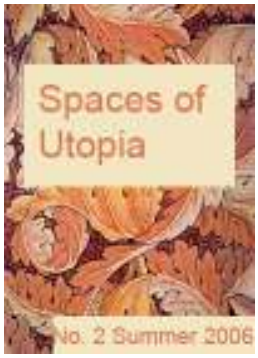
# Utopia Re-Interpreted

## An Interview with Vita Fortunati

**By Iolanda Ramos**

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Vita Fortunati, Professor of English Literature at the University of Bologna, has published extensively on modernism, utopian literature, women's studies and Interart studies. She is the editor of the *Dictionary of Literary Utopias* (with R. Trousson, Paris, Champion, 2000) and of *Perfezione e Finitudine*: *La concezione della morte in utopia in età moderna e contemporanea* (with M. Sozzi and P. Spinozzi, Torino, Lindau, 2004).

An Interdepartmental Research Centre on Utopia has been active in the University of Bologna, since 1989, under the direction of Professor Vita Fortunati. Since 2002 she has also been the Co-ordinator of ACUME – A European Thematic Network on Cultural Memory in European Countries.

We have asked Vita Fortunati a few questions about her research interests in the field of Studies on Utopia.

**Q.** In 1975 you published *La Letteratura Utopica Inglese*. Was it your response to the general assumption that utopia, over the centuries, has traditionally been a male genre?

**A.** When I wrote my book on the utopian genre in the 1970s, I felt an urgent need to trace the history of utopias from the female point of view. The book revealed the existence of a profound gap between the reformist intention which the utopist demonstrated in writing his innovative political-economic and religious proposals and his moralistic and censorial conservatism, when dealing

with the problem of women. Utopian projects which for men incarnate male tensions and desire for renewal, do not represent an alternative place for women. In the traditional utopia, there is no possibility for women to escape reality. The utopist, when dealing with this subject, does not do so in a critical manner but merely repeats the myths and customs of the patriarchal society of the time: on the one hand, women become the object of his desire, on the other, there is the prevailing image of women as life-givers and providers of goods and values. Reviewing the history of utopia in a female perspective revealed the duplicity of the image of women in Western culture: on the one hand, women as 'land to be cultivated', 'womb', exalted and sublimated because of their naturalness, on the other, women as an obscure, threatening force, with an insatiable sexual appetite. So utopia becomes either the place in which the utopist gives voice to the most unrestrained erotic aspirations or the place in which the fear of sex and women is exorcised by rigorous Eugenic practices.

The subordinate position of women in utopia could be explained by the fact that the majority of utopias of the past were written by men. But this explanation is insufficient because the few utopias written by women do not present a radically new vision compared to the male utopias. In these utopias, in fact, a patriarchal vision is replaced by a matriarchal vision in which men have been eliminated (see, for example, some utopias in which the myth of the Amazons is taken up again), but the image and the roles of women only appear to be *new* because, in reality, these women in power blindly repeat and ape male roles. On the other hand, the incapacity and impotence of these women to think independently, this need to relate to the male world in order to define themselves, is the historical consequence of the fact that power management, be it political or religious, and economic planning and scientific research were the prerogative and sphere of male domination.

**Q**. What is your opinion on the link between utopianism and feminism?

**A.** Although some scholars have defined the 20$^{th}$ century as a graveyard of utopian writing, from the end of the 1970s and especially in the last three

decades of the 20th century, there has been a considerable flourishing of utopian and science-fiction writing by women, especially in North America. This rebirth of utopia as a literary genre can be explained by the happy marriage between feminism and utopianism. The utopian and science-fiction genre is seen by writers both as a privileged strategy for deconstructing the patriarchal system, responsible for the exclusion and oppression of women, and as fertile ground for narrative and stylistic experimentation, searching for a female utopian language. There are, in my opinion, some specific reasons for this important link between feminism and utopianism. One of the aspects which feminism has in common with utopia is not only the desire to criticize and deconstruct the *status quo*, but also, and more importantly, the desire to present a world which is radically different from the present: that is, a world no longer structured on the rigid traditional division of sexual roles, a world capable of giving voice to 'the female territory of difference'. It is no coincidence, in fact, that feminist philosophers, such as Rosi Braidotti in her book *Nomadic Subjects* (1994), have strongly emphasized how the post-structuralist stage of feminism is characterized by a profound utopian tension and by a considerable vein of inventive creativity. Female thought, in fact, has worked to reveal the close relations between logocentrism and phallocentrism, to go beyond binary logic and affirm the importance of differences between women. Women have come up with a strong criticism of the Cartesian notion of the thinking Subject which permitted a clear distinction between body and mind, to give rise to a new concept of the body as a place of interaction between material and symbolic forces: the body as threshold, a surface area which is inscribed with many codes of power and knowledge. Female thought, therefore, is profoundly pervaded by a wide planning capacity which leads to the formulation of new conceptual schemes and, above all, to the creation of alternative political fictions, reviewing old myths to suggest new ones. This feminist project could not but find the utopian genre ideal, as it was this genre which naturalized this desire to break preset schemes and, above all, the ability to look at the present situation with foreign eyes. Women can do this, as they have been excluded, for centuries, from political power and social life. They have developed a detached point of view which allows them to see original possibilities,

unthinkable for anyone only interested in preserving domination. Women, therefore, create for themselves a condition which Simone de Beauvoir, in her seminal work, *The Second Sex,* identified as different from that of men. From this territory of difference, they develop the critical point of view which strongly animates feminist utopias and represents the opposite pole to the dominating patriarchal ideology. We can make a distinction between utopias only populated by women and separatist utopias where the female utopian community is rigorously divided from the male community, which has dystopian characteristics. I am referring to utopias such as *The Wanderground* (1978) by Sally Gearhart, *Motherlines* (1978) by Suzy McKee Charnas, *The Female Man* (1975) by Joanna Russ and *Houston, Houston do you read?* (1976) by James Tiptree. There has been much debate about these utopias, because, far from proposing alternative realities due to their extreme radicalism, they use mental formulas and frameworks which man always applies when dealing with women. I agree with the position of some scholars who emphasize the usefulness of the separatist utopia as a rhetorical strategy for eliminating patriarchal and sexist logic from society.

Female utopian writing of the last thirty years, in fact, has given voice to new utopian models which are desirable because they exalt the real values of female culture: pacifism, ecology and decentralization of power. These utopias come to represent, for an ever increasing number of women writers, the possibility of giving voice to an unexplored female universe, as they permit the representation of unusual situations as well as experimentation with new behavioral models. Utopia, as journey in time and space, could only be a splendid metaphor for this adventure in a territory not yet completely explored by the female conscience. Therefore, utopia, as a project for a new alternative reality, also becomes a metaphor for the construction of the 'new woman', a new concept of the female far away from the discriminating concept forged by patriarchal culture.

**Q.** Do you therefore assert that women writers have revised the concept of utopia, renewing a genre both from the formal point of view and in terms of contents?

**A.** The revival of utopian writing is centered on a revision of the concept of utopia and its paradigm. A static utopia of eternal and unchangeable happiness is replaced by one which is new, kinetic and 'in progress': a utopia constantly involved in self-criticism to avoid the risk of immobility and institutionalization. Tom Moylan, in his book of 1986, *Demand the Impossible*, proposes the important concept of 'critical utopia', which does away with the Manichean division between the source society (the one to be deconstructed) and the point of arrival (the perfect utopia). There is a higher level of conflict between the source society and the new utopian society, because not only do the writers emphasize the process of social change which leads to utopia, but also because there is a constant desire to debate the utopian society itself.

The critical utopias written by women not only criticize, unmask and investigate the imperfections of present-day society, but also those of the alternative society, of the utopia itself, which is not in the least immune from errors, problems and failures. In the 'critical utopia' the attitude of the inhabitants of the utopia has also changed; they are no longer passive followers of orders, but individuals who are actively involved in the creation of possible alternatives. The inhabitants of the utopia force themselves to explore human potential and revolutionary strategies and tactics to confront and change an unsatisfying reality. Utopia, then, is no longer static and is no longer a system which has been planned one time for all, but a continuous battle to achieve a better world. This new concept of utopia which is open and problematic inevitably leads to a lucid revision of the utopian paradigm whose rules appear to be constrictive and limiting.

**Q.** Can you briefly illustrate how women writers have made the concept of "critical utopia" their own?

**A.** I will use, as a point of reference, the work of a great science-fiction writer, Ursula Le Guin, who, for some time, has been questioning the great heuristic capacities of the utopian and science-fiction genre. For this important and profound critical revision, she makes use of the vast patrimony involving several

cultures: European, American, Indian and Oriental. This cultural syncretism seems to be self-evident in her essay of 1982 with the emblematic title “A Non-Euclidean View of California”, where she defines her utopia as yin, that is, anarchic, pacifist, feminist and ecological, as opposed to the male utopia characterized by the ideas of control, absolute perfection, linearity and the logic of language. Le Guin's utopia does not want to be European, Euclidean or male. Le Guin creates a dialectic dialogue with the Western utopian tradition dominated by a force which wants to control every aspect of reality and, above all, emphasizes the dominating and imperialistic vein which underscores much utopian and science-fiction literature. The utopist who theorizes the future utopian location is dominated by a conquering ‘European’ spirit and by the Euclidean presumption of dictating one’s own laws and of dominating the future from the present. In the Western utopia, there is this blind faith in reason, the single and uncontestable instrument for definitively solving the problems of humanity. This type of conception does not consider that human experience is not only multiple, but that it acquires a particular nature in every single individual. Le Guin, however, does not categorically reject reason; she rejects, in the name of individual liberty, ‘the happiness at all costs’ desired in the classics of Western tradition: a Euro-centric utopia in which the other worlds only exist so that they can be conquered and exploited without any respect for those who already live there. For Le Guin, on the other hand, it is fundamental to think of the future and of utopia as something which does not belong to us because someone else already lives there. Le Guin's utopia, however, is never, unlike many feminist utopias, a separatist utopia, because it is inspired by Taoist philosophy which is based on the balancing of opposites.

The need to review the traditional language of utopia is seen in Le Guin's narrative in the importance which she attributes to the active, not passive, role of the reader of her novels: the narrative strategies which Le Guin invents are aimed at arousing, in the reader, a curiosity for exploring alternative worlds. All of Le Guin's work is characterized by a continuous experimentation: from her first volume *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), where she deals with the fascinating theme of androgyny, to *The Dispossessed* (1974) which contains a vision of an ideal society based on anarchic ideology, to *The Word for World is*

*Forest* (1972) and *The Eye of the Heron* (1978) in which utopia and dystopia coexist, to arrive at *Always Coming Home* (1985), her most subversive and feminist utopian text. These works can be interpreted as consecutive stages to arrive at a revision of the very concept of utopia and as attempts to find the most suitable formula for containing and driving her utopian project which always has anarchic, pacifist and feminist values.

**Q**. Would you point out other differences in the way scholars tackle the subject of utopia from the 80s up to now?

**A.** Utopia is distinguished by intertextuality, i.e. it implies and in its turn enriches a net of intersections and cross-references both on a formal and on a substantial level. It presupposes the knowledge, on the part of the writer and the reader, of the thematic and structural features that mark it and that are represented, re-elaborated, certainly, and re-contextualized, in different texts, conceived in different historical contexts. Utopia, furthermore, is a polysemic object, by its very nature it lends itself to be analysed by means of different critical methods, and it is transversal, that is, it crosses many cultural areas and historical periods. Hypertextuality, being polysemic and transversal, gives utopia a complexity that opens wide research prospects. I would say then that studying utopia is propitious, especially now in a planetary society, because we are pursuing a field of research that is still open.

Nevertheless, I would like to stress that in the last years utopian studies and certainly research carried out by the Bologna Centre have primarily followed two paths. The first is focused on strictly theoretic and methodological issues: the definition of 'utopia', 'anti-utopia' and 'dystopia', in order to overcome the dichotomy, that in the last years had generated discussion, between the straightforward, separated representation of the best and worst of possible worlds. With the term 'critical utopia' we intend to refer to the description of an *otherplace, a nowhere* carried out by means of a process of deconstruction and reconstruction, reconciled in an *other* world, no longer strictly codified, but open to the subject's negotiations. Together, the critical analysis and the planning constitute the most lively character of the utopian

speculation. The second path, closely linked to the first, implies a re-reading of the huge utopian corpus, aimed at highlighting and discussing the most problematic, contradictory and perturbing aspects of the planned societies, and the unresolved issues of the dogmatic and rigid mentality of utopian thinkers.

**Q**. Having in mind your previous and current European research projects, do you think there are national and specific characteristics of utopianism according to each country and age?

**A**. Linked to the raising of problems emerging in utopia, to the search for its strengths and its weaknesses, to the individuation of specific traits and stereotypes, there is the investigation of the universal or the specific nature of utopias and of the utopian texts written in different geographical historical contexts. These matters generated a lively debate amongst scholars participating in a congress organized by the Centre in 2000. The papers, collected in *Utopianism / Literary Utopias and National Cultural Identities: A Comparative Perspective* (2001), edited by Paola Spinozzi, show extremely well how, by mapping utopias and dystopias in Europe, every utopian text, in representing an *otherplace*, confronts the cultural tradition and the national history of the country towards which the author expresses his/her sense of belonging.

The investigation of utopia in relation to cultural and national identity appeared so complex and stimulating that after the Conference me and my colleague Raymond Trousson conceived the idea of a *Histoire transnationale de l'utopie littéraire et de l'utopisme*, which is currently being published in French by the Parisian publishing house Champion. The work, collecting the contributions of 95 scholars from all over the world, investigates different national utopian traditions, both European and extra-European. I would like to stress that the aim was not to describe the history of utopia as a literary genre, but rather pinpoint which were the emerging and qualifying utopias, in each nation at a specific historical period, that is, which were the utopian texts which enjoyed a strong reception at a European level. The investigation was extended to literary utopias, to utopianism, in the sense of the emerging of the utopian

thought in political and religious movements, in utopian communities, in treatises on social and urban planning and on education.

**Q.** Can you recall some of the intellectuals whose reflections on utopia are still challenging? How important is interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity to the Centre on Utopia?

**A**. Amongst the intellectuals who have examined and re-interpreted utopian thought in the first decades of the twentieth century Martin Buber, the author of *Ich und Du* (1923) and *Pfade in Utopie* (1950), Karl Mannheim and his *Ideologie und Utopie* (1929), Ernst Bloch for *Geist der Utopie* (1923) and *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1951), Walter Benjamin and his theses *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1939) must be remembered. After the second world war Marcuse in *Das Ende der Utopie* (1967), already mentioned at the beginning of this interview, and Th. K. Adorno in *Negative Dialektik* (1966) have both rethought utopia.

I would also like to recollect the significant contribution of theorists of architecture and urbanists, amongst whom Lewis Mumford, the author of founding texts such as *The Story of Utopias. Ideal Commonwealths and Social Myths* (1923) and *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (1961), and Françoise Choay, author of *L' urbanisme: utopies et realites: une anthologie* (1965) and *La Règle et le Modèle: sur la theorie de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme* (1980). The relation between utopia and the town hides a complicated theoretical problem. The theoretical writings of the architects that have studied the city as a field of creation, as a place for creativity and utopias that propose a 'counter-space', as the basis for a 'counter-society', reveal a double movement: on the one hand, the utopian imagination tries to grasp and make its own the language of urban planning and of architecture, on the other, urban planning joins utopia, reaches towards utopia. This tension underscores, as Françoise Choay maintains, the dialectic relationship between utopia and architecture, understood, the latter, as semiogeny, i.e. a system of signs. The edifice is comparable to articulated language and the architect, operating on volumes and spaces in the edifices,

has, at his disposal, a system of signs which he can use to express his/her vision of the world. Utopia, greedy for projects, proposes static spatial models, uncorrupted by time; utopia prospects static towns in which change is impossible. In architecture, considered as semiogeny temporality dominates, the city appears as the result of a process. The history of utopias and that of urban planning are distinguished by continuous attempts to intermingle the utopia of towns to the town of utopia, that, despite being doomed to failure, highlight the strong bond between utopian planning and town planning.

Amongst the scholars who have actively contributed to the Centre on Utopia, I would start with the professors of Bologna University, amongst which the historian of philosophy Nicola Matteucci, French lecturers Carmelina Imbroscio and Nadia Minerva, and Italian Literature Professor Andrea Battistini. The English Literature scholar Adriana Corrado, of Istituto Universitario Suor Orsola Benincasa di Napoli, and American Literature professor Gabriella Morisco, of the Università di Urbino, have constantly adhered to the Centre's activities. Foreign members whose research has contributed significantly to the Centre's congresses and publications are Raymond Trousson, Bronislaw Baczko and Alexandre Cioranescu, history of ideas scholars; Krishan Kumar and Ruth Levitas, political thought historians; Lyman Tower Sargent and Vincent Geoghegan, Political Sciences professors; Louis Marin, semiologist; Jean-Michel Racault, French Literature scholar; Hans Ulrich Seeber and Patrick Parrinder, English Literature scholars; Fátima Vieira, expert in Cultural Studies from the University of Porto (Portugal).

**Q**. Are there in Italy and abroad other Centres analogous to the one you direct?

**A**. In Italy there is the Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca sull'Utopia of the University of Lecce, directed by Professor Cosimo Quarta, professor of Philosophy of History. The Centre, created in 1982 in the Philosophy department, was subsequently promoted by the Foreign Languages, Historical and Social Sciences Departments. Abroad there is the *Society for Utopian Studies*, both in the United Stated and in England. The members of our centre have been taking part in, and reporting at the European and American annual

meetings. The *Centro Interdipartimentale di Bologna* has built a fruitful and constant scientific collaboration with the *Centro Interdipartimentale di Lecce* and the *Society for Utopian Studies*, there have been many conferences and published works in which the members have dialogued and corresponded on common research themes.

**Q**. Would you list some of the classic texts on utopia and the critical studies the Centre has promoted the publishing of?

**A.** The primary and critical texts that the Centre's Scientific Committee considers relevant for publication appear in the series "Forma dell'Utopia", published by Longo, in Ravenna. The choice has been that of offering the Italian public little known utopian texts and at the same time texts that are representative of specific cultural traditions in different historical periods. Since it was England that offered the political and historical context that allowed the birth of utopia as a literary genre, which took place in 1516, with Thomas More's *Utopia*, particular attention has been reserved to Anglo-Saxon culture: *Man on the Moon* by Francis Godwin, edited by Giovanna Silvani and published in 1995, *Peter Wilkins: The Life and Adventures of an Inhabitant of Cornwall* by Robert Paltock, edited by Gabriella Morisco, translated by Silvia Castellari and published in 2002, and finally the *Fixed Period* by Anthony Trollope, edited by Vita Fortunati, translated by Lucia Gunella and published in 2004, are utopias that are deeply entrenched in Seventeenth-, Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England. The publication of *Imperium in Imperio* by E. Sutton Griggs, edited by Maria Giulia Fabi and translated by Pierpaolo Mura, with a preface by Vita Fortunati, answers the need to introduce the public to the first Afro-American utopia, published in the late nineteenth century. The author establishes a dialogue with Edward Bellamy, the author of a fundamental text of American narrative, *Looking Backward*. Bellamy makes no mention of multiculturalism, whereas Griggs shows how an authentic process of social change cannot be disjoined from racial integration.

It is the methodological outlook that brings together the critical monographs, characterized by an interdisciplinary and comparative approach.

Scholars of different subjects question the same themes, confronting different research perspectives. Theoretical and methodological issues regarding utopia as a literary genre and utopianism are investigated in *Per una definizione dell'utopia: Metodologie e discipline a confronto* (1992), edited by Nadia Minerva. The typology of travel and the status of utopian travellers are examined in *Viaggi in utopia* (1996), edited by Raffaella Baccolini, Vita Fortunati and Nadia Minerva. The intricate relations between biography and utopia are asserted in *Vite di utopia* (2000), edited by Vita Fortunati and Paola Spinozzi. I would mention, finally, the Italian edition of Raymond Trousson's seminal text, *Viaggi in nessun luogo: Storia letteraria del pensiero utopico* (1992).

**Q**. Judging on the scientific production of your Centre it seems that the study of literary utopias and utopianism responds to the need to explore the history of ideas. Is there also a social function in these research activities?

**A.** Certainly, studying utopia at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century cannot be carried without asking what function must be assigned to it in history and society. This issue is fundamental not only when research projects are elaborated, but also if one chooses to focus University courses on the concepts of utopia and utopianism. I would like to reinforce the idea that the power of utopia lies in the capacity to speculate on the possible laterals of experience. Utopia can also be seen as the search for compensation for something that we lack and that is strenuously looked for, both in personal and in social terms. As F.E. Manuel and F.P. Manuel have stressed in *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (1979), the relation brought about by the utopian thinker/writer towards time and history is a complex and intertwined one. The utopist observes reality with a piercing eye and then distances himself, he even becomes estranged, in order to assume a critical, deconstructionist attitude towards contemporary evils and society. Utopia, and here the genealogical link to satire shows itself, presupposes a global refusal of the world: the utopist carried out a dissection that brings him to effectuate a radical cut. While the

satirical writers anatomise reality in order to show its defects, utopists can overcome the *destruens* phase by creating a project: they deconstruct reality in order to recompose it according to their *nomos*. In positive utopias one always passes from a *destruens* phase to a *costruens* one. To observe conventions and institutions from an estranged point of view means to empty them of the meanings common sense generally attributes to them. Estrangement generates a cognitive tension, because the observer, not happy with what current opinion upholds, wants to slowly discover the uncanny, odd features of a familiar object. From a state of mind, estrangement becomes not only a literary device, but also a way of delegitimizing every political, religious and social aspect of the society in which the utopist is living.

It is clear that the utopian mentality shows its limits and contradictions, especially when it wants to be applied to ethics and moral codes, when it wants to impart forbidding precepts. Utopists can be inflexible pedagogues. It is even more dangerous when the utopist, caught in a frenzy for the reforming of the world, becomes a leader and wants to correct the deviations of human nature. It is understandable, then, why, in utopian societies, the danger of totalitarianism is ever present, and why dystopian societies are overwhelmed by dictatorial and repressive regimes. Finally, the most problematic issue utopias must confront is the *reductio ad unum*, i.e. the simplification of the anthropological complexity of the human being, and the reduction of reality to just one dimension, rigidly regulated by rules that are closely linked to the geometry of relations of utopian spaces.

**Q.** 1989 witnessed the crisis of political regimes that had claimed to be utopias and then became dystopias. Was it a coincidence that the Centre on Utopia, which gathered Italian and foreign scholars from diverse fields of studies, was formally constituted in such a symbolic year?

**A**. I would like to answer by pointing out a paradox. The 20$^{th}$ century, that destroyed the concept of utopia, also gave impulse to the renaissance of studies on utopia as a literary genre and on utopianism. There is no doubt that the experiment brought about by real socialism has solicited rigorous reflections

on the possibility of realizing a utopian society and on the boundaries between communitarism, communism and totalitarian regime. And when the conferences held by the communist thinker Herbert Marcuse at the Freie Universität Berlin between July 3rd and 10th 1967 were published under the title *Das Ende der Utopie*, intellectuals were pushed into a re-conceptualisation of Utopia, asking themselves when and how the speculative faculty that distinguishes the utopian mentality might be made to interact with the historical dimension. During the 60s and 70s contestation to talk about utopia acquired a strong political connotation, to support a utopian vision meant articulating dissension against the ruling classes. Questioning the reasons for which a utopian project for the transformation of society was not feasible meant a revision of the Marxist lesson, a debate on the notion of historical materialism, in a nutshell, it meant assuming a critical attitude towards Marxist orthodox thought.

The birth of the Centre on Utopia takes place in a very significant year for the history of Europe, but the motivations are much more profound. To constitute a research group on Utopia involving scholars from different branches of learning meant expressing a clear will to rethink both the capacity for speculation and abstraction that utopia implies, and its historical declensions and its ideological and political implications. And even more ambitious was, and still is, the will to understand if utopia can be adopted as a method, i.e. as a tool for the investigation of reality, as a hermeneutic method. In this perspective, I think that to investigate utopia and anti-utopia in these years has meant attributing an important value to the heuristic path that every utopian thinker, although differently oriented, traces.