

# The Utopian Genre and its Expressions through Plato, Thomas More, Willa Cather and John Steinbeck

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**Abstract:** *This paper discusses the utopian genre and its expression in the works of Plato, Thomas More, John Steinbeck and Willa Cather, particularly in the representation that the latter two make of the Californian West. This vast territory which presents itself as a promised land, a mythical place where adventure and imagination meet. Utopia as a genre inherited from Plato and Thomas More seems to express itself in the works of Steinbeck and Cather in the form of a quest for an elsewhere symbolized by the vast West and the figure of both the pioneer and the errand migrant, who see in the West the very topos where their wildest dreams might come true. Based on a historical and sociological approaches to literary texts, the paper examines the origins of the utopian genre, as it evolved over time and expresses itself in the works of Plato, More, Cather and Steinbeck.*

**Keywords:** adventure, dream, myth, promised land, utopia.

## 1. Introduction

Utopia owes its development as a genre, first to Plato and then to Thomas More<sup>1</sup>, whose seminal work *Utopia*<sup>2</sup> published in 1517 represents both the founding text and the archetype of its secondary genres which are dystopia and anti-utopia. In his work entitled *Utopia and Utopists*, Thierry Paquot<sup>3</sup> confirms this influence of More's text in the development of utopia as a genre:

Thomas More's text is undeniably the matrix of this literary genre. Subsequently, some authors (utopians) will copy the model by adding a few ingredients of their own, others drew inspiration from it to better convey their own convictions. It is clear that from England, utopia was established in Italy from the end of the 16th century for a short time, then in France and again in England at the beginning of the 17th century, where it lingered throughout the 18th centuries. From there on, it spread to Russia and the United States, and to South America, before being claimed almost everywhere in the industrial world during the 20th century.

Utopia, which differs from the travel narrative, presents itself as a genre which borrows its processes and its use of excessive imagination, to that travel narrative. It is

characterized by ideological and political underpinnings which bring it closer to the social novel. Indeed, the utopian narrative is never neutral. It conveys an ideology and its project is political in the etymological sense of the term, i. e. when it refers to the pooling of resources for the good from the city. From a historical point of view, utopia was born in the Athens of the 5th century BC, a context marked by the doctrinal opposition between sophists and disciples of Socrates. Utopia then accompanied the great scientific discoveries of the Renaissance. It was also inspired by the social doctrine of Christianity and its expression as a genre is almost always linked to that of a quest. The quest for an elsewhere, be it a new society, an idealized city or a new land. With John Steinbeck and Willa Cather, this elsewhere is the great West that their characters continuously try to reach and tame. This West, crystalizes the dreams and hopes of major figures such as the pioneer in Cather's *O'Pioneers* and the errand Migrant from Oklahoma in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

### 1.1. Thomas More's Utopia

With Thomas More, utopia takes the form of a quest for an ideal city. A city which ensures individual and collective well-being. To achieve this well-being, this city, like that of Plato, also cherishes the idea of abolishing the notion of private property. It is this wish that More formulates in *Utopia*. Trying to formulate when he states:

This, I do fully persuade myself that no equal and just distribution of things can be made, nor that perfect wealth shall ever be among men, unless this propriety be exiled and banished. But so long as it shall continue, so long shall remain among the most and best part of men the heavy and inevitable burden of poverty and wretchedness<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Thomas More (1478-1535) was an English jurist, historian, philosopher, humanist, theologian and politician who opposed King Henry VIII, which cost him his life. Appointed "extraordinary ambassador", then "king's chancellor" by Henry VIII, whose divorce from the king he disavows and refuses to endorse the break with the Roman Church. He resigned in 1532 and found himself imprisoned and then beheaded.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, Trad Ralph Robinson, New York: Barnes & Nobles, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Thierry Paquot, *Utopias and Utopists*, 2007, Paris : Editions La découverte, pp.31-32.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, op. cit., p.55.

More's Perfect City is somewhat comparable to Francis Bacon<sup>5</sup>'s New Atlantis, Thommaso Campanella<sup>6</sup>'s City of the Sun or William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha<sup>7</sup> or Thoreau's Walden Pond<sup>8</sup>. It is a new space that its founder seeks at all costs to isolate from the mainland. Here we see the principle of rupture and the quest for renewal which characterizes the utopian movement. The island is the symbol of this rupture, it is also the receptacle of a new socio-political vision which seeks to replace the existing social order. The land is for its part, the symbol of the old order or of a corrupt reality, the flaws of which the utopian seeks to get rid of. And it is from there, that we better understand the function that Paul Ricoeur gives to utopia when he writes:

If ideology preserves and conserves reality, utopia essentially calls it into question. Utopia, in this sense, is the expression of all the potentialities of a group that finds itself repressed by the existing order. Utopia is an effort of the imagination to think differently<sup>9</sup>

Through his critical inquiry into the existing order, the character of the utopian novel is tossed between two worlds from which he has to choose. Until the moment of his choice, he remains a simple and ordinary character and it is only when his choice is made that he becomes a hero. It is also from there on, that he breaks with the real world and embraces the imaginary one. Through his choice, the utopian hero must cut all ties with his old universe in order to discover a new one. The moral, political and economic paradigms of that new space are supposed to be pristine and totally free from all forms of corruption. The conquest of this virgin land cannot not be taken for granted, it is made of pain, sacrifice and will only occur after a series of ordeals. The hero then undergoes an initiatory journey which reinforces his status as a hero and legitimizes his choice. The movement towards his new land is also quite often, a solitary experience, as is the case with Julian West, the main character of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. That experience presents itself as an obstacle over which only those with a clear social transformation vision will triumph. It is in this respect that utopia should also be understood as a

<sup>5</sup>Francis Bacon (1561-1626) Bacon was an English philosopher. He is the author of *La Nouvelle Atlantide*. Written in 1624 and published posthumously in 1627, the text contains his description of Bacon's ideal city. Bacon's utopia is more scientific than political, it makes known some features of the institutions that gave the peoples of New Atlantis an ideal happiness.

<sup>6</sup>Thommaso Campanella (1568-1639) was an Italian Dominican monk. He was imprisoned for 26 years. It was in his detention that he wrote *La Cité du Soleil* around 1602.

<sup>7</sup>Yoknapatawpha county a fictional place imagined by Faulkner to materialize his ideal city. It is inspired by community life in the southern United States before the War of Cession. Yoknapatawpha is located in Mississippi and is the setting for several novels of Faulkner's including *As I lay dying* (1930).

<sup>8</sup>Located in the heart of Boston, Walden Pond is a natural space where Thoreau retreated for two years to live in direct contact with nature and experiment his principle of "Living Deliberately". The text *Walden or Life in the Woods* published in 1854 allows the author to share his solitary experience of living in communion with nature.

<sup>9</sup>(Paul Ricoeur "L'idéologie et l'utopie : deux expressions de l'imaginaire social", in: *Autres Temps. Les cahiers du christianisme social*, n°2, 1984. pp. 53-64.

genre which brings out characters carrying a discourse on society. But this societal discourse, even though projected towards the future, remains deeply rooted in the present. As Philip Stevic underlines it:

The work of every novelist, whether it treats of the contemporary situation or leads one to escape from it into an ivory tower, is explicitly or implicitly a social commentary on the time in which it is written. The utopian novel is essentially a negative stance taken from the print of reality and indicates what the author regards as evil in the world of his day. (Stevic: 1967, 257)

By criticizing the existing order, the utopian narrative places itself at the same time as an alternative and becomes *de facto*, a political project. Utopia then presents itself, in the words of Karl Mannheim<sup>10</sup>, as a gap between the imaginary and the real which constitutes a threat to the stability and permanence of this real.

Through this social transformation project, utopia further distinguishes itself from the travel narrative<sup>11</sup> which is only descriptive. Through this project, the utopian narrative seeks to convey an ideology, the goal of which is to reinvent the world. This project is also based on the consciousness and imagination of heroes who are trying to project a vision of the world. The utopian narrative therefore "engenders powers"<sup>12</sup> as it conveys its societal project.

## 1.2 The Platonic Utopia

With Plato, utopia is not based on an idealized past, nor is it expressed in the form of the quest for an El Dorado. It is conceived as the social contract of an ideal city that Book VIII of *The Republic* (Platon, 2002: p.138) presents both as a project and an objective of societal transformation. This utopia is not born *ex nihilo*, it is situated in the historical context of 5th century Athens. A society marked by a succession of political systems which have all shown their limits. These systems were called: aristocracy, oligarchy, tyranny and democracy. Of the four models, Plato, still in book VIII of the Republic, identifies democracy as being the least harmful. The philosopher also makes the implicit observation of the unachievable nature as well as the impossible perfection of governance systems. A perfection which is not possible to achieve simply because the men who design these systems are themselves not perfect. Consequently, the city of men cannot be perfect. The ideal city for Plato is therefore both a project of transformation

<sup>10</sup>Karl Mannheim author of *Ideology and utopia*, quoted by Paul Ricoeur in "Ideology and utopia: two expressions of the social imagination", in: *Other Times. The Notebooks of Social Christianity*. No. 2, 1984. pp. 53-64.

<sup>11</sup>The travel narrative may carry some degree of subjectivity but its primary function is to report on the discoveries and impressions of a traveler. It is a more or less faithful restitution of what the traveler has seen. It depicts reality but does not seek to transform it. Thus, by its exclusively mimetic aim, the travel narrative does not seek to criticize or question, its purpose is not political and its aim is not to create change

<sup>12</sup>Paul Ricoeur "Ideology and utopia: two expressions of the social imagination", in: *Autres Temps. The Notebooks of Social Christianity*. No. 2, 1984, pp.53-64.

and improvement of the social *status quo* and a vision built around the Socratic principle of justice. This ideal city is therefore a society based on a certain idea of justice and equity.

But similarly to More and Bellamy, this city also cherishes the idea of abolishing private property. Thus, the production of goods and services becomes a collective work and the fruits of labor are distributed fairly to all. The economic model is of the Keynesian type<sup>13</sup>. That is to say that it is not self-regulated by the market, its control is the responsibility of the State. Indeed, in this city, citizens are all equal before the State, which remains the sole holder of the means of production. But the ideal city of Plato and Socrates, is also and above all developed in a context of very strong doctrinal opposition between Socrates and the supporters of the sophist thought.

The term Sophist comes from Sophia which in Greek means wisdom. Sophists are advocates of wisdom. At least, they define themselves as such. Initially, the sophists are therefore those who seek wisdom. It is only afterwards, that that sophism became associated with rhetoric and the art of manipulation and convincing without being right. But ultimately, the sophist, like the utopian, seeks to be useful to society. Its science is mobilized to serve social causes. The doctrinal opposition between the two essentially stems from the potential for manipulation of sophist oratorical art and its use for political propaganda purposes. The question of the purpose of philosophical knowledge is therefore at the heart of this disagreement.

The rupture that will eventually be established between the two currents of thought is reflected in the condemnation and execution of Socrates and the demonization of sophism that followed. Thus, even today, the word sophism is associated in a pejorative way, with political propaganda, with hollow rhetoric intended to manipulate and deceive. On the other hand, wisdom, etymologically attached to sophism, is almost always associated with the thoughts of Socrates and Plato.

### 1.3 Willa Cather's: The American West between Symbolism and Myth

With Willa Cather, the American West constitutes a mirage beyond the symbolism of its myth. For her characters, going West means self-assertion, self-liberation oneself and fulfillment. The adventure to the West is a migratory movement and a self-discovery. The heroine of the novel *O' Pioneers* (1913) named Alexandra<sup>14</sup> is the symbol of this pioneering spirit so characteristic of those who go West. With the personality of a pioneer, Alexandra will manage to take up the challenge of leading the family business after the

<sup>13</sup>Maynard Keynes (1883–1946), British economist stipulates among other things that the intervention of the State in the economy can help to stabilize it. His theory is opposed to that of free trade and the self-regulation of the market of Adam Smith (1723-1790). Considered the founder of economic liberalism, Smith is a Scottish philosopher and economist of the Age of Enlightenment. His main work *The Wealth of Nations* was published in 1776.

<sup>14</sup>This choice of name is not accidental, it refers to the conquering figure of Alexander the Great.

death of her father John Bergson. Unlike her two brothers who will not support the rigors of the wilderness, Cather's heroine will find within herself the resources necessary to face and recover from the slope<sup>15</sup>.

From Cather's perspective, the West presents itself as both a wild land of challenge and adventure which, makes it possible to distinguish between the characters who possess what it takes to face the wilderness and those<sup>16</sup> who do not have it. One can thus distinguish among the Bergsons, these two categories. On the one hand the impetuous pioneer symbolized by Alexandra who is the double of her father John Bergson and on the other hand, Emil and Carl her younger brothers who are much less strong in character<sup>17</sup> than her. From John Bergson's perspective, his family's survival after his death, will depend on their capacity to successfully tame and control the land. That's why, on the eve of his death, the father carefully chooses Alexandra as his heir instead of her brothers. Sister Lucy Schneider helps us better understand this choice when she writes: "He (John Bergson) transmits his faith in the land and its possibilities to his daughter in whom he recognizes "the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out" (p.24) that had characterized his own father in his younger days"<sup>18</sup>.

Alexandra's success at the helm of the family farm is the symbol of Cather's desire to celebrate this entrepreneurial spirit so characteristic of the pioneer and of which John Bergson and Alexandra are clearly the incarnations. The survival of the company after the death of the father is also a reflection of the author's desire to show the prevalence of the forces of the spirit over those of nature<sup>19</sup>. Ultimately, Alexandra will even be more successful than her father in managing the family farm. This success can be perceived both as the triumph of an immigrant who ends up achieving his dream of America and a consecration of the enduring soul in the face of adversity. It is also part of the grand design of the story of "America, land of possibilities", which seeks to establish the idea that everyone and anyone, by dint of hard work, can succeed in America. It is the very story that the poet Emma Lazarus sings through her famous poem *The New Colossus*<sup>20</sup>:

On the other hand, the failure of the two Bergson brothers is there to remind us that this story of the emigrant who made fortune in America by taming the land is not the story of everyone. It is that of a minority and above all it is a

<sup>15</sup>Demonstrating at the same time that the setbacks of man in the face of this monster that is the west are not lacking, but they are not insurmountable, they can take over for a while but will never end in weakening the true pioneer.

<sup>16</sup>Those will end up abdicating and will leave the wilderness and return to live in the city.

<sup>17</sup>Which weakness of character is precisely what had pushed their father John Berg to choose Alexandra to succeed him at the head of the family farm after his death.

<sup>18</sup> Sister Lucy Schneider, "O Pioneers! In the Light of Willa Cather's "Land-Philosophy" O Pioneers! In the Light of Willa Cather's "Land-Philosophy" in *Colby Quarterly*, Vol. 8, Iss. 2 [1968], Art. 4, pp. 55-70.

<sup>19</sup>While demonstrating the point of view that the pioneer spirit can be defeated but it cannot be destroyed

<sup>20</sup>Unpublished poem by Emma Lazarus inscribed on the statue of liberty.

constructed story designed to give a certain image of America which seeks at all costs, to erase the imperfections of its system. It is for that purpose that in popular culture, the Great West is associated with dreams, utopia and above all with the spirit of conquest. The West is both a space to conquer and a land of opportunities which crystallizes the craziest of all dreams. From the Monroe Doctrine, the California Gold Rush, to the development of the Bay Area of the Silicon Valley, this image of the west remains quite tenacious. From Cather's perspective, those who go west are defined as pioneers, they are bold figures who embrace adversity and triumph over it. Their ontological value is measured by the sum of the experiences they accumulate on their journey to the West<sup>21</sup>. The question facing them is not only to conquer the vast land but to tame and transform into a land of opportunity<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, more than a place, the west is a spirit, that of the entrepreneur who has a taste for risk, a sense of adventure. It is a space for the realization of the most unrealistic projects, those that start from nothing to succeed. It is in this sense that the representation of the West in literature closely follows that of the American dream. The American dream is part of the design of an America that seeks to erase the imperfections of its model by presenting it as a land of possibilities. But more than a declaration of principle, the American dream fits into the liberal economic model, the foundations of which emanate from the thought of John Locke. Locke as everyone knows had a notary ideological influence in the development of American liberal thought.

#### 1.4 Steinbeck's West

The West appears in Steinbeck's work as a myth that captures the collective and individual imagination of its main characters. The West is depicted as an El Dorado and a final destination for migrants in search of individual and collective well-being. California is the physical symbol of this myth of the West as the land of plenty, associated with greenery and opulence. Steinbeck's travelers to California are not traveling, they are on a mission. When they arrive in California, they are no longer quite the same, they are on a human adventure which will physically and mentally transform them. During this trip, they are torn between a nostalgic feeling toward the land they left behind and a sense of hope derived from the representation they make of their final destination. Until their arrival in California, they will never stop reinventing themselves along the way. The road to California serves as a revealer of their *ethos*. More than a journey, an exodus or an exile, this trip will turn out to be a human adventure driven by the utopian representation of an opulent California which takes shape in the migrants' imagination. The West then, presents itself as a mythical place, a mirage that invigorates and gives meaning to the lives of these migrants. And like all myths, it doesn't even have to be true, its function is psychological and social. It

serves as a shield against despair. The simple movement towards the West transforms and gives meaning to their lives and the road does not only reveal them as characters, it transforms them as well.

Also, from a narrative point of view, the representation of Californian gives rise to an aesthetic which celebrates the migratory movement and values the elsewhere. The future destiny and the path to it become more important than the homeland. As a physical symbol of this elsewhere, the West is therefore the driving force behind the story. Its representation in the collective imagination of migrants becomes the engine that allows the characters to move towards an ultimate goal. At the same time, it makes it possible to thematize the dream as a means of coping with a difficult situation. The exile thus triggers a quest for meaning and a feeling of loss that will only be blurred by the utopia of a better tomorrow. The confrontation between dream and reality also allows the author to place his fiction in an intermediate temporality, that of travel. This journey, through the journey then defines the trajectory of the characters and gives substance to the story.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) for example, the journey of the Joad family is an adventure that reveals their own identity, the intrinsic value of these new migrants. The Joads realize that they are leaving their land forever and they know that they will never return<sup>23</sup>. The road that led them to California is a physical space which welcomes all those who dream of having a better life away from their native lands. *The Grapes and Of Mice and Men* are particularly teeming with these characters in perpetual motion, constantly in search of an elsewhere, of something that escapes them. These characters are constantly inventing and building themselves through dreams and through the magical representation of the West. They disregard their present condition and keep projecting themselves towards the future.

## 2. Conclusion

As a genre, utopia has indeed evolved since Plato and More and its mode of expression is perhaps not exactly the same in the works of Plato, More, Steinbeck and Cather. But its essence remains centered on the quest for a societal alternative and personal progress. This quest is also that of territories, ideal or idealized places perceived as El dorados where all imperfections are corrected and dreams are made true. For Steinbeck and Cather, Western California fulfills the same function as the ideal city of Plato and More. It presents itself as a land of dreams and adventure which gives meaning to the lives of their heroes and shapes both their personalities and life trajectories.

In Steinbeck and Carter's works, the characters who migrate to the West, build themselves, sometimes destroy

<sup>21</sup>Which at the same time forges their character and gives personality to their soul.

<sup>22</sup>This is what Alexandra Borg will succeed in *O. Pioneer and My Antonia*, which precisely celebrate the spirit of the pioneer who renounces the comforts of cities to build living spaces, even business opportunities, from the prairies.

<sup>23</sup>This is probably what explains why some of them will, along the way, in a lucid way, choose to suspend the journey and chose stay by the sea. These characters abandon everything to live with nature, they renounce the trip to the city and at the same time they reject the modern civilization that awaits them in California. The prospect of a return to the land of origin being totally ruled out, they consciously decide to stop traveling.



themselves but also they also reveal themselves. *The Grapes* is particularly full of these characters in perpetual motion, constantly in search of an elsewhere, of something that escapes them, whether it is a job, a roof or of love. These characters are constantly inventing and building themselves through dreams, that is to say through the magical representation they have of themselves and of a future that contrasts with their past and their present. They make an abstraction of their present condition to project themselves towards the future. But the odyssey of the Joads and the Wilsons is strewn with drama and abandonment, as the road creates the conditions for constant adversity. The road to the West destroys by its harshness and it can be fatal for the fainthearted. Besides, by the number of migrants it attracts, the road reflects a major societal disruption. It reflects a crisis that the author wants to associate with the disruption of the land based economy and the advent of the liberal system.

[19] Sister Lucy Schneider, "O Pioneers! In the Light of Willa Cather's "Land - Philosophy "O Pioneers! In the Light of Willa Cather's "Land - Philosophy" in Colby Quarterly, Vol.8, Iss.2 [1968], Art.4, pp.55 - 70

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