

## Socially Empty Space in Late-Nineteenth Century Utopian Literature

Matthew Beaumont

‘When a day that you happen to know is Wednesday starts off by sounding like Sunday,  
there is something seriously wrong somewhere.’

John Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951)

### I

In ‘The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’, Walter Benjamin refers at one point to ‘socially empty space’, an idea that he claims to have found in Marx (whose *Eighteenth Brumaire* he has recently cited). I have been unable to locate this concept in Marx’s writings; but this might not matter, for the formulation in any case seems more Benjaminian than Marxian. Benjamin himself, however, uses it rather enigmatically. He invokes it in relation to some lines from Baudelaire about an old woman who, because she is excluded from ‘the large, closed parks’ of Paris, sits alone and pensive on a bench in a public garden, ‘at that hour when the setting sun / Bloodies the sky with bright red wounds.’<sup>1</sup> Even in this context, where it appears to refer to those zones of the metropolis that are deliberately designed to exclude the

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,’ in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 101-2. The only other use of the phrase ‘socially empty space’ I have been able to find is in an article by J.B. Harley, ‘Maps, Knowledge, and Power,’ which argues that maps “‘desocialize” the territory they represent’, and so ‘foster the notion of a socially empty space’. See Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, ed., *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 303. I am grateful to Pete Ward for reading a draft of this chapter.

people that inhabit it, the idea of ‘socially empty space’ remains abstract and undeveloped. So in this chapter I want to exploit precisely the emptiness of the phrase, its elusive suggestiveness, in order to think about the utopian and dystopian aspects of depopulated space for capitalist modernity; that is, for a society archetypally defined by the sheer populousness of its metropolitan cities, which Raymond Williams once characterized in terms of ‘an unprecedented – crowding and rushing – human and social organization’.<sup>2</sup> Socially empty space is a species of space in which, because one expects it to be filled, densely populated, like the emblematic spaces of metropolitan modernity, the absence of people is perceived almost as a presence. It is urban space that vibrates with a sense of absence. This chapter makes a preliminary attempt to construct an archaeology of socially empty space in nineteenth-century utopian and dystopian fiction.

## II

The associations of socially empty space that I hope to explore are neatly captured by the title of one of Dickens’s pieces for *All the Year Round*: ‘The City of the Absent’. In this article, published in 1863, the Uncommercial Traveller describes his delight in roaming through the ‘deserted nooks and corners’ of the City of London, ‘after business-hours there, on a Saturday, or – better yet – on a Sunday’, when there is no one about. Light but melancholic in tone, the article begins as an experiment in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Introduction,’ in Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 29. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Engels was one of the most eloquent to register this ‘colossal centralization, this heaping together of two and a half millions of human beings’, a concentration of people that ‘has raised London to the commercial capital of the world’ but at the same time pressed ‘the dissolution of mankind into monads’ to its extreme. See *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1973), pp. 59-60.

urban picturesque. Dickens relates his particular fondness for the ‘City Churchyards’, which (like other ‘retired spots’ in the neighbourhood) are at their ‘idlest and dullest’ on Sundays in the summertime. ‘Peeping in through the iron gates and rails,’ he relishes the secret existence of these neglected churchyards, ‘so small, so rank, so silent, so forgotten.’ Roofs and chimneys are in a state of gradual collapse, pipes and drains are broken, gates and railings are rusted: ‘Contagion of slow ruin overhangs the place.’<sup>3</sup> Nature, it seems, is stealthily reclaiming the centre of London’s commercial life. As Ernst Bloch remarked, the ‘inorganic metropolis must defend itself daily, hourly, against the elements as though against an enemy invasion’.<sup>4</sup>

From these churchyards, the Uncommercial Traveller proceeds to ‘the hushed resorts of business’, where he likes to see ‘the carts and waggons huddled together in repose, the cranes idle, and the warehouses shut’. Here the emptiness of this habitually populous part of the metropolis is more apparent. ‘Where are all the people who on busy working-days pervade these scenes?’ he asks.<sup>5</sup> The Uncommercial Traveller is, I suspect, not simply speculating about what those who conduct business in the City during the week do on a Sunday. He is also implicitly reflecting on the depopulation of the City of London, the drastic displacement of its poor inhabitants, which took place in the mid-nineteenth century. This was the calculated effect of the City Corporation’s programme of street clearance, an attempt to expel the ‘dangerous classes’ from central London which had commenced in the 1830s and ‘ruthlessly continued’, as Gareth Stedman Jones has argued, in the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>6</sup> Dickens’s City of the Absent, then, is both a dystopian space and a utopian one: it is dystopian

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘The City of the Absent,’ in *The Uncommercial Traveller and Other Reprinted Pieces etc.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 233.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Bloch, ‘The Anxiety of the Engineer,’ in *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 307.

<sup>5</sup> Dickens, ‘The City of the Absent,’ pp. 238-9.

<sup>6</sup> See Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 166-9.

because, for the Uncommercial Traveller, the silent streets of the City of London on a Sunday vibrate with the absence of its former inhabitants, who have been dishoused by the Corporation's urban improvement; it is utopian because, in the secret spaces of the commercial centre, its forgotten nooks and corners, Nature is surreptitiously reappropriating the metropolis. Empty space is in this respect an example of what Benjamin called dialectics at a standstill, for it is a sign both of the city's damnation and its redemption.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of 'The City of the Absent', Dickens mentions the 'Sunday sensation' he experiences, when perambulating the City during its 'weekly pause of business', 'of being the Last Man.'<sup>8</sup> He is of course alluding to Mary Shelley's novel of that name. *The Last Man* (1826), which extended the tradition established by Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville in *La Dernier Homme* (1805), recounts the elimination of all but one representative of humanity by a plague that rages across the surface of the globe in a far-distant future. This novel effectively establishes the trope of socially empty space in post-Romantic literature. It takes the solitary individual of Romantic myth, who seeks redemption in a sublime landscape far from the mass of people, and relocates him to a ruined, completely depopulated city in which he is effectively damned. In her portraits of cities emptied by infection, Shelley was evidently influenced by *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Daniel Defoe's vivid reconstruction of London in 1665. For there, Defoe conjures ghostly images of a city devastated by death and mass migration, explaining for instance that, at the height of the panic, 'whole streets seemed to be desolated, and not to be shut up only, but to be emptied of their inhabitants; doors were left open, windows stood shattering with the

---

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,' in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 41

<sup>8</sup> Dickens, 'The City of the Absent,' p. 240.

wind in empty houses for want of people to shut them.’<sup>9</sup> This is exemplary socially empty space, palpably haunted by the inhabitants who have deserted it. But Shelley’s extraordinary descriptions of deserted cities in *The Last Man* reinscribe this dystopian scene in terms of the sublime, and in so doing they impart a faint, trembling utopian impulse to it.

In the penultimate chapter of Shelley’s apocalyptic romance, her dispirited, grieving narrator Verney, and his friends Adrian and Clara, apparently the sole survivors of the plague, travel across Italy with increasing desperation. ‘We banished from our talk, and as much as possible from our thoughts, the knowledge of our desolation,’ he records; ‘and it would be incredible to an inhabitant of cities, to one among a busy throng, to what extent we succeeded.’<sup>10</sup> They proceed in an almost hopeless spirit to Venice, floating into the Canale Grande on an ‘uninjured’ gondola retrieved from amongst the wrecked hulls they find ‘strewed on the beach at Fusina’:

The tide ebbed sullenly from out the broken portals and violated halls of Venice: sea-weed and sea monsters were left on the blackened marble, while the salt ooze defaced the matchless works of art that adorned their walls, and the sea-gull flew out from the shattered window. In the midst of this appalling ruin of the monuments of man’s power, nature asserted her ascendancy, and shone more beautiful from the contrast. (438-9)<sup>11</sup>

Subsequently, having requisitioned an abandoned boat, they attempt to sail from Venice to Athens, as if travelling back through the history of civilization; but a storm overtakes them, and Adrian and Clara are killed. His ‘limbs soiled with salt ooze’,

---

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, ed. Anthony Burgess and Christopher Bristow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 183-4.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, ed. Morton D. Paley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 438. Subsequent references are cited in parenthesis.

<sup>11</sup> J.G. Ballard’s imaginative debt to this description of a ‘drowned world’, as Shelley describes it a couple of paragraphs later (p. 440), is surely indisputable.

Verney eventually returns to consciousness on a beach on the Italian coast, where he disconsolately identifies himself with Robinson Crusoe, ‘that monarch of the waste.’ Embittered, he realizes that he has access to all the material riches of civilization, but none of its spiritual consolations: ‘If I turned my steps from the near barren scene, and entered any of the earth’s million cities, I should find their wealth stored up for my accommodation – clothes, food, books, and a choice of dwelling beyond the command of princes of former times’ (448). This enthralling, horrifying vision of a million dead cities, in a book that constitutes the *terminus a quo* of the tradition I have identified, constitutes that tradition’s *terminus ad quem*.

Shelley’s narrator then stumbles to the city closest to the coast where he has been beached, Ravenna, which he enters before ‘the second sun ha[s] set on the empty world’ (449). There he sees ‘many living creatures’, including dogs and horses, but no human beings (449). He fantasizes that, instead of inhabiting a post-human planet, he is simply mad, ‘labouring under the force of a spell’ that permits him ‘to behold all sights of earth, except its human inhabitants’ (449). In the final chapter, after a night spent sleeping on the pavement, he confronts ‘the dread blank’ before him, an empty space both temporal and spatial (452). He wanders around the city in search of life for three lonely days, then deserts it and meanders along the River Mantone until he reaches Forli. There, in spite of ‘the excess of desolation’ he encounters in the town, he enters ‘with pleasure its wide and grassy streets’ (455). The soft, silent reclamation of Forli’s arcades and squares by Nature, in an organic process that simultaneously tames and defamiliarizes the town, momentarily offers Verney hope. It is an exemplary representation of what Mike Davis has identified as ‘the nonlinear

dimensions of urban ecology'.<sup>12</sup> This is the tradition of the urban picturesque that Dickens excavated for his vision of the City of the Absent.

Rome, the city in which the narrator's record of the events described in *The Last Man* ominously ends, embodies in contrast an urban sublime. In his rambles through this monumental city, where he admits to being 'in search of oblivion', Verney finds himself awed by the fact that, as one of the supreme products of human civilization, it is also 'the majestic and eternal survivor of millions of generations of extinct men' (461). The impact on him of the city's numberless statues, which both diminishes and enlarges his spirit, captures precisely the dialectic of the sublime: 'I had shrunk into insignificance in my own eyes, as I considered the multitudinous beings these stone demigods had outlived, but this after-thought restored me to dignity in my own conception' (461). He is inspired by the 'meanest streets', scattered as they are with ruined columns and capitals; and he is inspired too by the walls of even 'the most penurious dwellings', for 'the voice of dead time, in still vibrations, is breathed from these dumb things, animated and glorified as they were by man' (461). Ultimately, though, the empty city proves almost fatally oppressive: 'The generations I had conjured up to my fancy, contrasted more strongly with the end of all – the single point in which, as a pyramid, the mighty fabric of society had ended, while I, on the giddy height, saw vacant space around me' (463). The utopian promise that this empty metropolis seems to incarnate, a promise inseparable from the fact that its spaces are not cluttered by masses of people, finally collapses before the dystopian prospect that it simultaneously invokes, one in which the existential subject, isolated and adrift in the classical city, is obliterated by solitude. In this respect, as I hope to make apparent, the representation of socially empty space in *The Last Man*, shaped as

---

<sup>12</sup> Mike Davis, *Dead Cities* (New York: New Press, 2002), p. 365.

it is by a monumental architecture that collapses in on the protagonist's mental architecture, anticipates that of *Looking Backward* (1888), Edward Bellamy's seminal late nineteenth-century utopian fiction.

### III

Before training my focus on *Looking Backward*, though, I want to glance at *After London: or, Wild England* (1885), by the naturalist Richard Jefferies, a utopian fiction which was manifestly influenced by *The Last Man*. For Jefferies, who presses the urban picturesque to its extreme, in a gesture of understated but unmistakable violence, also offers a suggestive meditation on socially empty space. *After London* is set in a future in which English society has been dramatically reshaped, along semi-feudal lines, because of a creeping environmental apocalypse that, in the aftermath of some nameless ecological or economic or even cosmic cataclysm, has comprehensively destroyed the infrastructure of industrial-capitalist society. Some people, reports the narrator, claim that 'the sea silted up the entrances to the ancient ports, and stopped the vast commerce which was once carried on'; others that 'the supply of food from over the ocean suddenly stopping caused great disorders, and that the people crowded on board all the ships to escape starvation, and sailed away, and were no more heard of'; others still that the earth tilted in its orbit because of 'some attractive power exercised by the passage of an enormous dark body through space.'<sup>13</sup> England became rapidly depopulated as a result of this disaster. 'All that seems certain,' the narrator adds, is 'that when the event took place, the immense crowds

---

<sup>13</sup> Richard Jefferies, *After London: or, Wild England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 15-16. Subsequent references are cited in parenthesis.



collected in cities were most affected, and that the richer and upper classes made use of their money to escape' (16). The poor, at least those of them that survived, must have fled from the cities, but they obviously didn't thrive, since 'a man might ride a hundred miles and not meet another' (16). Thus 'the cunning artificiers of the cities all departed, and everything fell quickly into barbarism; nor could it be wondered at, for the few and scattered people of those days had enough to do to preserve their lives' (18).

The first section of Jefferies's novel, 'The Relapse into Barbarism,' from which these accounts are taken, goes on to describe the gradual implosion of London, and the metropolitan civilization it symbolizes, in some detail. The south east of England has eventually become a massive lake, at the extremities of which are 'the vast marshes which cover the site of the ancient London' (36). In the aftermath of the catastrophe, the Thames became so choked, thanks to the accumulation both of flotsam from upstream and the city's refuse from its 'enormous subterranean aqueducts and drains', that it 'began to overflow up into the deserted streets' (36). The drains, in the meantime, 'were burst up, and the houses fell in' (36). 'For this marvellous city, of which such legends are related,' the narrator unsentimentally comments, 'was after all only of brick, and when the ivy grew over and trees and shrubs sprang up, and, lastly, the waters underneath burst in, this huge metropolis was soon overthrown' (36). This is the process that Dickens identified as a 'contagion of slow ruin'. But Jefferies's London, more dramatically, has metamorphosed in the end into 'a vast stagnant swamp', deadly, miasmatic, irreducibly enigmatic (37). In a tone of scarcely concealed rapture, the narrator concludes that 'all the rottenness of a thousand years and of many hundred millions of human beings is there festering under the stagnant water, which has sunk down into and penetrated the earth, and

floated up to the surface the contents of the buried cloacae' (38). England's other cities, though not perhaps as pestilential as the metropolis, are themselves too toxic to be habitable. So Nature – 'the monstrous vegetative powers of feral nature', as Davis puts it in his *précis* of the novel<sup>14</sup> – erodes and reclaims them. 'And thus the cities of the old world, and their houses and their habitations, are deserted and lost in the forest,' the narrator writes (39). Jefferies's London, which has no inhabitants, no buildings, no streets, cannot even be reforested.

Jefferies pushes the tropes of the urban picturesque to the point at which, in this representation of London itself as a kind of obscene stain, an undead city as opposed to simply a dead one, the metropolis constitutes a pure instance of the sublime. Like the *lamella*, in Lacan's terms, it 'stands for the Real in its most terrifying dimension, as the primordial abyss which swallows everything, dissolving all identities'.<sup>15</sup> The city resists all attempts to anthropomorphise it, even as it resists all attempts by humans to penetrate its toxic precincts (it is a swamp 'which no man dare enter, since death would be his inevitable fate' [37]). It is thus a species of socially empty space that has been realized as unmediated matter. Jefferies's London is the City of the Absent as pure presence. As I have implied, however, his dystopian vision of depopulation is implicitly shaped by a distinctive utopian impulse. For in this novel Jefferies takes a positively vengeful delight in the imaginative destruction of London. He did the same in a short story composed in the mid-1870s, 'The Great Snow'. There, a cataclysmic snow storm strips the metropolis back to a terminal state of anarchy in which desperate people die in 'unrecorded numbers'. 'Where now,' lament the 'fanatics' preaching to the people in this unsettling fantasy, 'Where now is

---

<sup>14</sup> Davis, *Dead Cities*, p. 370.

<sup>15</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Psychoanalysis and the Lacanian Real,' in *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 227.

your mighty city that defied nature and despised the conquered elements [...]?’<sup>16</sup> As in *After London*, the fanaticism of Jefferies himself is manifest in the gratification he derives from envisaging Nature’s revenge on Culture.

One of the first readers of *After London* to respond to its dialectic of destruction and recreation, the dystopian and the utopian, was William Morris. Morris read *After London* in April 1885 on a train journey from Scotland to Chesterfield, where he was due to deliver a lecture chaired by the so-called ethical socialist Edward Carpenter; and he recorded his immediate response in a letter to his friend and confidant Georgiana Burne-Jones: ‘I read a queer book called “After London” coming down: I rather like it: absurd hopes curled round my heart as I read it. I wish I were thirty years younger: I want to see the game played out.’<sup>17</sup> According to J.W. Mackail, his first biographer, Morris ‘thought that it represented very closely what might really happen in a dispeopled England’.<sup>18</sup> A month later, probably still thinking in part of *After London*, this time in a gloomier state of mind, he wrote again to Georgiana: ‘I have [no] more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future history of “civilization”, which I *know* now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long.’ ‘What a joy it is to think of!’ he nonetheless added in a tone of spiteful satisfaction, ‘and how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies.’<sup>19</sup> In *After London*, Jefferies simplifies the old, over-

---

<sup>16</sup> Richard Jefferies, ‘The Great Snow,’ in *After London: or, Wild England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 246, 248. Another tale on this theme, ‘Snowed Up’, remained unpublished in Jefferies’s lifetime.

<sup>17</sup> William Morris, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. Norman Kelvin, Vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 426.

<sup>18</sup> J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (London: Longmans, Green, 1899), Vol. II, p. 144.

<sup>19</sup> Morris, *The Collected Letters*, Vol. II, p. 436. One can detect an echo of Morris’s comments on Jefferies – its conviction that the sight of vast destruction might stimulate some massive, collective endorphin rush, capable of catalysing an entire programme of social reconstruction – in Fredric Jameson’s recent review of Margaret Atwood’s *After the Flood* (2009). The Flood of the title is a lethal, man-made plague that, as Jameson puts it, like the Biblical Flood, ‘fulfils its purpose, namely to

complicated society, with its immense tangle of competing interests, in a single cataclysmic act. The depopulated city, even if it is in a state of ecological or social chaos, is a city that can be cleansed, and might therefore begin again. For Morris, it prompts a feeling of febrile optimism.

Morris's utopia, *News from Nowhere* (1891), which channels his political anger through compelling, sometimes moving descriptions of socialist revolution, is a brilliant intervention in this debate about the social conditions that, in contrast to industrial capitalism, might make real feelings and passions feasible again.<sup>20</sup> But at the same time it domesticates Jefferies's fanaticism, in the sense at least that its utopian dream of the city operates inside the parameters of the urban picturesque. In Morris's pastoral future, the distinction between the countryside and the city has gradually been eroded. Bloomsbury, which is at best sparsely populated, is for example comprised of unfenced gardens and pleasant lanes. England itself is 'a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt, with the necessary dwellings, sheds, and workshops scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty.'<sup>21</sup> In the future elaborated in *News from Nowhere* there is no admixture of the utopian and the dystopian; so Morris's vision of the redeemed metropolis, with its happily depleted population, finally lacks the phantasmagoric energies of his contemporary Jefferies's vision of the damned, emptied one.

---

cleanse the world of the toxic garbage of human society, leaving the few survivors, (mostly people trapped in inaccessible and thereby uncontaminated spaces) to start something new.' Jameson concludes 'that the post-catastrophe situation in reality constitutes the preparation for the emergence of Utopia itself'. See 'Then You are Them,' *London Review of Books* 31:17 (10<sup>th</sup> September 2009), pp. 7-8.

<sup>20</sup> I have written more fully about *News from Nowhere* in *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England 1870-1900*, paperback edition (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), pp. 169-88.

<sup>21</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, in *Three Works by William Morris*, ed. A.L. Morton (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968), p. 254.

#### IV

In this section, I propose to focus on the representation of socially empty space in Bellamy's American blockbuster, *Looking Backward*, which famously provoked Morris to compose *News from Nowhere*. Morris's bucolic descriptions of London recall perhaps Shelley's description of the 'wide and grassy streets' of Ravenna in *The Last Man*, though the effect is of course far more comforting. *Looking Backward*, by contrast, elaborates on the tradition of the urban sublime initiated in Shelley's half-inspiring, half-terrifying portrait of Rome.

Bellamy's utopian novel narrates the fantastical experiences of its narrator, Julian West, an affluent inhabitant of Boston who, though he suffers from insomnia, in part no doubt because of the 'disturbances of industry' that afflict the city, sleeps for more than a hundred years.<sup>22</sup> One night in 1887, helped by a hypnotist, he retires to bed in a subterranean chamber he has had built in order to help him sleep. He awakes in the year 2000 to discover that the United States has become a successful state-socialist society. Cast in the form of an autobiographical account of his experiences in the Boston of the future, the bulk of West's narrative comprises a history of the development of the city's infrastructure and a tour of its superstructure, both conducted by a ciceronian character called Dr Leete. Leete explains that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, monopoly capitalism developed organically into state socialism:

'The industry and commerce of the country, ceasing to be conducted by a set of irresponsible corporations and syndicates of private persons at their caprice and for their profit, were intrusted to a single syndicate representing the people, to be conducted in the common interest for the common profit. The nation, that is to say

---

<sup>22</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 9. Subsequent references are cited in parenthesis.

organized as the one great business corporation in which all other corporations were absorbed; it became the one capitalist in the place of all other capitalists, the sole employer, the final monopoly in which all previous and lesser monopolies were swallowed up, a monopoly in the profits and economies of which all citizens shared.'

(33)

The labour problem has been solved because competition was abolished when the nation became the sole capitalist. The introduction of socialism was then primarily 'thanks to the corporations themselves' (34), though it was necessarily sponsored by public opinion. 'The popular sentiment towards the great corporations and those identified with them,' Leete proclaims, 'had ceased to be one of bitterness, as they came to realize their necessity as a link, a transition phase, in the evolution of the true industrial system' (33). It is presumably this happy consensus that permitted the nation to apply 'the principle of universal military service' to the problem of labour, and to turn the people into an 'industrial army' (36). The 'industrial army' is effectively the foundation of Bellamy's state-socialist future. Production is organised with a regimental efficiency analogous to that of 'the German army in the time of Von Moltke' (143); and this system informs all aspects of life, from the provision of leisure to the preservation of order.

*Looking Backward* is immensely important in the history of utopian thought, both because of its impact on the late nineteenth-century socialist movement and because it almost single-handedly led to a reclamation of utopian romance as a viable form of political propaganda at the *fin de siècle*. Furthermore, the subsequent political trajectory of what Morris condemned at the time as its dream of 'machine life' is

virtually allegorical of the fate of utopia in the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> Nationalism, Bellamy's name for this type of socialism in which, after the era of monopoly capitalism, the state itself acts as a giant corporation, assumed increasingly unacceptable overtones in the twentieth century, inflected as it seemed to be by both Nazism and Stalinism. More generally, though, it is a commonplace to state that, if the nineteenth century was dominated by utopianism, the twentieth century was dominated by dystopianism. The rationalist dreams of the nineteenth century became the irrationalist nightmares of the twentieth century. 'The fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant,' as Adorno and Horkheimer put it in mock-apocalyptic tones in the opening paragraph of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>24</sup>

The afterlife of the principal utopian space portrayed in *Looking Backward* encapsulates this darkening of the utopian imagination. I am thinking specifically of Bellamy's description of his protagonist's spiritual epiphany in one of twenty-first century Boston's department stores, to which he is taken by Leete's daughter Edith, 'an indefatigable shopper' (58):

It was the first interior of a twentieth-century public building that I had ever beheld, and the spectacle naturally impressed me deeply. I was in a vast hall full of light, received not alone from the windows on all sides, but from the dome, the point of which was a hundred feet above. Beneath it, in the centre of the hall, a magnificent fountain played, cooling the atmosphere to a delicious freshness with its spray. The walls and ceilings were frescoed in mellow tints, calculated to soften without absorbing the light which flooded the interior. Around the fountain was a space occupied with chairs and sofas, on which many persons were seated conversing. Legends on the walls all about the hall indicated to what class of commodities the counters below were devoted. (60)

---

<sup>23</sup> William Morris, 'Looking Backward,' in *Political Writings: Contributions to Justice and Commonweal, 1883-1890*, ed. Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994), p. 423.

<sup>24</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1986), p. 3.

This passage, which in spite of the discreet presence of the commodities themselves might indeed be a description of a shopping centre in 2000, and which thus appears to be the most prophetic of all the aspects of Bellamy's utopian society, in fact hypostasizes and idealizes the aesthetics of consumption then developed in the advanced centres of capitalism in the late nineteenth century, when temples dedicated to shopping, in the form of department stores like Whiteley's in London, were first erected.<sup>25</sup> The most profound epiphany experienced by West in utopian Boston takes place in a cathedral of consumption.

This, then, is the latent as opposed to manifest content of the utopian dream annotated in *Looking Backward*. I emphasise it in this context not only because it constitutes the inner logic of Bellamy's vision, nor because of its representative disposition of public space as private space, of monumental space as domestic space, but because of its afterlife. In 1893, the description I have cited inspired the architect George Wyman to design the Bradbury Building, a five-storey office block in Los Angeles commissioned by the silver-mining millionaire Lewis Bradbury. The airy grandeur of its 'commercial romanesque' interior, surmounted by a spectacular glass roof, was an attempt to capture the vast hall of light imagined by Bellamy. Ironically, however, the building's interior space has in the course of the last one hundred years become more closely associated with darkness than light, with the dystopian as opposed to the utopian. It was used, for example, as the location for a number of important noir movies made in the mid-twentieth century, including Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), Rudolf Maté's *D.O.A.* (1950), and Joseph Losey's remake of Fritz Lang's *M* (1951), in each of which the protagonist's existential emptiness is

---

<sup>25</sup> For this argument, see Matthew Beaumont, 'Shopping in Utopia: *Looking Backward*, the Department Store, and the Dreamscape of Consumption,' *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 28:3 (2006), pp. 191-209.



reflected in the lonely, hostile spaces of the post-war city. Subsequently, it was the setting for the climactic scenes of Ridley Scott's neo-noir film *Bladerunner* (1982). Bellamy's enlightened, lightsome interior thus comes to radiate disaster triumphant.

So Bellamy's utopia contracted little black cells in the twentieth century, and these metastasized, until it acquired a positively dystopian appearance. The point I want to underline in this chapter, though, is that *Looking Backward* already contained these pockets of darkness; and one can detect them most clearly in his representation of the protagonist's relationship to, or encounter with, utopian space, and in particular empty space. It is in these passages that the form of Bellamy's utopia – which has been decried by critics from Morris onwards because its framework for the future socialist society is varnished over with such a thin, clumsily executed romance – comes to seem more complex. It is in the fleeting glimpses of twenty-first century Boston as a city of the absent that this utopia seems to me most interesting. In spite of the rationalist aspirations that shape its blueprint for state socialism, Bellamy's book needs to be seen as the product of the *fin de siècle*, and hence as incipiently modernist, not simply as the end of an Enlightenment tradition of utopian thought. Some of the urban psychopathologies that first emerged as such in the late nineteenth century can be dimly detected in *Looking Backward*, and in this respect its hero is not the uncomplicated political or ideological cipher with which the reader of nineteenth-century utopian fiction is conventionally expected emptily to identify.

Exhausted by insomnia, West admits to having been in 'an unusually nervous state' the evening before he time-travelled into the future (15). The urban psychopathology from which he manifestly does not suffer, however, is claustrophobia, a condition identified as recently as the late 1870s. As I have intimated, in late-nineteenth century Boston he habitually slept in a subterranean

chamber built in order to insulate him from the ‘never ceasing nightly noises’ of the city (13). The walls of this tomb-like chamber ‘had been laid in hydraulic cement and were very thick, and the floor was likewise protected’ (14). The roof consisted of ‘stone slabs hermetically sealed, and the outer door was of iron with a thick coating of asbestos’ (14). But if West is not a claustrophobic, he might plausibly be described as an agoraphobic. The name ‘agoraphobia’ was first ascribed to a fear of open or urban spaces (it applied to both) by Carl Otto Westphal in 1871. It had though been identified as a distinct neuropathic phenomenon from at least the late 1860s, at the outset of what David Trotter has called ‘phobia’s *belle époque*’.<sup>26</sup> In his *Die Agoraphobie* (1872), Westphal observed that ‘for some years patients have repeatedly approached me with the peculiar complaint that it is not possible for them to walk across open spaces and through certain streets and that, due to the fear of such paths, they are troubled in their freedom of movement’.<sup>27</sup> I want to claim that the socially empty spaces of twenty-first century Boston create a comparable anxiety in West, by briefly examining three examples of its representation.

West’s first experience of the city of the future – once he has been shaken from his coma by the family that inhabits the house accidentally built above the subterranean chamber in which he has been entombed – is one of socially empty space. This is his primal scene. He sees the city from a distance, though, so it doesn’t cause him undue anxiety. Initially, West refuses to believe that he has slumbered for more than a hundred years, reasonably enough; so Dr. Leete takes him up to a platform on the rooftop and, like Satan tempting Christ, reveals the city of the future laid out beneath them:

---

<sup>26</sup> David Trotter, ‘The Invention of Agoraphobia,’ *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32:2 (2004), p. 463. I have discussed agoraphobia more extensively in ‘Ford Madox Ford: Autobiography, Urban Space, Agoraphobia,’ *Journal of Literature and Science* 3 (2010), pp. 37-49.

<sup>27</sup> Terry J. Krappi and Michael T. Schumacher, *Westphal’s ‘Die Agoraphobie’, with Commentary: The Beginnings of Agoraphobia* (Langham: University Press of America, 1988), p. 59.

At my feet lay a great city. Miles of broad streets, shaded by trees and lined with fine buildings, for the most part not in continuous blocks but set in larger or smaller inclosures, stretched in every direction. Every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees, among which statues glistened and fountains flashed in the late afternoon sun. Public buildings of a colossal size and an architectural grandeur unparalleled in my day raised their stately piles on every side. Surely I had never seen this city nor one comparable to it before.

(22)

There is nothing threatening about this space, even though its topography comes as a shock to West. From a distance, the supreme rationalism of its geometric forms is both inspiriting and comforting (and he is soon consoled too by the sight of the Charles River). Indeed, it is as if he half expected the city of the future to be like this; as if he has simply become conscious that the city of the past secretly aspired to this precise state of social equilibrium. I intend to identify this space, in which West hasn't so far had to participate directly, *monumental space*.

West's second encounter with space does not take the form of a topographical experience so much as an existential one. This one takes place when he wakes up in the Leetes' unfamiliar apartment on the morning of his first full day in the future and undergoes an estrangement that precipitates a deep psychological crisis. Here is a *horror vacui*. This passage is itself proof that Bellamy's account of the transition to utopia experienced by his protagonist is anything but simplistic. West is reborn into a vertiginous, sickening state of non-being:

I think it must have been many seconds that I sat up thus in bed staring about, without being able to regain the clew to my personal identity. I was no more able to distinguish myself from pure being during those moments than we may suppose a soul in the rough to be before it has

received the ear-marks, the individualizing touches which make it a person. [...] There are no words for the mental torture I endured during this helpless, eyeless groping for myself in a boundless void. (45)

The shift described here is from monumental space to *mental space*. In this scene, effectively located inside his consciousness, an inchoate state of agoraphobia can be inferred from West's perception of himself in relation to the 'boundless void' in which he blindly fumbles. The condition seems at least, he states, to last an interminable amount of time, and he is forced to fight for his sanity: 'In my mind, all had broken loose, habits of feeling, associations of thought, ideas of persons and things, all had dissolved and lost coherence and were seething together in apparently irretrievable chaos' (46). His sense of self can scarcely be preserved in what he describes as the 'weltering sea' in which it struggles (46). In a discussion of spatial pathologies, the architectural critic Sigfried Giedion once stated that 'our period demands a type of man who can restore the lost equilibrium between inner and outer reality'. 'This equilibrium,' he continued, 'never static but, like reality itself involved in continuous change, is like that of a tightrope dancer who, by small adjustments, keeps a continuous balance between his being and empty space.'<sup>28</sup> West is this tightrope walker attempting to regain his equilibrium after almost fatally toppling into empty space.

So far, then, Bellamy has represented an exterior space that is utopian and an interior space that is dystopian. The third instance of empty space he depicts combines monumental and mental space, collapsing the utopian and the dystopian in on one another. Clumsy though the formulation is, it might be called *monu/mental*

---

<sup>28</sup> Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to anonymous History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 720.

*space* in order to signal this synthesis, such that the monumental city is experienced as a mental collapse, the ordered city as psychological disorder.<sup>29</sup> Still suffering from the feelings of dissolution I have detailed, West decisively but desperately puts on his clothes and leaves the house, though it is scarcely light outside: ‘I found myself on the street. For two hours I walked or ran through the streets of the city’ (46). In this scene, Bellamy situates a state of non-being in an urban frame, dramatizing the protagonist’s loss of self in terms of an agoraphobic reaction to the unfamiliar, the alien city. ‘So far as my consciousness was concerned,’ he explains, ‘it was but yesterday, but a few hours, since I had walked these streets in which scarcely a feature had escaped a complete metamorphosis’ (47). He experiences space as an impossible palimpsest, in which the past merges with the present, the present with the future, ‘like the faces of a composite photograph’ (47). His mind cannot compute the competing claims of these opposing cities – ‘it was first one and then the other which seemed more real’ – and threatens to implode. Then, all of a sudden, he finds himself back at the Leetes’ house, the site of his home in the nineteenth century, as if his feet have instinctively saved him from some complete psychological collapse in the vast, empty spaces of the city. Inside, he drops into a chair, and makes a final, concentrated attempt to resist the city’s colonization of his mental space:

I covered my burning eyeballs with my hands to shut out the horror of strangeness. My mental confusion was so great as to produce actual nausea. The anguish of those moments, during which my brain seemed melting, or the abjectness of my sense of helplessness, how can I describe?’ (47)

---

<sup>29</sup> For a further illustration of *monu/mental space*, one might look to the metaphysical cityscapes painted by Giorgio de Chirico, himself an agoraphobic, from the 1910s. The spectral piazzas in compositions like ‘La Matinée Angoissante’ (1912), which in the present context recall Shelley’s description of Rome, are the visual equivalent of Bellamy’s portrait of the individual self hopelessly dissolving in the empty streets of the city. Both portray a fear of emptiness that is indissociable from the experience of urban space as impossibly alien.

In so far as it is experienced from the inside rather than the outside, as psychological rather than sociological space, the monumental city of the future provokes an agoraphobic reaction. Its ‘miles of broad streets’, which stretch in every direction, its ‘large open squares’, and its ‘public buildings of a colossal size’, are suddenly threatening, oppressive. The large-scale geometric space embodied in utopian Boston provides precisely the kind of environment that, in the late nineteenth century, stimulated panic among individuals who were susceptible to agoraphobia. Kathryn Milun has recently argued that agoraphobia emerged ‘during a period of massive migration from country to city, together with the construction of monumental architectural forms that accompanied both metropolitan growth and the rise of the modern nation-state’. ‘Nineteenth-century agoraphobics experienced the gigantic squares and boulevards introduced into their cities as hostile environments,’ she goes on to claim; ‘They perceived these monumental spaces as “empty” and experienced intense anxiety that caused them to retreat to the curb, to their homes, and even to bed.’<sup>30</sup> Agoraphobics, as Milun emphasizes, were often people who, because they had migrated from rural communities, felt overcome by the gigantism of urban society. Bellamy’s protagonist, in spite of his name, is a migrant through time rather than space, a Time Traveller; but the pathological effect on him is the same.

He is rescued from his agoraphobic collapse, in the first place at least, by the appearance of Edith, who has heard him groan aloud, and who offers him ‘the most poignant sympathy’ (47). He reaches for her outstretched hands ‘with an impulse as instinctive as that which prompts the drowning man to seize upon and cling to the rope which is thrown to him as he sinks for the last time’ (48). In the second place, he

---

<sup>30</sup> Kathryn Milun, *Pathologies of Modern Space: Empty Space, Urban Anxiety, and the Recovery of the Urban Self* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. ?.

is rescued by a carefully calculated process of socialization that enables him to accommodate himself to the city of the future, a process that is initiated, symptomatically, if at first unexpectedly, by the shopping trip to which I have already alluded. It is in the course of this excursion, to a space in which the monumental forms of the city are domesticated, and the urban sublime is consequently tamed, that West becomes a normalized, socially functional utopian subject. In the late nineteenth century, the epoch in which consumption comes to be a central component in the expansion of capitalism, Bellamy implicitly identifies shopping as a viable means of resocializing the individual who is adrift in socially empty space.<sup>31</sup> But this cannot efface completely the cenophobia, or fear of empty space, that characterized West's first experience of the utopian city.

## V

'Who will recount the pleasures of dystopia?' Fredric Jameson asks.<sup>32</sup> It could equally be asked, 'Who will recount the horrors of utopia?' The pleasures of dystopia, for their part, might be described in the surreptitious, almost unacceptable thrills to be derived from the images of depopulation that accompany the representation of a catastrophe, as in *The Last Man*. Conversely, the horrors of utopia might be detected in analogous images of depopulation, as in *Looking Backward*. Socially empty space – especially in so far as it is experienced as what I have identified as monu/mental

---

<sup>31</sup> *Looking Backward* is thus perhaps the first representation in literature of a behavioural therapy that, more than a century later, is popularly used to treat agoraphobia, a treatment presently labeled 'flooding'. 'During the treatment,' as Milun explains, 'the patient is most commonly taken to a shopping center [...] and kept there until she has abreacted the full psychosomatic range of anxiety effects.' 'As a method of catharsis,' she continues, 'flooding allows the patient to release the neurotic symptom and shop normally like any of his neighbors.' (p. ?).

<sup>32</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Then You Are Them,' *London Review of Books* 31 (10 September, 2009), p. 7.

space – is at the same time the utopian moment in dystopian literature and the dystopian moment in utopian literature. In a metropolitan society dominated by the routine experience of a mass of people, in all its positive and negative aspects, and of a spatial regime that is at once anarchic and elaborately regimented, the city of the absent is simultaneously a dream of being freed from the constraints of capitalist modernity and a nightmare of being cut loose from its consolations.