



## A Map of the World Without Utopia

### Looking Backward

by Edward Bellamy

New York: Signet Classics, 2000

(originally published in 1888 as *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*)

222 pp., paper, \$5.95

### The Telling

by Ursula LeGuin

New York: Harcourt, 2000

264 pp., Cloth, \$24.00

### A Skeptic's Utopian Gazetteer

A sampling of classic plot devices, hoary notions, and unsustainable assumptions in utopia novels. If you would like to add to this list, please be in touch with *Frigate*.

### Time Travel by Hypnosis

*The Diothas* by Ismar Thiusen 1883

*Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy, 1888

*Thiusen, whose real name was John Macnie, accused Bellamy of plagiarizing his work.*

*The Case of the Fox* by William Stanley, 1903

### You Haven't Come All That Far, Baby!

*Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy  
*Edith of 2000 spends her days shopping and her nights nurturing.*

*Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach, 1970.  
*Although a woman is head of state, the hospital is a place where shapely nurses cheerfully provide conjugal therapy for male patients.*

### How DO these idealists support themselves?

### [Jan Alexander](#)

Let us look backward for a moment upon the dawn of the Gilded Age and imagine the murmuring of genteel voices at a dinner party on Boston's Beacon Hill. "The labor problem" was an issue the guests might very well have been discussing, as a fictitious but very much of-his-time young man named Julian West did on the evening of May 30, 1887. Those exasperating tradesmen had gone on strike in the midst of building a new house for Julian and his fiancée, the fair Edith Bartlett. In fact, the working classes all over the world seemed to be going crazy all at once, Edith's mum pointed out that evening.

But Julian, the hero of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, one of the best selling utopian novels of all time, lives to see an age in which the enlightened class itself comes to the conclusion that social Darwinism produces a society unsafe and unsavory for everyone. This leads to a top-down revolution. This age is none other than the very moment we're living in, the autumn of 2000, and appropriately, the book was reissued this year. Frozen in time by mesmerization, his vital functions in a state of total arrest for 113 years, Julian awakes to find a Boston — indeed, an entire world — where everyone has an equal income and an equal chance at education. "Is a man satisfied, merely because he is perfumed himself, to mingle with a malodorous crowd?" asks the man who has aroused Julian, the wise Dr. Leete.

Bellamy's utopia was an urban one, with Boston of 2000 a shining example of what city planners can do if their goal is to create an idyllic living space for every citizen. He writes of large open squares everywhere, filled with trees, with statues glistening and fountains flashing in the late-afternoon sun, a city where "public buildings of a colossal size and architecture grandeur unparalleled in my day raised their stately piles on every side." Bellamy saw only avarice and inequality in the Victorian mansions that, in reality, make Boston of 2000 look like a private utopia for descendants of Julian West's circle and for dot.com millionaires.



As it happened, while rushing through Boston's Logan Airport I saw a recent issue of *Forbes* magazine, strategically displayed, with a headline proclaiming "Everyone Should Be Rich." What a rude jolt of reality! I can't imagine that anywhere, in the real year 2000, anyone is even thinking of producing a magazine with the kind of cover story Bellamy would have liked to see, along the line of: "Everyone should be emotionally, intellectually and

*News from Nowhere* by William Morris, 1890. Left to be masters of their own free will, people work just because they want to.

*Freeland: a Social Anticipation* by Dr. Theodor Hertzka, 1891 (first edition in German in 1889).

*The departments of justice, police, military, and finance cost nothing, but taxes flood in spontaneously from appreciative citizens.*

creatively fulfilled without having to worry about money as a motivating factor." Instead, at a time when everyone should be rich because it's so hard to get by if you aren't, a canon of dystopic novels has replaced the utopian literary tradition that was originally articulated in Plato's *The Republic*, ordained by Sir Thomas More and emulated widely from the late nineteenth century right up to that quaintly idealist era of the early 1970s.

*Dystopia* is not exactly the opposite of *utopia*. It could be the realization of it, as in the two most prescient dystopic satires to date, *Animal Farm*, in which the shrewdest of the oppressed became the oppressors, and *Brave New World*, which showed us how genetic engineering might someday render us all precisely suited for our station on the socio-economic scale. "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at," is the inscription on the title page of an exhaustive survey of utopian novels by the American writer, critic, and editor Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias*, first published in 1922. However, history since then has done nothing if not shown that a society aspiring to be utopia is a dangerous place.

With reality in mind, I'd surmise that the very conventions of the utopian novel have been partly responsible for its demise as a narrative form. *Looking Backward* was above all a novel that embodied the model of utopia as "nowhere," the literal Greek meaning of the word, and therefore a place where the author can let his vision run amok without working out all possible consequences. In Dr. Leete, the novel had a guardian of the republic, as outlined by Plato, as well as a tour guide to Julian's visitor in paradise, a role that harks back to Raphael Hythloday in More's original utopia. If the guardian and the guest weren't enough of a clue that Bellamy was writing with his tongue in his cheek even while harboring a very real wish to wake up both the complacent class and the anarchists of his era, he threw in a pinch of medieval fairy tale (this was pre-Hollywood, after all), in the person of Dr. Leete's beautiful young daughter, named Edith just like the fiancée of Julian's previous life. We can forgive Bellamy's failure to predict names like Brittany or Courtney, but overall he gets only a passing grade as a futurist. While he did come up with a lively forecast of concert broadcasts, credit cards, and even Internet shopping, his cusp-of-the-twenty-first-century characters spoke like Victorians, and he managed to evade the subject of transportation technology by keeping all of their activities within walking distance.

By comparison, the presence of a horse-drawn carriage in the twenty-first century makes for an appealing but completely out-of-date arcadian utopia in William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (i.e., utopia), one of fifty-some-odd utopian novels that appeared in the US and Europe in the decade after *Looking Backward*. These utopias were either heavily inspired by Bellamy's ideas or, as was the case with Morris, reacting to his emphasis on cities and sordid utilitarianism.

All of these novels depend on the notion that a benevolent environment can obliterate the very notion of original sin. It's a completely theoretical idea, one that is futile to debate *ad nauseum*; if real-life experiments in utopia are any indication, Freud's resigned pronouncement of humankind's irreducible irrationality has won out. Bellamy and his followers were moralists, heavily influential ("Bellamy Clubs" sprang up across the US after *Looking Backward* appeared) even as modernist thinkers of the same period were splaying out the guts of what was conventionally termed "morality." Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* first appeared in the 1880s, and André Gide's *The Immoralist* came out shortly after the turn of the century. But while examining the bankruptcy of morality was strictly an elitist pursuit, Utopian fare was an escape into a "no place" where it was easy to see what you had to do to be good. It certainly didn't hurt that utopian goodness produced happiness in this life, unlike in the Biblical version, where good people enjoyed paradise after death.

A fictitious utopia, however, is just as unreal as heaven, and dire consequences result when it's taken too literally. Consider Dr. Leete's explanation of how the utopian economic system came to be:

Early in the last century the evolution was completed by the final consolidation of the entire capital of the nation. The industry and commerce of the country, ceasing to be conducted by a set of irresponsible corporations and syndicates of private persons at their caprice and for their profit, were entrusted to a single syndicate representing the people, to be conducted in the common interest for the common profit. (54)

Later he tells Julian that "the nation guarantees the nurture, education, and comfortable maintenance of every citizen from the cradle to the grave." (74)

This is Dr. Leete lecturing to his frozen-in-time protégé. We see few of the concepts he discusses in action; indeed, the society has no need or wish to grow, and the ideals at its foundation are as fixed as the stasis that preserved Julian in his long sleep. Can we trust that this happy state of affairs is as the good doctor describes it? Certainly not when we look backward now, knowing what was really going on in the countries where a single state industrial complex representing the people boasted of the ability to care for citizens cradle to grave. The non-fiction accounts of Maoist China as a utopia, written by real-life visitors ranging from Shirley MacLaine to China scholars, turned out to be the most fictitious stories of all. Sir Isaiah Berlin wrote in "The Pursuit of the Ideal" that a utopian solution is dangerous because,

...if one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious forever — what could be too high a price to pay for that to make such an omelet, there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken.

Except that it turns out that in reality the leaders devour the omelet and leave nothing but cracked shells for the hungry masses. Dystopia reigns. And what a bright new day seems to be around the corner when private enterprise returns! After a system in which government position and the exchange of favors are the only means of procuring a comfortable home and enough to eat, capitalism arrives with the promise that anyone can get the goodies merely by handing over cold hard, anonymous cash. At least that's the pattern we've seen.

One prominent exception to the utopian novel as a provocative but static treatise is Aldous Huxley's *Island*, not nearly as well known as *Brave New World* but even more on-target in its predictions, and the novel that best illustrates the impossibility of throwing a bunch of people together in the Garden of Eden and coming up with harmony. When the collective goal is, say, a society completely freed of inhibitions, who gets to issue the pronouncement of what "uninhibited" actually means?

*Island* belongs to a tradition of psychological utopias that became popular literature in the mid-twentieth century, inspired of course by psychoanalysis as a science. The utopias in this tradition hold that a society of neurosis-free individuals could collectively turn a whole system around. This psychological approach itself more-or-less turned around Bellamy's predictive order, since he postulated that economic and political reform would result in a society so conducive to personal fulfillment that its citizens would be happier, healthier, and even better-looking than people of the 1880s.

One way Bellamy's system looked out for people and brought out

their best, too, was to give women gainful employment (though the Edith of 2000 seems to have no occupation other than shopping and falling in love). In Bellamy's Victorian sensibilities, women were self-supporting yet still guardians of morality; they chose husbands based not on material assets, but on "beauty, wit, eloquence, kindness, generosity, geniality, courage." Ugly and boorish people were bred out of the race. (Apparently some aspects of social Darwinism were more equal than others.) But the best known of the psychological utopias, B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, was an anti-political action treatise, expounding behavioral engineering as a better solution.

And then came Huxley's *Island*, which is hard to read today without thinking of the way the global economy has brought the wondrous freedom of the open road — in the form of motorcycles — to Bali and other once-idyllic places. Yet Bali never embraced the kind of sexual freedom allegedly practiced by the Trobrianders of the South Pacific, made famous in Wilhelm Reich's 1932 essay *The Imposition of Sexual Morality*. But imagine what might happen if the Trobrianders had worshipped Reich instead of the other way around! There you have the basic premise for Huxley's twist on the plot line of traveler washed ashore amidst a civilization far better than his own.

This traveler, Will Farnaby, is an uptight Englishman, victim of unsatisfying relationships with both his madonna wife and his whorish mistress. The pantheon of sages on the island — Pala — upon which Will has washed up most assuredly includes Reich and Freud, albeit with some skepticism about the man with the cigar. And while Will has capitalist motives that a Reichian might attribute to having grown up in a sexually repressed patriarchal world, he happily plunges into the habits of a culture that keeps the polymorphous perversity of infancy intact. Besides being a place where people keep hopping in and out of each other's beds, Pala is a society of grown men who aren't afraid to cry and children who trot off to check out another nuclear family when their parents mess with their heads.

But Pala has snakes, as Eden must, and counter-revolutionaries in its midst. Paradise is doomed because a puritanical and materialistic youth named Murugan is about to inherit the throne. His top priority: "get this place modernized." There's a small matter of oil and a pack of multinationals circling for prey. What's more, Murugan possesses contraband reading matter: a motorcycle catalog. The story ends with his accession, and one can only guess that on Pala, as in many developing nations, the wish to catch up with wealthy societies and acquire the material trappings does have an impact; it makes individuals less interested in the general good of the community, sometimes even the extended family, and more preoccupied with making money.



Into a climate ripe for insights into how far a reign of materialism can go steps Ursula LeGuin with her latest novel, *The Telling*. Written with China in mind, *The Telling* is the fourth in her cycle of tales of distant planets visited by the Hainish, intergalactic colonizers whose deeds are monitored by emissaries of peace and enlightenment called the Ekumen. Science fiction has practically cornered the market on dystopian literature, partly because our fear of the power of technology is at the core of many of the greatest horrors we can imagine. Yet even before H.G. Wells started exploring the potential for paradise on distant planets, utopia by its very name has always been a place of science fiction, usually reached in the nineteenth century by time travel, while in More's age a traveler might still have imagined sailing to uncharted islands on earth. Dystopia is easier to find right here where we live, with dysfunctional families, alienated souls and a poverty of dreams and values, but a novel dealing with these problems in our own time is likely to be labeled *realism*. We go to other planets to see

ourselves in a magnifying mirror. Indeed, LeGuin may be a favorite of literary audiences precisely because her characters seem to live pretty much the same way earthlings of 2000 do, ruled by human irrationality rather than by fancy gadgets and gizmos.

LeGuin's 1969 classic *The Left Hand of Darkness*, appropriately for its time, described a planet where the Hainish experimented with breaking down the gender gap by fashioning one sex. The inhabitants knew nothing of oedipal hang-ups and rape, plus everyone was equally burdened and equally privileged, no one "quite so free as a free male anywhere else." The result, a society that operated without sex urges except at the time of a monthly estrus, was a frigid planet known as Winter, where pettiness and power struggles were everyone's preoccupation. LeGuin is an heir apparent to Huxley. She also senses the power of misinterpretation--or interpretation of one person's deeds by another — to seep into any human experiment and destabilize its chemistry.

In her new novel, LeGuin's Ekumen observer, an earthling named Sutti, travels to a dystopic planet called Aka, ruled by a monolithic Corporation of Dovza that has raped most of the resources, including human initiative, and made consumers into heroes.

From a great consensual social pattern within which each individual sought physical and spiritual satisfaction, they had made it a great hierarchy in which each individual served the indefinite growth of the society's material wealth and complexity. From an active homeostatic balance they had turned it into an active forward-thrusting imbalance. The difference was between somebody sitting thinking after a good meal and somebody running furiously to catch the bus. (119)

On Aka the economy is based on endless growth and the people obey. They obsess about diets and fortune-telling while they rush about madly, fueled by a foul and addictive beverage called *akakafi*, which the Corporation makes under the brand name *Starbrew*. Sutti wonders further: "How was it that everybody in the world was willing to move in the same direction, talk the same language, believe the same things? Fear of being evil, or fear of being different?" (67) Yet the Akans are not wholly different from Bellamy's Bostonians of *Looking Backward*: in both novels, there is a universal consensus of belief. In the earlier book no one can imagine the existence of dissent, while in the dystopia of *The Telling* the rulers fear dissent and therefore manage to keep the people too ignorant to understand what is happening to them. They can no longer read their own classic ideograms, which have been banned, and therefore they're ignorant of history. Therein may lie the most important difference between utopia and dystopia: ostensibly one thrives on universal enlightenment, the other on dogmatic rules. The trouble with enlightenment, at least from the perspective of a head of state in utopia, is that by definition an enlightened society requires constant probing and examining. Utopia is supposed to be a place where fear is unknown, yet all that questioning is bound to cause fear, as some folks in the society, quite possibly those in power, turn out under close scrutiny to have flaws.

Yet in dystopia, where the rulers and the ruled each live in perpetual fear of the other's wrath, there is always room for a savior, and always hope for a bright new day. Sutti is that savior on Aka, where she treks over ice-covered mountains to find a cache of ancient books that reveal the planet's history. Now if only technology could keep the world fixed forever in a shining victorious moment! Otherwise imagine what might happen on such a planet as Aka if good triumphed over evil and it became a desirable place for those seeking self-contemplation. Artsy types and cultural scholars would start flying in from remote corners of the galaxy; then, as the planet became known as a place where the

galleries were hip and you could get a good cup of espresso, property values would hit the stratosphere, and a large segment of the population, left out of the booming economy, would start getting riled. A utopia can exist only in a world in which time doesn't march forward; otherwise utopia/dystopia turns out to be cyclical, like a stock market of quests and yearnings.

As in the stock market, this literary convention is full of precise and quantifiable measures of value. I suspect that's another reason we've grown to trust the dystopian side of the coin more than the other; it's so clear in retrospect that many self-righteous guardians of the faith turned out to be oh-so-wrong in practice.

In *The Telling*, while it's clear who the good guys and bad guys are, LeGuin treads on risky new ground for the utopia/dystopia genre. She has borrowed a little from *Rashomon* to explore the way two opposing points of view might describe one state of existence. Highly telling is Sutti's name. She is from India originally, and a namesake variation of Sati, the god Shiva's wife who died when her husband was shamed, thus giving rise to one of earth's most heinous crimes against women, *suttee*, the burning of wives on their husbands' funeral pyres. But as her great-uncle told her long ago: "Sati is Shiva, and Shiva is Sati. You are the lover and the griever. You are the anger. You are the dance." (228) She decided it was okay to be Suti if she could be Shiva too.

And here is how the Monitor, a man who's been spying on Sutti for the Corporation, describes the coming of the Corporation State from earth, and the resistance of the traditional guardian caste known as maz:

Your people came here and they brought a new world, a promise of our own world made greater, made better....The maz mumbling forever about things that happened ten thousand years ago, claiming they knew everything about everything, refusing to learn anything new, keeping people poor, holding us back. They were wrong. They were selfish....They had to be pushed aside, to make way for the future. (231)

We're not exactly asked here to weigh the serpent's opinion of Eden; the contest quickly reverts back to a battle of dogma versus reason, as is archetypically the case in the utopia canon. Even a tenuous cross-pollination of good and evil is an evolutionary step in a nearly five-hundred-year-old tradition, and probably in keeping with a postmodernist age of cynicism. Yet do we really want anyone to tamper with our last remaining adult fairy tale?

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#### DRAWN ON FOR THIS ESSAY

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Morris, William. *News From Nowhere*, first published 1890, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.

Mumford, Lewis. *The Story of Utopias*, first published 1922.

Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1950.

Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*, first published 1945. Signet Classic, 1996.

Plato. *The Republic*. Desmond Lee, translator. Penguin Classics. Paper, \$8.95

Skinner, B.F.; *Walden Two*, MacMillan, 1948.

#### WEB SITES OF INTEREST

[Edward Bellamy and \*Looking Backward\*](#)

["Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World,"](#) at the New York Public Library through January 27, 2001. Extensive suggested-reading list including primary and secondary sources.

[Thomas More's \*Utopia\*](#)

[George Orwell Links](#)

[Utopian Philosophy by Jon Will](#) Huge site index.

[Plato's \*The Republic\* Online](#)

["Convention and Change" — a utopia course syllabus](#)

[B.F. Skinner Homepage](#)

[Feminist Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Utopia Web Site](#)

[Web Site Devoted to Ursula LeGuin](#)

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