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Memory, place and utopia

The relationship between memory and utopia is a complex one. At first glance they are antithetical: memory refers to the past, utopia to the future; memory is what has been, utopia is what is to come, the novum, the not yet. Yet reflection reveals this apparent antithesis as illusory.

- Utopia is not always located in the future. Images of lost paradises and golden ages are placed in the past, accompanied by versions of the Fall. Usually these are beyond the memory of any living individual, inscribed in the collective memory as myth or history, as something that must not be forgotten. The more recent past may be the repository of utopian longing as well, perhaps especially following cataclysmic disasters such as wars and tsunamis: expect the phrases "before the war" or "before the tsunami" to be recurrent in individual life histories and social scripts, as versions of "before the fall". At a more banal level, successive generations persistently locate a golden age when crime was minimal and "you didn't have to lock your door" approximately thirty years earlier.

- Remembered utopia is always a reconstruction of the past. But if the not-yet has the otherness of the novum, representations of future utopia are always simultaneously dependent on existing cultural resources. Indeed, the intelligibility of all cultural production rests on shared memory, since languages and systems of signs are learned. This endorses Fredric Jameson's insistence that Utopia is literally inconceivable, as well as terrifying in its implication of the annihilation of our selves as we know them.

· Utopian representations of the future – claims that the future may be qualitatively different from the present – involve a process of transcending the past. This is never a simple forgetting. It always involves *managing* the past, both individually and collectively.

· Thus memory and forgetting, and their management, are necessary component parts of the utopian project. Forgetting may be more typically associated with dystopias. Orwell, of course, addresses the erasure of collective memory in *Nineteen Eighty-four*. In Doris Lessing's *Shikasta* (1979), a crucial element in the dystopic process is forgetting, especially forgetting what we might be (individually) and what we are here for (collectively).

Memory, embodiment and place

Commentators from different disciplines have pointed out that there are different kinds of memory. Bloch works with a distinction between *anamnesis* and *anagnorisis*. *Anamnesis* is "simple" recall, perceived by Bloch as intrinsically conservative. *Anagnorisis* is a process of recognition, where the gap between past and present is not collapsed. As Vincent Geoghegan puts it:

> In *anagnorisis* memory traces are reactivated in the present, but there is never simple correspondence between the past and the present, because of all the intervening novelty. The power of the past resides in its complicated relationship of similarity/dissimilarity to the present. The tension thus created helps shape the new. The experience therefore is creatively shocking. (Geoghegan 1997:22)

If *anagnorisis* is more evidently critical than *anamnesia*, neither should be assimilated to nostalgia. Indeed the whole concept of nostalgia is problematic, implying as it does an outsider's critical assessment of longing for the past. The definition of memory and desire as nostalgic is almost always a political and delegitimising act, similar to the rejection of radical alterity as utopian.

An orthogonal distinction can be made between *individual* and *collective* memory. In a recent short book on war photography, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag argues that:

Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory. … All memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What we call collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds.

Sontag 2003: 76

This appears to contradict the arguments of anthropologists and sociologists, notably Maurice Halbwachs, who insists that all memory is social. Individuals, he says, remember as members of groups, and it is their membership of these groups – and the legitimation given by the groups to their memories – that give them structure, coherence, a sense of validity to the individual. Dreams, in contrast, for Halbwachs, are fragmentary and disorganized: "dreams show unstable fragments and images that cannot provide the groups support that makes waking life and memory cohesive and structured" (Halbwachs 1992:23). The contradiction between Sontag and Halbwachs is less acute than it seems. For the implication of Halbwachs position is not that the distinction between individual and collective memory is false, but that both are social. Both are dependent on, and reproductive of, individual belonging to social groups, and to social cohesion and solidarity in a Durkheimian sense – quite literally, they involve the re-membering of the group.

The frameworks which groups provide are not merely abstract belief systems. As Connerton explains Halbwachs, the mental spaces within which memories are mapped always refer back to the material spaces that groups occupy. Halbwachs draws on Comte's claim that our mental equilibrium depends on the consistency of our physical environment, and argues that collective memory depends on a socially specific spatial framework. Thus:

[O]ur images of social spaces, because of their relative stability, give us the illusion of not changing and of rediscovering the past in the present. We conserve our recollections by referring them to the material milieu that surrounds us. It is to our social spaces – those which we occupy, which we frequently retrace with our steps, where we always have access, which at each moment we are capable of mentally reconstructing – that we must turn our attention, if our memories are to reappear.

Connerton 1989:37

Paul Connerton introduces another crucial element here, that of embodiment. He argues that despite the merits of Halbwach's argument, there is too much emphasis on the cognitive – one might say too much emphasis on the extent to which memory involves re-cognition. If "we preserve versions of the past by representing it to ourselves in words and image" (Connerton 1989:72), or by its *inscription*, memory also operates through *incorporation* and *performance*. The collective aspect of this involves commemorative ceremonies. At the individual level, memory is embedded in practical habit, in daily social practice, in specific physical places. Habit involves the capacity to reproduce actions, the kind of "muscle-memory" involved in riding a bicycle or playing a musical instrument. This is procedural memory. "[H]abit is a knowledge and remembering in the hands and in the body; and in the cultivation of habit it is our body which 'understands'" (Connerton 1989:95). Thus in habitual memory, "the past is … sedimented in the body" (Connerton 1989:72). Habit might seem closer to *anamnesis* than to *anagnorisis.* Connerton also argues, however, that all habits are affective dispositions, embodying desire as well as capacity. This characteristic is, he says more apparent in "bad" habits such as smoking. More accurately, perhaps, it is apparent in habits we are trying to break, or whose performance is otherwise frustrated by a social or spatial context.

If Sontag emphasises the visual aspects of memory, and its stipulatory character, Connerton emphasises its embodied and spatial character. I think it was Simon Schama (1995) who remarked that our embodied sense of physical place, the way in which our body knows where to go, which way to turn, is laid down very early. It is, as David Harvey (2002) says, in the nature of capitalism to constantly tear down and rebuild the physical infrastructure of our lives. Earthquakes and tsunamis can of course have the same effect. But whereas ecological catastrophes are recognised as traumatic, the deliberate razing and reconstruction of the physical environment is not. Yet changes to the landscape are disturbing. When a building is demolished and the site redeveloped, it is extraordinary how quickly it becomes difficult to remember what was there before. The proliferation of books of old photographs of localities may be nostalgic, but also involves, as Sontag suggests, a stipulation that it is important to remember this. The effectiveness of these photographs, however, depends very much on being able to identify the street layout, the precise location. When street layouts, rather than specific buildings, change,

what is generated is a dream-like sense of dislocation and an *embodied* sense that something is wrong. If the social spaces where we retrace our steps are not simply occupied by different buildings, but are effectively obliterated so that we cannot walk that way, they are literally no longer *recognizable*. Such physical obliteration also represses, or at least compounds the forgetting, of the social performances previously enacted in them. It creates an absence in what Schama (1995: 24) calls "the archive of the feet".

Questions of memory and place are, as Schama showed, significant in the visual and fictional representation of place – and thus in the representation of no-place, or utopia. Utopian texts are only a fraction of the possible cultural manifestations of utopianism. But in relation to texts, the questions of individual and collective memory can be explored in three different registers: author, text and audience. Texts, as Ricoeur argued, have the distinctive character of a portability that transcends the social conditions of its production and reception, opening them to a "potentially unlimited series of socially-situated readings" (Connerton 1992:96). Within the text, it is possible to explore the treatment of both individual and collective memory, and their embodied and spatialised character. These questions are, however, not independent of the working of individual and collective memory in the authorship of the text, and the place of its composition. And, thirdly, the resonance of memory depends on the audience. As Ken Roemer argues, if we suppose the meaning of a text to lie in audience responses to it, then we have to consider the entry and re-entry of the text into the cultural matrices of different times and places, and altered geographies.

These issues are illustrated by, and illuminate, some aspects of memory and place in the authorship and reception of Hammersmith's utopias, the most famous of which is of course William Morris's *News from Nowhere*. It is ironic that it is called *News from **Nowhere***, as it is more clearly located in a specific place than any other utopia. The changes to place that are registered in the text – which are considerable – operate to insist that it is the same place at a different time, and not that we are (as in Wells's *A Modern Utopia*, or Lessing's *Shikasta*) on some similar parallel planet. They contribute substantially to its dreamlike quality. Geoghegan (1992) has explored the use of history and memory in Morris's text, in contrast with Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Here I am concerned with the contexts of the production and reception of Morris's text, and particularly on their spatial aspects.

The specific spatial referents of Morris's utopia are (in reverse order) Kelmscott, the village on the Upper Thames where Morris rented his holiday retreat Kelmscott Manor; the Thames Valley; London; and Hammersmith. *News from Nowhere* was written in 1890. From 1878 till his death in 1896, Morris lived in this (then) western suburb of London, on the north side of the Thames, in a house with panoramic views of the river which he called Kelmscott House. For five years before this, he lived a mile or so north-west, in a house called Horrington House which no longer exists. The importance of Kelmscott Manor in Morris's utopianism is often stressed – not least because the Kelmscott edition of *News from Nowhere* is prefaced by an illustration of Kelmscott Manor that has been repeatedly reproduced: the picture that locks the story in our minds. Moreover, the archive of the feet can take you to the very spot where that image places the viewer; the camera captures the same image in the twenty-first century. In the first section of *News from Nowhere*, Morris reconstructs London. He tears it down, and replaces it with … what? A decentralised network of villages, with their own markets (although nothing is bought or sold), theatres, and parliaments. Hammersmith is the prototype, and the description of Hammersmith transformed percolates through the first four chapters.

The usual interpretation of this is that Morris is reconstructing London to correspond to an idealised medieval topography, and there are phrases that seem to bear this out. The vernacular architecture is described as "so like medieval houses of the same materials that I fairly felt as if I were alive in the fourteenth century", while the positive comparisons of the public architecture are to Gothic, Byzantine and Florentine styles. What seems, then, to be operating here is a particular form of collective memory, and idealised history of the middle ages.

Of course, as always in Morris this is a look back to look forward. To represent Morris as a medievalist is to radically misunderstand him. But to read the image of a transformed Hammersmith as essentially medieval also depends on forgetting – specifically, on forgetting the history of Hammersmith. The look back in *News from Nowhere* is also to the recent past, within Morris's own memory and certainly the living memory of his audiences. Comparing maps in 1870 and 1894 – just before Morris moved to the area, and just after *News from Nowhere* was written – it is evident that this was precisely the period during which most of Hammersmith was built. The

Metropolitan Line (now the Hammermith and City Line of the London Underground network) was extended to Hammersmith in 1864, and the District Line in 1870. Rail and housing developments covered land that had previously been farmland, market gardens, plant nurseries or private gardens. Most of the major public and civic buildings were rebuilt during this period. The "ugly" bridge which Morris replaces was built in 1887 (Pevsner also detested it)**.** The most evocative account of this transformation comes from William Richmond, another Hammersmith resident and family friend of the Morrises, who designed the mosaics in St Pauls Cathedral. The loss of rural Hammersmith was recent, and Morris was writing against recent changes, as his contemporary audience would have recognised. The text thus appeals to individual memory both in its construction and its initial reception, and a memory that is embedded in a specific place.[1]

The recovery of this context is legitimated through the resources of collective memory. By which I mean I spent a long time messing about in the local history archive, looking at old maps and photographs, and reading the wonderful edition of Morris's letters edited by Norman Kelvin. But it was initiated through individual memory – and loss. I first read *News from Nowhere* when I was seventeen – in Hammersmith. Kelmscott House lies on the route of childhood riverside walks – and is now the premises of the William Morris Society. The coach house that Morris used for weaving carpets, that became the meeting-hall for the Hammersmith Socialists, is still in use for public lectures. Speaking there among the ghosts of Morris, George Bernard Shaw, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is a strange and awesome, experience. Another layer of memory: Morris refers to the Creek , a little tributary of the Thames. When I was a child, my mother would lift us up to peer over the wall to where this stream, culverted in 1936, emerged from the flood defences. The creek is central to Hammersmith's collective memory: murals in the town hall, painted as late as the 1950s, show it as the tumbling stream of Morris's utopia. In Morris's time, and until the 1930s, it was a smelly working dock. Yet it was only after my mother's death, as I explored the archive, that I realised she was passing on her own personal memory, for

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[1]   For a fuller discussion of the changing history of Hammersmith and is impact on *News from Nowhere,* see Ruth Levitas, *Morris, Hammersmith and Utopia,* William Morris Society, 2005.

she had lived by the river before 1936. Apart from one area redeveloped in the 1920s, and the related disappearance of the Creek, the 1894 maps show a street layout that was familiar in my 1950s childhood. It was possible, to a substantial extent, to identify the routes Morris would have walked. And to a substantial extent, it still is possible to refer to the archive of the feet.

Except that in the late 1950s, a huge multi-lane dual carriage way was built through the heart of Hammersmith. It links the M4 into central London. Kelmscott House as it now stands has a reasonable sized garden. But in Morris's time the garden stretched back a quarter of a mile. Most of the garden was subject to compulsory purchase (for £2000) by the London County Council in the early 1950s. The land taken was so extensive that it accommodates not only the full width of the road, but a block of flats on the other side. This was also the first road in Britain where traffic took precedence over pedestrians. The land that is taken by the road is no longer part of the archive of the feet.

There are other Hammersmith utopias besides Morris's. Indeed Hammersmith may be seen as a cradle of utopias, not least as a legacy of Morris, if not of *News from Nowhere*. Here, Eric Gill and Douglas (Hilary) Pepler met, eventually forming the catholic arts and crafts colony at Ditchling, in Sussex – still accessible, with its own museum. Here, E.T.Craig, old Owenite and steward of Ralahine was, with Morris, among the nine founder members of the Hammersmith branch of the Social Democratic Federation: Craig died in Hammersmith, and though his grave is now unmarked, his house is still standing. Willie Yeats not only went to the Hammersmith Socialists (and stormed out in high dudgeon). He lived for a time in that piece of utopian urban planning, of which Morris deeply disapproved, the garden suburb of Bedford Park – then described as in Hammersmith. Yeats's sisters, Lily and Lolly, learned the embroidery skills they were to take to Sligo from May Morris. And Yeats himself first encountered the Order of the Golden Dawn, which was to contribute to the development of Irish utopianism, in Bedford Park.

Least known, least remembered, are the utopian projects of one Warwick Herbert Draper, who lived at Kelmscott House from about 1910 to 1923, and just along the river almost next door to May Morris from 1901. Draper, together with his neighbours Douglas Pepler and Fred Rowntree, in 1905 set up a settlement called Hampshire House in the poorest area of Hammersmith,

substantially modelled on the Toynbee Hall settlement in London's East End. While living at Kelmscott House, Draper wrote a history of Hammersmith, which makes repeated reference to Morris. In 1915, for the tenth anniversary of Hampshire House, he wrote a small utopia, a projection of how he would like it to be in 1955. He was also a staunch supporter of that other utopian project, The League of Nations. In 1918, he wrote a more extensive utopia, *The Tower* under the pseudonym Watchman, republished in 1919 as *The New Britain*. The dedication to his wife, Grace Devett, in the 1919 edition makes reference to an unpublished sketch written before the 1914-18 War, but I have as yet been unable to trace the Draper papers. I have never seen copies of his guild socialist utopia outside the British Library. The disappearance of texts from collective memory is one thing. One might even not wonder at the disappearance from even local collective memory of a man who was, it seems, involved in the early years of the Garden City movement at Letchworth, was responsible for preventing the building of the road through Hammersmith and Morris's garden before the first world war, and for preventing the industrialisation of a large section of Chiswick's riverside in the aftermath of that war. Draper, indeed, might with justice be described as Hammersmith's other utopian – who repeatedly used the memory of Morris as a political weapon.

What is truly astonishing is the absence of reference to Hampshire House, which played a significant role in the life of the area for a quarter of a century. The grounds of Hampshire House adjoined those of Kelmscott House. It was demolished to make way for the road. This forgetting is, I think, directly linked to its total physical erasure. I do not think it would have disappeared so utterly from view if the house had been put to other use, or the roads that led to it were still extant. Morris himself said, in *News from Nowhere* "I thought I knew the Broadway from the lie of the roads that still met there". But not only Hampshire House, damaged by wartime bombing, was destroyed. The place where it stood was expunged by the road. It has been physically obliterated, and thus forgotten, *oublie*. You cannot walk that way again.

Individual and collective memory, in both inscribed and embodied forms, thus operate not only within the text. They affect, in ways we may forget, the generation of the text itself. They affect how we read particular texts. And our embodied and spatially embedded memories govern which utopias survive,

which disappear apparently without trace from memory as they are lost from the archive of the feet.

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