

*in Utopias and the Millenium*, ed. by K. Kumar & S. Bann.  
London, Reaktion Books, 1993.

I

## *The Frontiers of Utopia*

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The title of my essay, 'The frontiers of Utopia', can be understood to refer to two possible issues: the frontiers that define and limit Utopia, if there are any such frontiers; and secondly, the frontiers that are created by the utopian imagination, if that imagination is indeed capable of such an act.

In any event, this theme, in its ambiguity, offers an opportunity to think about terms and words which appear to have some semantic affinities with Utopia and frontiers, such as 'horizon' and 'infinity', 'limit' and 'travel'. There is an immediate and (so to speak) unregulated affinity between frontier, limit and horizon, as well as between travel, Utopia and infinity. Let us consider then, the example of horizon and infinity on the one hand, and frontier and Utopia on the other: these plays on words and significations are useful in so far as they trouble the usual, reified lexical, logical and philosophical classifications in history, society and culture, in their representations as well as their ideologies. We must enter into these plays and games with language and meaning since they also, in fact, affect history – as plays of forces and powers; in this way we can grasp their practical, concrete efficacy and analyse the ideological significations which derive from their oppositions, proximities and even confusions.

The use of the term horizon is attested from the second half of the 13th century. At first the word signified 'limit', the limit of the gaze, the limit of sky and earth. In the 18th century, through metonymy, it came to designate the part of the landscape close to this line, and in the Romantic epoch 'horizon' meant the opening of vision to the 'extreme' of the gaze, the mystery of a remote space concealed from view, and, finally, the infinity of space. Oddly enough, 'horizon', which originally meant a limit, the power of circumscribing a place, came to mean immensity, infinity – such as the limitless horizon of the ocean. The conquest through the discovery of mountain landscape at the end of the 18th century, of higher and higher view-points, moved the horizon further and further back, until it vanished into infinity. In his essay, 'Utilité du Beau', Victor Hugo wrote:

(for a wood or a village), which are combined in the French '*lisière*'. This term no longer signifies a way, but rather a no-man's land, the fringe of an edge. The '*lisière*' is the space of a gap, but uncertain of its limits, as when a land, an estate, a forest have simply their own edge, with no other limit in front, just a wild or an undetermined space. Here again, examples in 18th-century French dictionaries trace a remarkable network of significations: this is no man's-land, a limit blurred by destructive or wild forces: 'les champs qui aboutissent au grand chemin ont souvent leurs lisières mangées par les moutons'. 'Les bêtes fauves endommagent fort les terres qui sont des forêts'; 'les ennemis voulaient entrer dans cette province, mais ils n'ont ruiné que ses lisières.'

My semantic journey adrift on the term *lisière* (edge, fringe, selva), points out a notion I will call a *neutral place*, a locus whose characteristics are semiotically negative, whose specificity consists in being neither the one nor the other, *neither* this edge *nor* the other: it is the place where two kings meet to make peace after having been at war with each other for many years, a neutral place where they negotiate on an island which, in the middle of the Bidassoa river (one bank of which is French and the other Spanish) is the 'common-place', the locus of a peace. Other examples are the raft that was the site of the meeting between Tsar Alexander and Emperor Napoleon, or the ship off Malta, and the 'island' of Iceland, which were the places where the American and Soviet leaders met one another. The island was on those occasions the neutral place *par excellence* in between the two halves of the world. Today, the separating gap, the neutral place, the interval structure, is in the process of becoming a *lisière*. It is becoming a fringe-structure which has on the one side a well-determined edge, and on the other side an edge fraying so as to become a chaos, an *apeiron*, an infinite *chôra* as ancient Greeks would have said; this is, perhaps, the advent of a new horizon. These three terms seem to me to be related to each other nowadays: '*lisière*', the 'indefinite', 'horizon' . . . This network may soon constitute the chance of Utopia, just as in the early modern period the structure suddenly manifested itself between a newly discovered America and an old, tired Europe, between the opening of the Western space of a New World, and the terrible confrontations – national, political, religious – of the Old World.

This is the merging place of Utopia: a neutral place, an island in between two kingdoms, two States, the two halves of the world, the interval of frontiers and limits by way of a horizon that closes a site and opens up a space; the island Utopia merging into the 'indefinite'. As I have

already mentioned, the term 'Utopia' was coined by More in about 1516 to name the island he describes in the second book of his work. *Outopos*, *Outopia* is a paradoxical, even giddy toponym, since as a term it negates with its name the very place that it is naming. If we translate the Greek term, it does not mean a place which is nowhere, that is, an island which only exists in More's imagination or a place which does not exist: the term as a toponym designates a no-place. Furthermore, the term designates *another* referent, the 'other' of any place. When More says 'Utopia', this name performatively creates that 'otherness'. In this sense, Utopia is the neutral name, the name of the 'neutral'. It names the limit, the gap between two frontiers or two continents, the old and the new world; it names the 'way of the *limes*', travelling between two edges which will never join together as an identical line.

Utopia, at the dawn of our modernity, could be the name of the horizon which, as we have seen, makes the invisible come within the finite, all this by a strange nominal *figure* of the frontier (horizon, limit), that is to say a name which would constitute a distance, a gap, neither before nor after affirmation, but 'in between' them; a distance or a gap that does not allow any affirmation or negation to be asserted as a truth or as a falsehood. *Ne-uter*, this is the radical of the frontier (limit, horizon) as well as that of Utopia. As I write, in 1992, suddenly in Eastern Europe there has opened up the immense emptiness of the end of a certain Utopia, an end that does not cease to end; it is precisely today, at the end of a millennium which sings out loud the end of ideologies, when the end of frontiers seems to be accomplished in a universal totality – when (in a recent debate) there is confusedly and loudly forecast, in the manner of Hegel and Kojève, the end of history, no longer however in the extreme and alternative terms of material animality or abstract formalism, but as the universal mode of high-tech, democratic hyperliberalism – it is precisely at this moment, while new, or very old and frightening, frontiers appear or reappear, those of nationalistic, racial or religious exclusions – precisely at this moment that it is worth recalling the fiction of an island that appeared at the dawn of a period for which our present time would form the twilight.

In the case of the island of Utopia, the frontier is the infinity of the Ocean, its border, a boundless space. Utopia is a limitless place because the island of Utopia is the figure of limit and of distance, the drifting of frontiers within the 'gap' between opposite terms, neither this one nor that one. Utopia is the figure of the horizon. If in the functioning of a city, in its structure formed by streets and dwellings – if in the functioning of a

landscape, in its partition between nature and culture, forests and fields, waters and rocks – space cannot exist without limits and frontiers, Utopia develops and displays a virtual or potential spatial order: it offers to the beholder-reader an ambiguous representation, the equivocal image of significations that are contrary to the concept of limit. On the one hand, it offers the synthetic unity of the same and the other, of past and future, of this world and the beyond – and the frontier would be in this case the place where conflicting forces are reconciled. On the other hand, it offers the active tracing of differences, the indefinite fight between opposite forces – and in this case the frontier would open a gap, a space ‘in between’ which could not exist except by the encountering of violent and resisting forces.

Some years ago, I attempted to tackle the immense questions raised by Thomas More’s island, through what Kant constructs, on the border between sensibility and understanding, as the schematism of the transcendental imagination. Utopia could be envisaged as a scheme of pure, *a priori* imagination, here displaced into ethics and politics, into aesthetics and religious matters. As Kant wrote, ‘the scheme is produced by a mysterious art, hidden in the depths of the human soul, an art whose secrets would be difficult to elicit and reveal by *pure knowledge* alone.’ ‘Image’, Kant wrote, ‘is produced by the empirical faculty or reproductive imagination. On the other hand, the scheme of sensory concepts (like spatial figures) is a product and somehow a kind of ‘monogram’ of the pure *a priori* imagination, through which and from which images are at first possible . . .’ In the Kantian scheme, Utopia is not an image or a representation. It does not belong to a definite ideology. It is the monogram of the art of pure fiction on all these borders and frontiers that human thought sketches out so as to achieve a knowledge shared by several human beings; that human will marks and displaces so as to become a collective power and to accomplish itself in common action.

As ‘horizon’, moreover as a scheme of the horizon, Utopia does not transform the sensible into the intelligible, or reality into ideology. Utopia is the infinite work of the imagination’s power of figuration. Utopia is the infinite *potentia* of historical figures: it is this infinite dimension, this ‘work’, this *potentia*, that the Greek negation ‘ou’ allows to be understood as a prefix to the name *topos*. Utopia is the plural figure of the infinite work of the limit or frontier in history.

*Totality and Infinity: Utopia at the Horizon  
of a Voyage (Travel)*

It seems worthwhile to call Utopia back, as such, into the philosophical field. In order to deal with the return of Utopia, it seems opportune to think about the epistemological conditions of that coming back. It will be useful tentatively to grasp Utopia in *its process*, what I called some years ago, in a homage to Ernst Bloch, its ‘fiction-practice’, rather than to treat it as an icon or as an image, in its monumental formalist organicity, in its architectural system, in a word, in its representation.

As a representation, Utopia is always a synthesis, a reconciling synthesis. It decodes its image, it deciphers its icon. It stands as a perfect idea above any limit; it asserts an originary or eschatological projection beyond any frontier, and gains a universal validity by making all details explicit. Utopia as ideology is a totality; and when political power seizes it, it becomes a totalitarian whole. The utopian representation always takes the figure, the form of a map. In the complex unity of its ensemble, with its names, numbers, coloured fields all exactly coded according to the rules of representation, it gives a location to all journeys, all itineraries, all voyages and their paths: all of them are potentially present because they are all there, but implicitly it negates them all. The eye that sees it is an abstract eye, since it has no viewpoint: its place is everywhere and nowhere. Utopia as representation defines a totalitarian power, an absolute, *formal* and abstract power.

But at the very moment that I look at the map – when I follow with my finger the route of a road, a contour-line, when I cross here and not there a frontier, when I jump from one bank of a river to the other – at this very moment a figure is extracted from the ground and the map, the figure of a projected journey, even if it is an imaginary one, a dreamed one. With that figure, a narrative begins, with a before and an after, a point of departure and a point of arrival, a happy coming-back or a final permanent exile. The locus has become space: directions, speeds, travel-timing give motion to the map with the tracings of various routes. With all these temporal processes, these potential action-programmes, with all these proximities and distance, space ‘awakens’ to narrative, and loci open up to various practices which change and transform them through variations, transgressions, etc.

All narrative is a space narrative, said Michel de Certeau. All narrative is a travel narrative; all travel consists in going from a place to a no-place, a route to U-topia, from a starting point which, in a narrative, always

describes a peaceful order of things and loci, of co-presences regulated by the laws of a kinship system, a local organization, a geographical articulation, a political system. Narrative proceeds from a place and a moment that narratologists call the 'schema of incidence', that is, the trespassing of a limit, the crossing of a frame, of a threshold. This is the way in which narratives demarcate space; travels, as departures and passages, beginnings and crossings in the narrative they produce – and by which they are produced as well – determine frontiers which they trace upon encountering them in order to cross them in some of their parts. As Michel de Certeau has superbly shown, the travel narrative authorizes frontiers to be established and displaced, founded and trespassed over. Travels and voyages, as a result of their movements, are 'located' in the gap of the limit, on the *limes-way* and trespassing over its double edge. Travel would be the 'work' of the horizon, the neutral space, the space of limits and frontiers they trace or demarcate while crossing them: this is the typical form of the Utopian process.

From the time of More's book, Utopias have tended to begin with a travel, a departure and a journey, most of the time by sea, most of the time interrupted by a storm, a catastrophe which is the sublime way to open a neutral space, one which is absolutely different: a meteoric event, a cosmic accident, which eliminates all beacons and markers in order to make the seashore of a land appear at dawn, to welcome the human castaway. In fact, even if the travel does not end with a storm and with arrival in an unknown land, the process of travel may be a way of displaying, just in front, a utopian space (or the utopian *chôra* as Plato would have said). Any travel is, first of all, a moment and a space of vacancy, an unencumbered space which suspends continuous time and the ordering loci.

The ideology of travel implies a departure from a place and a return to the same place: the traveller enriches this place with a whole booty of knowledge and experience by means of which he states, in this coming back to the 'sameness', his own consistency, his identity as a subject. The utopian moment and the space of travel, on the contrary, consists in opening up in this ideological circle, in tracing out its route, and *nowhere*, a place without place, a moment out of time, the truth of a fiction, the syncopation of an infinity and paradoxically its limit, its frontier.

When Peter Giles, More's friend, introduces Raphaël, the traveller and narrator-descriptor of Utopia, to Thomas More, he narrates precisely Raphaël's travels; he tells More of Raphaël's motivation to travel, his desire to visit the world; he informs More on the subject of Raphaël's

travels, his departure from Portugal, his participation in Amerigo Vespucci's expeditions. Raphaël's travels, in fact, would have been very similar to Vespucci's if, during the fourth journey, instead of coming back to Portugal, he had not been one of the twenty-four men left at Cape Frio, on the Brazilian coast. Fiction, in this location on the American shore, is exactly tangential to the geographical routes on the maps of the time and the 'real' world. This place is, in a sense, a minimal space at the limit between what is unknown. Giles draws our attention to this point, he locates the sailors' fortified camp *ad fines postremae navigationis*, at the limits of the 'last' voyage. And on this frontier, which is also an initiating threshold, human abandonment, the desire of travelling and the encounter with death merge together. Giles and More sum up all these notions with two classical mottos: Raphaël, while happy to be left on the extreme edge of the world, is less concerned with pursuing his travels than he is with finding a tomb where he can definitely rest. He is in the habit of saying that 'sky is a tomb for the one who is deprived of an ultimate dwelling'; he says too that 'from every place in this world there is a route that leads to the heavens'.

The horizon, as edge of the world, joins on to another edge, that of the other world, and on this limit between the two, a space, a gap is opened up, which belongs neither to the one nor to the other, a gap between the interior space which is enclosed by the routes of travels, the *terrae cognitae*, and the unknown outer space: this is the indiscernible gap which is the imaginary site of the voyage. Raphaël, the hero of More's *Utopia*, is the figure of that imaginary site on the frontiers, on the limits, on this gap. The narrator of *Utopia* displays the very space wherein the imagination will create the mysterious island and bring it into the world.

Nevertheless, Raphaël's story is less concerned with narrating travel than it is with displaying a map, but a map whose essential characteristic consists of not being another map. Or being in maps, it cannot exactly be found in them. This means that Raphaël, and only Raphaël, can travel to Utopia. As a Utopia, travel cannot be repeated; while as an ideology, as an ideological representation, it imperatively demands to be repeated. The story that Giles tells Busleyden about the geographical location of the island is well known. At the very moment when Raphaël gives More that information, a servant comes up to More and says something to him, whilst one of the members of the party who has flu coughs so loudly that Giles cannot catch the traveller's words. Thus in the ironic fiction of an accident, the possible inscription of the island on a map disappears completely.

But should Utopia not already be on the existing maps? Giles does not come across it either among the ancient cosmographers or the modern. Maybe it exists under a name other than its Greek name *Utopia*, *Nowhere*? Perhaps it is an 'unknown' island? This would not be surprising when today (that is, in 1516) everyone knows that many new lands which the Ancients did not know are being discovered? If so, the island map is caught up in a displacement process within the mapping representation: constantly, unceasingly displaced, about to be inscribed at the very moment when it is about to be erased amidst all the real islands that travellers register when they find them, among all the potential islands which other travellers will discover. The island which exists at the frontier of all travels, as their dream or as their hidden figure.

If the name of the island, or its map, can be condensed within the term that introduces it into the universal map of all the places that are known and into the dictionary of their names, then the name of the utopian island, in its turn, is going to be named, inscribed and erased in terms of the displacement of the letters that compose the name: *Outopia*, *Eutopia*, *Oudepotia* – three names which circulate in the surroundings of More's text or from Giles's foreword to Budé's letter to Lupset; three terms in which the 'e' of happiness (*eutopia*) is substituted for the 'o' of nowhere (*outopia*) to cross the infinitely small and infinitely great distance which separates a geographical fiction from a political and social one; or where the permutation of a 'p' and a 't' (*potia/topia*) makes time and space equivalent. Displaced letters, displaced names (displacing their significations) – a displaced map displacing all maps and really finding none – Utopia as process is the figure of all kinds of frontiers, displacing, by the practice of its travels, all representations, secretly duplicating any kind of real geographical voyage and any kind of historical and temporal change.

In the term invented by More to name the best possible republic, in his fiction of the perfect state, we can read today, in 1992, the limits or frontiers of any state, of any institution – I mean what it is that limits their totalitarian desire for absolute power: in Utopia, we read the unfigurable figure of Infinite Liberty.