Cities Utopian, Dystopian and Apocalyptic

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Introduction

The city has always held the promise of utopia, the intimation that it be the spatial form within which a harmonious and wholesome society could take shape, as the emanation of a civic, rational or holy order. And as often, the city has been associated with the opposite: with the utter failure of such an order to take hold, and with the sense that an imminent end-time could upend the social and cultural fabric of humankind in the form of its perhaps most celebrated cultural artefact. This chapter examines utopian, dystopian and apocalyptic renderings of the city in literature. Various approaches could be adopted to undertake such an examination. One could start out with religious visions of the city, or focus on more secular city ideals and the worldly apocalypse. Or it would be possible to focus primarily on utopian, dystopian and apocalyptic narratives as literary genres proper, or on the interaction between these literary genres and their broader religious, sociological, or political counterparts. My approach in this chapter will be guided by an interest in the implications of utopia, dystopia and apocalypse for urban planning and development. I will start out by examining city utopias as emblems of a godly scheme for society, of a civic order, and as dream of a harmonious community. One utopian narrative, Edward E. Hale's *Sybaris and Other Homes* (1869), will be used as a point of entry to approach these thematics.

The term utopia is used here to denote the depiction of a non-existing, imagined state or place, in which one finds crystallized a vision of the 'good society' (see Pinder, 2002: 15; Kumar, 2010: 27). This conceptualization of an ideal societal form can be expressed either in the form of a

literary narrative, or in the more rationalistic account of the sociologist or philosopher (cf. Manuel, 1965/1973). More often than not, utopia contains something of both genres, mixing the scientific jargon of an ideal society's explorer with the stylized tone of the fictional narrator. I will be most concerned here with the literary form of utopia, and its dystopian and apocalyptic counter-currents and undercurrents.

While utopias can be set in a range of possible contexts, one characteristic in terms of location tends to unite them: utopian environments are typically located in a more or less inaccessible place, distanced from the reader in terms of place and time. Utopian environments have thus been situated in outer space, or within a hollow earth, or in a distant past or future. Within this variety of settings, the form of the city has had a continuous appeal as the preferred spatial mould. This has lead Northrop Frye to claim that, since '[t]he symbol of conscious design in society is the city … utopia is primarily a vision of the orderly city and of a city-dominated society.' (Frye, 1965: 27)

City as Re-creation of Cosmic Order

An emphasis on the fundamentally imaginary nature of utopia is present in the very title of the text that gave its name to the narrative genre. In the way Thomas More constructed a name as 'a contamination between ou-topia (non-place) and eu-topia (good-place)' (Baeten, 2002: 144), he emphasized that utopia exists by definition outside of the normal, worldly fabric. Literary utopia, by consequence, tends to take the form of a vision or a dream, and it is hardly a coincidence that so many utopian narratives, from Louis Sebastian Mercier *L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante* (*The Year 2440* [1775]; see also Sutton, 1994: 19) to Orson Welles's *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) or Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1889), describe the visits of

sleepwalkers of sorts. Yet it is important not to exaggerate the gulf that divides the dreamed-of, idealized city, and its counterpart, the actual city. An idealized, godly or rational grid underlies to a degree all existing cities. From urban civilization's beginnings in early antiquity, there has been a continuous interaction between how cities have been built and experienced, and how they have been imagined as emblems of a pre-ordained order. Lewis Mumford argues that the first cities of the Bronze Age were in effect utopias on earth, in the way they represented a cosmic order in built form. The ancient city was a utopia transcribed into reality, 'a glimpse of eternal order, a visible heaven on earth, a seat of the life abundant – in other words, utopia.' (Mumford, 1965/1973: 13). Insofar current cities resemble the ancient city at all, they, too, contain elements of utopian form.

The interaction between the city as form and the city as idea recurs in Greek and Roman antiquity. In political and philosophical thought (Plato's *Republic* is a case in point) the city was used as a metaphorization for the political and cultural community, and in Greek and Roman colonies, new cities were laid out according to a preordained grid reflecting a universalist order (McEwen, 1993). In the Christian thinking of the church fathers, most notably that of St. Augustine, the city came to symbolize a morally inspired community. In St. Augustine's sermons and writings, the community of believers to which the Christian belongs, as a pilgrim in the earthly world, appears as a heavenly 'city of God'. In both cases –Platon's *Republic* and Augustine's *City of God* – these utopian, ideal states (either as city state, or community of believers), are not be understood as being entirely detached from the actual world, or as an unambiguous appeal to contemplate something that is out of reach. Plato's interlocutor in the ninth book of the *Republic* suggests that the ideal of the city fundamentally informs the actual city-society:

> ‘But perhaps it[the ideal city]’s laid up as a model in heaven for anyone to look at who wishes to found himself. It makes no difference whether it exists or ever will exist here. He’ll practice the politics only of it and of no other.’ (Plato, 1979: 251)

St. Augustine argues in a somewhat similar vein, though in a radically different context, that the two idealized cities he distinguishes, that of the city of God and the city of the world, Jerusalem and Babylon, are present together inseparably:

> How can these two cities be distinguished? We cannot separate them from one another, can we? No, they are intermingled, and they continue like that from the very beginning of the human race until the end of the world. (Augustine, 2001: 265)

In the Western tradition of city writing, founded on Judeo-Christian and Classical examples (of which Saint Augustine and Plato offer the most well-known exponents), the image of the city oscillates between utopia and its opposite – between the city as a model for various ideals, and the city as the spatial embodiment of various forms of evil. The city is the embodiment of an enforced comprehensive order and that order’s victory over natural chaos. Simultaneously, it is the symbol of human hubris, of mankind’s Promethean urges, and of the vengeance this pride and presumption could incite. The continuing oscillation between these two visions lies at the heart of the profound ambiguity that constitutes more than anything else the key characteristic of the urban experience and its complex rendering in the literary imagination (see Pike, 1981: ix-xv). In this unstable ambiguity, there is ample room for pondering the potential fall for grace and divine or (other) retribution. It is perhaps no coincidence that some of the very first city renderings in Western culture, both in literature and in images, show cities being annihilated (Mumford, 1961: 51). From the sack of Troy, the destruction of Nineveh, and the fall of the

Temple of Jerusalem, not a grand leap of the imagination is needed to account for the continuing fascination in popular culture with the apocalyptic destruction of cities in early modern, modern and post-modern times, from sensational news reports of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake to novels such as H.G. Wells's *The War in the Air* (1908) and the annual wholesale destruction of American cities witnessed in Hollywood productions.

Plato's *Republic* belongs to the genre of the 'rationalist utopia', with its own distinctive generic features (Balasopoulos, 2014). The appearance of utopian narratives as a fictional literary genre had to wait until the early modern period. Two golden ages of literary utopia can be discerned. The first founding period of utopian literature has produced such classical works as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1515), Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), and Tommaso Campanella *La città del Sole* (1623). It coincides with a pivotal time of transition (cf. Jameson, 2005: 15) that was characterized – amongst many other things – by an interest in urban matters, and when the connection between urban form and the concept of the ideal city was eagerly explored (Sennett, 1990: 121-204). The same interest in matters of urban form during a profoundly transitional era is evident also in the second period, which is set in roughly the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, and includes such influential works as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1889) and William Morris *News from Nowhere* (1890). There is an intriguing correlation between the appearance of urban planning as separate discipline in this period and the proliferation of literary utopias, often with distinctly satirical undertones. Modern city planning has been argued to arise 'out of a vision of an alternative society, a utopia' (Hall, 1989/2014: 463), and in the answers it provided to urban problems, it often relied on the utopian literature that engaged with these same questions.

A considerable literature on both of these utopian literatures has come into being (see e.g. Forbes, 1927; Frye, 1965; Claeys 2010; Balasopoulos, 2014; Latham & Hicks, 2014). In what follows, a relatively little-known utopian work, *Sybaris and Other Homes* (1869) by the American author Edward E. Hale, will be examined as an illustrative example of the generic features of literary utopia. The themes of the text, its idealization of the suburb, and its apocalyptic undercurrents will provide a point of entry to utopia's relationship with contemporary urban planning discourse, and traced further into the thinking and writing of the city during the twentieth century.

A Visit to Sybaris

Edward E. Hale's *Sybaris and Other Homes* is part of an upsurge in utopian writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century, informed by the industrialization and urbanization in this period, and commenting upon the increasingly critical relations between capital and labour (see Forbes, 1927; Seed, 2012: 338). It is a motley collection of texts, in which one of the short stories, entitled 'My Visit to Sybaris', describes the experiences of an American adventurer, the Bostonian reverend Frederic Ingham. When on a secret mission on behalf of Garibaldi in the gulf of Tarentum, adversary winds beach Ingham's ship on a strange coast, and he finds himself unexpectedly in a city whose inhabitants possess a mix of modern, ancient and future mores, laws, beliefs and technology.

Utopian narratives tend to set the visionary world apart either in time and space from the visitor's one, and in the case of Sybaris, both of these distancing strategies are at work. The utopian society is set apart from Ingham's known world in spatial as well as in temporal terms. The Sybarites are presented as a relic society from ancient times, who have preserved much of their ancient mores, although they are also in communication with the nineteenth century's western

world, and they possess advanced, futuristic technologies. It is a secretive location: the Sybarites 'have published no sailing directions since St. Paul touched here' (Hale, 1869: 87). Arrival in Sybaris also carries undertones of a dreamy journey to the netherworld: Ingham reads the *Aeneid* when crossing the Bay of Tarentum, after which he falls asleep (Hale, 1869: 21-23). Upon arrival in the strange bay, his unwilling Charon – the Italian steering the boat – believes he will encounter 'the father of lies himself' (Hale, 1869: 30) – the devil. Regardless of these premonitions of a descent in hell, Ingham meets a society of friendly and hospitable humans, and is escorted through the city by the 'Proxenus' (ibid. 35), who is the 'officer whose duty it was to see to strangers' (ibid. 34), and who acts as a guide to the visitor. George, the Proxenus, his brother Philip, and several other Sybarites provide the narrator with information about this strange environment. Through the Proxenus, the narrative takes on the form of dialogue typical of many utopian narratives, in which an outsider is gradually introduced to the trappings of a strange world and society.

Utopian narratives can be divided into narratives focusing on technological innovations and those interested more in drawing up a moral and social blueprint of society (see Frye, 1965). In *Sybaris*, there are several references to widespread and everyday use of innovative technology, most notably the telegraph (in use in Sybaris for a few millennia, as the narrator claims; Hale, 1869: 36-37), and the horse-car rail track, pulled by chain, 'driven by stationary engines five or six stadia apart' (Hale, 1869: 32-33). They also possess something that resembles the personal car: 'little steam-wagons', running on petroleum, which they use for transport and which people keep 'in a shed at the back of the house' (ibid. 60-61). More important, however, are the set of laws and rules that constitute the moral and legal framework for this society, most of them going

back to ancient ‘Charondan’ laws. The most conspicuous element of the law book is the crime of ‘harpagmos’, ‘this terrible verdict which they all so dread’, as Ingham recounts:

> It is given on an indictment brought by the state’s attorney in a criminal court. It means, ‘He has taken from a citizen what he cannot restore.’ (ibid. 52)

The crime includes the stealing of time, echoing discussions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century about labour and currency reform (associated with the American Josiah Warren and the British Robert Owen), that in turn fed into utopian narratives in the later nineteenth century, which presented time as alternative currency, such as the ‘labor checks’ in Henry Olerich’s *A Cityless and Countryless World* (1894; see Forbes, 1927). There are interesting ecological dimensions, too, since the verdict of ‘harpagmos’ can be passed for disturbing the natural and ecological harmony. In this respect, ‘Sybaris’ prefigures later utopian/dystopian accounts concerned with ecological catastrophes. Two striking examples are given. The first involves a capitalist enterpriser who builds a river dam to power his factory, due to which ‘five hundred thousand people lost their fish because that fellow chose to spin cotton a ten-millionth part of a drachme cheaper than the rest of mankind’ (Hale, 1969: 54). The second example involves the draining of salt marshes at Paestum, which ended in disaster: ‘They got more than they bargained for. They disturbed the natural flow of the currents, and they lost their harbor.’ (Hale, 1969: 54) In both cases, ‘harpagmos’ is pronounced.

As the narrator, a reverend who knows his Bible well, even in Greek, most probably realizes, ‘harpagmos’ is also a Biblical term, translated in the King James Bible as ‘robbery’. The Biblical passage in which the term is used is of interest for the overall moral framework laid out in Sybaris, and for its implications for the urban planning paradigm in this utopia. The full theological and linguistic arguments of the Biblical passage in question (which is remarkably

controversial) would lead us too far, but it is interesting that, in the traditional translation of the word, the 'robbery' is related to the desire of usurping Godly status, of wanting to being equal to God (Phil 2, 5-12). Harpagmos could entail stealing, as it were, of God by presuming to be on the same level (Wright 1986). Indeed, all the laws and rules of Sybaris seem aimed at suppressing the Promethean and Icarian urges commonly associated with urban development. Upward, vertical desires are frowned upon in Sybaris, which is structured as a horizontal utopia. When first seeing the city, Ingham exclaims in surprise: 'Did anybody see the towers of Sybaris? Not a tower!' (Hale, 1869: 29)

The advanced technology the Sybarites possess (the cable track, in particular) is emphatically not used to construct elevators, but to enable the inhabitants to live in well-connected suburbia. Moral laws are thus made to justify a specific urban planning aesthetics. All buildings have only one storey, and 'stair-builders and slaveholders are forbidden to live in Sybaris by … fundamental law' (Hale, 1869: 33). The result is an urban landscape in which the distinctions between suburb and the centre have been erased:

> I supposed that his was a mere suburban habit, and, though the houses came nearer and nearer, yet as no two houses touched in a block, I did not know we had come into the city till all the passengers left the car …' (Hale, 1869: 33)

The visit to Sybaris is in effect an introduction to a suburban dream city, in which '… a house without its own garden was an abomination, and easy communication with the suburbs was a necessity' (Hale, 1869: 41).

Utopia, Planning and Anti-Urbanism

Although *Sybaris and Other Homes* describes idealized societies, the text is not without its pessimistic undercurrents. Even the most optimistic and idealistic utopian narratives function to some degree as satirical allegories, inherently containing a critical view of society by their projection of an idealized better world. In nineteenth-century utopian narratives, this tends to become ever more explicit, as is by explanatory forewords and dedications. The collection *Sybaris and other Homes* is structured in such a way that it constantly invites the reader to compare conditions in Sybaris with those in nineteenth-century American cities, presenting contemporary urban society in unmistaken dark colours. Paratexts, including the title, motto, and introduction, emphasize these critical characteristics of the text. The book is dedicated to the Suffolk Union for Christian work, which had as its first mission 'the provision for better homes in cities' (Hale, 1869). The introduction by Edward E. Hale explicitly compares Sybaris and Boston, presenting the account of Boston as a society that 'ought not be', compared to the 'if' of the utopian society. The structure of the book leads the reader from utopian perspectives on the question of housing to a chapter describing the actual condition in the contemporary US. This chapter, which contains gloomy descriptions of working class conditions, bears the tendentious title 'How they live in Boston, and how they die there'. The final chapter of the volume states the ultimate purpose of the narrative as a whole: 'Homes for Boston Laborers'.

While I defined utopia above as the depiction of the 'good society', the extent to which utopian narratives unequivocally describe an unambiguous 'good society' remains a matter of debate. In the way utopias present a rigid and immobile social form, they come dangerously close to description of a totalitarian state. The question whether a narrative describes a 'good' society or a nightmarish travesty of the good society will often be answered differently depending on the reader and his/her context. Plato's Republic has been read by twentieth century critics not as

utopia, but as ‘the prototype of the fascist state’ (Mumford, 1965: 4), and the society depicted in *Looking Backward* has similarly been read with considerably more foreboding by readers in the second half of the twentieth century than at the time of publishing. Northrop Frye claims that ‘most of us today would tend to read it as a sinister blueprint of tyranny’ (Frye, 1965: 29). If it is hard to draw clear distinctions between utopian and satirical or dystopian impulses in modern utopian narratives, urban planning perspectives that were inspired by utopia have been equally ambiguous.

Sybaris and Other Homes aimed to provide answers to practical questions arising from urbanization, modernization and industrialization. The collection of texts written by Hale essentially deals with the question of housing conditions for the working classes, a question that ‘at the time of writing was the crusade uppermost in his mind’ (Holloway, 1956). The city is no longer the abstract form in which the idea of society or the state is approached, but a concrete and pressing question. Like other utopian texts published in the course of the nineteenth century, *Sybaris and other Homes* feeds on a larger set of thoughts about the ideal structure of society, the problem of increasing modernization and urbanization, offering tentative solutions. These in turn fed back into the actual town plans.

Hale’s account of Sybaris provided an indirect influence for Frederick Law Olmsted’s plans for Riverside, Illinois, planned in the late 1860s and one of the early examples of American suburban city planning. Riverside was the ‘best-known curvilinear suburb of the nineteenth century’, and its plan contains an abundance of pastorally curving streets (Langdon, 1994: 39). Olmsted and Hale corresponded with each other after Olmsted had read *Sybaris and Other Homes*, and when Hale visited Riverside, he ‘there found his Sybaris fully realised’ (Condello, 2014: 117-118).

Other novels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century communicated similarly with urban planning paradigms. David Seed points out that novels such as Charles W. Caryl's *New Era* (1897) and Chauncey Thomas's *The Crystal Button* (1891) provided urban planning solutions in considerable detail (Seed, 2012: 341). People from a variety of denominations turned to utopian narratives to bring across their concerns with urban questions. In *Hygeia*, the British physician Benjamin Ward Richardson describes the ideal city of health, considering, like Hale in *Sybaris*, the multi-story morphology of cities undesirable (Richardson, 1876). *Hygeia* contained no cellars. Richardson's utopia similarly influenced concrete urban design: Bedford Park, in part inspired by *Hygeia*, contained buildings without cellars (cf. Wilson, 1991: 44-45, 101).

As the suburban city in 'Sybaris', with its banishment of stair-builders and praise for low-rise illustrates, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century utopian narratives tended to exhibit a distinct uneasiness about the form the modern city had taken. The most well-known utopias of the late nineteenth century, Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and Morris's *News from Nowhere* – a reaction to Bellamy – were meant to participate in discussions concerning the city, and reformers associated both with the City Beautiful movement and the Settlement movement found inspiration in Bellamy's novel (Wilson, 1991: 70). Both of these texts, and Morris's novel in particular, essentially presented pastoral models for future society. From these pastoral themes, it was only a small step to works such as Henry Olerich's *A Cityless and Countryless world* (1894), in which, as the title suggests, the distinction between city and countryside are altogether abolished in favour of the latter (see also Forbes 1927).

As industrialization and modernization gathered pace, a pastoral vision of the city was increasingly competing with the metaphorization of the city as a monstrous, runaway machine, representing a threat to the perceived harmony between man and nature that reigned in a pastoral

past. This metaphor was further modulated as the ‘machine in the garden’ – a concept with a long legacy in American thinking, in particular (see Marx, 1964; Trimble & Winters, 1984) – and the cognate concept of a Frankensteinian machine out of control of its creators (Frye, 1965). In both cases, the city appears as the opposite of utopian views of future society – a dystopia of sorts.

The term ‘dystopian’, apparently first coined by John Stuart Mill in the middle of the nineteenth century, refers to ‘an alarmingly unpleasant imaginary world’ (Baldick, 1990/2008: 100), but in the industrializing cities of the nineteenth century, what was perhaps most alarming was the fact that grim environments that resembled the opposite of imagined better worlds were not imaginary at all, but lying within walking distance of well-off city dwellers. Progress and the enlightened march of civilization was supposed to move towards a better future, but such a view became hard to sustain. Stretching the definitions of the term ‘dystopia’, several of the realist and naturalist nineteenth- and twenty-century city texts have been read as dystopia, even if they describe actual conditions realistically. A case in point is Coketown in Charles’s Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854), which in the form of a conjectured city, styled the very real urban conditions in England.

In their dubious stance towards the industrializing city, utopian narratives and their counterparts in urban planning discourse envisioned two broad solutions that had little to offer to the contemporary urban morphology of the inner city, and that would result in realities that contained, in turn, distinctly dystopian elements. One was the modernist high-rise city, envisioned as a comprehensive alternative to the congested city. It was most famously evoked in the modernist ideals of Le Corbusier’s *The City of To-morrow* (1929), and implemented in a variety of modulated forms from Chandigarh, India to Brazilia, Brazil. In literature, this vision

was anticipated by such utopian authors as Paul Scheerbaert, who both in his literary and architectural writing proposed futuristic cities of glass. A second and related utopian-inspired urban planning paradigm envisioned was to emphasize the garden to the detriment of the machine, in the form of a sprawling suburbia. Texts such as Hale's *Sybaris* forestall this pastoral turn in urban development, which has lead, in the course of the twentieth century, to sprawling development as well as a vast a literature of the suburb that has only fairly recently been more thoroughly examined in literary urban studies.

Both the modernist city of skyscrapers and the sprawling suburban city carried the seeds of failure. As the prohibition on high-rise buildings in Sybaris illustrates, the idea of secular buildings rising to the skies as spatial embodiments of linear progress had long been suspect. Since Biblical and Mesopotamian accounts of the tower of Babel, the building of iconic high-rise buildings had led to accusations of pride and presumptions that would not go unpunished. The downfall of the WTC towers on the 11th of September, 2001, is only the most spectacular of recent examples that have been read in such vein. Suburbia carried its own distinct challenges to utopia. Riverside, the suburb inspired by *Sybaris*, was adorned with curvilinear streets that gave it a tranquil feel, but in which inhabitants found it extremely difficult to orient themselves (Langdon, 1994: 39). The problem was emblematic for suburbs: by neutralizing the centre, suburbia defied the need for clear orientation points.

The moral and existential repercussions for this lack of centre were quickly taken up in literature. Los Angeles, in particular, became the emblem of the suburban, sprawling city, a postmodern city that, by virtue of Hollywood and Malibu, was also emblematic of American consumerist and popular culture. As Elizabeth Wilson points out, in literature, 'LA is the "nowhere city" (the title of a novel by Alison Lurie) in which lives are inconsequential, fugitive and timeless in the sense

of lacking both past and future.' (Wilson, 1991: 136) It is tempting to draw a connection between the unintelligibility of human behaviour in novels such Brett Easton's *Less than Zero* (1985) and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and to some extent even in earlier LA texts such as John Fante's *Ask the Dust* (1939), and the diffuse suburban urban form within which they are set. Literature suggests that as the city does no longer resemble the city, moral bearings get lost.

Utopia in the Inner City

While the literature of suburbia developed a distinctive strand of desperation and alienation, a sense of utopia was retained in a genre that bears particular relevance for Northern American cities – what Blanche Gelfant has called the ecological novel, which 'focuses upon one small spatial unit such as a neighborhood or city block and explores in detail the manner of life identified with this place' (Gelfant, 1954: 11). Utopia has always been concerned also with the ideal of a harmonious community. In a succession of New York novels describing life in often ethnically delineated inner city boroughs, the protagonist's development is outlined against the background of a close-knit social community at the neighbourhood level. The American ecological or (inner city) novel problematized community by positing complex heroes drawn between the gravitational pull of the ethnic neighbourhood and a larger world outside it. The ideal presented in such novels remains that of potential integration into urban society (or conversely, the escape from a cohesive community into a broader and more meaningful fold), a personal utopia of harmonious relationships within a meaningful community.

While utopian novels such as *Sybaris* posited an answer to the city in the form of a suburban environment that was essentially pastoral, several twentieth-century ecological city novels developed their own schemes to integrate the city-as-machine and the ideal of the garden. In the

New York ‘ecological novel’, the possibility for upward social mobility, and the sense of a community that comes to bloom, repeatedly take shape in the *topos* of the small garden or the tree within the inner city. Metaphorized most famously in Betty Smith’s *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943), the image reappears in a number of more recent reflections on life in the inner city. The tree in the city appears as a form of garden in the machine, an urban pastoral that hints at the possibility of a genuine community life and personal development against all odds. In recent texts, however, even this symbol of hope is used in a questioning light. In Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011), a friend of the narrator notes about Brooklyn’s iconic ailanthus tree that ‘[b]otanists call it an invasive species. But aren’t we all?’ (2011/2012: 179) In the context of a novel that deals extensively with the violent nature of dispossessions and migrations, the remark reminds us that the ‘tree of heaven’ too, has become embroiled in a wider symbolism of displacement, memory, and violence.

In the course of the post-war decades, utopian images of a sense of community in the inner-city neighbourhood – if only as something to rebel against – was crumbling. Utopian and modernist planning, both in the form of the brutalist high-rise and the pastoral suburb, had turned their back on inner cities. Combined with the specific dynamics of Northern American cities, these reactions became part of a process that turned some of the post-war inner cities into areas that resembled the gloomiest of nineteenth-century industrial cities, without the jobs. Increasingly, ‘dystopian’ became a term not used to describe an imaginary or future city, but inner city reality. In literature and in cinematic representations from the 1970s and 1980s onward, the image of a ‘dystopian’ New York became increasingly ‘codified and clichéd’ (see Webb, 2014: 315). The image of a disintegrating, burning New York City becomes a stark symbol of the failing city in novels as diverse as Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997) or Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World*

Spin (2009). In Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, an English academic who moves to New York is shocked by the dystopian appearance of the city:

> It was July and the city shimmered and stank … I was astonished to see so many beggars in the rank, disordered streets, where crones and drunkards disputed with the rats for possession of the choicest morsels of garbage … The skies were of strange, bright, artificial colours – acid yellow, a certain bitter orange that looked as if it would taste of metal, a dreadful, sharp, pale, mineral green … (1977/2001: 11-12)

The fact that it will take some time for the reader to realize that the novel does *not* depict actual New York in the 1970s, but an alternative dystopian future tells us much about the established image of New York during these decades as a city beyond redemption. In Carter's novel, New York, like the New York in Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's column* almost a century earlier, and a host of other novels in between, is a city on the way to be obliterated. It is, as in the 1985 New York novel by the same name, by Madison Smart Bell 'waiting for the end of the world'. To William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, the group of novelists to which Bell (as well as Auster and DeLillo) belonged were writers not of dystopia, but of an 'urban apocalypse', that drew its imagery 'as much from biblical accounts […] as from the actual topography of their settings' (Sharpe & Wallock, 1987: 26-27).

Urban End-Times

Even in optimistic utopian narratives millenarian sentiments tend to be present at least in the form of an implied, possible past or future. Edward E. Hale's *Sybaris and Other Homes* is again a case in point. Similar to other novels that explicitly referred to Biblical or ancient cities, the very name 'Sybaris' alerts the reader to an implied story of hubris and destruction. In Antiquity,

Sybaris was perceived as the epitome of pride, arrogance and luxury, and its consequent destruction as a just retribution. In the introductory chapter of Hale's book, frequent comparisons are made between Boston and Sybaris, pointing out that the original, prospering Sybaris existed only a little longer than Boston at the time of writing: 'For two hundred years and more, - almost as long, dear Atlantic, as your beloved Boston has subsisted, - Sybaris flourished …'(Hale, 1869: 9). Addressing his reader as an 'Atlantic' further rubs in the message of possible destruction. One of the implied messages in *Sybaris* is not only that contemporaries of the author are living in a dystopian reality, but that the present course of society is on the path to a violent ending. Bellamy's *Looking Backward* contains similar implications. In a nightmare within the dream, the protagonist awakens back in Boston, only to realize the full proportions of the dismal conditions of his contemporaries. A visit to the poorest districts of South Boston – visited also in *Sybaris and other Homes*, as a counter-narrative to the utopian setting of Sybaris – provides him with a vision from hell. Having compared Boston earlier to Babel, Bedlam and the Land of Ishmail, the protagonist notes: 'as I observed the wretched beings about me more closely, I perceived that they were all quite dead. Their bodies were so many living sepulchres.' (Bellamy, 1941: 266) If that is not enough to imply that late nineteenth-century urban society is on a course to destruction, the narration explicitly refers to two competing potential futures, one utopian and one apocalyptic. Awakening in the future, the protagonist shows surprise that the city he sees has not descended into total ruin: 'All I can say is, that the prospect was such when I went into that long sleep that I should not have been surprised had I looked down from your house-top to-day on a heap of charred and moss-grown ruins instead of this glorious city.' (Bellamy, 1941: 36-37) The harmoniously laid out future city of Boston is situated at the end of one specific path into the

future, but if society continued on its present, late-nineteenth-century path, the prospect of urban apocalypse seemed the more probable future.

Apocalypse in the Unreal City

Since there have been cities in literature, there have been accounts of their destruction. It is theme that pervades the literature of the city, from early Mesopotamian accounts of the flood to Plato's narrative of Atlantis in *Critias* and *Timaeus*. What we call Antiquity was already a world littered with deserted cities, as such diverse first-hand accounts as Xenophon's *Anabasis* (fourth century BC) or Pausanias's *A Guide to Greece* (second century AD) testify. In *Civilisation and its Discontent*, Freud reads the urban ruins of Rome as a metaphor for the layers of human memory and conscience (1930/1961: 16-19). But the process could be reversed, too. In literature urban destruction is often posited as thoroughly informed by or even caused by mental processes. Emphasis on how (a potentially contorted) individual consciousness filtered the urban reality, in modernist and symbolist literature, gave rise to specific aesthetics – unreal cities that reverberate with the associative processes of the mind (see e.g. Sharpe, 1990). An increasing interest in literature's capacities to describe processes of consciousness, combined with an acute fascination for end-times conspired, around the turn-of-the-twentieth century in the form of a distinctive aesthetics of disaster (cf. Ellmann & Feidelson, 1965; Spears, 1970: 42).

Apocalyptic instances are not only bound up with the falling apart of a commonly experienced world. In literature, they are more often than not evocative of a tumbling down of the mental scaffolds of the personal, inner world. In the expressionist poems of Paul van Ostaijen's *Bezette Stad* (*Occupied City*; 1921) or of Georg Heym, as well as in modernist works such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), the contemporary city becomes the scenery of collapsing inner and outer end-times, as Antwerp, Berlin and London are read in millenarian light. In such works, the

literary city has become unreal and unstable, distorted by an over-sensitive narrative consciousness.

While Eliot's lyrical persona is akin to the seer, in prose, urban apocalypse resides as often in the perspective of the madman, or that of characters that are mentally incapacitated by distress, disease, or hunger. Confusion, despair or illusion become projected upon the cityscape, and in such texts, the reader is guided to interpret the dystopian or apocalyptic cityscapes as a result of the protagonist's cognitive restrictions. In Jules Verne's *Paris au XXe siècle* (*Paris in the Twentieth Century*), utopia turns into dystopia and eventually into intimations of apocalypse for the protagonist, who, towards the end of the novel, is described as going mad, convinced that he is chased by the evil spirit of electricity (Verne, 1995: 172 ff.). Eve/Evelyn, the protagonist in *The Passion of New Eve*, is almost continuously sedated, drugged or otherwise cognitively impaired in the course of her journeys through an increasingly apocalyptic world. In Lethem's *Chronic City* (2010), the progressively apocalyptic atmosphere is not unrelated to the protagonists' extensive use of 'chronic', a potent brand of marijuana, which, as the title of the novel suggests, defines the city in the novel. Often, the characters' cognitive restrictions make it impossible to say whether the apocalyptic feel resides in the storyworld or in the protagonist's mind. A case in point is Timothy Findley's novel *Headhunter*, in which the protagonist, the schizophrenic Lilah Kemp chases Conrad's Kurtz through a disconcerting Toronto, after having 'inadvertently set … [him] free from page 92 of *Heart of Darkness*' (1993: 3).

Cities after Utopia?

Around the turn of the twentieth century, utopia thinking and writing seemed to have lost its drive. Literary utopia had run out of steam, and in critical urban theory, too, the big reach of

utopian thinking appeared something from a bygone age. As Guy Baeten argues, '[u]topian thinking, both as a literary and political genre has been rendered marginal in contemporary political practices. Urban dystopia, or "Stadtschmerz", is now prevalent in critical Western thinking about city and society' (Baeten, 2002: 143). Concomitant with this end of utopia has been the rise of dystopian, apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, and climate-catastrophe narratives, especially in popular fiction and on the big screen.

Some caveats would seem to be in place. As several of the texts discussed above showed, utopian literary narratives tend to include dystopian references – and the other way round. If literary utopia is not defined primarily by an optimistic ethos – always dependent on author or reader perspective – but by the respect in which it provides an implicit better alternative to the present world, dystopian and apocalyptic narratives cannot be excluded from the utopian literary tradition. If we follow Northrop Frye in considering dystopia not as the opposite of utopia, but as a satirical, or critical form of utopian writing, the previous decades can be considered as an age that has presented an unprecedented range of alternative worlds (future, past, or alternative) that puts the actual world in perspective, and that more often than not are in explicit dialogue with the long history of utopian and critical utopian narratives. Cities continue to take a prominent place in these representatives of the genre.

In urban planning narratives, the first decades of the new millennium have seen the reappearance of what could be considered as utopian thinking. Concomitant with this is the proclamation of a 'renaissance of the city'. Examples can be found in Far-Eastern, Middle-Eastern and Central Asian cities, but also in Western Europe and the Americas. One example that could be singled out is the appearance of a distinctively utopian Toronto around the turn of the twenty-first century, a 'Torontopia' in which utopian visions of the city from artistic and cultural actors, as

well as from the municipal level come together (Levin & Solga, 2009). Whether this is the kind of critical utopian paradigm Baeten had in mind remains to be seen. In many respects, the newspeak surrounding cultural regeneration of cities seems more like the sober appropriation of grass-root citizen movements by neo-liberal forces. Torontopia, as well as the endless plans for ever-higher skyscrapers in the desert, and the many current schemes for sweeping urban transformation worldwide, show that policy makers and planners continue to be in thrall to utopian narratives of the city. At the same time, the wide range of imaginative fiction that continues to draw on utopian traditions bears witness to the undiminished potential of city literature to project imaginative alternatives – utopian, dystopian and apocalyptic – for the cities we inhabit.

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