

Spaces Beyond Borders: The Peripheries of Utopia

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IN 1963, when J. R. R. Tolkien wrote a reply to one Colonel Worskett, a reader who evidently admired the author's heroic romance *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien expressed doubt about his intention to publish further narratives. While struggling to write the work now known as *The Silmarillion*, he mused that "Part of the attraction of The L. R. [*The Lord of the Rings*] is, I think, due to the glimpses of a large history in the background." This was "an attraction," he continued,

like that of viewing far off an unvisited island, or seeing the towers of a distant city gleaming in a sunlit mist. To go there is to destroy the magic, unless new unattainable vistas are again revealed.¹

For Tolkien, it is in the narrative's peripheries that the wonder and fascination of utopianism and fantasy fiction lie. To pass them by is to put the magic at risk. Yet, going beyond these peripheries also has a power — even according to Tolkien himself. In his "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien argues that one of the great powers of fantasy fiction

is its ability to exceed the “ancient limitations” of human power.² In Tolkien’s case, such crossing of peripheries occurs particularly with the “desire to converse with other living things” and, with reference to perhaps Tolkien’s greatest theme, “the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death ... Few lessons are taught more clearly in them than the burden of that kind of immortality, or rather endless serial living.”³ Exceeding the peripheries of everyday human thought enables an engagement with these concepts; indeed, Tolkien argues that “the fairy-story is specially apt to teach such things.”⁴

The exploration of peripheries is a very valuable exercise, illuminating both the storyteller’s art and the work of the critic. It allows one to consider things other than how they are. It is on the peripheries of thought and form that restrictions and limitations break down. In these peripheries, what had previously appeared to be rules or necessities are revealed only to be customs or assumptions. Working in this space, in essence, is also at the heart of modern utopian theory, which interrogates the conventional and seeks the radical. To realise and explain this work, however, also involves venturing beyond the peripheries of customary understandings of the term “utopia.” When one hears the word “utopia,” one perhaps tends to imagine something programmatic: an engineered or “perfect” society, operating according to some rigid ideological and socioeconomic blueprint and evoking Plato’s *Republic* or Thomas More’s work of that name. Alternatively, one might consider the famous satirical dystopias of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell — although to do so is perhaps to overlook the fact that positive utopias have also often had satirical purposes.

Such conceptions of utopia, widely disseminated in secondary schools, are somewhat outdated. Lucy Sargisson succinctly summarises the modern understanding of utopia in her 2012 book *Fool’s Gold? Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century*. Utopias, she writes, “criticize their present, engage in contemporary debates and imagine alternatives.”⁵ They are, in this sense, a way of conversing with the present, not simply modelling the future. Nevertheless, the “blueprint” interpretation of utopia tends to confuse the genre as a literary exercise whose purpose is the implementation of political doctrine. This understanding

imagines utopias to be merely sets of sociopolitical instructions dressed in a narrative framework. But this is not necessarily the case, as utopias may also be works of satire, speculation, or philosophical thought experiments. Certainly, utopia has come to be conflated with authoritarian and totalitarian political movements, an association deriving from Karl Popper's 1945 work *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, in which Popper argues that utopia "demands a strong centralized rule of a few, and which therefore is likely to lead to a dictatorship."⁶ This conflation further complicates the question of where the boundary is to be drawn — assuming it exists at all — between utopianism in literature and any political theory, philosophy, or ideology that might be labelled "utopian." In any case, the popular understanding of utopia is confused and muddled.

There is substantial ambiguity concerning whether utopian literatures are purely intended as thought-provoking works of fiction or as sincere proposals for political action. Tolkien might well be understood as the author of works in the latter category, although, in a 1954 letter to Naomi Mitchison, Tolkien stated that "*hobbits* are not a Utopian vision, or recommended as an ideal in their own or any age."⁷ As this essay will make clear, many texts that possess utopian qualities, including Tolkien's, turn out to lack the intentionality that would otherwise characterise them as ideal or *idealised* visions for the world. Yet, whatever their author's intentions, these books are utopias nonetheless.

The origins of utopianism are both satirical and instructive. According to Paul Turner, More's *Utopia* was a means for More both to speak his mind — to "disclaim responsibility for any view that might be considered subversive" — and to "overcome dilemmas" — to "attempt to solve the problems of human society."⁸ However, More's 1516 text represents only the beginning of utopianism, and should not be understood to circumscribe the boundaries of the form. Those boundaries, like anything, would grow and change over the subsequent centuries; and one could not use More's text alone to define what utopian literature should entail in the present or recent centuries.

To emphasise the obsolescence of such definitions, we may turn to Lyman Tower Sargent's 1994 article "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," in which Sargent writes that, "at its base, utopianism is social dreaming."⁹ Sargent goes on to argue that "utopia" itself requires a much broader definition, and suggests that a utopia is "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space."¹⁰ At this level, the overall positivity or negativity of the society is not of immediate relevance, and Sargent specifically classifies the positive utopia as only one permutation of this more general type. A positive utopia is a "eutopia" that "the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived."¹¹ In this scheme, "utopia" becomes a neutral term, and its defining features become only its non-existence (its fictionality), its level of detail, and location; there is nothing in this definition to suggest that the utopia is a blueprint or a recommendation or suggestion for political action. At this point, new peripheries begin to emerge, with the description of imaginary societies, satirical representations, and serious political proposals simply becoming overlapping states within a wider realm.

It can already be perceived at this stage that the utopia is, figuratively speaking, not a country with rigidly defined borders. Sargent argues that literature has produced a far greater variety of utopias than can be simply classified by a binary division of eutopia and dystopia. He classifies some utopias, for instance, specifically as "utopian satires," which function primarily as criticisms of existing societies rather than representations of improved ones. He also observes anti-utopias, which criticise other utopias or utopianisms; and critical utopias, which may be better than existing societies, but are still not perfect, and probe the limits of utopian imagining. Sargent further emphasises the malleability of the peripheries of the utopia when he goes on to list a "tentative taxonomy" of thirty-four different kinds of utopian text, some being genres and some others involving different media and modes, not all of them fictional, which may be considered utopian.¹² These range from concepts as deeply-rooted in art, spirituality, and culture as the loci of heaven and hell to the modern discipline of urban planning. Thus, at

the peripheries of utopia one does not in fact discover rigidity — not, at least, as Popper discovered it, when he made hard connections between utopia and authoritarian politics.¹³ Rather, at these peripheries, one discovers flexibility, intersection, and conversation.

Ruth Levitas identifies the utility of utopias in her 2013 book *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. Levitas holds that a utopia is an “imaginary reconstitution of society” and argues that utopias “should best be treated” as “provisional and reflexive models of possible futures open to criticism and debate.”¹⁴ Levitas goes further than this, however, and proposes that analyses of utopias should consist of “readings that ... explore the formal means by which the utopian marvelous [sic] or the quality of grace is conveyed.”¹⁵ Defining grace in secular terms as a sense of “connection, acceptance, reconciliation, wholeness,” Levitas connects grace to ways of being, arguing that,

if utopia is understood as the expression of the desire for a better way of being, then it is perhaps a (sometimes) secularized version of the spiritual quest to understand who we are, why we are here and how we connect with each other.¹⁶

Such an approach allows utopias to be understood as methods rather than as goals; a utopia is “not about devising and imposing a blueprint” but about forging connections and developing “alternative possible scenarios.”¹⁷ Conceiving of utopia as method also allows for multiple layers of magnification — of society, community, and individual — since it interprets utopia as involved with ways of being rather than as mere place.

These concerns with constructive analysis, grace, and ontology, are essential to exploring peripheries in modern utopian theory. Just as H. G. Wells, in *A Modern Utopia*, argued that “No less than a planet will serve the purpose of a modern Utopia,” so does utopian theory expand and cut across the boundaries of mode and genre.¹⁸ Texts of all kinds may be interrogated for their representations of being, as well as for what they express about concepts such as Levitas’s approach to secular grace. And although her aims are primarily sociological, Levitas’s method, at least in literary terms, provides an opportunity to

interrogate the idea of peripheries in and around literary spaces. When applied to “the literary,” this utopian method enables us to interpret utopias in two ways. First, it helps us to think about the way in which texts represent humanity and society so as to inspire us to consider future possibilities; and, second, it helps us to identify conversations between otherwise unrelated texts, thus permitting new insights into the connections and shared interests across broad literary landscapes.

Levitas notes that there are three elements in her utopian method. The first is the “archaeological”; it involves “piecing together the images of the good society that are embedded in political programmes and social and economic policies.”¹⁹ The same element helps readers interpret representations of utopianism in texts, particularly in terms of the aspects of utopianism Levitas identifies: approaches to ontology and the pursuit of grace. The second element is ontological interpretation, which, concerned as it is with the topic of “human flourishing,” requires readers to ask “what capabilities are valued, encouraged and genuinely enabled, or blocked and suppressed, by specific existing or potential social arrangements.”²⁰ This element allows for another productive area of investigation when considering various literatures. The third mode is what Levitas describes as “architecture,” which compels us to imagine “potential alternative scenarios for the future.” Although this is the most sociological element of Levitas’s methodology, it is useful when interpreting any of the architectural elements that may arise within texts. Of course, it is with the archaeological and ontological modes that a utopian reading of literature is most concerned, as these elements help us to discern not only the relationships between texts but the utopian arguments or ideas they bear. Indeed, by engaging in archaeological and ontological analysis, utopian theorists may discern the places in which the liminal and peripheral spaces between genres, modes, and other divisions are at their most narrow. In fact, in these spaces, borders so readily blend and merge with textual superficialities that the very notion of dividing texts fades into the background.

The border of utopianism itself presents a significant periphery. Approaches that perceive the utopia only as a desire for perfection with a forward-looking and teleological narrative — where “true” utopian

literatures are only ever “science-fictional” — are disassembled through Levitas’s method. While it is true that many of the canonical utopias have been concerned with imagining a future society that is refined or even perfected, modern scholars have identified utopian elements in many kinds of literatures, highlighting the breadth of utopia’s spaces, or the porousness of the borders that have divided one literary genre from another. This is extremely valuable for opening generic and formal discussions beyond the bounds of science fiction-based utopias, permitting greater access to possibilities. Just as Levitas presents the utopia as a “reconstitution,” so Sargisson argues that “All utopias and all utopianism stem from a discontent with the present.”²¹ Thus, it is possible to cross or push back the peripheries of literary modes by looking for utopias not in the speculative future but in the relationship that they have with the present, or with an imaginary past.

One may grasp the utility of utopianism as an instrument for exploring literary peripheries through reading the prose romances of the Victorian polymath William Morris. Along with being a political activist, an arts-and-crafts movement pioneer, an associate of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and a designer of hand-printed wallpaper, Morris was also a prolific poet and fiction author, publishing ten prose romances in the last decade of his life. His best-known romance, *News from Nowhere*, is a canonical utopia in which a sleeper awakens in an improved future world. Although Morris utilised this conceit as a deliberate parallel to, or even as a parody of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, Morris’s utopian romance is striking (and original) in its representation of a pastoral future in which art has replaced labour, cities have largely been abandoned for country living, money making no longer exists, and all government and mass production have been so reduced as to have no bearing whatsoever upon the lives of the people. Morris wrote a review in the socialist newspaper *Commonweal* of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* — one of the now-forgotten bestsellers of late-nineteenth-century America. There he criticised Bellamy’s novel — a book in which the narrator awakens to a “perfect” future in which all industry is nationalised — as “working by a kind of magic” as well as for presenting “no idea beyond existence in a great

city.”²² To Morris, the conventional utopia in its nineteenth-century incarnation was wholly undesirable, as it merely took to a mechanical extreme the existing state of industrial life.

Instead, in his own romances Morris offers a radical reimagining of utopian possibility. *News from Nowhere* reverses industrial-age utopianism by banishing industry to the peripheries: “All work which would be irksome to do by hand,” the narrator says, “is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without.”²³ That Morris expends not a word more on these “immensely improved machines” reflects his indifference to them. While such machines exist in his utopia, they are not particularly important, because their existence and operation is not relevant to the nature of life in utopia, nor to the utopian way of being. The text is also explicitly apolitical or even anti-political, with the narrator’s guide, Old Hammond, proudly informing us that “we are very well off as to politics, — because we have none.”²⁴ A key component of Morris’s utopianism, then, is that society is largely unplanned, and boasts no elaborate system of laws or organisation. As Levitas notes in *Utopia as Method*, one reading of *News from Nowhere* is that the “lack of institutional specificity ... is the central point of the text.”²⁵ By transgressing the conventions and peripheries of the form, Morris unearths new generic possibilities. Despite its pastoral and anti-political elements, however, *News from Nowhere* remains the closest of Morris’s romances to a traditional utopian text; after all, it features a visitor who is suddenly exposed to a better model of society.

Although *News from Nowhere* sits relatively comfortably within conventional utopian boundaries, Morris’s *The Story of the Glittering Plain* takes a bolder approach to the utopia. The novel’s setting is more imaginative than *News*, for instance, as it incorporates something of an early-medieval dialect, as well as representations of technologies reminiscent of the medieval period. Yet into this fictionalised medievalism Morris inserts another apparent anachronism, as protagonist Hallblythe states, regarding the title “Lord,” as in “ruler of a land,” that “I know not this word, for here dwell we, the sons of the Raven, in good fellowship.”²⁶ Morris’s pointed representation of an egalitarian and possibly anarchic

society in an otherwise quasi-feudal setting utterly defies the expectation that a utopia should depict a coherently imagined future (which, from the point of view of the nineteenth-century romance, might be a twentieth-century future devoid of both feudal and medieval traditions). However, Morris's text is consistent with Sargisson's position that utopias are not required to be set in an obvious future, but need only represent a "discontent with the present."

Utopias outside of obvious future settings also appear in other romances by Morris, such as *The House of the Wolfings* and its sequel *The Roots of the Mountains*. These texts are not traditional utopias in any sense; set in a fictional past, in the late classical period, they feature a fictional Gothic tribe at war. In the first text, the tribe is at war with the Romans; in the second, with the Huns. The social structure of this tribe is wildly imaginative: while the setting evokes a pastoral world comparable to that in *News from Nowhere*, the tribe is substantially egalitarian and its members operate according to a rational and deliberate process of communal decision-making. The Gothic culture represented in *The House of the Wolfings* also lacks class hierarchies, much as in *The Story of the Glittering Plain*. As the narrator observes, "nor were there many degrees amongst them as hath befallen afterwards, but all they of one blood were brethren and of equal dignity."²⁷ This is not a historically accurate depiction of such tribes but a utopian displacement or insertion of egalitarianism into a semi-historical setting. But further anachronisms arise in these texts, such as in *The House of the Wolfings's* conclusion, where, unlike in reality, the victory of the Goths means that the Roman Empire "began to stay the spreading of their dominion, or even to draw in its boundaries somewhat."²⁸ This anachronism challenges the view of the utopia as merely teleological, for it suggests that certain utopian possibilities may not emerge organically from the present, but instead may arise from a process of reimagining on a much broader scale.

The Roots of the Mountains offers just such a broad reimagining, representing the Goths in "a world where," as Norman Talbot describes it, "the Romans had not laid such cultures waste."²⁹ This romance features a number of communities overcoming their class dif-

ferences, forming an allied and communal society so as to defeat the marauding Huns. Those in the various interacting communities that Morris describes are, by the end of the romance, “friends henceforth, and became as one folk, for better or worse, in peace and in war, in waning and waxing.”³⁰ The positioning of the utopia in an imaginary past enables a refreshing view of the present, demonstrating that the utopia does not have to adjust or enhance an industrialised present, but can review or replace industrialisation altogether. Indeed, it is through venturing to the peripheries of the form that these possibilities are revealed.

It should be emphasised that Morris’s Gothic romances, unlike *News from Nowhere*, are not formal utopias where some newly arrived visitor marvels at a future society. They are, rather, heroic narratives in which utopian elements are represented in both the social and ontological elements of the setting and plot. Relatedly, these romances feature elements of the supernatural, associating them with legend and the fantasy genre rather than with the science fiction of the formal utopia. As such, these romances blur the peripheries between traditional utopias and become productive spaces for the generation of new ideas. But if Morris’s romances are, on their surface, pastiches of medieval romance, they are also models for a better and more equal — and a less mechanical and industrialised — ontology. While permitting an element of critique, utopian texts such as these may also uncover the past as a valuable source of utopian speculation, free from the trappings of historical inertia. In particular, Morris’s fictionalised Goths in *The House of the Wolfings* are juxtaposed to their enemies, the Romans, whose hierarchies, imperialism, and labour exploitation are analogies for Morris’s own industrialised context. Moreover, the Romans function as the harbingers of what Morris perceives as the less savoury elements of Western society’s classical roots, further demonstrating the peripheral notion that better ways of being are not exclusively found, if they may be found at all, by revising the structural present. Morris’s prose romances are thus utopias that go beyond the peripheries of convention, indicating the way in which these boundaries are liable for reconsideration and renegotiation. Critically reading these

romances in turn emphasises the value of exploring these peripheries, and the potential for utopian theory to discern radical possibilities beyond the generic margins.

Although Morris's romances are not conventional utopias, they remain distinctly utopian texts. Indeed, Morris's political activism may bring a kind of unconscious utopianism closer to the surface of these books. It is useful, then, to return to Tolkien, on whom Morris was perhaps the greatest influence — at least in style and mode — despite major differences between the authors' political and religious views. Like Morris's prose romances, Tolkien's narratives, including *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, might be considered archetypes of the "fantasy" genre. When discussing Tolkien, however, identifying the generic peripheries is useful, as his works may appear to sit uneasily in the generic schema. As a genre, fantasy resembles the maps of Hobbits' Shire in *The Lord of the Rings*, which "showed mostly white spaces beyond its borders."³¹ But, as Sargent argues, fantasy and utopia are always linked, since "at its base," utopian fiction "includes elements of fantasy."³² More recently, in *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea*, Gregory Claeys proposes that texts with a supernatural component "form part of the discourse of utopia insofar as they feed our sense of fantasy, expand the boundaries of possible realities, and promote hope, illusion and sometimes a passion for change."³³ The utopian element of fantasy, or the fantastical element of utopia, then, is essential for identifying counter-examples of the outmoded idea that a utopia must provide a blueprint for a hypothetical society. Utopias have not been, and should not be, bound by such restrictions. By exploring the peripheries of utopia in the novels of Tolkien and Morris, for instance, we may access the *ontological* meanings of these texts — the ways in which they allow us to contemplate new ways of being as opposed to new methods of social organisation.

Approaching utopias in this way allows us to fill in the "white spaces" around texts. On an archaeological level, particularly if the reader ventures further afield to consider Tolkien's broader corpus, it is obvious that Tolkien's process in creating his imaginary worlds is not simply fantasy world-building but constitutes a deep engagement with

utopian ideas. Tolkien establishes a series of desirable or idealised spaces in his narratives — spaces which could be considered “eutopian” — and then demolishes them one by one through war and disaster. Thus, on the surface, Tolkien primarily offers anti-utopian representations; indeed, several imaginary societies in these texts, such as that of the union of Elves and Men, are presented in this manner. Through the rise and fall of the hidden or guarded Elven realms of Doriath, Nargothrond, and Gondolin, Tolkien uses the fantastic to represent the impossibility of inviolate societies that are free from evil. In this manner, Tolkien suggests that no society, even one in which the inhabitants are immortal or gifted with superhuman abilities, is eternal or absolutely indestructible. Such a reading shifts Tolkien’s work so that it is understood less as conventional fantasy and more as an instance of what Sargent calls the anti-utopia, a mode of literature that criticises utopian ideas. The anti-utopia contrasts with the dystopia in that it focuses not on exploring the worst possibilities of society but on illustrating why better societies fail, and why utopian politics sometimes go awry.

Of course, Tolkien’s work reveals an engagement with a wide variety of different utopias, including almost all of the main types identified by Sargent: eutopias, dystopias, anti-utopias, and critical utopias. That all of them are set in an imaginary time and place reinforces the notion that these utopias primarily embody a dissatisfaction with the present rather than a desire for the future. As I have already suggested, Tolkien and Morris largely use the past, rather than the future, to explore this sense of dissatisfaction; and even this method is itself a peripheral one, obviously at odds with the forward-looking impulse of most utopian literature. Chester Scoville observes that both Morris’s and Tolkien’s books “run counter to the prevailing ideas of modernism, in which nothing *before* the modern is of any use whatever.”³⁴ While Scoville’s representation of modernism may exaggerate the movement’s stance on the past, however, Morris and Tolkien do nonetheless write against the dominant modes of their contexts in permitting the past, as well as the future, to be explored for new ideas.

Tolkien’s fantasies scrutinise and critique approaches to present concerns, contrasting plans for a better society with the pursuit of

better ways of being. Through his depiction of “political” behaviour, as opposed to the ontological or spiritual, Tolkien’s political criticism opens up an avenue to a better life. This process is perhaps most strongly evoked in *The Lord of the Rings* through the character of Saruman, the wizard who seeks to establish himself as the rival of the Dark Lord Sauron rather than to fulfil his original purpose — to defeat him. In arguing that “the old allies and policies will not avail us at all,” Saruman presents his plans in purely political terms; for him, only new allies and new policies can remedy the situation.³⁵ However, Tolkien also equates Saruman’s reliance on military oppression with the evil Sauron does to achieve his aims, so that what appears to be “new” is in fact simply another permutation, another kind, of the same tyrannical impulse. Another example of the same notion appears in the character of Denethor, Steward of Gondor. Denethor’s greatest desire, which, since it is impossible to attain, ultimately leads him to suicide, is to “have things as they were in all the days of my life.”³⁶ His hatred of the changes taking place around him can be seen as utopian in character, reflecting Tolkien’s opposition to conventional and traditional utopian ideas. Sargent observes that if a reformer is a utopian, then “the opponent of reform is in the same sense a utopian.”³⁷ Tolkien is critical of those who believe either that the world can be made politically ideal, as Saruman does, or has been ideal in the past, in the manner of Denethor. In a similar way, Tolkien describes Denethor, in a 1956 essay, of being “tainted with mere politics” in that his opposition to Sauron derives purely from his sense of political rivalry rather than from an intrinsic opposition to evil.³⁸ Tolkien is convinced that political action is a means by which the world will be ruined rather than saved. Through these representations, the peripheries between the fantastic and utopian text allow authors to critique one means of pursuing an ideal while prescribing or advocating another.

Anti-utopianism is only one “peripheral” utopian genre identifiable in the works of Tolkien. Another is the critical utopia, defined by Sargent as a work that describes a world that is superior to reality but still possesses “difficult problems that the described society may or may

not be able to solve.”³⁹ The famous Shire of Tolkien’s *Hobbits* constitutes such a world of critical-utopian speculation, in that the society is to a degree very desirable, with its idyllic pastoral existence, while, on the downside, its inhabitants are limited in their thinking about and understanding of the world. Of all of Tolkien’s fictional societies, the Shire is the most painstakingly “described in considerable detail,” particularly in the Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*.⁴⁰ Tolkien is careful to present a balanced image of this society: the Hobbits, for instance, “love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favourite haunt.”⁴¹ And although the Hobbits’ bucolic lifestyle is almost certainly intended to appear desirable to the reader, Tolkien’s text highlights the fact that this state of affairs only exists because the Hobbits are “sheltered” — that they are naïve and narrow-minded — thanks to the efforts of outsiders: “they liked to have books filled with things that they already knew, set out fair and square with no contradictions.”⁴² This kind of critical-utopian representation explores the peripheries of the mode by imagining a society with both advantages as well as correlative shortcomings over the present. This kind of utopian analysis also challenges the limits of narrative classification, as it puts Tolkien directly in conversation with his contemporaries, which is to say the utopians and dystopians of the twentieth century. Indeed, Tolkien’s imagining of many imperfect societies from an imaginary past both contrasts and complements the ominous futures about which Huxley and Orwell wrote in their own famous dystopian narratives.

Yet it is also worth considering how ontological readings of utopian literatures have the capacity not just to alter the boundaries of the genre (by bringing more texts into the utopian fold) but to establish a whole new set of peripheries, such that the construction of imaginary societies may no longer be seen as relevant. Utopianism is, after all, a kind of “social dreaming.” And, as Frederic Jameson proclaims in the opening paragraphs of his *Archaeologies of the Future*, “Utopia has always been a political issue,” even though, as he qualifies, “its political status is structurally ambiguous.”⁴³ Jameson describes a “Utopian politics” as one that aims at “imagining, and sometimes even realizing, a system radically

different from this one.”⁴⁴ Indeed, Jameson is careful to distinguish a “utopian politics” from the political status of the utopia itself, suggesting that although the “blueprint” approach may be useful for analysing a utopian text’s political orientation, it may be useless — or much less useful — for analysing its form, its structure, its political status. This correlates with the association Levitas draws between utopianism and ways of being. If the utopia is concerned with radical difference, then the peripheries must be redrawn to make room for utopias that are different to others, including in ways that are not explicitly political. Here, for instance, the “eutopian” can be found beyond the blueprints, systems, and programs for society; it may be found, that is, in the structure, form, and values of the narrative itself.

Positive, utopian ontologies, for instance, appear in Tolkien’s narratives. Often, these texts underscore the value of travelling and new experiences, highlight the reconciliation of differences between cultures, and stress the importance of hope in difficult times. These ideas are consistent with a metaphysical concept Tolkien has expressed before: “in every age there come forth things that are new and have no foretelling.” This “creation myth” also conforms to Tolkien’s religious views, which, even in his fiction, appear in various ways: “to none but himself has Ilúvatar [God] revealed all that he has in store.”⁴⁵ Despite their faithfulness, these narratives develop spaces in which eutopian ontologies may succeed while political action fails. *The Lord of the Rings* in particular, with its narrative about the need to destroy the One Ring of the Dark Lord Sauron, offers something of a guideline for defeating tyrants. The road to victory, it suggests, is not to match their force, but to destroy the specific weapons they use (or seek to use) to subjugate and oppress their targets.

As Tolkien observed in an essay of the late 1950s, even Sauron’s motive was initially to attain a form of political utopianism: “He loved order and coordination, and disliked all confusion and wasteful friction.”⁴⁶ As many characters are hopeful utopians in their political orientation, any opposition to this standard soon becomes a radical alternative: “It is wisdom to recognize necessity, when all other courses have been weighed, though as folly it may appear to those who cling

to false hope.”⁴⁷ In this scheme, the utopian-political becomes the conventional, while the utopian-ontological becomes the radical; indeed, the latter’s radicality derives not from making different political choices but different personal ones. This is no clearer than in the case of Faramir who, unlike his brother Boromir and father Denethor, will not allow himself to be tempted by the Ring:

I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway. Not were Minas Tirith falling in ruin and I alone could save her, so, using the weapon of the Dark Lord for her good and my glory. No, I do not wish for such triumphs.⁴⁸

In these positive characterisations, with their exemplary portrayal of heroic subjective values, we can identify aspects of Levitas’s argument for a utopianism of the wholeness of being and human flourishing. As Levitas suggests, many utopias do their work by advocating better ways of being rather than by illustrating better forms of social organisation.

In addition to the above, Tolkien’s narratives also urge us to accept the inevitability of change and to recognise that humans have only limited control of the future:

It is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till.⁴⁹

Appreciating this sentiment compels us to venture beyond the customary borders of utopia, and to the peripheries; it compels us to recognise that the most desirable act of all, the one most fulfilling of wholeness and human flourishing, comes not from accounting for all uncertainties but from acting appropriately within a given context. Here the sentiment can be reunited with Morris, from whose *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (co-authored with E. Belfort Bax) Levitas quotes as follows: “it is impossible to build a scheme for the society of the future, for no man can really think himself out of his own days.”⁵⁰ Here a utopian way of being comes to exist in a peripheral space between the ideal, the possible, and the contextual. It is no longer constrained by a program

or a blueprint that, however flexible, might be expected to be implemented in the future. By observing these ontological values and ideals, utopian studies may shift the peripheries, redefining where the generic boundaries can be drawn, if at all.

This study of Morris and Tolkien's romances has sought to illustrate how the utopian method can be of value when considering peripheries. Utopian theory in its modern incarnation is in itself a peripheral discipline, and the line that defines utopian scholarship is commonly revealed to be shifting and illusory. A utopian interpretation of Morris's and Tolkien's romances should not just view these texts as heroic narratives with distinct utopian engagements, however, but also identify some radical possibilities. One major possibility opened up by this analysis has been recognising the way in which positive and critical utopian representations of the pastoral may enable better or preferable social organisations *and* ways of being. Engaging in a literary conversation across the peripheries, these texts contrast with the industrialised, urbanised, traditional utopias of the twentieth century. At the same time, by recalibrating the formal boundaries, these texts make new arguments about the means we have to improve our lives through a new lens — that of the uchronic or historically displaced time and place, where ideas appear in unique and reflective spaces. Scoville argues that the use of the medieval allows Morris to impart “clues that could lead humanity to heaven on earth or something very close to it”; while, for Tolkien, medieval images also offer “clues that could — just — hold off hell on earth.”⁵¹ Approaches to these texts seeking hard and fast peripheries around utopias would be likely to dismiss their image systems as irrelevant; however, modern utopian scholars should reevaluate these delineations and identify new interactions between utopian texts and their systems of representation.

Utopia studies should not, of course, be limited to placing works of fantasy and historical fiction in conversation with science fiction. Nor should it be confined to Sargent's seemingly exhaustive taxonomy. Any text that offers commentary on ways of being or that addresses the human desire for such notions as Levitas's “grace” should be of interest to utopia studies. Indeed, utopianism should catalyse new conversations

between texts, including between texts that might otherwise be considered to bear no obvious relation, whether in terms of genre, mode, or context. While these categories have their place, the value in transgressing the boundaries is to produce a fresh set of engagements — and this ideal is itself a utopian idea. Sargisson offers comparable proposals in *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*:

Transgressions of social codes, of the concept of order, and of generic conventions all comprise elements of a practice, which I have called radical and transgressive utopianism, that seeks to subvert and exploit the ways in which our perceptions of reality ... are constructed.⁵²

By interpreting how utopian texts represent the societies of their authors, and by examining the approaches they take towards ways of being and grace, it is possible to discern new connections between texts. This mode of utopian analysis is particularly valuable when exploring literary peripheries, as it enables scholars to bring together and draw links between several different utopian truths or ideals.

Notes

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 333.
2. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 381.
3. *Ibid.*, 382, 383.
4. *Ibid.*, 384.
5. Lucy Sargisson, *Fool's Gold: Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 20.
6. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 149.
7. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 9.
8. Paul Turner, "Introduction" in Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2003), xiv, xvi.
9. Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 4.
10. *Ibid.*, 9.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 11.

13. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 149.
14. Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 153.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 11–13.
17. Ibid., 18–19.
18. H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, eds. Gregory Claeys and Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), 15.
19. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 153.
20. Ibid, 153.
21. Sargisson, *Fool's Gold*, 1.
22. Ibid., 356.
23. Ibid., 127.
24. Ibid., 107.
25. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 114.
26. William Morris, *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (London: George Prior Publishers, 1979), 3.
27. William Morris, *The House of the Wolfings* (London: George Prior Publishers, 1979), 3.
28. Ibid., 199.
29. Norman Talbot, “William Morris and the Bear: Theme, Magic and Totem in the Romances,” in *William Morris: Centenary Essays*, eds. Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 100.
30. William Morris, *The Roots of the Mountains* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1890), 424.
31. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 42.
32. Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” 4.
33. Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 209.
34. Chester N. Scoville, “Pastoralia and Perfectability in William Morris and J. R. R. Tolkien,” in *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages*, eds. Jane Chance and Alfried K. Siewers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 101.
35. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 253.
36. Ibid., 836.
37. Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” 27.
38. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 243.
39. Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” 9.
40. Ibid.
41. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1.
42. Ibid., 5, 7.

43. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), xi.
44. *Ibid.*, xii.
45. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 18.
46. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Harper Collins, 1994), 396.
47. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 252.
48. *Ibid.*, 656.
49. *Ibid.*, 861.
50. William Morris and E. Belfort Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893), 278.
51. Scoville, "Pastoralia and Perfectability," 101.
52. Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 225.