

*The Literary Utopias of Cultural Communities, 1790-1910.* Eds. Margu rite Corporaal and Evert Jan van Leeuwen.

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# The Literary Utopias of Cultural Communities, 1790-1910. *Eds. Marguérite Corporaal and Evert Jan van Leeuwen.*

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## REFERENCES

Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010. Pp. 278. ISBN: 978-90-420-2999-6 (hbk).

- 1 “Utopia,” from the combination of the Greek diminutive plural of *topos*, that is “place,” and the pun between the two prefixes *ou*, “non-,” and *eu*, “good,” is a term that is not-so-often used in the twenty-first century. It rather reminds us of bygone centuries, when scientists, philosophers, publishers or writers had time to dream and discuss of possible societies, and were not forced to face the disillusionments of a post-modern and a post-industrial society in which scholars are more and more required to produce useful knowledge, a paraphrase to indicate the kind of knowledge applicable to obtain monetary outcomes. Marguérite Corporaal and Evert Jan Van Leeuwen’s volume seems to testify the obsolescence of such a term, since the different authors’ contributions cover a period that starts in the 1790s and ends in the beginning of the twentieth century, as to indicate that utopian visions are not likely in a world devastated by two world wars and 9/11. That is indeed the opinion expressed by Peter van de Kamp in the “Afterward”; quoting from John Gray’s *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (2008), van de Kamp concludes that “any utopian belief in progress hinges on millenarianism, with its misplaced trust in a kathartic [*sic*] apocalypse and its subsequent new dawn” (260), bringing the volume to a discouraging close that is not in tune with the previous essays, a conclusion that makes the reader reflect whether our society can really go beyond

positions of ideological delusion. The final contribution does seem abrupt, since the volume —fourteen articles and a foreword which are the result of a conference held in Leiden in 2006— evokes in positive or at least neutral terms many utopian thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Henry David Thoreau or William Morris.

- 2 Covering more than one hundred years, the long nineteenth century, the volume crosses continents, addressing utopian thinking in Great Britain and in the United States, showing the deep intellectual relation and exchange between the two countries. It even reaches the Far East, illustrating in Debasish Chattopadhyay's "Nonsense Club and Monday Club: The Cultural Utopias of Sukumar Ray" the application of utopian reasoning in India at the turn of the century, or in Kimberly Engber's "At Home, in Japan: The New World Literature of Isabella Bird and Winnifred Eaton" how the process that leads to utopia starts from a different experience of one's self, an act deeply influenced by the contact with the Other and the development of productive imagination. In this challenging essay, Engber sees Japan as "the discursive setting for self-invention," (224) since violating boundaries of individual and communal identities is, according to Engber, the first step towards utopia given that "when individual identity is detached from community then imagining a new and different community may become possible" (226). In this way Engber links voyages of discovery and literary utopias, showing that "the ability to imagine other worlds may begin with the experience of seeing oneself through other's eyes" (230).
- 3 Five of the fourteen essays are devoted to utopian thinking in the United States, and they are of particular interest to students and scholars of American studies, since cultural communities "that expressed their utopian ideals in an attempt to bring about changes and reform, and the realization of a better world" (1) are strictly linked to the meaning of "America," that is that act of cultural imagination that brought the Pilgrims to build that "city upon a hill" and the subsequent declaration's statement of the right to the "pursuit of happiness." The link between utopian ideas and the definition of the United States is revealed by the first essay of this cluster, Marylin Michaud's "A Turn to the Past: Republicanism and Brook Farm," in which the author presents the utopian experiment of Brook Farm as a regress towards forms of agrarianism that the republic's fathers, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, had pinpointed as the guiding principle for a harmonious state. Building on the ideas of the French socialist reformer Charles Fourier, the community proves that well in the nineteenth century —Brook Farm was founded in 1841— the debate about the nature of the United States was still active, and that "the economic and social liberalism of the post-revolutionary era" (69) was not welcomed universally; rather, the agrarian ideal espoused by the Brook Farm community indicates a "willing to sacrifice [...] private interests in favour of the public good" (70), a point of discussion about the character of the United States that is seldom remembered after the undisputed domination of free-capitalism came into being. Richard Francis further expands the discourse on Brook Farm and implements it by building a relationship between Ripley's community, Alcott's Fruitlands and Thoreau's Walden Pond, whereas in her "Nathaniel Hawthorne's Minority Report on Transcendentalism" Teresa Requena Pelegrí discusses Hawthorne's position with regard to the Transcendentalist community of Concord, his disillusionment after his stay with the Brook Farm community, as expressed in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and his anti-utopian reform stories such as "The Minister Black Veil" (1836) and "Rappaccini's Daughter." "Thoreau's Individualistic Utopia" is the title of Daniel Ogden's contribution, in which he confronts Henry David

Thoreau's pursuit of utopia in an individualistic manner but highly political fashion. Ogden concentrates on both "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849) and *Walden* (1854) and, in contrast to Hannah Arendt's view of Thoreau's use of conscience Ogden asserts Thoreau's highly political aim, as his connection to abolitionists, free-thinkers and his involvement with the underground railroad proves, thus proving that isolation and Utopia are not two opposed terms.

- 4 Roger Ebbatson's essay "The Great Earth Speaking: Richard Jefferies and the Transcendentalists" adds onto the problem between community and isolation discussing the work of the English nature-writer Richard Jefferies at the light of American Transcendentalists, especially Emerson's idea of nature, and in contrast to "the materialism and teleology of the Victorian doctrine of progress" (131). This contribution joins the group of articles that focus on the relation between utopian communities in Britain and the United States. In "The sexual difference: Gender, Politeness, and Conversation in Late-Eighteenth-Century New York City and in Charles Brockden Brown's *Alcuin* (1798)" Bryan Waterman scrutinizes "The Friendly Club" of New York, a club highly influenced by the British Jacobins, in particular by Mary Wollstonecraft. Notwithstanding the club welcomed feminist arguments, Waterman acknowledges how the circulation of opinions between sexes was inhibited by codes of polite communication, a fact that is evident for a discrepancy between "club members' embrace of Wollstonecraft feminism and their unwritten and perhaps unconscious homosocial constitution" (24). While Charles Brockden Brown, one of the club members, expressed the hope for a revolution in gender norms in his *Alcuin; or the Rights of Women* (1798), actually this revolutionary wish remained partial also among free-thinkers, due to the high pressure to maintain social conventions, above all when it came to relationship and dialogue between the sexes. The same transnational impulse for utopian ideals is presented by Evert Jan Van Leeuwen in his "Godwin, Bulwer and Poe: Intellectual Elitism and the Utopian Impulse of Popular Fiction," in which Van Leeuwen pinpoints two common traits shared by these intellectuals: "their strong belief in the superiority of their own intellects over that of their fellow authors," a fact that prevented them from involvement with any utopian community, but at the same time "their strong feeling that it was their duty to write in order to educate" (47), the latter being a feature that characterized many utopian thinkers who paid particular importance to education, a key factor toward independence of the individual mind and hence toward social progress. What distinguishes the three writers of the title is their belief in popular fiction as a way to disseminate their utopian visions, and the use of sensational, gothic and crime fiction to communicate their philosophy.
- 5 The next four essays, C.C. Barfoot's "In the Churchyard and Under Full Moon: The Radical Publisher and His Clients and Guests," Florence Boos' "The Ideal of Everyday Life in William Morris' *News from Nowhere*," Valeria Tinkler-Villani's "Thoughts Towards the Nature of Creativity in Literary and Cultural Communities: *The Germ* and Its Fruition," and Wim Tigges' "A Feminist Mirage of the New Life: Utopian Elements in *The Story of an African Farm*" cluster around discussion about utopian thinking in Britain. Barfoot examines the figure of Joseph Johnson, a publisher, editor and bookseller of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. London around whom people such as Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, William Blake, Dissenters, freethinkers and people of the Lunar Society gathered. He "signaled the arrival of a world in which booksellers and publishers were not just conduits for the printed word but patrons, inspirers, commissioners of words in print that might seek to

change the world” (22), a category that the author believes existed also in the twentieth century like in the case of Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press, Faber and Faber, or the feminist Virago Press. Florence Boos investigates *News from Nowhere* (1891) by poet, designer, translator and social activist William Morris. The book appeared periodically in the Socialist League’s *Commonweal*, and Boos studies how Morris’ ideals are still resonant in twentieth-century Socialists and Marxists such as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, above all indicating how Morris’ ideals of pleasure in labour, nature as a regulative ideal, architecture as a record of memory and human endeavor and the ideal of simplicity all anticipate twentieth-century Marxist thought. Valeria Tinkler-Villani considers Pre-Raphaelites as well, in particular the magazine *The Germ*, and traces a continuity between the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Bloomsbury, primarily taking into consideration Hogarth Press. Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) is analyzed by Wim Tigges from a gender perspective, and this article pairs with Margu rite Corporaal’s “Towards a Feminist Collectivism” about the American Utopia *Herland* (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the writer’s role in Bellamy’s Nationalist Movement.

- 6 All in all, this volume shows that utopian thinking is strictly linked to ideas such as social equality and feminism, an approach which first found spaces for development in the different gender dynamics that existed in utopian communities, as the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mr. Johnson confirms. In the “Afterward,” van de Kamp rightly affirms that the book might “pertain to recent interpretations of contemporary world politics” (259), in need of reconstruction after decades of political despair. The book would then become a form of historical memory particularly attractive for the newer generations. Even though van de Kamp reminds us that utopia often verges towards dystopia, the historical memory of different possibilities with regard to political issues reminds us that our democracies are not an absolute identity, but are the fruit of negotiations that took place two centuries ago, and that what prevailed was contained within a much broader discussion on utopian communities. In a western world in which identity politics have shown that marginalization can exist also within democracies, remembering different experiments of government may be a useful exercise, and this book offers an important historical memory, “the product of a literary conceit—a trope that manifests a mental process” (254) that it is our duty to remember, rather than forget, given the perfectible nature of our democracies. Afterall, utopias exist “by virtue of the counterfactual hypothetical,” and for this reason they “can never exist” (255).

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