

BOOK REVIEWS

**TOM MOYLAN, *DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE: SCIENCE FICTION AND THE UTOPIAN IMAGINATION*, ED. RAFFAELLA BACCOLINI (OXFORD: PETER LANG, 2014)
ISBN 978-3-0343-0752-9 (PB) £32.00 [MAXIM SHADURSKI]**

Since its first publication in 1986, Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* has been instrumental in shaping our current understanding of utopia. The book's second edition, which has appeared in Volume 14 of the Ralahine Classics series, offers a very timely renewal (and critical reception) of the important formulations that the original version put forth and debates it probed. In addition to the 1986 text, the reader will find a new introduction, an essay on Aldous Huxley's *Island*, and some of the utopian scholars' reflections that register the continuing centrality of Moylan's work to the field of utopian studies.

Moylan begins by explaining his initial enquiry as 'an unabashedly aligned intervention written during, and sharing in the spirit of, the larger sphere of oppositional culture and politics' (xi). By the latter he means the writing, thought and attitudes that emerged in the aftermath of the Paris civil unrest of 1968, and in the context of 1970s emancipatory movements and the radical Left's intellectual activity in the US. Moylan is careful to historicize the science fictional texts he examines as an offshoot of a politics and culture whose character was 'anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist; new left, feminist, liberatory, ecological; as well as formally experimental' (xiii). Such texts equally sought to salvage utopia from ideological co-optations and marketing abuses, forging 'the relationship between the politics of everyday life and revolutionary transformation' (xvi). Moylan's emphases on the transformative use value of the utopian imagination traverse much of the book and signal a wider optimism which, at the time of writing, would be flying in the face of a nascent neoliberalism.

Even though the book contains five references to H. G. Wells and his work, Wellsian readers will be able to gain their own insight into a number of conceptual and socio-political intersections between Wells's legacies and Moylan's formulations of utopia. Drawing predominantly on the fictions of Joanna Russ (*The Female Man*, 1975), Ursula K. Le Guin (*The Dispossessed*, 1974), Marge Piercy (*Woman on the Edge of Time*, 1976), and Samuel R. Delany (*Triton*, 1976), Moylan proposes to treat them as critical utopias. The adjective 'critical' has been chosen primarily to anchor these fictions in the period that produced them, and to emphasise their commitment to action and change. Further to being a periodising tool, 'critical' may equally provide what Moylan calls an 'interpretative protocol' (xxiii). Critical utopias not only challenge and deconstruct male-dominated and market-driven relations, but they

also subvert the generic institution of utopia. Moylan defines the critical utopia in terms of radical openness, dynamism, and revolution. Rejecting the idea of a monolithic blueprint to be superimposed on society from above, he privileges process as a way of ‘negating the present’ and imagining ‘any of several possible modes of adaptation to society and nature based generally upon principles of autonomy, mutual aid, and equality’ (26). This process holds the key to the utopian imagination, whose textual practices inform us that the world as we know it is unfixed and therefore subject to change, provided we awake and take action. Along similar lines, Moylan renounces the generic rigidity inherent in some of the earlier utopian texts whose ‘neat and totalized ... narratives’ would ‘lull us further into the artificial dreams of the present social formation’ (188). Moylan’s study of the selected fictions convincingly demonstrates ways in which their writers ensure openness through textual fragmentation, create narrative dynamism through a convergence of conflicting possibilities, explore an amalgam of social alternatives ‘based on the principles of liberation, feminism, socialism, and ecological cooperation with nature’ (130), and simultaneously critique and revive the utopian genre (184). The critical utopia comes into its own precisely through a close interaction of realism and fantasy, in the spirit of the 1968 slogan: ‘Soyez réalistes, demandez l’impossible’.

Wellsian Utopia lends itself to the role of both an antecedent and a riposte to Moylan’s formulations. Openness and dynamism, which Moylan assigns to the critical utopia, have respective forerunners in *A Modern Utopia* (1905), wherein Wells had famously stipulated that ‘the Modern Utopia must be not static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages.’⁶⁴ These lines transcribe Wells’s evolutionary awareness of the degeneracy and extinction that might befall a species and – by extension – a genre of writing after progress has become foreclosed. In order to avert closure and entropy, Wells suggested that the Modern Utopia should develop in ‘a world of uncertain seasons, sudden catastrophes, antagonistic diseases, and inimical beasts and vermin, out of men and women with like passions, like uncertainties of mood and desire to our own’.⁶⁵ All such natural mobilisations of Utopia would also inflect the form of utopian fiction, rendering it unfixed and enabling what Simon J. James has described as ‘an irruption of the narratable’.⁶⁶ However, unlike Wellsian Utopia, Moylan’s critical utopias deliver explorations of frequently conflicting and mutually exclusive alternatives. Their fictional worlds contain multiple trajectories of development

⁶⁴ H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (1905), ed. Mark R. Hillegas (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 5.

⁶⁵ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 7-8.

⁶⁶ Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity and the End of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 137.

that suspect a uniform and hierarchical social order, no matter how dynamic its parameters style themselves to be.

Perhaps the most notable distinction between critical utopias and Wellsian Utopia involves their practical implementation. Moylan stresses the significance of revolution as the vehicle of change. By contrast, Wells tended to construe revolution in a metaphysical sense as the outcome of change; thus, in *Men Like Gods* (1923), the protagonist Barnstaple ponders on the seminal forces that produce the Utopian order: 'Revolutions arise and die; the Great Revolution comes – incessantly and inevitably.'⁶⁷ On a similar note, Wells concluded *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), maintaining that 'this is neither a dream book nor a Sibylline history, then it is a theory of world revolution.'⁶⁸ During his third visit to Russia in 1934, Wells interviewed Joseph Stalin. As the verbatim record of their talk testifies, Wells disavowed revolution as an active overthrow of existing power structures, noting that 'I think the forms of the struggle should fit as closely as possible to the opportunities presented by the existing laws, which must be defended against reactionary attacks.'⁶⁹ Wells's distrust of revolution as a transgression of the status quo corresponds to his evolutionary and gradualist mind-set, as well as bespeaks his ambivalences about the revolutionary potential of the working class. Unlike Wells, Moylan invests whole-heartedly in revolutionary struggle, whose battlefields will now be located at a distance from the state, as this form of political organisation will have been overlaid by corporate powers. He argues that critical utopias do their emancipatory work 'in the general name of autonomy and justice for humanity and nature' (11). However, regardless of this crucial distinction, Wellsian Utopia and critical utopias ultimately overlap on what Raymond Williams dubbed 'willed transformation', which is the pinnacle of human agency.⁷⁰ The final pages of Wells's *The Open Conspiracy* (1928) premise the awakening of humanity 'from a nightmare of the struggle for existence and the inevitability of war' on the human will.⁷¹ In a verbally resonant way, Moylan places willed transformation at the heart of the 'struggle against all types of exploitation and domination' (35). In the course of his sojourn in Utopia, the protagonist of Wells's *Men Like Gods* becomes privy to an entirely transformed planet, which he can only dream

⁶⁷ H. G. Wells, *Men Like Gods* (1923), in *H. G. Wells: Classic Collection II* (London: Gollancz, 2011), 203-410 (402).

⁶⁸ H. G. Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) (London: Gollancz, 2011), 424.

⁶⁹ *Stalin-Wells Talk. The Verbatim Record and a Discussion by G. Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, J. M. Keynes, Ernst Toller and Others* (London: The New Statesman and Nation, 1934), 15.

⁷⁰ Raymond Williams, 'Utopia and Science Fiction', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 203.

⁷¹ H. G. Wells, *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1928), 152.

to see in his own space-time: “Given the will,” said Mr Barnstaple. “Given the will.”⁷²

Moylan’s book is an inspiring reading, especially against the present-day backdrop of a growing political apathy and disengagement. *Demand the Impossible* harbours a potent reminder that the radical Left, even though it had failed to mobilise a revolution, was once capable of reaching out to the limits of the imaginable. Moylan manages to communicate his own hope of willed transformation, reigniting the reader’s dwindling imagination and frequently disoriented will.

**DEBORAH McDONALD AND JEREMY DRONFIELD, *A VERY DANGEROUS WOMAN*
(LONDON: ONEWORLD, 2015) ISBN 971-1-78074-7088 (HB) £20 / \$29.99
[MICHAEL SHERBORNE]**

It’s unusual for a biography to omit the name of its subject from the title, but presumably the publishers think Moura Budberg is insufficiently well-known to lure prospective purchasers. Readers of the *Wellsian* will recognise her, however, as the international woman of mystery who became H. G.’s final mistress. This new biography supersedes previous attempts to get at the facts about the career of this enigmatic figure, without necessarily getting fully to grips with her personality.

Born in Ukraine, Moura was originally Maria Zakrevskaya, daughter of the Tsar’s chief prosecutor. By the age of sixteen she had developed an ability to charm, interrogate and manipulate, perhaps inherited from her father, and was ready to unleash these powers on a succession of male victims. At seventeen she wedded an Estonian aristocrat and reinvented herself as Moura von Benckendorff, international socialite. Moura’s love for the two children of her marriage seems to have been somewhat arm’s length, her love for her husband non-existent. Separated from her family by the Great War, she gravitated to St Petersburg in time for the Russian revolution and swiftly made herself mistress of its leader, Kerensky. She set up a salon where she could coax secrets from eminent guests and pass them to her husband, also to the British, and perhaps even to the Germans.

Moura had found her vocation, eliciting gossip from powerful men and using it to her advantage. Even the fall of Kerensky didn’t knock her back for long. She found a new role for herself at the British embassy, working for the man whom she would always consider the love of her life, the secret agent Robert Bruce Lockhart. Naturally, her loyalty to him did not preclude passing information to the Russian secret service, the Cheka, whom she found it prudent to keep on-side. Such was Moura’s duplicity that she even returned briefly to

⁷² Wells, *Men Like Gods*, 403.