

BOOK REVIEW: Peter Edgerley Firchow, *Modern Utopian Fictions from H. G. Wells to Iris Murdoch* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), xviii + 203pp., ISBN 978-0-8132-1477-1, HB. [Simon J. James]

Peter Edgerley Firchow, Professor of English at the University of Minnesota, already the author of *The End of Utopia*, on Huxley's *Brave New World*, sets out in his new book to redress the claim that recent analysis of utopias has tended to be by social scientists rather than literary critics. Professor Firchow's avowed hostility to 'literary theory' will attract or discourage different cohorts of readers; although avowedly 'literary-critical', he is not above bringing Huxley or Orwell up to date on where history has proved their predictions wrong. Firchow has written on some compelling topics in the past, but the lack of a compelling overall thesis more coherent than the claim that 'we' will always have a need for utopian fictions is an inevitable weakness of this study.

More readers will find *Modern Utopian Fiction's* relaxed and conversational tone of address style welcoming than annoying, but in places the writing can read more as a polished seminar room performance than a scholarly artefact. 'Here the mystery lies deeper. Here the mystery lies in that curious and extraordinary specimen named H. G. Wells' may give you some sense as to whether the flavour of Firchow's style is to your own taste or not. Paraphrase of elementary aspects of plot is surely unnecessary for the intended reader of a scholarly monograph published by an academic press at nearly forty pounds. The habit of beginning sentences with a conjunction, or not writing in sentences at all, and of the text answering its own supposedly rhetorical questions can also grate over nearly two hundred pages.

The pedagogic origins of the book's analysis also means that the range of texts selected is rather unchallenging: only one of the literary texts discussed here

will be unfamiliar to most English Literature students who have come through, at least, the British school system in the last twenty years. The scope of the title is also rather betrayed by the subtitle, since this discussion of 'Modern' utopian fictions ends with Iris Murdoch's *The Bell*, published exactly fifty years ago. (Margaret Atwood's dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale*, a similar mainstay of school curricula, receives only a passing mention.)

The Time Machine sets the template for what Firchow means by the genre, since it 'explicitly depicts a utopia that is an anti-utopia' (indeed, this book on utopias does not discuss any actual literary utopias). For Wellsians, Firchow's insights into *The Time Machine* are more agreeable than they are striking: that the Eloi have degenerated because their society was too utopian, that *The Time Machine* is a symbolic narrative, that the civilised Time Traveller has to become decivilised to survive, even that his journey below ground is in some way a journey into his own self, will already have occurred to most critical readers of the text. (Firchow's later translation of *Animal Farm* as socialist fable is similarly irreproachable without breaking much in the way of new ground.) There are passing references to *Men Like Gods*, 'A Story of the Days to Come' and even *The Science of Life*, but some omissions, not only of other critical material on *The Time Machine*, but also of Wells's own work, are peculiar, since Wells wrote a large number of more explicitly utopian literary and sociological texts right up until his death in 1946. That the degeneration of the Eloi is a consequence of stasis is quite correct in terms of the text; a way for utopia to avoid this fate is suggested in Wells's closely titled, but undiscussed here, *A Modern Utopia*. A rather less distantly informed sense of Darwin and T. H. Huxley might also have illuminated this part of the discussion further: to claim these days that the possibility of degeneration within Darwin's theory of evolution is 'less well known' shows that a lot of reading in this area appears to have been skipped. (The referencing of 'The patriarchal conditions prevailing in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century' by 'see Virginia Woolf's *A Room of My Own* [*sic.*] for more details' is perhaps the most striking example of the airiness of the volume's apparatus.) Nonetheless, it is useful to have these observations gathered together, and many working on Wells will find insights worth citing.

Inevitably, discussion of the more recent primary material feels fresher. Subsequent chapters live up more closely to the introduction's promise of testing the boundaries between the literary imagination and other disciplines of knowledge such as political science, philosophy, and, especially, ethics. *Modern Utopian Fictions* is thoughtful on how the utopian mediates between nostalgia and anticipation. The book's remaining chapters are also entertaining lectures: the section on Shaw's *Major Barbara* collects an interesting if speculative analysis of the play that is not particularly focussed on utopia until two-thirds of the way through. The Aldous Huxley chapter gains considerably from being informed by a much broader, and at times very usefully anti-chronological, range of intellectual history; the context of twentieth-century philosophy and more extensive

knowledge of the author's other works also proves productive in the chapter on Murdoch, which also boasts a perceptive analysis of narrative voice. (This novel, while set in an ideal community, does not have very much to do with utopia either, however.)

Professor Firchow insists on the quality of his chosen material as 'literary' artefacts, but in a rather pre-Barthesian way, insists on seeking for 'solutions' for problems, ambiguities, or simple silences in texts, as if they were incomplete mimetic representations of something greater on the other side of the page, instead of just constructions of language. Constructions such as 'probably not coincidental that', or 'perhaps the real reason for' betray the awkwardness of such an approach, and this reader at times wishes that *Modern Utopian Fictions* would allow for the autonomy of texts to be just as they are.