Clues to Utopia in W. H. Mallock's *The New Republic*

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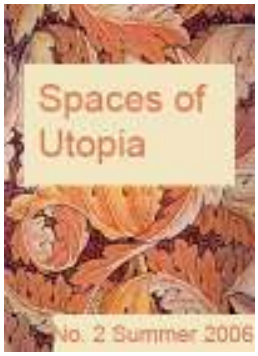

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Besides raising issues such as the role of conservative thought in relation to satire in nineteenth-century utopianism, this essay aims at a reflection on the complex topic of utopia and modernity, bearing in mind that W. H. Mallock's *The New Republic* contributes to oppose and criticize the modernization process in Victorian culture and society. I think the text can primarily be examined as a literary expression of a general feeling of discontent in Victorian society in spite of all its progress – progress, a concept that in England had come to possess "a curiously ambiguous emotive power" (Wiener 1992: 5).

The New Republic was first published in *Belgravia: An Illustrated London Magazine* between June and December 1876, and in two-volume book form in 1877. The work remained anonymous until the following year, when a New Edition in one volume was issued and the identity of the author was disclosed as being the 28-year-old William Hurrell Mallock, a graduate of Balliol College, Oxford.

In 1871 he had been awarded the Newdigate Prize for a rather bad poem on "The Isthmus of the Suez Canal", and his wit had already won him a reputation when he privately printed at Oxford, in 1872, *Everyman His Own Poet, or The Inspired Singer's Recipe Book*, a kind of manual on how to make

poems in the manner of well-known contemporaries. Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, Morris and Arnold were among his chosen masters.

He must have enjoyed the experiment because he repeated this satirical methodology in his first novel. In fact, *The New Republic* achieved great popularity as a satire on late-Victorian intellectual life, being directed at specific issues, ideas, dogmas, and at the people who held them. The title was obviously inspired by Plato's *Republic*, a book which described "the meeting of a party of friends, who fell [to] discussing high topics" (Mallock 1975: 134), and Mallock's text intended to "hit upon the notion of constructing an ideal perfect state, in which of course justice would be lurking somewhere" (*idem*, 135).

It was considered a *roman-à-clef* in which some eminent Victorians were thinly disguised and therefore quickly recognized by the reader. Walter Pater, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold and Thomas Henry Huxley were the personalities behind the characters 'Mr. Rose', 'Mr. Herbert', 'Mr. Luke' and 'Mr. Storks', respectively. The author also paid a reverse tribute to Benjamin Jowett, who appeared as 'Dr. Jenkinson'. In fact, since 1870, when Mallock became a student and Jowett was elected the Master of Balliol College and "the most famous university don of Victoria's reign, a national figure" (Ellis 1997: 283), they shared a strong dislike of each other. As for the "lovely" (Mallock 1975: 17) Mrs. Sinclair, she was based on Violet Fane, to whom the text was dedicated. She was a poetess and novelist of little ability but well known at the time for her fashionable lifestyle, and she was certainly more important to Mallock than she can be to us now.

Mallock himself identified the originals of many of his characters (see Davis 2004), but not all of them can be clearly recognized. This has opened the path to various suggestions (Lucas 1975: 16-29). Some characters may be the product of his imagination, others merely private individuals. On the one hand, Lord Allen is an idealized portrait of the English aristocrat. On the

other, it is not possible to say if the writer had anyone particularly in mind when he created Lady Ambrose, Lady Violet Gresham or Miss Prattle, for instance.

The New Republic; Or, Culture, Faith, and Philosophy in an English Country House brings together a group of people who meet for a weekend at a villa by the sea, trying to figure out the purpose of life. The book also needs to be set in the context of Britain in the 1870s and 1880s, a time of skepticism and unbelief. According to Mallock, "one can hear faith decaying" (*apud* Hoare 2005: 20), and his pessimism is visibly incorporated in the text when his Oxford friend, W. M. Hardinge, alias 'Mr. Leslie', addresses the assembled company: "I certainly think that our age in some ways could not possibly be worse. Nobody knows what to believe, and most people believe nothing" (Mallock 1975: 50). Dr. Jenkinson, however, tries to put the question in context:

> The age we live in is an age of change. And in all such ages there must be many things that, if we let them, will pain and puzzle us. But we mustn't let them. There have been many ages of change before our time, and there are sure to be many after it. Our age is not peculiar. (*idem*, 54)

In this excerpt from the text they were talking primarily about the decline in religion, but their remarks can be applied to the general spirit of the age, a time when "Culture replaced Christianity as the main agency responsible for keeping Anarchy at bay" (Fraser 1986: 5). Both the sense of spiritual, moral, social and political change and the fact that the foundations of the most serious convictions had been shattered were disturbing enough. The worst thing, though, was that the disintegration of opinion was so rapid that both wise and foolish men were equally ignorant when the close of the century dawned upon them. Mr. Allen made a categorical statement: "I know quite well how society is falling to pieces, and how all our notions of duty are becoming confused or lost" (Mallock 1975:127).

In fact, what was new about the mood of the last quarter of the century was not so much the perception of change, to which the Victorians had become accustomed, but the sense of "drifting on the current rather than controlling it", as Robin Gilmour puts it (Gilmour 1986: 149). Through Mr. Laurence, the characters realize they had been after all "talking a good deal about the signs of the times" (Mallock 1975: 233).

This reminds the reader of the debate on the 'Condition of England' question, which had lain dormant to some extent since the 1840s, and which had surfaced again in the 1880s with a new urgency as the mid-Victorian consensus started to fracture. Writers felt this to be a time of crisis:

> There was a widespread awareness that the social and intellectual problems inherited from the previous generation had not been solved, were perhaps insoluble, and had in any case to be confronted without the ethical idealism and moral energy available to their fathers. (Gilmour 1986: 151)

The cultural fragmentation of the period is reflected in its fiction, which displays a wide variety of form and subject-matter (see James 2006 and Kucich 2001). As the embodiment of attractive alternatives to Victorian England, some writings around the time of *The New Republic* work within the frame of Utopian fiction. Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, published in 1872, is a satire, like *Gulliver's Travels*, and is one of the most unusual observations of what was wrong with Victorian society. *News from Nowhere* by William Morris (1891) is a utopia, a "compensatory dream" where society is as perfect as it can be (Pollard 1993: 455).

In the tradition of Plato's dialogues, the building of a new republic in Mallock's text is the product of an exchange of ideas. It is not an account of a fictional voyage to an imaginary country, as in More's *Utopia*, nor a dream where the main character plays the role of a time traveller to a perfect society which resulted from a socialist revolution, as in Morris's *News from Nowhere*. Neither is it a description of a world in which the ideas and customs of the

traveller's own society are inverted, as in Butler's *Erewhon*, although Mallock's text certainly shares a good sense of humour with it.

In his work on English fiction of the Victorian period, Michael Wheeler reminds the reader that "Morris's *News from Nowhere* also satirizes nineteenth-century society and its fiction, but from the quite different perspective of a perfect country of the future" (Wheeler 1990: 164). It should also be kept in mind that:

> Late Victorian romance is about extremes, presenting (…) "ideal existence" rather than the "facts of life", and sharp contrasts between black and white rather than shades of grey. (…) Utopian fiction of the late Victorian period (…) conveys a social or political argument by means of contrasts between the real world and an impossible "nowhere". (*idem*, 163)

The New Republic seems to transmit what Chris Coates has termed "a 'utopian tendency' to human nature, an innate drive to make the world a better place" (Coates 2001: 304). Over dinner, on a Saturday evening near the end of July, the host, Otho Laurence, says to his guests they should have a menu for the conversation, for he has always found it absurd "to be so particular as to the order of what we eat, and to have no order at all in what we talk about" (Mallock 1975: 9). They decide to begin the discussion with the topic 'The Aim of Life', followed by 'Town and Country', 'Society', 'Art and Literature', 'Love and Money', 'Riches and Civilisation', 'The Present', and lastly 'The Future'.

Different points of view are developed as the characters present arguments concerning the aim of life as being progress, life itself, or culture. Concrete references to utopia begin in Book II, chapter I, in the long sermon delivered to the congregation by Dr. Jenkinson on Sunday morning service:

> Any Utopia we might imagine would, if it were a thinkable one, be only our own age in a masquerading dress. For we cannot escape from our age, or add, except in a very small degree, anything that is really new to it. Nor need we wish to do so. Our age is for us the best age possible. We are its children, and it is our only true parent. But though we cannot alter our time at a stroke, so to speak, no, not even in imagination, we can all of us help to do so little by little, if we do cheerfully the duties that are set before us. (*idem*, 118)

Needless to say some of the listeners, mainly Mrs. Sinclair, Mr. Herbert, Mr. Leslie and even Mr. Stockton, strongly disagree with him on this doctrine that the world could not be better than it already is. Mr. Luke seems to reconcile both opinions:

> It is indeed the very essence of the cultured classes to be beyond their time (…). Unfortunately, (…) the dense ignorance of the world at large hampers and hinders such men as these, so that all that their teaching and their insight can do, is only to suggest a Utopia in the future, instead of leading to any reality in the present. (*idem*, 127-28)

However, after an increasingly heated exchange of opinions on the subject of progress, Mr. Herbert seems to deliberately defy Mr. Storks by putting forward a shocking standpoint: "The only hope for the present age lies in the possibility of some individual wiser than the rest getting the necessary power, and in the most arbitrary way possible putting a stop to this progress" (*idem*, 132). For the first time in the debate, the intervention of the working class is made necessary:

> I would collect an army of strong, serviceable, honest workmen, and send them to blow up Manchester, and Birmingham, and Liverpool, and Leeds, and Wolverhampton (…). I would destroy every railway, and nearly every steam-engine; and I would do a number of other things of a like sort, by way of preparing the ground for a better state of society. Indeed, so far am I from believing that an entirely different and better state of society is unthinkable, that I believe it to be not impracticable. (*idem*, 133-34)

Moreover, Mr. Herbert says he is actually founding a community – a Utopia, in fact – where he trusted the principles of order and justice might be realized. Any enlightened 19th century reader would of course recognize this initiative as corresponding to Ruskin's Guild of St George.

The "notions of life as it ought to be in a new Republic" (*idem*, 137) are specifically dealt with in the middle of the book (see Book II, chapters II and III). From the beginning, however, readers cannot avoid smiling at the whole idea of a comfortably settled, opulent group of people who want to construct a

utopia in one single beautiful afternoon. Furthermore, readers can hardly help themselves from laughing when they find out that the group realizes there is little prospect of achieving its goal because everyone has a different proposal for the imagined new Republic, and the way the characters find to solve the problem is for them to adopt a different approach to their discussion. Therefore, instead of thinking about the essence of a good society, they concentrate on getting rid of what is evil before introducing what is good. For the reader, this is certainly an original method of constructing a utopia.

Even then, the picture becomes too eclectic. For Mr. Laurence, the special qualities which make a perfect society are wit, knowledge, experience, and humour. Lady Ambrose fears the new society will be too bookish. Mr. Allen says: "What I should want in a Utopia would be something definite for the people to do, each in his own walk of life" (*idem*, 211). Mr. Herbert wants to hear more about the practical manifestations of happiness in the new Republic, and Dr. Jenkinson thinks they seemed "to have forgotten trade and business altogether" (*idem*, 280).

It is possible, though, to point out two specific suggestions for a utopian city. Mr. Rose would remove London to some kindlier site – for instance, to the south-west and to the sea-coast, "where the waves are blue, and where the air is calm and fine" (*idem*, 266). London could then be born anew, a dream which they could "make a reality, would circumstances only permit of it" (*idem*, 268).

For his part, Mr. Herbert is concerned, among other things, with the sanitary disposal of the dead in the city. He would have corpses turned into gas, which could be collected in small separate gasometers. The antithesis between physical and spiritual interpretations of death were dividing the Victorians, but Herbert says to his audience that if a dead friend's corpse turned into a gas-flame and disappeared before one's eyes, it would not matter whether this happened because "as your hearts would suggest to you,

it went to the Father, or (…) as your men of science would assert to you, it went simply – out" (*idem*, 350). This is a part which Michael Wheeler, in *Heaven, Hell, and the Victorians*, considers an "example of a grimly satiric treatment of the Victorian way of death" (Wheeler 1994: 226-27), adding this to the fact that "black humour can be therapeutic" (*idem*, 227).

Notions of progress and modern society are thus questioned in the fictitious dialogue written by Mallock, who is also the author of "such typical titles of the period" (Gilmour 1986: 151) as the satire *The New Paul and Virginia; or, Positivism on an Island* (1878) and the novels *Is Life Worth Living?* (1879), *A Romance of the Nineteenth Century* (1881), and *The Old Order Changes* (1886).

In later works, such as *The Limits of Pure Democracy*, published in 1917, Mallock shows clear conservative thinking, presenting political and economic arguments that could not appeal to liberals, socialists, and democrats in general. In *The New Republic*, in spite of his scepticism and implicit criticism of the British way of life in the last decades of the 19th century, he does not seem to be concerned with an explicit political commitment. Nevertheless, he expresses his preference for an oligarchy and his belief in the importance of the influence or authority of the capable few on the majority of people. Certainly his opinion would not have been very far from Miss Merton's: "I think an aristocracy, as a rule, must always be the best governors of men, for their ambitions, as a rule, are the only genuine ones" (Mallock 1975: 78).

The party he gathered in his work is representative of some sectors of 19th century British society that were concerned about the state of the world. As David Newsome remarks in *The Victorian World Picture*, "the rejection of Victorian standards tended to be confined to the upper classes and the intellectuals" (Newsome 1998: 255). Mallock uses his talent for parody and his dislike of political and religious liberalism even when he gives voice to a

futile social activism and a light-hearted class conscience: “Hardly a week passes without some new scandal”, Lady Ambrose observes cheerfully in the text. “However, that sort of thing, I believe, is confined to us. The middle classes are all right – at least, one always hears so” (Mallock 1975: 126).

Further on in the text, the author uses a subtle device when he inserts a more violent criticism of the liberal middle-classes in a letter addressed by Laurence’s uncle to him, and read aloud by him to the company:

> I had once hoped that the middle classes – that vast and useless body, who have neither the skill that produces their wealth, nor the taste that can enjoy it – might have proved themselves at least of some use, by preserving the traditions of a sound, respectable morality; (…) But no; they too are changed. (*idem*, 246-47)

This sense of hope and fear, interwoven with class conscience, was stressed by the Marxist historian A. L. Morton in his seminal work *The English Utopia*:

> Utopia is really the island which people thought or hoped or sometimes feared that the Britain of their day might presently become, and their thoughts were affected not only by the books they had read and the ideas with which they were familiar, but by what was going on in the real world about them, by the class they belonged to and by the part that class was playing and wanted to play in relation to other classes. (Morton 1978: 11)

As a matter of fact, it seems that, for Mallock, the essence of civilization was to be found in the aristocracy and nowhere else. Throughout the pages of *The New Republic*, the considerate, moderate, and witty Laurence, Leslie and Lord Allen stand for all that Mallock most admired in society, and they are shown in stark contrast to the arrogant, dogmatic, and humourless men of science that stand as a symbol of the modern interpretation of the universe.

Their discussion of an ideal Republic is used to formulate a number of brilliant parodies, and the book is useful as a document concerning the respect and relative disrespect with which Mallock treats his figures. Mr.

Herbert, i.e. Ruskin, for instance, is shown as rather theatrical, but is still evidently respected. According to Mr. Laurence, and as an echo of Mallock's own opinion, he was "almost the only man of these days for whom I feel a real reverence" (Mallock 1975: 16). In fact, his has been considered "the only portrait in that book which is not a caricature" (Armytage 1961: 289).

In the end only Mr. Herbert is to be trusted as the true voice of wisdom: "There can be no civilisation without order, and there can be no order without subordination" (Mallock 1975: 350). In his long last speech (*idem*, 342-59), he confesses his doubts, he assumes the weaknesses of men of ideas, and he undoes the house-party's sense of well-being. It must not be forgotten that Ruskin "typifies, sometimes in exaggerated form, many of the characteristics of the leading men of the age" (Pollard 1993: 24).

In *The New Republic*, Mallock brings together the champions of conflicting points of view so that they expose their own and each others' inadequacies (see *idem*, 29-30). Lady Ambrose's remark is therefore a very reasonable one: "How are we to build a castle in the air together, if we are all at cross purposes like this?" (Mallock 1975: 152).

Behind the wit which runs through the whole text lies one of the works which best describes the late nineteenth-century England sense of uncertainty. In *The Victorian Frame of Mind,* Walter Houghton states that "the combined effect of a dissolving tradition of thought and the new scientific conception of man and nature was to drive sensitive minds into the mood of ennui and frustration" (Houghton 1985: 71). This opinion can be complemented by Raymond Williams's idea that "we tend to look at the period 1880-1914 as a kind of interregnum" (Williams 1993a: 161) and with his own interpretation of Mallock's work:

> Mallock's *The New Republic* is as good a starting point for this period as could be found: not so much as a foretaste of what is to come but as a valediction to the period we are leaving. (Williams 1993b: 162)

Who then are the builders of utopia in Mallock's text? Certainly not the selfish middle-classes, nor the ignorant workers who nevertheless would be useful for blowing up the instruments of progress and establish the foundations for a new kind of society. The answer seems clear – the cultured men and women of 19th century Britain, that were willing to preserve the good established values in order to change for the better a world that, according to them, was changing for the worse. In fact, readers are not confronted with an actual utopian society, but with suggestions on how to build a utopia.

Consonant with utopian writing in general, *The New Republic* suggests a plausible scenario, and even creates what nowadays might be called a virtual world, not only because the fictional characters relate to actual people, but also because their speeches are extremely similar to those of the real persons who inspired them. Furthermore, Byron, Wordsworth, John Stuart Mill and Comte, among other real people, are alluded to in the text.

Re-reading *The New Republic* in the 21st century can simply be regarded as a way of getting in touch with some of the most prominent nineteenth-century authors, by means of the acute sarcastic portrait that Mallock makes of them. Today, as at the time when he wrote, a common reader is presented in a few pages with a compact version of their most characteristic theories.

In my opinion, Mallock's novel can also be seen from a different perspective. Inspired by the utopian topics discussed in the text, readers can feel challenged to outline their own arguments for and against an ideal, perfect, happy society, regardless of its practicability. In short, although it cannot be defined as a genuine utopian text, *The New Republic; Or, Culture, Faith, and Philosophy in an English Country House* provides unquestionable clues to utopia.

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