

UTOPIA, DESIRE, AND EXIGENCE: RE-THEORIZING UTOPIA AS RHETORICAL ACTION

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David Alessandro Lemke

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David Alessandro Lemke

The Supervisory Committee certifies that this ***disquisition*** complies with
North Dakota State University's regulations and meets the accepted
standards for the degree of

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SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Gary Totten

Chair

Verena Theile

Heather Dubrow

Christina Weber

Approved:

03/22/13

Date

Kevin Brooks

Department Chair

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I seek to redefine Utopia as a literary genre. Specifically, I argue that Utopias and utopian literature should be read as socially situated actions that are interpreted through an exigence composed of the rhetorical and socio-political situation from which an author writes and a critic reads. In the first half of the paper, I argue that by reading Utopias as actions the inherent subjectivity in literary studies can be redirected in a more positive direction. Instead of arguing about the positive or negative aspects of a utopian work's content, critics can focus on the effect such texts have in critiquing and reimagining our society. In the second half of the paper, I read Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* against the business practices and advertising of Monsanto Company to suggest ways in which my system of analysis can be more beneficial for utopian studies and leftist literary criticism.

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I: INTRODUCTION

Utopia's interdisciplinary connections are numerous and diverse, but one of the least discussed and studied is the relationship between Utopia and rhetoric. This situation is due in part to the fact that utopian texts have traditionally been categorized as literature, and generic terms for utopian texts only exist from a literary perspective. Although literary in nature, there is something unquestionably rhetorical about utopian writing. While current terms for utopian texts are based in principles of classification, in this paper I suggest a system of analysis that recognizes the inherent subjectivity in Utopias and seeks to read utopian texts through an analysis of their socio-political exigence, relying in particular on Caroline Miller's definition of exigence as a social motive that is composed of a text's rhetorical, social, and historical situation. While we typically assume that texts have a meaning that is independent from authorial intent and our subjective values, utopian texts are implicitly value-laden. Since every action has a motive (or intent) and an aim (or a value-laden goal), my definitions will incorporate intention and subjectivity in a way that allows them to be analyzed relatively and independently of any subjective value judgment. To demonstrate my generic refinements, I will read Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* against the advertising and business practices of the Monsanto Company, a multinational American corporation, to show how reading the function and purpose of Utopias is more useful and applicable in contemporary utopian studies and expands the range of texts that can be read and analyzed as utopian.

I will begin with some theoretical transparency. For the purpose of this paper, I align myself with Ruth Levitas's umbrella definition of Utopia as a theoretical term in *The Concept of Utopia* (1990). Levitas argues that in the history of utopian studies, Utopia has been defined through its content, form, or function, which she argues has mischaracterized Utopia by limiting what is considered utopian or overlooking the variations in the utopian form. Levitas's definition focuses on a "desire for a better way of being and living" (10), an element she

identifies as present in all utopian manifestations. She argues that desire is not an essential human characteristic, but rather, “where such desire is expressed – and the scope for this will itself be historically variable – it will not only vary markedly in content but may be expressed in a variety of forms, and may perform a variety of functions including compensation, criticism and the catalyzing of change” (8-9). Desire is exhibited in a number of forms, but as a literary critic I’m primarily interested in examining utopian texts as a textual manifestation of desire. Current generic definitions for Utopia use intention and other theoretically problematic elements as components in their definitions that limit the critical and world building power of Utopias. After all, as genre theorist John Frow writes, “far from being merely ‘stylistic’ devices, genres create effects of reality and truth which are central to the different ways the world is understood” (19). My generic redefinitions incorporate elements of Caroline Miller’s rhetorical genres precisely to help utopian theorists and critics focus on the use of Utopias as tools that allow us rethink and question our present, past, and future.

At the heart of my rethinking of Utopia is the concept of exigence and its relationship to Levitas’s utopian desire, specifically the ability of exigence to reconceptualize desire as a recurring social motive and not as a component of individual intention. Exigence is a rhetorical term used by a number of theorists and defined in a number of ways, but for my purposes I lean on Caroline Miller’s definition of exigence advanced in her essay, “Genre as Social Action” (1984). Exigence is a component of a rhetorical situation, which for Miller is socially constructed, that allows writers and readers to comprehend the motive behind a writer’s actions. Miller writes:

Exigence is a form of social knowledge—a mutual constructing of objects, events, interests, and purposes that not only links them but also makes them what they are: an objectified social need... Although exigence provides the rhetor with a sense of rhetorical purpose, it is clearly not the same as the rhetor’s intention, for that can be ill-formed, dissembling, or at odds with what the situation

conventionally supports. *The exigence provides the rhetor with a socially recognizable way to make his or her intentions known...* Exigence must be seen neither as a cause of rhetorical action nor as intention, but as social motive. To comprehend an exigence is to have a motive. Except in a primitive sense, our motives are not private or idiosyncratic; they are products of our socialization.

(157-8, *emphasis added*)

By conceptualizing of Levitas's utopian desire as a particular rhetorical exigence, we can better understand desire as a social motive that has resulted in a variety of textual manifestations that have been tagged with the generic term Utopia. Instead of conceiving of utopian writing only as a literary genre with specific features, we need to recognize the unique situational aspect of utopian writing. Authors engage in utopian writing for a reason: a desire to see the world in a better way. Analyzing the exigence, as opposed to the content, of Utopias will help critics examine how a particular author's Utopia emerges as the result of a specific rhetorical situation, which is made up of a historical setting and a presumed audience and admits a particular authorial point of view, instead of judging the value or quality of the author's utopian world. As Miller writes, studying rhetorical genres "is valuable not because it might permit the creation of some kind of taxonomy, but because it emphasizes some social and historical aspects of rhetoric that other perspectives do not" (151). It is not the features of a text that are important, but "the action it is used to accomplish" (151). In addition, my approach to Utopia gives critics the opportunity to examine the genre historically, and to understand why the common social motive of desire has resulted in a variety of Utopian forms and manifestations. Equating desire with exigence will help avoid a number of the problems that plague other generic definitions.

II: EXISTING GENERIC DEFINITIONS FOR UTOPIA

From this starting point, I want to discuss the biggest problem with existing generic definitions for Utopia: their relationship with subjectivity. Almost all critics would agree that subjectivity is present and a part of any literary analysis, and that is no different for literary utopias. In utopian generic criticism, however, there has been a conflation of two kinds of subjectivity: subjective value judgments about the content of the text and the purpose and function of the text. This is especially problematic given that while utopian scholars have widely attempted to dispel the conception of Utopia as perfect, such an understanding has continued to be popular. The Oxford English Dictionary defines Utopia as “[a] place, state, or condition ideally perfect in respect of politics, laws, customs, and conditions,” and anti-utopian theorists, like Krishan Kumar, continue to tie Utopia and perfection together in their work: “the utopian... denies original sin, and believes that men can perfect themselves by creating the right environment” (100). Such simplistic definitions of Utopia as perfection are theoretically limited given their inherent critical subjectivity. Perfection is a value-laden term and, in such definitions, whether a text is a Utopia or not depends on a critic’s (or author’s) values. Reading utopian texts as socially motivated actions helps us to study what utopian texts do and how they do it instead of our attitudes towards these texts.

Given the necessarily subjective nature of valuing utopian literature, it should be clear that generic terms that rely on those subjective judgments will have some serious theoretical flaws. For example, attempts to classify B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two* (1948) demonstrate the indeterminacy of current generic definitions. Skinner considered his text a utopia, or good world; but most of his readers found the behavioral engineering and rejection of free will in the novel troubling and read it as a dystopia or anti-utopia. In a more extreme example that demonstrates the importance of recognizing subjectivity, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is traditionally considered a dystopia, but it is only from a critical position that

embraces feminism and gender equality that such a statement can be made. Generic terms based on subjective value judgments about the content are problematic for theoretically sound criticism.

This conflation of subjectivity is the primary problem in the set of definitions Lyman Tower Sargent advances in his essay, “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited” (1994).¹ Sargent’s definitions have been invaluable in laying the groundwork for the study of utopian literature and his definitions have been widely accepted. If Sargent’s definitions have one weakness, however, it is the purpose for which he defines them. As the bibliographer of the Society for Utopian Studies, Sargent’s task is an unusually difficult one: to decide what is or is not utopian. While such definitions are necessary to an emerging field of study, Sargent simultaneously recognizes and admits the theoretical limitations of his terms: “[D]efinitions are intellectual constructs that attempt to provide a useful tool to deal with the bulk of a phenomenon. Definitions are rarely or ever useful at the extremes, and the boundaries established by definitions are both moveable and porous or permeable, but for certain purposes (e.g. bibliography) boundaries are necessary” (5).

Ruth Levitas agrees with Sargent’s admission, and adds that “Sargent’s reasons for viewing utopia as a literary genre are more pragmatic than theoretical” (*Concept* 193). Both Levitas and Sargent agree that these definitions have weaknesses and argue that such limitations are inherent in generic definitions of utopian texts. I would disagree with such an assessment. While Sargent’s definitions are limited, their problems emerge from the delicate relationship between intention and subjectivity in utopian criticism, not anything innate in utopian literature.

Sargent’s definitions for Utopia and its subgenres rely on intention as the central organizing concept.² Analyzing authorial intention is not problematic on its own, but Sargent uses intention as a way to avoid acknowledging the subjectivity at the heart of the value judgments being used to categorize texts. As he writes,

Scholars are always aware that authors do things they do not intend, but with utopian literature, the consideration of intent must be included. Intent is a minefield and should be entered only when necessary and only for the limited purpose of determining whether the work should be classified as eutopian, dystopian, and so forth. (13)

In Sargent's definitions, a text is eutopian, dystopian, or even anti-utopian based on what the author intended, which presents problems for any sort of theoretically sound generic analysis. Even if the author was to tell us what he or she intended, as with Skinner's *Walden Two*, such information might be suspect or even simply ignored by critics if it disagrees with their own critical assessment. After all, as Darko Suvin writes about literary utopias: "using the intentions of the author... as a defining characteristic of a genre poses serious problems because, even in a generally didactic literature like utopian literature, it is not always possible to be certain of an author's intention" (142).

Tom Moylan and Raffaela Baccolini, two utopian theorists who helped continue the rise of interest in utopian studies into the 1980s and 90s, crafted newer generic terms like critical utopia and critical dystopia to try to avoid focusing on intention in favor of other textual features like form and historical period. Critical utopias, according to Moylan's *Demand the Impossible* (1986), were a new type of utopian writing that better recognized the imperfections within utopian societies: "The critical utopia... deviates by presenting the utopian society in a more critical light... the society is shown with its faults, inconsistencies, problems, and even denials of the utopian impulse in the better place" (44). Critical dystopias, on the other hand, "allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open ending of these novels maintains the utopian impulse *within* the work... by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel" (*Dark Horizons* 7). Both critical genres also emphasized the mental operations of readers over the textual representations of Utopias, with Moylan arguing that the benefits of critical utopias come from the "more mediated effects that

the utopian imagination can have on a set of readers at the level of ideological formation” (5).

Moylan’s focus on Utopia’s effects on ideology reflects a strong influence in his work, that of post-structuralist utopian theorists.

The post-structural shift in utopian studies is mostly a result of Louis Marin’s book *Utopiques* (1973), and Fredric Jameson’s influential 1977 review of it. In *Utopiques*, Marin conceptualizes of Utopia as an ideological neutralization between the features of the text and reality in such a way that readers are pushed towards more Utopian possibilities in their mental operations. In Jameson’s words: “To understand Utopian discourse in terms of neutralization is indeed precisely to propose to grasp it as a process...or explicitly to repudiate that more traditional and conventional view of Utopia as sheer representation, as the ‘realized’ vision of this or that ideal social or society ideal.” Jameson argues that “it is possible to understand the Utopian text as a determinate type of *praxis*, rather than as a specific code of representation, a *praxis* which has less to do with the construction and perfection of someone’s ‘idea’ of a ‘perfect society’ than it does with a concrete set of mental operations” (“Of Islands” 6). This shift in utopian criticism from analyzing representations to process/praxis is a fundamental component of Moylan’s critical utopia and a necessary nuance in critical conceptions of Utopia. As Jameson notes, Utopia as *praxis* distances the concept from perfection and focuses on the effects utopian texts can have on readers. Moylan and Baccolini incorporate Jameson’s work into their definitions and clearly avoid using intention as part of their utopian genres.

As my rhetorical genres will seek to do, Moylan’s and Baccolini’s critical utopias and dystopias incorporate aspects of socio-political context into their definitions. Unfortunately, they do so far too objectively to be theoretically sound. Many of Moylan’s observations about utopian texts are useful and insightful, but he attributes the changes too often to the oppositional culture of the 1960s. It is tempting to believe that such a period of revolutionary fervor and activist engagement led to or was supported by a more critical form of Utopia, but the reality is that texts that could be considered critical utopias have existed before the twentieth

century and will continue to exist after it. It is unnecessarily problematic to try to limit critical utopias to a particular historical period, and yet Moylan's terms do so:

Utopia became a residual literary form, and the dystopia was recontained and enlisted as proof of the uselessness of utopian desire. However, this neutralizing cooptation and inversion of utopia – this static conflict between toothless utopian and bleak dystopia – was itself negated in the revival of the literary utopia that occurred after the social upheavals of the 1960s. (*Demand* 9)

Moylan describes the critical response to utopian texts and the societal mood about utopian texts as somehow essential or inherent in their creation, something that is echoed in definitions for critical dystopias: “[Critical dystopias] carry out an intertextual intervention that negates the 1980s negation of the critical utopian moment and thus makes room for a new expression of the utopian imagination” (*Dark Horizons* 7). These definitions imply that these texts were integrally involved in shaping utopian thought and critical interest in utopias, but it was not the utopias that changed, it was the critical views of the scholars and critics who read them. It is no mistake that terms such as critical utopias and dystopias, emphasizing “expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling, debunking, of both the genre itself and the historical situation” (10), emerged soon after the rise of post-structuralist theories stressing many of those same values.

Although Moylan's and Baccolini's definition of critical utopias and critical dystopias avoid any discussion of intention by emphasizing form, function, and historical context over the text's content, at the core of both definitions is a melding of eutopia and dystopia that relies on a subjective value judgment on the text's content. Baccolini calls critical dystopias “texts that maintain a utopian core at their center, a locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing tradition and reconstructing alternatives” (“Gender and Genre” 13). Moylan argues that critical utopias have an “awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition...the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself” (*Demand* 10-11). So if a critical utopia is a utopia that embraces dystopia, and a critical dystopia is a dystopia

that embraces a utopian core, and we agree that generic judgments about whether a text is “good” or “bad” are meaningless given the subjectivity at the core of that kind of analysis, neither represents theoretically sound criticism. Both Moylan and Baccolini recognize the problem with intention and attempt to remove it from the equation, replacing it with elements of content, form, function, and time period. However, at the core of both definitions is a subjective critical judgment on the value of the content in a utopian world.

Sargent, Baccolini, and Moylan try to avoid using subjectivity and intention in their generic definitions, acknowledging the problems inherent in such literary analysis. However, as Lisa Garforth points out, avoiding intention altogether creates other problems for utopian theory. In her essay “No Intentions? Utopian Theory After the Future” (2009) Garforth criticizes the current trend of moving away from intention in utopian studies:

Intention is about closure – around an object, an aim, an ultimate good or goal. Contemporary approaches to utopianism, by contrast, wish to hold onto notions of the good... but simultaneously refuse closure – in relation to signification and desire, to the social and the subject. Closure is associated with the totalizing, the authoritarian, the static, the final... In postmodern theory, the fixed, the closed and the structured are precisely what is constraining and ideologically suspect.

(9-10)

Garforth’s quotation recognizes the influence of post-structural thought on theorists like Moylan and Baccolini and points out the problems in abandoning intention. While literary theory and criticism move away from intention and closure in analysis and towards openness and multiplicity, the merging of utopian theory with literary theory in the field of literary utopianism problematizes such an understanding of intention. While most literary critics have forsaken authorial intention it seems very difficult to separate intention from a utopian text, as Sargent acknowledges. Considering utopian texts rhetorically allows the delicate relationship between intention and subjectivity to be navigated through the use of exigence.

III: UTOPIAN EXIGENCE

For the purposes of theoretically sound generic analysis, I suggest redefining how we determine whether something is utopian or not and adopting two terms for this purpose: Utopia and anti-Utopia, both of which I will define further below. For the purposes of classification, I recommend that we continue to use Sargent's terms with a slight modification. I propose that we replace utopia with eutopia to help differentiate between the classification of texts and the function of utopianism as a living concept. Opposed to Sargent, Moylan, and Baccolini's terms, I hope my terms will be able to better embody the spirit and purpose of utopian literature. Instead of assuming or trying to interpret whether or not the author has decided to engage in utopian writing, conceiving of desire as exigence allows us to identify utopian writing as a result of a distinct, repeated, and typified situation caused by desire "for a better way of being and living" (Levitas 10). As Caroline Miller writes, "What recurs is not a material situation (a real, objective, factual event) but our construal of a type" (157), and exigence helps us understand and interpret those types correctly and historically. Critics can avoid trying to decipher the author's intentions or making a value judgment about a texts' content and analyze the rhetorical situation in which he or she was writing. Critics are no longer required to make subjective value judgments about a text's content and it is impossible to ignore the historical contingency in which an author was writing.

Additionally, Utopia as action allows critics to recognize that utopianism and utopian texts are not limited to literature. Even if a text does not fit into a specific literary genre, it may emerge as a response to utopian desire, which can then be analyzed as either Utopian or anti-Utopian. By admitting the rhetorical aspects of utopian writing, it is possible to acknowledge the multifaceted aspect of utopianism and the countless manifestations it has in texts and yet still maintain genres and subgenres with boundaries that are useful for bibliographic and taxonomic

purposes. This creates a two-tiered system of analysis which will better suit the study of utopian texts and allow for theoretically sound and useful generic criticism.

Thus, I am proposing a hierarchical approach to utopian texts, with Utopia being an overarching term for a type of writing that is manifested in texts throughout our culture and represents a reaction to a particular exigence, a desire for a better way of being and living, in a positive way that helps readers think themselves out of their historical situation. In opposition to Utopia, I suggest the use of anti-Utopia as a concept that works against utopian thinking and promotes the ideological status quo. If the purpose and goal of utopian writing and thinking is to help think ourselves out of our historical situation, anti-Utopian writing works to reaffirm the values of our culture or dominant ideology, from a particular critical perspective. I define Utopia and anti-Utopia in the tradition of Karl Mannheim and Paul Ricoeur, who each identify a similar antinomy in modes of thought. In Paul Ricoeur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986), he refines Mannheim's distinction between ideology and utopia in terms of legitimization: "where ideology is legitimization, utopia is an alternate to the present power. It can be either an alternative to power or an alternate form of power. All utopias, whether written or realized, attempt to exert power in a way other than what exists" (310). In a vacuum, this distinction may seem a little vague, but the terms function much more clearly when put into action, as I will demonstrate in the second half of this paper. As Levitas comments on Mannheim and Ricoeur's antinomies, "the process of legitimization and challenge is both more dynamic and more clearly rooted in lived experiences, rather than being an abstract battle between disembodied ideas" (*Concept* 91). The difference between Utopias and anti-Utopias is based in the specific situation and exigence from which a particular author writes and a particular reader or critic interprets.

At this point, an observant reader could point out that creating a hierarchical system of analysis still does not avoid the problem with subjectivity that I identified earlier. As critics, we are still making a subjective judgment on the text in question, except we are making a claim about its Utopia-ness or not instead of its positive-ness or not. However, this criticism ignores

the biggest difference between the two claims: while subjectivity problematizes judgments about value it actually enables a rhetorical evaluation of the Utopia-ness of a particular text. This is because the antinomy between Utopia and anti-Utopia needs to be understood and analyzed relatively, not absolutely. The best we can do at this level of analysis is determine how much a text pushes against the status quo and suggests new and divergent streams of thought from a particular critical or theoretical perspective. No text can be a complete Utopia or anti-Utopia. There will always be a perspective that contradicts what is generally assumed or agreed upon (a chauvinistic reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example). As Paul Ricoeur writes: “the only way to get out of the circularity in which ideologies engulf us is to assume a utopia, declare it, and judge an ideology on this basis... the judgment is always a point of view—a polemical point of view though one which claims to assume a better future for humanity” (172-3). Recognizing that we critique or theorize from a particular critical position helps scholars admit their biases and purposes, as well as recognize the limitations of our own readings.³ We cannot suggest a final or authoritative reading of a text any more than we can call a text an absolute Utopia or anti-Utopia, but for interpretation and analysis we do not need to.

To demonstrate the efficacy of my interpretive paradigm and the use of the rhetorical level of analysis, I will read Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* as a Utopia against the anti-Utopia of Monsanto Company’s advertising and business practices. By crossing generic boundaries to include material typically not analyzed in utopian studies, I want to show how considering utopian texts rhetorically benefits contemporary literary criticism and offers new avenues for reading and comparing Utopias.

IV: *ORYX AND CRAKE* V. MONSANTO

Oryx and Crake is a post-apocalyptic novel written by Margaret Atwood and published in 2004. Commonly categorized as a dystopia or critical dystopia, it tells the story of Jimmy the Snowman, one of the last existing humans after a virus kills most of the planet's population. In typical dystopian fashion, the narrative alternates between present and past, contrasting Snowman's prior life in the super-advanced scientific compounds with his life after the apocalypse as a guide and teacher for a group of genetic mutants named Crakers. The world of the scientific compounds from which Snowman emerges is brutal and disturbing; at one point it is suggested that the scientists are manufacturing diseases so they can sell more vaccines and medicines. In addition, if we should choose to consider the author's intention, we are lucky enough that Atwood is a contemporary writer and has been interviewed about the novel. Although she does not refer to the novel specifically as a utopia or a dystopia, she does admit concern with the scientific world she depicts in the novel: "the world of *Oryx and Crake* is what worries me right now. It's not a question of our inventions — all human inventions are merely tools — but of what might be done with them; for no matter how high the tech, *homo sapiens sapiens* remains at heart what he's been for tens of thousands of years" ("Perfect Storm"). Atwood describes a world that seems worse than our current one, but analyzing intent is only so useful.

Rather than focus on Atwood's intentions and the literary genre of *Oryx and Crake*, it is more valuable to consider whether Atwood's novel is rhetorically Utopian or not. The novel addresses a number of issues within the scientific world and satirizes many aspects of our society, including education, food production, and income distribution. For this analysis, however, we need to be more specific. What aspect of Atwood's exigence are we analyzing? In this case, my approach is influenced by a Marxist desire for more equitable resource

distribution, focusing in particular on food production and distribution as a social motive within the novel and Atwood's implicit critiques of capitalism as an obstacle in the pursuit of that goal.

Although the food industry is not the only component of Atwood's critique, it is one element for which we can find a clear exigence to which *Oryx and Crake* responds as a Utopia. Famine and malnutrition have always been problems for human society, but such problems are especially difficult to accept today, given our high level of scientific and governmental development in terms of food production. According to a United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) study in 2002, there were an estimated 925 million people (about one in seven) suffering from some form of undernutrition. This is especially maddening given that we produce "17 percent more calories per person today than... 30 years ago, despite a 70 percent population increase. This is enough to provide everyone in the world with at least 2,720 kilocalories per person per day" (9). The particular social motive or exigence in this case is a desire to address malnutrition and to more evenly distribute the food resources throughout the world. Although Atwood does not reference or cite these studies in her book or in interviews, exigence allows us to consider the desire for more equitable distribution of food as a social motive, one that Atwood is almost certainly aware of and engaging with in *Oryx and Crake*. Atwood's novel represents a Utopian response to that particular exigence, which I will read against the anti-Utopian commercials and business practices of Monsanto.

While Atwood responds to the exigence of world hunger through literature, Monsanto has responded through their advertising and business practices as a multinational corporation. Monsanto is one of the world's largest producers of genetically engineered (GE) seeds, which it licenses and sells to farmers throughout the globe. There are a variety of modifications done to the seeds, but some of the most noteworthy have been Monsanto's pesticide and herbicide resistant seeds and plants. These plants can be planted much closer together, since farmers do not need room for mechanical weeding, and produce a much higher crop yield. Monsanto has also developed crops that produce their own pesticides, tomatoes with a faster ripening time,

and a soybean that produces oil that has no trans fat and reduced saturated fat. Many of these innovations help farmers grow stronger and more resistant crops and harvest higher yields, apparently working to help solve food shortage issues.

In their advertising and marketing, Monsanto tries to emphasize Utopian goals. Monsanto's motto reads: "Producing more, conserving more, improving lives. That's sustainable agriculture. And that's what Monsanto is all about" (Monsanto.com). On their webpage, Monsanto accentuates their role in aiding farmers and helping everyone get enough to eat. The following statement appears under a tab about improving lives: "We're working to help farmers achieve big increases in yield and productivity. And for all of the world's farmers who raise themselves from poverty to prosperity, many more people will also prosper." Another section about Monsanto reads: "Billions of people depend upon what farmers do. And so will billions more. In the next few decades, farmers will have to grow as much food as they have in the past 10,000 years – combined. It is our purpose to work alongside farmers to do exactly that." A video advertisement on their site entitled "Committed to Sustainable Agriculture, Committed to Farmers" makes their alleged exigence even clearer: "Stand in the congested streets of a developing country, and you'll see millions of people struggling to feed themselves... we believe, working together, we can create a brighter, sustainable world for all of us. That's the world we visualize at Monsanto" (Monsanto.com). Monsanto clearly presents itself as a corporation with a Utopian social motive, responding to a genuine desire for a "better way of being and living" (Levitas 10).

However, Monsanto is also a very large multinational corporation. As a for profit corporation, it is not enough to simply develop a number of genetically modified seeds and plants to sell farmers; these seeds are also patented to prevent farmers from reusing, exchanging, or modifying the seeds in any way. Farmers are thus forced to continue to purchase Monsanto's seeds to ensure the high yields they rely on. Monsanto also regularly sues or threatens to sue farmers for patent infringement, generally because a farmer has either stored

Monsanto seeds to reuse or because a farmer not paying Monsanto has had their field contaminated by GE seeds. The Center for Food Safety, a non-profit advocacy group, reports that Monsanto investigates around 500 farmers per year in the United States and between 2005 and 2010, has filed over 130 lawsuits over its patents on GE seeds. Over that same period, Monsanto has been awarded over twenty-three million dollars in damages from farmers (1). Unlike the farmers who are harmed by these lawsuits, these damages are just a drop in the bucket for Monsanto, given that it had net sales of 13 billion dollars and profits of over 7 billion dollars for the 2012 fiscal year (Monsanto Company). Sadly, this is but a small percentage of the farmers that Monsanto affects, given that most of the cases are resolved confidentially outside of court.

Monsanto's profit motive has also had widespread effects in developing countries like India. One of the most tragic and underreported stories in the world today is the rash of rural farmer suicides in India, mostly due to indebtedness. Since 1997, 200,000 farmers have committed suicide throughout the country. This rise coincides with the entrance of genetically modified seeds and crops by companies like Cargill and Monsanto in 1998. Monsanto and other seed companies' policies on seed savings⁴ have kept local farmers from being able to ensure they could plant a crop the next year. As Vandana Shiva writes: "what was traditionally a free resource, available by putting aside a small portion of the crop, becomes a commodity. This new expense increases poverty and leads to indebtedness." In addition, Monsanto's advertising and products have led to further problems for Indian farmers:

When Monsanto first introduced Bt Cotton in 2002, the farmers lost 1 billion rupees due to crop failure. Instead of 1,500 kilos per acre as promised by the company, the harvest was as low as 200 kilos per acre. Instead of incomes of 10,000 rupees an acre, farmers ran into losses of 6,400 rupees an acre. In the state of Bihar, when farm-saved corn seed was displaced by Monsanto's hybrid corn, the entire crop failed, creating 4 billion rupees in losses and increased

poverty for desperately poor farmers. Poor peasants of the South cannot survive seed monopolies. The crisis of suicides shows how the survival of small farmers is incompatible with the seed monopolies of global corporations. (Shiva)

Monsanto's oppressive practices and questionable ethics have led to a crisis for farmers throughout the developing world. Their oppressive patent litigation and problematic seed monopolies have made it difficult for small and independent farmers to grow crops without Monsanto's seeds, and their stated goals of sustainable agriculture and improving the lives of human beings seem less important when a dollar is on the line and there is a farmer to sue or a patent to protect. Although Monsanto tries very hard to be seen as a Utopian force for change in the world, the dissonance between their advertising and practices makes them much more anti-Utopian in responding to this particular exigence.

Returning to Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, I will show how Atwood responds to this exigence in a much more Utopian manner than Monsanto, one that pushes the boundaries for how we think about food and helps readers consider alternative paths to future nourishment while not ignoring possible dangers and ethical issues as Monsanto does. One of the pressing problems being addressed by the scientists in the compounds of *Oryx and Crake*'s world is the diminishing of resources in the face of ever-increasing demand. In the world of food, students in the scientific compounds show off a variety of innovations to Jimmy as a solution for food shortage.

One of the most graphic and disturbing creations in the book is the genetic oddity known as "ChickieNobs" (203). Created by students at Watson-Crick, the ChickieNob is an animal created to grow chicken parts at high speed without any kind of living sentience; in other words, an animal vegetable. Jimmy is disgusted by the creation: "What they were looking at was a large bulblike object that seemed to be covered with stippled whitish-yellow skin. Out of it came twenty thick fleshy tubes, and at the end of each tube another bulb was growing... 'This is horrible,' said Jimmy. The thing was a nightmare. It was like an animal-protein tuber" (202).

The ChickieNob faces a double condemnation from the text's narrators; Jimmy and the novel's implicit narrator express their disgust at the students' creation. However, in the face of such criticism, Atwood allows the scientists to offer an ethical rejoinder to Jimmy's disgust: "The woman... explained that they'd removed all the brain functions that had nothing to do with digestion, assimilation and growth... And the animal-welfare freaks won't be able to say a word, because this thing feels no pain" (203). The ChickieNobs are very unusual, and they give Atwood the opportunity to engage in a very different conversation about animal rights and food production while posing an interesting ethical question. Generally, genetic modification and growth enhancement are considered ethically questionable because of their application to living, sentient animals. But what happens if scientists can create living vegetable-animals? This conversation already exists around veganism and invertebrate animals, but Atwood's ChickieNobs are profoundly Utopian in that they respond to her exigence by pushing the discussion about food ethics into a completely new direction that is not often considered in contemporary discussions about farming and animal welfare.

While pushing our consciousness towards new ways of thinking about contemporary problems, Atwood also embeds a critique of capitalism into her short section about ChickieNobs. Ultimately, after Jimmy expresses his disgust and the female student argues for the ethicalness of the ChickieNobs, Crake identifies the influence of capitalism and profit on the project: "'Those kids are going to clean up,' said Crake... The students at Watson-Crick got half the royalties from anything they invented there. Crake said it was a fierce incentive... 'They've already got the takeout franchise operation in place,' said Crake. 'Investors are lining up around the block. They can undercut the price of everyone else'" (203). In the face of diminishing resources and a hungry populace, ChickieNobs could be used to supply low-cost protein to the poor and underprivileged living in the Pleeblands, but the capitalist system that governs life in the scientific compounds and in the world of *Oryx and Crake* dis-incentivizes such egalitarian solutions. The students are encouraged to think about their financial self-interest through

royalties and it is clear the companies and compounds have little to no compunction about putting profits above the general welfare. Even as Atwood pushes readers to think about alternative ethical questions about animal welfare, she points to a contemporary roadblock to genuine change. The same relentless drive to profit that Monsanto displays in protecting their patents and seeds is pointed to by Atwood as a serious problem in overcoming the type of societal problems Monsanto is alleged to be fixing.

A similar theme arises in relation to the Happicuppa coffee plant. Similar to the ChickieNobs, the Happicuppa coffee plant is developed by scientists at the HelthWyzer compound. The purpose of this plant is to make it easier to grow and harvest coffee beans: “Individual coffee beans on each bush had ripened at different times and had needed to be handpicked and processed and shipped in small quantities, but the Happicuppa coffee bush was designed so that all of its beans would ripen simultaneously, and coffee could be grown on huge plantations and harvested with machines” (178-9). Unfortunately, as with the ChickieNobs, the interest of the innovators is not with widespread benefit but with individual profit. Atwood writes that the development of the plant: “threw the small growers out of business and reduced both them and their labourers to starvation-level poverty” (179). This leads to widespread rioting and outright warfare in some areas of the globe, pitting individuals against the power of corporations and their agents. Again, Atwood criticizes an outcome that emerges as a direct result of capitalism and profit seeking.

In many ways, the ChickieNobs and Happicuppa coffee plant function as a microcosm of Atwood’s entire novel. *Oryx and Crake* is a novel about science and innovation and the price humans pay for that innovation. Much of the novel is grim and dystopian, but it is not an anti-Utopian text. Atwood uses the grim setting to simultaneously critique aspects of our contemporary culture that she views as problematic while pushing our thinking about current problems like animal welfare into different and unusual directions. While our current problems about malnutrition and food shortages in no way represent the entire exigence Atwood was

responding to, they do illustrate the potential for reading Utopian texts as rhetorical documents, especially when read against or together with contemporaneous anti-Utopian texts. Reading from a different perspective and considering a different exigence might reveal a different critical conclusion, but that is a natural result of analyzing texts.

V: CONCLUSION

The paradigmatic shift I am proposing, from reading utopian texts primarily as literature to reading them primarily as action, is important for a number of reasons. First of all, it reflects the shift in what has been considered a text in hermeneutics. Cultural studies has allowed an entire generation of scholars to focus on non-traditional low-culture texts like TV shows, diaries, Internet videos, and so on. By considering utopianism as a rhetorical aspect of a text, Utopian studies can expand to include discourses that have definite connections to utopian thinking but have not been substantially studied, like commercials and corporate policy. Secondly, by considering exigence as the defining aspect of Utopian texts, analysis will be fundamentally grounded in the situation out of which an author is writing, incorporating intention and subjectivity as part of what makes a text a utopia. Finally, the use of the terms Utopia and anti-Utopia, that are reliant on the critic admitting a particular critical perspective, will be valuable in encouraging the use of metacommentary in utopian criticism and in forging analyses and critiques that are specific to a particular “desire for a better way of being and living” (Levitas 10).

After all, as much as critics might like to move away from closure and fixed meanings in favor of openness and ambiguity, the purpose of Utopia and of utopian thinking in general is a desire for something better. And without some sort of direction, without a goal in mind, change is even harder to achieve than usual. I come from a Marxist persuasion, and my interest in Utopia emerges from my desire and belief that Utopias could help us rethink our current economic system and arrive at a better, more equitable option. But I do not ask Utopias or any text to do that work for me. Change will not come naturally as a result of reading a Utopian text, and criticizing Utopia for being unable to generate change, as some Marxists do, is an unfair and misguided critique.⁵ Utopian literature cannot, on its own, bring about the downfall of capitalism and usher in an egalitarian age of Marxist socialism any more than the *Communist Manifesto* or *Das Kapital* could. The power of these texts resides in the abstract: the mental

operations of utopian writing can help or force a person to reconsider the present and ponder alternative possibilities for the future. To blame utopian thought for being unable to impart significant change in the world is simply to further misrepresent the purpose and function of utopianism and literary utopias.

By considering the rhetorical dimensions of Utopia, critics have a much greater responsibility in determining the utopianism or not of a particular text. If we want Utopias to be understood as texts that respond to a particular exigence, that try to imagine the world in a better way, we need generic terms that reflect those purposes. Incorporating exigence and socially motivated action into a definition for Utopia will allow critics the flexibility to link Atwood's Utopia to the anti-Utopia of Monsanto, a comparison that has real world significance and importance to millions of people. In addition, this approach requires critics to be theoretically transparent and to admit to their biases and interests in evaluating a particular Utopia. Utopia is a human phenomenon that manifests itself in a number of diverse ways, and this definition is one more step in helping us understand, critique, and benefit from its many textual manifestations.

Notes

1. This is a revision and update of Sargent's original essay, published in 1967.
2. Sargent's five subgenres have one phrase in common: "a non-existent society... that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as [better than/worse than/a criticism of] the society in which that reader lived" (9), which encapsulates the focus on intention.

3. Critical transparency is important for several reasons, as Fredric Jameson writes: “every individual interpretation must include an interpretation of its own existence, must show its own credentials and justify itself: every commentary must be at the same time a metacommentary as well” (7). This is not simply for theoretical clarity; the importance of metacommentary is in making motives and purposes clear for other critics and theorists. Sargent’s generic terms do not function as theoretically sound definitions in part because of their purpose as bibliographical terms of classification. The purpose of my generic terms is specifically to make analysis more meaningful and focus the attention on the exigence of the text.
4. Very simply, seed saving is the practice of putting away a small amount of seeds from pollinated crops to grow the following year. Traditionally, this has been a method for farmers to ensure that they have something to plant the next year, regardless of how well their crop does. Monsanto’s customers have to agree not to save seeds as a part of their agreement with the company. This means farmers are forced to pay Monsanto for seeds every year, regardless of the success or failure of their crop.
5. The contentious relationship between Marxism and Utopia is best explained in Ruth Levitas’s second chapter of *The Concept of Utopia*. She writes: “The real dispute between Marx and Engels and the utopian socialists is not about the merit of goals or of images of the future but about the process of transformation, and particularly about the belief that propaganda alone would result in the realization of socialism” (41). Marx and Engels did not believe that utopianism, in the forms they saw, was able to impart significant change in the world, which has led many Marxists to repudiate Utopia as a tool for communism or socialism.

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