Metacommentary on Utopia, or Jameson's dialectic of hope

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Earth is in the grip of the system that defeated socialism, and it is clearly an irrational and destructive hierarchy. So how can we deal with it without being crushed? We have to look everywhere for answers to this, including the systems the current order defeated.

-- Kim Stanley Robinson, Green Mars.

What is most striking about Jameson's writings on Utopia is his marked interest in its failings and failures rather than its strengths and successes. Yet he is not a pessimist. His paradoxical catchcry--Utopian thought succeeds by failure--is, I want to argue, optimistic, but peculiarly so (Jameson 1982 153; 1975 239; 1973 59). Instead of prophesying a bright future on the basis of a rosy present, Jameson uses the various futures art has so far been able to imagine to diagnose what it is tempting to call the existential health of the present. Postmodernism, for instance, can conjure fantastic digital paradises in which everything a person could want would be available instantly in virtual form (as well as a host of apocalyptic scenarios, to be sure, from total environmental collapse to thermonuclear Armageddon), but appears unable to conceive of a world-system other than capitalism (Jameson 1994 xii). Criticism, then, is a matter of exposing the widespread numbness felt in the face of this poverty of imagination (Jameson 1994 61; 1971 374). Utopia, in this sense, is an essential dialectical tool. And it is precisely as a tool that I intend treating it. So instead of attempting to determine what Utopia means to Jameson, I will (as Jameson has himself already famously done) appropriate Deleuze and Guattari's anti-interpretative cri de coeur and ask how does Utopia work in Jameson (Jameson 1981 22)? In so doing, I will be following Jameson's own method of engagement, the metacommentary: it is not so much the nature of Utopia that we need to know, as the need for it.(1)

The implication I want to develop here is that for Jameson, Utopia is not a place, but a process whose mechanism I will try to flesh out here, and that however welcome and fantastic (or even unappealing, as is sometimes the case too) specific Utopias may appear to him, it is still the act of fantasizing itself that he prioritizes not the actual fantasy (Jameson 1988b 80). As in the case of the basically artless Hollywood films like The Godfather and Jaws, what impresses Jameson is the way they conceal a Utopian impulse--"that dimension of even the most degraded type of mass culture which remains implicitly, and no matter how faintly, negative and critical of the social order from which, as a product and a commodity, it springs" (Jameson 1992 29). His method consists in discovering the best in the worst, Utopia in other words, and then asking why it is that it must be so deeply buried, and moreover, why it is that no-one else seems prepared to look for it? Resistance to Utopia, the ailment he finally diagnoses our culture as suffering from, is shown to occur on two levels: first in the text itself, and second in the analysis, the latter being the more worrying of the two because it is calculated whereas the former in all likelihood is unconscious (Jameson 1994 61; 1982 154). In this way, cultural analysis has been, through recourse to such a historical notions as pleasure, desire and gratification, thoroughly depoliticized.(2) Utopia is the critical means of reversing this trend: not only does it provide an explanation of the appeal of certain texts (why they give us pleasure), it also provides a critical yardstick by which they can be measured.

While methodologically this procedure is clearly indebted to Hegel, conceptually its primary debt is to Freud, or rather to a certain form of Freudian hermeneutics based on the distinction between a symptom and its repressed idea.(3) On this view, Utopia is figured as the repressed; its conspicuous absence in most cultural texts is thus a symptom of a deep resistance. Of course, the fact texts are actually cast as symptomatic means this particular repressed is, thankfully, irrepressible, that is to say, insistently returning (Jameson 1973 68). The larger goal of Jameson's criticism, then, is to diagnose the source of this censorship, and, in the same gesture, perform a kind of cultural "talking cure" by bringing into the open the repressed idea of Utopia as it exists in popular and other texts. The cure is not easily effected, however, because by definition the censorship of its message is systemic, not capricious: our culture does not merely repress its Utopian impulses because of some inexplicable whim, or even out of a sense of its impossibility (if that were so, it could be

easily remedied: it would only be a matter adjusting our collective reality principle, something the rapid uptake of new technologies would suggest is readily done); rather, if Utopia is truly subject to resistance, it must be the case that our culture somehow believes that Utopian visions are incompatible with the very organization of our society. To the extent he is able to effect a cure, Jameson does so by demonstrating that collectively we suffer a neurosis we might call, to coin a term, false anxiety. It is not really Utopia which makes us anxious, he shows, but the fact that a context in which Utopian ideas can be freely uttered and discussed has been lost to us.(4)

The cause of this loss is, in short, history. In so saying, we do not part company with Freud, as might be expected, because Freud himself says to fully understand the nature of repression, and indeed the nature of what is repressed, we have first of all to grasp the "structure of the succession of psychical agencies" (Freud 1991: 147) by which he means to say repression occurs in stages. In the first instance, the ideational representative of an instinct is, for whatever reason, denied entrance into the conscious. Subsequently, a fixation is established, with the effect that from then on, the idea is prevented from developing further, or somehow evolving, and is permanently attached to the instinct it initially served to represent. What Freud calls `repression proper,' the next or second stage of repression, follows this: all ideas which, however loosely, call to mind this now repressed idea, are made to suffer the same fate, and are similarly banished from the conscious. But, Freud notes, "it is a mistake to emphasize only the repulsion which operates from the direction of the conscious upon what is to be repressed; quite as important is the attraction exercised by what was primally repressed upon everything with which it can establish a connection" (Freud 1991: 148). In order to point up this latter and too little emphasized aspect of Utopia, Jameson has suggested that it be thought of as a machine.

Metacommentary alone cannot deal with this shift, however, because it is not properly speaking of a meta order; it is not, in other words, an alternate apprehension of Utopia that is at issue, a transcoding or change of codes, but something much more fundamental (in a philosophical sense): what I want to call, a new way of thinking it.(5) For one thing, by freeing it from the fixating grip of repression, Jameson opens Utopia to change once more, transforming it into a dynamic concept. As should be obvious, from this one point alone, defining Utopia as a machine is an instrumental move and needs to be dealt with for itself. To do this, the process behind its conceptualization needs to be made apparent, which returns us to Deleuze. His method, which I cannot do justice to here, provides a means of ascertaining the nature and function of concepts that does not at the same time hypostatize them. For Deleuze philosophy is composed of a series of carefully worked out problems, or if you prefer, questions (Deleuze 1991 106). And the greatest of all these problems is the problem of where to begin. "Where to begin in philosophy has always--rightly--been regarded as a very delicate problem," Deleuze says, "for beginning means eliminating all presuppositions" (Deleuze 1994 129). This is not to say presuppositions are irreducibly obscure, however, or that all philosophy is heterological, which is to say sponsored by the stipulation of an invisible and ineffable Other, but rather to observe that the first task of philosophy is to think its beginnings.(6) This task begins with the establishment of good and rigorous questions, by which he means any question that does not predetermine its solution.(7)

Just how far from easy this assignment is can readily be seen by simply asking: `what is Utopia?' This question not only presupposes both the possibility and the character of Utopia, it takes us no further than its object. It condemns us to tautology; for if we were to say Utopia is anything besides Utopia we would not be answering the question. Not only that, any such tautology is also always already a misrecognition since the word `Utopia' is not itself `Utopia' but its designation. What one must do, therefore, is find a way of getting into the middle of things, and staying there (which does not mean staying put), because only there can the limitations of the twin obstacles of `where to begin?' and `where will it end?' be, in Deleuze's terms, made to stammer (Deleuze & Parnet 1987 35). For Deleuze, being in the middle means locating the point where connections are made, the set of relations that link us to Utopia being the most pertinent to our purposes here, and stammering is the acceleration of this process. When Deleuze changes the question from `what does it mean?' to `how does it work?' his aim is to discover the logic of a text, the principle behind the connections it makes, and their type. The concept of the rhizome is doubtless the most developed example of this mode of critical inquiry, but by no means is it the only one. Insofar as Jameson is concerned, it should be noted that The Political Unconscious is explicitly dedicated to developing the implications of this hermeneutic shift

inaugurated by Deleuze which, in Jameson's view, "amounts less to a wholesale nullification of all interpretative activity than to a demand for the construction of some new and more adequate, immanent or antitranscendent model" (Jameson 1981 23). Utopia, as I will try to show, is a crucial component of this new model, its driving force in fact.

Now we can ask a very precise question: how does an immanent Utopia work? This question no doubt comes as something of a surprise because Jameson frequently defines Utopia in such a way as to make it appear transcendental: by placing it structurally beyond the capacity of writers and thinkers alike to imagine fully, Jameson makes Utopia seem transcendental in the classic Kantian sense, that is, something which must be posited because it is a necessary frame for thought but cannot be presented. Yet, crucially, it is not as a frame for thought that he actually uses it.(8) In his accounts of Science Fiction, Jameson follows Suvin in suggesting Utopia--or, more generally, the future--might serve the same function as Brecht's `estrangement' (Jameson forthcoming 26; 1973: 58). In the case of Brian Aldiss's Starship, the futuristic substitution of culture (the starship itself) for nature (the real world, as it were), results in a twofold estrangement:

> on the one hand, it causes us obscurely to doubt whether our own institutions are quite as natural as we supposed, and whether our `real' open-air environment may not itself be as confining and constricting as the closed world of the ship; on the other hand, it casts uncertainty on the principle of the `natural' itself, which as a conceptual category no longer seems quite so self-justifying and common-sensical. (Jameson 1973: 58)

Here it is the inability of the author, in spite of his evident imaginativeness, to create a truly alternative universe that for Jameson evokes a Utopian dimension, a dimension he ascribes to all Science Fiction. By force of its failure we are returned all the more intensely to the real (Jameson 1973 59). This is what it means to succeed by failure; but, what is important for our purposes, however, is the fact that it is an immanent dimension--immanent because it is a failure, because it never rises above the realm in which it is and can be thought. In my view, though, it is not until The Seeds of Time, that the full significance of this becomes clear. There Jameson defines Utopia as a machine.

The object of the Utopian text, Jameson argues in The Seeds of Time, is not to tell a story or predict the future, or even to wrestle with the various calamities that apparently await humanity in the hope of developing a tonic or cure; such tasks, he suggests, belong properly speaking to the dystopian text, which, following Deleuze's separation of sadism from masochism, he proposes is not of the same order as the Utopian, and needs to be kept distinct from it in our minds. Whereas the dystopian text deploys Utopian images and concepts as so many plot-devices, the genuinely Utopian text transforms them into objects of representation in their own right (on this view, even infernal machines such as one finds in Kafka and Platonov are to be considered Utopian, albeit structural inversions, rather than dystopian as they might perhaps appear [Jameson 1994 58]). It does so because the thing the Utopian machine is meant to produce, namely the living reality of Utopia itself, actually defies any such presentation. Two insurmountable obstacles stand in the way of its figuration, and, as I aim to show, it is precisely these obstacles that call on us to think Utopia in a new way. The first is a fear of the simulacra: "if you know already what your longed-for exercise in a not-yet-existent freedom looks like, then the suspicion arises that it may not really express freedom after all but only repetition" (Jameson 1994 56). The second is a fear of projection: the worry, in other words, that the open future one dreams of is--unbeknownst to you or anyone else--always already contaminated by your "own deformed and repressed social habits" (Jameson 1994 56). And here again it is a matter of succeeding by failure: by absorbing all such aspects of unfreedom into itself, and confronting the very forces of unfreedom directly, the Utopian machine creates an environment in which freedom can flourish, but only beyond its confines.

Philosophically, this presents a rather curious problem which, because of its paradoxical presentation by non-presentation, might be staged as follows: What is by virtue of not being? But this is not quite right, because while it is true the Utopian machine presents itself by not presenting what it in fact represents, it also calls to mind that which it does not present by virtue of not presenting, thus creating a situation familiar to us from

speech-act theory. The Utopian utterance performs Utopia even when and where it does not actually state it. So it is as a performative, the nature of which we are yet to specify, that Utopia is finally to be reckoned. But what kind of performative is it? Fortunately, the list of options is relatively short, and there is really only one that fits the bill, and that is the act of promising. When you promise something you create an expectation, but do not fulfil it--except at the cost of extinguishing the promise itself, and that is their whole point. The promise thus holds its endpoint (which cannot--of course--be experienced in the act of promising itself) in front of us right from the outset and calls on us to acquit it, to make it happen, as it were, and vanishes in the instant we do. In respect of this, the question might be better posed in this way: What is by virtue of being not yet? Utopia, I want to suggest, takes the form of a promise, or better a promising-machine. In this way we are able to say what it is by telling what it does, thus relieving ourselves of the burden of having to describe its peculiarly unpresentable content. More importantly, it provides a structural means of binding us to Utopian thought in a way that definitions of it as anticipatory fatally do not. Utopia is to us the promise of a better future.(9)

The promise, according to Derrida, owes its possibility "to the ordeal of undecidability" (Derrida 1994 74), by which he means to say, it can neither be recuperated as an onto-theological concept, nor a teleo-eschatological one. It is undecidable, finally, because it does not actually deliver anything, or transmute into anything, but rather in the manner of a perfect gift persists as a contract binding only itself to itself, calling for no recompense of recognition.(10) In Derrida though, the promise is treated rather weakly as messianism. His notion of the perfect gift has, I think, much greater Utopian and/or philosophical potential than he allows, which can be released if its dynamic ontology is turned into the basis of a dialectic. This is, of course, precisely what Jameson does under the auspices of dialectical materialism, but without touching on the issue of the ontology of Utopia. Yet, I would say, underpinning this historical method there is an entire metaphysics of the ontology of Utopia that Jameson does not ever fully explain, and which, in fact, really only surfaces in cryptic form in the dedication and title to The Seeds of Time. What are seeds of time? Can they be given a more conceptual, or at any rate, less prosaic form? The answer to this is yes, but to explain myself, to explain the dynamic ontology of Utopia which I believe underpins the historical dialectic, in other words, I need now to turn more directly to Deleuze. In particular I want to utilise another of Deleuze's famous categorical separations, namely his break-up of the conventional connection between real and virtual.

Let me start by saying, that like any other seed the seeds of time are promises. That we do not know which of them will flourish, and which of them will perish, is precisely the nature of any promise, for who can tell which of the many promises in which we are all imbricated will be made good and which will be left to wither and die. And it is precisely this lack of certainty which makes them Utopian, for it is what keeps the seeds open to the future, open to new possibilities. Less optimistic economies guard against unfulfilled promises with the notion of debt--potlatch and so on--which Deleuze and Guattari rightly see as the foundation of capitalism, rather than profit per se (Deleuze & Guattari 1983 149).(11) In other words, it is not the lack of certainty that is constitutive of Utopia--lack does not motivate it, in the way lack motivates Lacanian psychoanalysis for instance (which, on this view, we must now see as irreducibly dystopian)--but rather the fact that no guarantees are felt necessary. My point is that while promises bind us, they do not obligate us; they are not contracts or transferences, but voluntary undertakings for which--strictly speaking--we expect no reward. As such, the promise has no part to play in capitalism: instead, it might be the heart of peaceful collective life, or at least the fantasy of such an existence. That this sounds fantastic is, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, precisely capitalism's means of destroying it.

> The deliberate creation of lack as a function of market economy is the art of the dominant class. This involves deliberately organizing wants and needs (manque) amid an abundance of production; making all of desire teeter and fall victim to the great fear of not having one's needs satisfied; and making the object dependent upon a real production that is supposedly exterior to desire (the demands of rationality), while at the same time the production of desire is categorized as fantasy and nothing but fantasy. (Deleuze & Guattari 1983 28 [emphasis added])

The philosophical challenge before us then is to devise a means of thinking the fantastic in a real, rational way, immune to the disparaging and abusive neglect of an apparently inalterably productivist economy and society. This challenge is to be met by thinking through the unthought of Utopia, its metaphysical element. The anomalous ontological status of the promise is not made sensible by introducing the binary real and unreal, or even symbolic and real, where the promise would be the unreal symbol and the promised its real opposite, however, for the promise is no more or less real than either the past or the future, nor is it unreal in contrast to the reality of the quotidian here and now. As a performative, the promise is just as real, just as effective, as what is promised, which, by the same token, since it always already remains to be seen, is just as symbolic as the promise. The better distinction, therefore, as Deleuze has shown, is the one that puts both on the plane of the real and distinguishes instead between their comparative actuality and virtuality (Deleuze 1994 208). Note, also, that it is not a matter of separating the real from the possible, as alternative for virtual, for the possible can only be thought as a limit to the real, whereas the virtual imposes no restrictions beyond the limit of the imagination (Deleuze 1994 211). An idea, in this scheme, is the virtual aspect of an activity, and becomes actual the moment it is put into practice, actualised; while the practice is actual it becomes virtual the minute it is enacted because of its dependence on a certain image of itself as doing something, virtualised. This process is conceived as dynamic and interactive by Deleuze, the twin transformation being his explanation for the unfolding of new lifeworlds.

If we take Utopia as our example, this can perhaps be made somewhat clearer. Utopia, insofar as it is an idea, is virtual; it is an image without substance. Yet, the very thinking of such a thought is, as Jameson tirelessly counsels, the inauguration of a process that may well culminate in the creation of a Utopia; so, as it is thought, the virtual idea becomes actual. By the same token, the actual, whatever steps are made toward the creation of a Utopia, are themselves virtualised, bonded to an idea, an ambition. Philosophically, this explains, and strengthens, what Jameson casts as the weaker form of Utopian thinking, namely the attempt to change the world by transforming its forms (Jameson 1988b 109). It strengthens it because it does not merely say Utopian thinking returns us to the real, which is Jameson's catchcry, it says rather that Utopia is real, and thinking it transmutes the real itself. This notion is not foreign to Jameson, however, merely it is recast in different terms. For Jameson, the futurity of Utopias is an essential working component that serves to keep the achievements of the present in their proper perspective. Hence the slogan, `always historicize.' Crucial, then, is its dynamic mechanism, the constant movement between actual and virtual, what Deleuze calls becoming, that accounts for the power of thought, as it were, by connecting time and space, original and copy. It is the rhythm of this movement that affirms the choice of promise as an apt rendering of Utopia.

If Utopia is virtual, or inactual, then it is also waiting to be actualized, which is to say anything but static--all waiting is waiting for something to happen, and as such a code-word for the perpetual happening of the present. While on first inspection, Utopia appears to be a space, weirdly lifeless and inert, as Jameson points out, and usually, from More onwards, is figured as such--a better world--it turns out, strangely enough, that it can only be thought in temporal terms, because Utopia, by definition, cannot be actualized in the present (Jameson 1988b 95). Otherwise, as Deleuze might have put it, why aren't we already experiencing it (Deleuze 1983 47)? It is either a relic of the past, an Arcadia or Eden from which we have been expelled, or the perfection of fate, heaven, nirvana, etc., or the promise of a better world, Marxism, feminism etc., which is thought in the present but only able to be experienced in the future. Of the three forms, the latter is the most elusive, and for that reason the most promising (in that it cannot be thought in concrete terms). It is also the only one concerned with difference, the other two are actually quite conservative, something that can readily be seen by enumerating the experience each form can give rise to. How do we experience Utopia? The three experiences of Utopia that can be identified, are each defined according to the temporality of the Utopia in question: (1) We lament the passing of the past, and long for its return (return of the same), and experience that longing as nostalgia or melancholy. (2) We also long for our heavenly future, and suffer in its name, and call that experience faith (the elimination of difference). (3) The still to be realised promise of the promise is the stuff of dreamers and revolutionaries and is experienced as motive (the desire for and the instituting of difference). For while the past has been, and the future already is, the promise is always already still to be and has no way of being except at the cost of extinguishment--to be is in this case to not yet be. It is this problem, the difficulty of cataloguing or describing the experience of Utopia that demands it be thought in machinic, rather than narrative terms. For it is only in the experiencing of Utopia that Utopia can truly be said to be

Utopian, where Utopian means a better life. This is best understood as machinic, as Deleuze and Guattari have explained, because narrative refers to the meaning of existence, not the fact of existing.

The critical implications of these three experiences of Utopia have been elaborated upon by Jameson in his various accounts of popular culture. Film, for instance, insofar as it provides a symbolic solution to an equally symbolic problem, is analogous to past-Utopia; it constitutes what Metz called a good-object, something that makes us feel good but necessitates no action. It exists, but we cannot access it, but at least we can bask in the warm glow of its memory. By the same token, the already realised Utopias of religious fabulation necessitate too much action on our behalf; where mass culture is proscriptive, it is prescriptive. We stand before this Utopia, trembling like as not, and apprehend it via our sense of our own inadequacy. This Utopia is not of our own devising and our actions are only ever turned toward atonement. In contrast to the other two, Utopia as promise is inscriptive: it is writerly whereas the other two are readerly. It infuses the real with a higher goal, or to put it another way, gives existence a purpose beyond simply existing, namely to continue to improve the conditions of one's existence. We do not thus raise ourselves up to its benchmark as in heaven, but rather use it to raise ourselves up--we work through it. Most of the objections to Utopia are raised in response to this latter form, the promise, and yet precious few actually think it in temporal terms, which would mean, as Derrida might say, meditating on the implications of promising rather than musing on the promised. In a different way, Jameson has shown how the apparently promised is used as a stick with which to beat all forms of Utopian politics, never mind the disjunctions between what was promised and what was actually delivered.

In order to release the promise of Utopia, the Utopian machine has, according to Jameson, two formal problems it must overcome, which as we have seen, it does by absorption (Jameson 1994 52-6). The problems are absorbed into the figuration of the Utopia itself, as two brief examples will show. The first major hurdle is the apparent necessity of negation: it seems impossible to make any radical changes to our present situation except by cancelling it altogether and starting over. In a world characterized by frequent change, which is how postmodernity now thinks itself, this would entail instituting an utterly discrediting system of no-change, the absolute antithesis of the Utopian impulse. This is the problem explored by Kim Stanley Robinson's (1992) fantastically imaginative, Red Mars, which Jameson sees as being not only "the great political novel of the 1990s" but also the "place in which the interrelationships of the various radical or revolutionary groups have been most vividly rehearsed in our own time" (Jameson 1994 65). It is a late example of a Fourieresque totalization, bringing together a diverse bunch of conflicting ideologies and groups to demonstrate, in virtual form, the possibility of actual harmony. Ostensibly, the novel hinges on a single question: whether to terraform Mars or not? But this is soon shown to be anything but a unidimensional issue: terraforming itself is so complex an idea, depending on such a wide array of technology, yet still contingent on the vagaries of environment, that it cannot be described as being simply this or that. There are modalities, as it were, of terraforming, and each of these has its own adherents, and matching ideologies.

At one extreme, there is Ann who advocates no change at all, but this position is basically asocial since it takes no account of what it means to live on Mars, only what it means to be on Mars. The other extreme is represented by the fantasy of Mars being transformed into a second earth, a veritable garden of Eden. Between these two extremes are a plethora of socially figured Utopias, all depending one way or another on some form of cancellation, which I will here define as the opposite of what Jameson (1975) has defined as world-reduction (scarcity on Mars is the problem around which the narrative revolves, not a reflexive condition of it). According to the Russian anarchist, Arkady, in order to have a political Utopia on Mars, earth ideas concerning economics and sexual politics, among other things, have to be cancelled; that is, left on earth. In their stead, a new Martian cosmology, reflecting Martian values, which mostly means writing on a blank slate, has to be created. In economic terms, as Arkady consistently argues, this means keeping big business out by preventing the ownership of Mars by individuals or groups and maintaining a rigorous control on immigration. In cultural terms, this means setting up a truly socialist society, an ideal which is still too earthbound for some. Turning their back on earth ideas altogether, Hiroko and a small group of like-minded agriculturalists, found a pagan cult and worship the very dirt of Mars in strange nee-primitive rituals designed to bring them into close spiritual contact with the alien planet. On the other side of the equation, there is an equally vociferous and active group who desperately want to cancel Mars and terraform it in order to better enjoy it as an earth away from earth Utopia. This group seem to have a monopoly on good sense because

Mars is essentially uninhabitable by humans; yet the extent of the changes they have in mind, such as the creation of an oxygen rich atmosphere, are born of a total negation of the reality that they are on Mars. Rather, they operate as though they had been given the raw materials with which to create earth, again. But between them, and ultimately between all groups that emerge on Mars, is Frank Chalmers, the pragmatist, to my mind the most interesting and intriguing character of them all. He represents the necessity and failure of pragmatism in politics, and it is surely telling that even after his death his name is used almost totemically to recollect this fact, leaving us to conclude that only the idealistic is really ideal.

This brings us to the second obstacle to Utopian thought, namely projection; that is, the problem of creating a perfect future by infusing it with what one person, or group, fancies the present presently lacks, which usually means ideals such as freedom and equality variously redefined as prosperity and autonomy. Yet, projection, as the subtitle to Ursula K. Le Guin's (1974) The Dispossessed perhaps counsels, can only result in an ambiguous Utopia because, as Deleuze and Guattari have cautioned, and Lyotard has complained, we have no way of knowing what counts as the genuinely ameliorative when it is the future we are talking about because its material conditions are by definition beyond our imagining except in the form of an uncomplicated continuation of the present, an idea that is now mostly dismissed as a fanciful (Deleuze & Guattari 1994 100; Lyotard 1992 24). So the ideal must be judged by the pragmatic. And if there is one thing Science Fiction has clearly shown, it is that new problems arise in response to new conditions, a fact which, as cybernetic theoreticians like Gregory Bateson began to show some forty years ago, has been ignored at enormous cost. The idea of the eco-system means that change can only be made at a systemic level: the elimination or addition of a single component changes the system as a whole. Countless economic and environmental disasters attest to this: from silt in the Nile, to algae blooms in practically every waterway in the Western world, Utopian visions built around the ideal of enriching the present world by adding something it presently lacks come unstuck as unexpected outcomes take effect.(12) The act of creating a new world or society may well be Utopian in spirit, but the world or society that results is like any other human habitat: profoundly complicated.

In The Dispossessed, the Utopia it depicts is an extreme version of an economically derived view of the world we may dimly recognize (however it may actually have been derived--whether anarchism or Taoism) as an existential form of Marxism. Utopia, according to its theorist Odo, a dissident philosopher, means self-possession won by dispossessing oneself of the very habit of possession. Yet even on the marvellous colony of Anarres, which was created in accordance with Odonian principles, Utopia is ambiguous. The right to do what one is good at (such as physics, or a certain type of marine biology), the fight to stay together or live as partners, the right to publish one's own work and the right of movement (travel to Urras and back), are all held to be in insoluble conflict with the greater good of the Anarres community. The ambiguity of the novel's conclusion is that one must accept the narrowness of the community in order to have a community of this type--its simple principles create the very circumstances that Shevek finds so constrictive. But in accepting this narrowness, one must also be prepared to create the friction one will inevitably experience when one upsets the order of things as one must from time to time do. The essential problem this novel explores is, I think, a conceptual one: most of the difficulties Shevek encounters in his life spring from the fact that on Anarres they lacked a category to replace property in the case of love between people, and parents and children, and also place and career. His book, his career, his partner, his children, his life even, are all problematic notions on Anarres because they are predicated by a possessive, yet Shevek does not experience any of them as possessions.

Jameson's work does not promise this or that, but rather calls us to account for the present from the perspective of the future, and in so doing asks us to recognize that the future is in our hands, which is to say, the future is now unfolding because of us, or else in spite of us. This is what the slogan `always historicize' means when it is turned around and made to look forwards, not backwards.

NOTES

(1.) This is an extrapolation of Jameson's notion of metacommentary, which method is spelled out in the following quote: "The starting point for any genuinely profitable discussion of interpretation must not be the nature of interpretation, but the need for it in the first place" (Jameson 1988a: 5).

(2.) In The Seeds of Time Utopia is given precisely a repoliticizing, therapeutic task: "There is," Jameson says, "a collective therapy to be performed on the victims of depoliticization themselves, a rigorous look at everything we fantasize as mutilating, as privative, as oppressive, as mournful and depressing, about all the available visions of a radical transformation in the social order" (Jameson 1994: 61).

(3.) As Jameson himself puts it, metacommentary "implies a model not unlike the Freudian hermeneutic (divested, to be sure, of its specific content, of the topology of the unconscious, the nature of the libido, and so forth), one based on the distinction between symptom and repressed idea, between manifest and latent content, between the disguise and the message disguised" (Jameson 1988a: 13).

(4.) This is not to say, however, that the fear of Utopia is without a genuine dimension for indeed, as Jameson points out, there is good reason to be anxious about Utopia--its installation in particular--but rather than defining or explaining it, this simply adds to the weight of existing ideological resistance and inertia. Cf Jameson 1994: 66-1.

(5.) For a definition of transcoding, which Jameson explicitly positions as the next or higher stage of metacommentary, see Jameson 1988b: viii.

(6.) For this definition of heterology see de Certeau 1984: 3.

(7.) "In fact a philosophical theory is an elaborately developed question, and nothing else; by itself and in itself, it is not the resolution to a problem, but the elaboration, to the very end, of the necessary implications of a formulated question" (Deleuze 1991: 106).

(8.) The suggestion that Utopia is an immanent rather than transcendental notion is Marin's. See Jameson 1988b: 88.

(9.) It is worth noting that Jameson describes one of the institutions of Utopia as precisely "a promise of the fulfilment of collective living" (Jameson 1988b: 95)

(10.) "Now the gift, if there is any, would no doubt be related to economy. One cannot treat the gift, this goes without saying, without treating this relation to economy, even to the money economy. But is not the gift, if there is any, also that which interrupts the economy? That which, in suspending economic calculation, no longer gives rise to exchange? [...] if the figure of the circle is essential economics, the gift must remain aneconomic. Not that it remains foreign to the circle, but it must keep a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness" (Derrida 1992: 7).

(11.) It is interesting to note, in this respect, that in Kim Stanley Robinson's Green Mars (1992: 368-70) potlatch appears precisely as a means of warding off or somehow avoiding capitalism, rather than an anticipation of it.

(12.) I take this example from Conley 1997: 56-60.

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