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Projections and Utopianism in Contemporary Australian Fiction: Towards an Exploration of the Paranoid Mind

In an age of anxiety where protection from putative nightmare scenarios is offered as a substitute for the dreams and hopeful promises of yesteryear, utopianism is waxing fruitful in contemporary Australian fiction. Had Australia's birth as a nation not been so painfully established on dissatisfaction with most of its population attempting to escape the British class system or being unenthusiastically transplanted, it would be quite unlikely that many Australian writers would have been so inclined to sprinkle their narratives with repetitive utopian impulses (see works cited section). In numerous novels, the mainland or its southern geographical appendage is either depicted as the setting of these unthought-of and rather off-beat ideal societies or as the model with which they implicitly compare themselves. I will here use the terms "utopianism" or "utopian impulse" rather than "utopia," because if I were to speak strictly of "utopia," discussion would be limited to Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* (1982), which is the Australian narrative closest to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516).

The idea for an article linking paranoia and utopianism through an exploration of the concept of projection in four narratives in the past twenty-five years by Murnane (*The Plains*), Peter Carey (*The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*), Christopher

Koch (*Out of Ireland*), and Rodney Hall (*The Last Love Story*), came after the reading of Christian Marouby's *Utopie et primitivisme*. In this seminal book, Marouby argues that utopia and primitivism are both the result of the projection of European consciousness although they come under different expressions. According to Marouby, the utopian construct appears to be in its geography, architecture, political organisation, social hierarchy and repressive policy a "structure of defence" against a threat perceived in all aspects of nature. Following Marouby's analysis, I will argue that utopian thinkers (referring here to novelists and characters alike) appear in their *Meliora sequamur* quest somewhat as silent tyrants laying the foundations for the birth of a totalitarian society. I will try to show that utopianism-packed narratives, whether they are set in the past or future, are the result of projections.

The very notion of projection challenges Raymond Ruyer's "utopian mode" which he defines in *L'Utopie et les utopies* as "a mental exercise on lateral possibilities," as Frank Manuel reminds us (Manuel x). To my mind, utopian possibilities—unlike the possibilities offered in the sister speculative genre of science fiction—cannot be lateral, since utopian projects, as the Latin etymology indicates (*pro jactare*), are invariably cast (*jactare*) forward (*pro*) on a vertical axis with stories which might be set in the past but whose prime intent is that of transcendence, the primitivist yearning for some golden age or for some paradisiacal states. They may also be projected on a horizontal axis with tales set in the future, *i.e.* cast forward in time. This idea owes much to Paul Tillich's theory

of two orders, one in the horizontal plane, the order of finitude with its possibilities and impossibilities, its risks, its successes and failures; and another, a 'vertical order' (the term now used symbolically), an order which secular and religious utopias have expressed in

symbols such as "Kingdom of God," "Kingdom of heaven," "Kingdom of justice," and "the consummation." (Tillich 308)

I will attempt to demonstrate that because utopian impulses are born of a present regarded as so constricting, writers feel the urge to seek elevation of the spirit or to open up the possibility of a brighter future. Consequently, these impulses can only be conceived of as projects or projections, as models cast forward in space or in time precisely because human beings cannot associate reality with parallel or lateral dimensions; hence the shifting into the future of a vision of a society imagined in the present and the yearning to recover a bygone Earthly paradise.

By and large, utopian projects seem to be little more than consciousness-raising blueprints for a better place, or more specifically, distinct worlds of perfection located elsewhere. A survey of literary representations of perfect worlds will show that utopias are far-off locales encapsulating otherness whose depictions either derive from imaginative tales (diegesis) or from imitations of reality (mimesis). In both instances, the mechanism of projection that underpins utopian visions in the form of extraterritoriality (projection in space) and extra-contemporaneousness (projection in time) is essential to disconnect and distance fantasy from reality.

Because there remains little land to be discovered covering our thoroughly charted globe, the selected contemporary utopias are either established in remote imaginative geographies like Rodney Hall's and Peter Carey's utopian cities, or in realistic settings which either belong to a bygone era, exemplified by Koch's Beotian Vandemonia, or to uchronia like Gerald Murnane's Inner Australia in *The Plains*.

Despite its landmass of sweeping plains that gives an impression of "southern emptiness" (Koch 321), Australia-as-

an-island is almost a byword for isolation as understood both in terms of seclusion and abandonment, for these writers who were all born before or during World War II¹. Space therefore becomes an obsession for utopian thinkers; hence the topocentric titles of utopianism-packed narratives like *Out of Ireland* (1999) and *The Plains*. Because of this sense of claustrophobic isolation, utopian projects are often perceived as journeys of the mind, “mental exercise[s],” or to use Pr Abraham Maslow’s felicitous term “eupsychia,” synonymous for good thinking (Manuel 71). In this respect, utopian thinkers dreaming about alternative worlds can be regarded as visionaries, if not escapists. Because utopias are all about abstract thinking as illustrated by Murnane’s *The Plains*, narratives must be idea-driven to pertain to the utopian genre. In other words, the individual, being part of what Fredric Jameson calls the “statistical population” (Jameson 39), is depersonalised and sacrificed to the community. Therefore, character-driven novels like the ones written by Carey, Koch and Hall can only be said to contain at best utopian impulses, at worst—a streak of utopianism.

Actual space must be left aside so as to open up the dimensions of an imaginative space in which the feeling of abandonment is projected. Invariably, the mysterious place is secluded, desired and unattainable because it is always perceived as lost. Located, like Thomas More’s *Utopia*, in an isolated dimension that sustains a vivid imagination for a world of otherness, Murnane’s secluded society of plainmen, described as “marooned on their grassy islands impossibly far

¹ Koch was born in 1932, Hall in 1935, Murnane in 1939 and Carey in 1943. Given their historical and geographical contexts, it is no wonder pre-World War II generations of Australians have resented their isolation as a punishment, being thus deprived of a direct affective relationship with Mother England. In terms of history I allude to the strong record of transportation and exile whereas, geographically, Australia is poles apart from Great Britain.

from the mainland" (34), appears as a self-contained entity lying at the heart of the world's largest island. Fittingly enough, the verb "to maroon" which means both to abandon on a desolate island and "to isolate as if on a desolate island" recurs in all four narratives (Carey 117, Hall 10; Koch 228). Mr Handley-Smythe in *Out of Ireland* exclaims:

We're marooned [...] on this fucking wretched island, and nothing to the south of us but the Pole. One can never be at home here: do you see? One is always—*lonely*. (228)

Carey's narrator, the eponymous Efrican Tristan Smith, voices his feeling of seclusion from the outset of the novel:

How can I make you know what it is like to be from Efrica—abandoned, self-doubting, yet so willful that if you visit Chemin Rouge tomorrow morning we will tell you that the year is 426* and you must write your cheques accordingly. (5)

It seems that Hall, Carey, Koch and Murnane have all been affected by this anxiety, which derives from the feeling of having been abandoned on an island in the South Pacific. These telling examples would certainly come as grist to David Malouf's mill, as he has already pointed out Australians' "self-pitying sense of being unloved and abandoned by a bad stepmother, in a place far from home." (Malouf 98).

Common to the four novels is the depiction of a society set in secluded space, the geography of which is either imaginative or reality-based. In Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994), both the Republic of Efrica and Great Voorstand are archipelagos whose existence is attested by illustrative maps (1, 225), and incorporated in the reader's actual world through the mention of existing nations such as France, Holland and England. In this fictitious world, Efrica implicitly parallels Australia and imperialistic Voorstand the

United States. Common to Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* and Rodney Hall's *The Last Love Story* (2004) is the depiction of companion territories that stand in sharp contrast to each other. Hall's outlandish geography is, however, tangentially related to reality, as the writer confesses in an endnote. In *The Last Love Story*, an isolated metropolis is split into twin cities facing each other across the Friendship Bridge, following a violent uprising on Grand Day, six years previous to the storytelling time. Although no pointer in the narrative determines a particular environment, the cityscape borrows from actual divided cities in Germany, Israel and Palestine.

Driven by the desire for perfection, utopian writers are bound to strive for control of every little detail in the conception of these channelled and regulated ideal societies which, once they have been tried out, might reveal themselves as sheer hells. In Rodney Hall's *City South*, citizens are depicted as free in a successful and thriving town conducive to youthful romance, as depicted in the relationship between Judith Stott and Paul Bergson. But there, in the apparently perfect *City South*, repressed corruption is rampant and can be taken as a forewarning of a situation which could potentially degenerate and come close to what is experienced in *Slow City*, the dystopian *City North* where people are ruled by a harsh and strict regime: "let's not imagine there was satisfaction in the south either. [...] [A] corrupt council and foreign franchises flourished." (9).

By contrast, Murnane's version of utopianism is firmly grounded in Australia at an unspecified time. The plains of Inner Australia appear as an almost impossible otherness that belongs to the ineffable and to the indefinable. In keeping with the utopian genre, the ideal society that Gerald Murnane proposes in *The Plains* has not been discovered but created.

Although the microcosmic society of plainsmen has a history, a culture and a political life of its own, it remains a nation in progress in search for its distinctiveness, awaiting completion. The unnamed narrator-come-protagonist regarded as “a filmmaker of exceptional promise” (108), has set himself to interpret the flat landscape ever on the brink of being disclosed with a “film that would reveal the plains to the world” (19). In a society with a taste for endless speculations, the filmmaker’s achievement lies not in the result (as the narrator, suffering writer’s block, struggles with his still-to-be-written screenplay) but in his unceasing attempt to capture ‘a distinctive landscape’. As he puts it, “What they praised was [...] my years spent in writing and re-writing notes for introducing to a conjectured audience images still unseen” (109).

In a sense, Murnane’s visionary dream of a perfect world is motivated by the persistence of desire that propels the narrative into motion. The narrator’s challenge is therefore to avoid possession so as to prolong both desire and the utopian dream. Revelling in the prolongation of desire, the narrator proclaims that the visible is not satisfactory to any valid definition of the plains and so sets to “explore whatever [is] beyond the illusions that [can] be signified by simple shapes and motifs” (38-39).

As with Murnane’s, Christopher Koch’s utopianism is projected in Australia, more specifically in Van Diemen’s Land. The utopian blueprint in *Out of Ireland* does not serve as a “mirror image of the existing reality which it critically confronts” (Nuzzo 128; translation mine), but quite the reverse. It purports to reflect the nineteenth-century Australian experience of settlement within a romanticised landscape, while hinting at some nostalgia for the earthly paradise, a yearning for an unsullied prelapsarian society. Christopher Koch conceived the

genesis of Tasmanian society as a *Mundus alter*, a not fully accessible utopian city (easy of access by seaway only) whose authorities have wiped out History with a twin denial: the eclipse of both the convict system and of Aboriginal civilisation.

According to Christian Marouby, “[t]he construction of the utopian city is at variance with the past and with its incoherent remains; one must make a clean sweep and begin with a smooth surface like the blank page on which its creator designs” (Marouby 54; translation mine). This could explain why Doctor Howard sees Van Diemen’s Land as ‘a free society’ that is coming into being and why the colonial authorities “want it re-named Tasmania. The Australian colonies are a new America, in their view” (264). Gradually, however, Koch’s utopian impulses will shape up and transmogrify into what Northrop Frye calls a “utopian satire”, namely “a world-state assumed to be ideal [...] in terms of slavery, tyranny, or anarchy” (Frye 28). In classical utopias “appearances and the real must overlap” (Marouby 6; translation mine), therefore if the island purports to be a reassuring place and a picture of perfection, one should be able to read happiness on the faces of its citizens.

But ultimately, the mock utopian society in *Out of Ireland* is constructed on imperfection. Koch’s society, which struggles to preserve its image of a paradisiacal world, shows patent signs of lurking hostility. Beotia turns out to be infested with poisonous vegetation and peopled with an aggressive non-native population (mainly convicts who are responsible for the latent insecurity) along with barbarous ‘savages’. In order to contain every individual’s asocial drive and search for personal interest, the community remains subject to strict *ratio* and stern rules. By pushing this logic of protecting the people

against themselves too far, justification for a whole penal world of coercion to emerge would be found. This repressive system is organised in concentric circles in *Out of Ireland*—a postcolonial rewriting of *Inferno*, the first part of Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (c.1307-21) (Vernay 166-78).

The creation of an Eden replica goes hand in hand with the preservation of that pocket of unsullied world that comes under the patriarchal surveying control of its creator(s). The creator's almightiness is therefore expressed in his all-seeing ability, which is either established by a network of surveyors as in *Out of Ireland* or through cutting-edge technological devices such as "hidden surveillance cameras" and "surveillance monitors" in *The Last Love Story*.

The pervasive surveillance system is oppressive and may build up a paranoid mind. In *The Last Love Story*, Judith "got used to the thought of being watched" (243). Unlike the totalitarian City North, in which there are solid grounds to develop fear of "unseen danger" (37), the inhabitants of the South, like Judith, should feel much freer. However, they feel compelled to protect themselves and so the residents of City South end up sharing the same situation with the citizens in the dystopian North. This coercive surveillance system helps the citizens to self-regulate their behaviour and to preserve harmony and order.

Surveillance is even more domineering in *Out of Ireland*, where the colonial power—as Christian Marouby puts it—organises itself around "a centralising thought" and a policy of openness which vouches for the safety and order within the city. Koch therefore is able to draw a parallel between the colony's internal organisation and Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon:

—You know, what the British have created on this island is a Panopticon, he said. Do you realise that, Devereux ?

—The term's unfamiliar to me, I said. Expound, my boy.

—I'm referring to the penal theories of Jeremy Bentham. He recommended that a prison be built in such a way that every section radiated out from a central observation room, or tower. In this monstrous "Panopticon" of his, the prisoners would thus be spied on at all times, do you see. "A machine for grinding rogues honest," but what I put to you is this. Van Diemen's Land is itself a Panopticon! [...]

—This is a colony infested everywhere by spies—you must have learned that already. So I ask you: is not every felon and ex-felon watched and accounted for at all times? And doesn't our Grand Turnkey Denison sit at the centre of the machine like a spider—kept informed of everything through his many official agents and convict informers? You see? The entire bloody colony is a Panopticon! (278-79)

Robert Devereux eventually embraces the theory of constant and ubiquitous surveillance when he states, "this island is truly a Panopticon. Everyone must watch everyone else" (Koch 365). In a Foucauldian sense, it is not the certainty of being spied upon which impacts on human behaviour, but rather the uncertainty of whether one is or is not being watched which forces the prisoner into steady discipline. Illustrating Foucault's theory in *Discipline and Punish*, the Van Demonians—who are being seen without seeing—are disempowered and thereby reassure their masters of their harmlessness. To some degree, this abnormal stress on homeland security is an indication that utopias contain paranoid tendencies in embryonic form.

Paranoia is fundamentally an experience of anxiety, an affective state experienced by the ego which, according to Freud, arises "as a response to a situation of danger; it will be

regularly reproduced thenceforward whenever such a situation recurs" (Freud 72).² The anxiety-stricken person behaves "as though the old danger situation still existed," remaining "under the spell of all the old causes of anxiety" (Freud 90). Facing an anxiety-packed situation, the paranoid mind will therefore aim at relocating the fear of an endopsychic danger situation, turning an internal conflict into an external one thanks to a mechanism of projection. This delusional system has been identified by Freud as a "neuro-psychosis of defence," which, in an attempt to make one feel safer, ironically attributes to a seemingly harmless environment an unambiguously hostile and menacing quality. The psychoanalytical predisposition of men to psychoses may account for the patent fact that utopian and dystopian narratives are gender-marked as largely masculine, as reflected in the current selection of writers.

Christian Marouby argues cogently in *Utopie et primitivisme* that utopia presents itself as a "structure of defence," insularity being understood as a paranoia-prone space. To Marouby's mind, the utopian insular vision tends to project an internal danger against which its organisation has defensively over-structured itself onto the outer world. As I have argued, all of the selected narratives feature insular societies located, or at least felt to be located, on an island whose overprotective and overprotected environment acts as a buttress against deep-seated anxieties of penetration and aggression.

This fantasy of physical inviolability seeks to ward off putative dangers of invasion, contamination, and degeneration that the openness of borders cannot prevent in the normal course of events. This defence mechanism rests on the illu-

² See also Sigmund Freud. *The Schreber Case*. Trans. Colin McCabe, Ringwood: Penguin Books, 2003. Freud's view of paranoia as a defence against homosexual drives following his analysis of Schreber's case has fallen into disrepute with the Neo-Freudians. We will thus disregard this lead.

sion that evil has been shut out of the now sanitised enclosed and self-contained space. Dreams of paradise also indicate that utopian thinkers regard evil as a threat that they keep at bay. This dread of evil, with which writers are over-concerned, morphs into visions of overwrought and strictly controlled societies.

Such fantasies of control and domination exemplify the utopian writer's indulgence in wishful thinking. In this illusory world, the quest for the earthly paradise fulfils an *ab initio* fantasy that finds expression in an exaltation for beginnings. The craving to regress into a state of original bliss, along with the enhancing of the omnipotence fallacy³ account for such exaltation while hinting at the idea that utopian thinkers are dissatisfied with and overcritical of their world which they see as fallen and imperfect.

Roger Mucchielli's definition of ideal cities in *Le Mythe de la cité idéale* (1961) refers to the utopian city as a "myth, awakened by the personal revolt against the human condition in general in the shape of existing circumstances, which meets the obstacle of impotence and evokes in the imagination an other or a nowhere, where all obstacles are removed" (Manuel xi). There is, in the minds of utopian thinkers, a feeling of impotence that morphs into fantasised omnipotence and turns them into perfection-shapers. Paradoxically enough, the impotence of utopian writers lies less in their inability to have their ideas put into practice—time will probably tell!—than in their ability to create ideal societies. I tend to see these vi-

³ The omnipotence fallacy mainly accrues from the possibility of re-shaping things thanks to the potential expressed through fiction writing. In other narratives, it might take the form of an attempt to give History a new course.

sionary dreams of perfect worlds as the overcompensation of our unalterable current society, which writers cannot change, save by imagining flawless alternatives which alleviate frustration. However, as in the case of most fantasies, utopian visions are best to remain impulses that are not acted out, lest they should lose their soothing effect on the thinkers' discontented minds.

Because utopias are chiefly hope-generating in their intent, the utopian dream should be attainable in the eyes of most readers. In no way should readers be under the impression that they are unable to seize their chance to carry out the dream, or worse, that they might have missed it. There lies the contradictory essence of utopianism, which simultaneously jettisons all dawning hopes and sustains them. Indeed, anything belonging to the future is contingent (in other words, it can or cannot occur), and yet, because anticipation turns putative things into the soon-to-be-realised present, there is still hope for the project to be carried out. Paradoxically, utopias hinge on the possibility of being realised—through their seeming accessibility and sense of immediacy—and the impossibility of being pinned down. Their desirability is thereby safeguarded, and, these contradictory elements explain their elusiveness and allusiveness, as reflected in vague time markers and indistinct geographical landmarks.

In the greatest utopian tradition, the existence of the imaginary islands of the Republic Efica and the Great Voorstand in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* are geographically attested by illustrative maps which, as in More's *Utopia*, are part of the paratextual apparatus. The fact that these maps are systematically decontextualised enlargements that cannot be used to pinpoint the exact location of utopian societies goes towards proving the point about elusive geographical bear-

ings. In addition, Rodney Hall's utopian-inspired "fairy-tale" articulates the aforementioned paradox when he challenges the typical ahistorical trait of utopias with a romance taking place in an unspecified time without jeopardising its accessibility.

Indeed, his "fairy-tale of the day after tomorrow" (as the subtitle goes) can still be imprecisely identified as the early years of the twenty-first century. Though endowed with a contemporary past that witnessed an anthrax scare, the collapse of the Twin Towers, and the Bali bombings, *The Last Love Story* is set in a very near future, close enough to give a sense of impending bliss or doom within reach. This extremely thin borderline between promised ecstasy and looming tragedy testifies to the fact that utopian and dystopian writers have always been closely related, in that what the former conceives of is but the sanitised version of the latter's project.

In a sense, utopian thinkers could be regarded as silent tyrants in so far as they superimpose their models of better social systems onto the existing one with which they have to comply half-heartedly. Their utopian impulses do not appear as a straightforward spelt-out demand for change; rather they present themselves as suggested counter-models, altered blueprints for the society in which a given people lives, so as to point out in a most oblique way the dysfunctions inherent in reality.

Even though these are imagined worlds, it follows that utopianism is for these novelists the cement which consolidates the foundations of their mute tyrannies under which life is ritualised, well-organised and closely controlled, forcing people into becoming overcautious and extremely regimented. Otherwise, "[h]ow to account for the fact that in such confined spaces so many individuals can co-exist without killing or mor-

tally detesting one another?" as Emile Cioran has put it (Cioran 103, translation mine). Happiness becomes a moral duty, the norm—a rule, companionship—a lifestyle, and seclusion from the external world—an essential requirement. And when you think of it, the denial of complaint, the compliance with a norm, communitarian activity and isolation are all defining traits of prison life. Because utopian schemes are a response from a discontented mind to the present, they are hardly more than a sublimated vision of a corrupt world making the here and now more endurable to the utopian thinker.

Because utopian fantasies of perfection, control and domination are the mirror image of a foredoomed imaginary dystopian threat, utopianism contains the seed of the paranoia that is developed at the core of dystopian fiction. By and large, utopian projects are excessive in the sense that they are constructed with excess, to excess, and in response to excessive feelings. While utopianism feeds on surplus, dystopia flourishes in saturation. In other words, what can be read between the lines in utopian writings is simply explicated, elaborated on and brought to a pitch in dystopian novels. Just as hate cannot be felt without experiencing love, dread cannot be felt without going through anxiety.

This psychoanalytical approach demonstrates that the dystopian narrative can no longer be perceived as the negative counterpart of utopian fiction, since the former turns out to be the logical expansion, if not the aggravation of paranoid tendencies that transpire in the latter. Far from being poles apart and antagonistic as they are classically represented, utopias and dystopias should be seen as two adjacent markers on the gradation continuum, proving the dystopian impulse to be an additional projection. All things considered, dystopias

and utopias alike remain to various degrees *cast forward*—in time, in space, in thought and in anticipation.

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⁴ Dr. Jean-François Vernay is the author of *Water From the Moon: Illusion and Reality in the Works of Australian Novelist Christopher Koch* (New York: Cambria Press, 2007) and of *Panorama du roman australien des origines à nos jours*. (Paris: Hermann, 2009). He is currently selecting essays for a special issue of *Antipodes* on the theme of fear in Australian culture which he guest-edited with Dr. Nathanael O'Reilly in June 2009.

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