholoday also shares many features with the authoritarian, centralized utopias which appear in Italian literature in this period—with the programmatic nightmares of Doni (in the dialogue between the fool and the scholar in *I mondi*, 1552), of Patrizi (in *La Citta Felice*, 1553), of Agostini (in *La Repubblica Imaginaria*, 1580) and of Campanella (in his *Civitas Solis* of 1602). The claustrophic (not to say uterine) aspect of these utopian spaces emphasises their hermetic separation from contamination or contact with the "outside" or non-utopian world and in general the exophobic regimentation of space and frontiers permits not only the spatial isolation of the "perfect society" but also cuts this off from historical development and change (fossilization is a concomitant to exclusion).

However, Hytholoday's presentation is not exhaustive of the narrative complexity of More's text which unlike its Italian successors (with the exception of Doni who provides an internal critical distance at certain points) includes criticism of the supposed ideal within the text. While the narrator of utopian society presents his description as a possible model or ideal mirror, the figure of More in the text is seen as taking a skeptical, distanced and ironic attitude to the imaginary city. First the credibility of the narrative itself is questioned, and secondly its applicability and practicality criticized. More uses the dialogue form to multiply viewpoints and emphasize the instrumentality of the utopian construct thus undermining it as a finality.

Throughout the work mirroring devices are used to multiply parallels and contrasts, rendering any global, unifying discourse inoperative. The reader is constantly sent back and forth between real cities and the utopian cities—thus London and Amaurote are constantly being compared and contrasted. While actual features of London topography are smuggled into the utopian landscape, the ideal city is distanced and idealized through the use of features taken from Plato's description of Atlantis in the *Critias* or from borrowings of the mythical representations of Imperial Rome. Moreover, the work makes constant reference to other cities, real and imagined to multiply the points of reference—thus Bruges and Antwerp are presented as backdrops to the general narrative and Hytholoday describes the colonial city of Castellum in South America as well as referring to a number of imaginary cities visited during his travels.

It is necessary to see *Utopia* in the context of Menippean satire. In general terms this has four typical characteristics. First the mixing of the serious and the ridiculous or ludicrous tone to create uncertainty and parody. Secondly, in contrast

to the novel little emphasis is given to psychological description or the delineation of character so that the center of focus is on the clash of ideas and concepts. Thirdly, the key narrative role is accorded to the figure of the detached observer, so that description is provided from an external, all surveying viewpoint. Fourthly, there is the presentation of a burlesque, topsy turvey world of exaggeration and deformation—the topos of the mundus inversus. It is therefore extremely dangerous to assume that the picture of Amaurote actually represents a blueprint of More's political ideals or that the utopian fiction is to be taken seriously in political terms. The work maintains an ironic distance akin to the tongue in cheek tone of the academic jeu d'esprit in which the serious and ludicrous are combined. The names of characters and places obviously point to the fictional nature of the exercise and emphasize the emptiness or lack of referentiality to any possible reality (thus the Greek etymology of Hytholoday's own name connotating both eloquence and lying points to the inherent narrative ambiguity, while the place names such as Amaurote, Alaopolis, Achorites, etc. all use the privative Greek prefix a—to indicate their negative, unreal status).

Unlike the majority of its European imitations in the vein of programmatic utopian fiction, More's work succeeds in constructing a polyphonic, self-parodying fiction which subtly combines all three of the mirror functions of utopian discourse which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. I would argue that this complexity is increasingly lacking from subsequent utopian fiction written in the two hundred years which follow the publication of *Utopia*. Utopias became increasingly one-dimensional and authoritarian so that the more interesting literature of imaginary cities belongs rather to the domains of satire and fantasy.

A prime example of the satiric use of the 'utopian' (i.e. non-existent, consciously unreal) urban setting is found in Joseph Hall's *Mundus Alter et Idem* (1605). The book is organized as a series of descriptions of the previously unknown lands of the Unexplored Southern Hemisphere made by the Menippean narrator Mercurius Brittanicus. Since More's utopian cities were based on principles of rationality and mathematical precision they conform to a uniform ideal plan—but since the cities of the *Mundus* are satiric distortions of the real world the only limitation on the variety and heterogeneity of the imagined cities lies in the limits of the author's imagination.

In this sense the book is very close in spirit to the surrealist travelogues of Henri Michaux (*Au pays de la Magie* (1941), *Voyage en Grande Garabagne* (1936) and *Ici, Poddema* (1946)) or Italo Calvino (*Le Citta invisibili* (1972)). Mercurius describes more than sixty cities each of which is individualized to a grotesque and ludicrous degree. The sites chosen for the imaginary cities vary widely to cover a range of bizarre possibilities so that we read of the underground city of Charbona,

of Mantecca the city built on a marsh, of Ucalegonium constructed on the peak of a rocky mountain (so that entry and exist is achieved via rope ladders let down from the city), and of Farfellia which is a city composed of buildings all on wheels so that the city can be moved from place to place. The building materials also vary widely from city to city so that in Desuergona residents live in buildings made of glass (in anticipation of Zamyatin's dystopian novel *We* written in 1920), while in Tarochium the city is made of wood so that it can be burned down if the people revolt against the rulers, Dunius is made of a magnetic substance which was chosen so that this port town would attract the nails and iron which hold together ships passing by and thus make it impossible to attack by sea, while the inflammable, oily substances used in building Antoia result in frequent explosions and the spontaneous combustion of whole quarters of the city. There are a myriad of shapes and forms employed to organize the urban spaces, with perfectly round and square cities on the typical utopian model being outdone by the five-sided city of Pampinola, the octagonally shaped Cubea and most spectacularly by the city of Pazzivilla which is "not round or oval, like other cities. Rather it is a cross between a cylinder and an inverted pyramid, plainly composed as a copy of the human body"[2].

As with More's work the names of cities have symbolic overtones, and in Hall's work they hint at the character of the inhabitants or the particular vice of human nature which is being satirized through the deforming description. The city of Abraxia has exactly 365 buildings because the inhabitants are all necromancers and cabalists who have calculated that the mystical value of the city's name is just this figure. In the case of the mobile city the name is constantly changing as a result of the capricious and fickle nature of the inhabitants. When Mercurius first enters it is called Farfellia and the city shield shows a tortoise carrying his shell with the motto "I carry everything with me", but by the time Mercurius leaves the name has changed to Papiliona and the shield now shows a butterfly fluttering above a field of flowers with the motto "Wherever I please". As can be seen from the above examples the urban descriptions are based on ludicrous individuation and particularization in total contrast to the norms of uniformity, centralizing rationalization and mathematical rigor which usually govern utopian fiction. Hall's work parodies and employs the lavish and exotic wealth of detail typifying many of the early ethnographically-minded travel books cataloguing the otherness of non-European civilizations. Like these, the work provides accounts of buildings, local customs, clothes and accessories, famous monuments, legal systems, coins, religious practices, ceremonies, furnishings, etc. to fill out the sense of an alternative urban and social reality.

In general Hall focuses most attention on the urban centers in the imaginary lands and paradoxically shows how these are ideally suited to the needs and

character of their residents. For example in the description of Artocreopolis the satire is an attack on greed and gluttony. According to legend this city was originally two separate cities named Artopolis and Creatium but the former grew so rapidly it gobbled up the second. The city is seen as having an organic, animal existence which moreover imitates the predominant passion of the men and women who make up its population. There is a similar correspondence between man and his urban environment evident in the shape of the buildings described as squat, low and broad without staircases or beams to obviate accidents (when drunk) and unnecessary effort for the predominantly obese residents. Since obesity is the prime virtue social rank is determined according to waist size. The urban layout reflects this system of values with gates being guarded to ensure that those who come in are well loaded with food supplies while those who leave are required to go out fat and full to maintain municipal honor. The city itself is surrounded by an oily, greasy moat, full of all variety of fish and water fowl, the walls of which are made of slaughtered cattle cemented with egg whites with conduits feeding into the city to provide a constant supply of food. The city and its dwellers form a symbiotic, organic unit(y) in which the needs of the population determine the details of urban space and the organization of the city shapes the character and lifestyle of the resident population in a mutually reinforcing reciprocity.

Oddly enough the dystopias of Hall's satire are ideal, perfect places for the inhabitants who are described as living in these—whereas the programmatic utopias of this period rarely take the details of concrete, individuated human life as the groundwork for urban, utopian principles. Programmatic utopias usually lay down universal, abstract principles which are then forced on mankind—individuals are coerced and controlled into conforming to the preestablished rationality. Hall's cities are dystopias for the reader but utopias for the fictional residents. Each city is a natural expression of the organic desires and values of its residents developing like a glove made to match the particular, individual shape of a living hand rather than say imposing a rigid, uniform ideal shape of metallic precision on the ill matching flesh and blood of human nature as happens with many of the mainline utopian fictions. In the anarchic, carnevalistic energy and confusion of the satiric space Hall presents an implicit criticism of reductive schemes for rationalization and standardization of the ideal space.

Moreover, there are explicit attacks on the limitations and absurdity of programmatic ideals. The technocratic senators of Pazzivilla are ridiculed for their utopian schemes for reforming the city which include plans for a system of aqueducts for bringing water from the valley up to the mountain city, for bringing the sea inland since ports are said to flourish, for constructing a vast bridge to link the city with the adjoining mountain peak, for rebuilding the city by erecting towers and

spires everywhere or for hermetically sealing it off from the outside world by a mountainous wall.[3] The unnatural and unnecessary technocratic reforming of the city point to the megalomania, xenophobia and authoritarian attitudes which underlie programmatic utopianism.

The two utopian works I have considered so far manifest the mirroring functions of idealization and deformation but I should like to turn finally to a work whose driving force is in the depiction of an escapist fantasy of alterity in which the main focus of the utopian framework seems to be the rewriting of the world of here and now not for the purpose of presenting a realizable or potentially better state of things nor for presenting a grotesquely distorted image of ourselves but in order to create an extension of the imaginable as pure activity, as an exploration of the creative process of imagining beyond what is given for its own sake.

The best example of this ludic, self consciously artificial use of utopian space in English literature during the two hundred years I am considering seems to me to be found in two works of Margaret Cavendish; in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* (1656) and *The Blazing World* (1666).

In both books the baroque fantasy creates a theatrical labyrinth of self-conscious spectacle in which alterity is imagined for its power to amuse and delight. While the overall plot structure of *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* is allegorical, the extravagance and superfluity of sensuous detail obscures the abstract skeleton supposed for organizing the picaresque adventures. The fairy story plot of Travellia's relations with the Prince of the Kingdom of Riches seems little more than a convenient operatic convention for journey through the colourful wonderlands of otherness. The imaginary cities which Travellia visits in the Australian hemisphere are as multifarious as those imagined by Hall but their main aim is to excite wonder and pleasure through their visual beauty and imaginary flamboyance. One city built on the banks of a huge river consists of houses made of exquisitely carved fishbones and roofed with iridescent fish scales laid like tiles which "glittered so in the sun, as they looked some ways like silver, other ways like rainbows, in all manner of colours."[4] Cavendish goes on to describe a number of other cities delighting in the maximum differentiation of appearance and form in response to a pure childlike delight in inventing alternative worlds; the city which looks like a forest housing the residents in the hollowed trunks of the trees, the crystal city with its buildings of classical elegance dominated by the flaming Palace of the King composed of triangles and spires housing jewelled statues and porcelain fountains etc. The magical atmosphere is a product of the lavish descriptions which emphasise the aesthetic and sensuous qualities of the urban spaces; smells, colours, textures, design, visual motifs, forms are woven into a verbal tapestry of surreal intensity.

Cavendish's works look forward to the fantasy worlds of Nineteenth century

children's literature and the continuity with the picaresque dreamlands of Charles Kingsley, Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald is striking. The fantasy framework of *The Blazing World* makes this very different from the programmatic or satiric utopias, and the self-reflexive, meta-fictional playfulness of the text is stressed by Cavendish in her prefatory remarks to the reader where we are told, "fictions are an issue for man's fancy, framed in his own mind, according as he pleases, without regard, whether the thing he fancies, be really existent without his mind."[5]

The heroine of the story is abducted and carried by sea to the North Pole where everyone else on the ship dies. The Lady is saved by a strange semihuman species of bear who actually belong to another world (or parallel dimension since we are told that "···the Poles of the other world, joining to the Poles of this···if anyone arrives to either of these Poles, he is either forced to return, or to enter into antoher world"[6]). The bears take her to an underground city. From here the heroine is transported from one subterranean island to another as she approaches the Emperor's City where she is eventually made Empress. This parallel universe is full of bizarre semihuman creatures who may have given Restif de la Bretonne the idea for his famous utopian fantasy *La Decouverte Australe par un homme volant ou le Dedale Francaise* (1781).

The fantasy world of Cavendish is constructed on the medieval principles of plenitude and maximization as defined by C. S. Lewis.[7] Like many utopias the Imperial City is isolated and hidden away from the outside but in Cavendish's description this is partly a theatrical device, rather like a stage curtain, to hide the magnificence of the scene and thus increase the admiration of the spectator dazzled by the panorama of architectural splendour suddenly revealed. Thus the approach to the city is obscured, "···the Lady at first could perceive nothing but high rocks, which seemed to touch the skies···but at last drawing nearer, she perceived a cleft which was a part of those rocks out of which she spied coming forth a great number of boats, which afar off showed like a company of ants"[8]. The architecture of the city stresses grandeur and magnificence and is characterised by a lavish use of precious stones and materials and a Pompeian gigantism; "she came to the imperial city···which appeared in form like several islands···the bridges, whereof there was a great number were all paved, the city itself was built of gold, and their architectures were noble, stately and magnificent, not like our modern but like those in the Roman's time; for our modern buildings are like those which children use to make of cards, one storey above another fitter for birds, than men."[9]

Despite the emphasis on visual splendour and beauty, values of practicality and rationality are also stressed since the Lady is told that the buildings are all less than two storeys in order to make them less "subject either to the heat of the sun, to wind, tempest, decay, etc." and when she asks why the walls of buildings are so

thick she is told "the thicker the walls were, the warmer they were in winter and cooler in summer" and it is explained that "arches and pillars, did not only grace a building very much, and caused it to appear magnificent, but made it also firm and lasting." The world which the heroine visits has much in common with the scientific utopias of Campanella, Bacon or Samuel Gott—there are special scientific communities engaged in constant experimental research, a level of technology far in advance of contemporary Europe has been achieved and elaborate machinery and devices are mentioned, the progress of medicine has resulted in the disappearance of disease, the multifarious humanoids which inhabit the Blazing World all speak one universal language and there is one universal state and deistic religion and war and need have been eradicated.

However despite aspects of idealization which are common to the programmatic utopias the overall impression of the work is much closer to science fiction or fantasy. The creation of the alternative world is a conscious exercise in ludic fictionalizing and Cavendish herself who is brought into the work to act as secretary to record the story of the Empress conveyed to her by spectral messengers is told that the powers of the imagination are unlimited for "every human creature can create an immaterial world fully inhabited by immaterial creatures···and all this within the compass of the head or scull(sic), nay, not only so, but he may create a world of what fashion and government he will, and give the creatures thereof such motions, figures, forms, colours, perceptions, etc. as he pleases". The plurality of imaginable worlds, the meta-fictional reflexivity and mise en abime with the story of the story inserted in the fiction distinguish Cavendish's work from any kind of prescriptive unidimensionality.

At the beginning of my paper I tried to isolate and define three distinct aspects of fictions constructing imaginary otherworlds which are implicitly or explicitly contrasted with an internally defined here and now acting as point of reference. I have argued that the categories of idealization, deformation and ludic duplication can be seen in relatively clear form in the three authors chosen but it is obvious that utopia, satire and fantasy are only convenient terms for overall tendencies which inevitably imply and reciprocate each other. I believe that the question of the comparison of the particular strategies and techniques adapted in different cultural traditions for utopian representation can be addressed more productively if it is based on an analysis which distinguishes these aspects in order to show the differing configurations and applications in particular works of fiction.

Notes

1. For fuller treatment of these Renaissance urban programs see;

i. *Les utopies de la renaissance*, Presses Universitaires de France (1961) esp. pp. 11–37 and 211–230.

ii. *Voyages en Utopie*, Georges Jean, Gallimard (1994), pp. 48–50.

2. *Another World and Yet the Same*, Edited and translated by J. M. Wands (New Haven, 1981), p. 89.
3. Ibid, pl 88–89.
4. Margaret Cavendish *The Blazing World and Other Writings*, Ed. Kate Lilley, Penguin Classics, 1992, p. 64.
5. Op. cit. p. 123.
6. Op. cit. 126.
7. The principle of plenitude is discussed in *The Discarded Image*. In his own fantasies Lewis is very close to the mannerist, semi-allegorical and sensuous style which Cavendish also develops—there are abundant similarities in fictional and descriptive techniques with Lewis's science fiction trilogy—*Out of the Silent Planet (1938), Perelandra (1943)* and *That Hideous Strength (1943)* as well as with the Narnia Chronicles.
8. Op. cit. p. 130.
9. Op. cit. p. 131.