Utopia, the ECF virtual issue
Introduction, by Jason H. Pearl, Florida International University

Utopian literature invites debate, almost as a constitutive principle, so it is no surprise to find essays on the topic throughout the pages of this journal. And the ongoing need to understand the ideals of the past—ideals that helped shape the present—ensures the appearance of more such articles in the future. First, though, it must be acknowledged there are some critics and historians who believe the eighteenth century was inhospitable to the utopian imagination. J.C. Davis, for instance, ends his influential survey in 1700 by citing a “waning confidence in the will or capacity of the state” (Davis, Utopia and the Ideal Society: A Study of English Utopian Writing, 1516-1700 [Cambridge University Press, 1981], 366).

Dreams of a perfect world, the thinking goes, flourished in the Renaissance, when overseas exploration inspired a new sense of possibility, and in the seventeenth century, a time of radical Puritan politics. The eighteenth century, in contrast, is labelled an age of science, reason, and scepticism; its fiction was committed to realism, not flights of fancy.

But specialists have debunked facile myths about the Enlightenment and expanded our notion of what utopia is in the first place. For Thomas More, author of the genre’s founding text, it was a topos, a place, specifically an undiscovered island. For writers of the eighteenth century, it was also a time in the future, or the past; it was a practice, a subjectivity. In an eight-volume anthology, Gregory Claeys has gathered together everything from lunar voyages to nuts-and-bolts proposals for industrial projects. And, of course, at the end of the century, there were revolutions founded on utopian principles, not to mention small-scale communities operating more quietly. Some scholars argue that the Enlightenment itself was utopian. These claims are now relatively mainstream, borne out by well-regarded monographs.

For a sample of ideas, we are best served starting with journal articles, such as those assembled here, which treat many of the major themes. Some of the following essays look at imaginary geographies in the tradition of Thomas More. Others focus on fictions set in newly configured domestic spaces. Still others examine novels that make utopia an action or a scheme for the future. Together, this work shows the tenacity of utopian ideals even in a time characterized by empiricism, even in a genre—the novel—devoted to verisimilitude.
We must remember that, at the start of the period, much of the globe remained unmapped and open to speculation. Thus, one could still be “enthusiastic about the possibilities of New World colonization,” as Richard Frohock points out (Frohock, “Violence and Awe: The Foundations of Government in Aphra Behn’s New World Settings,” *ECF* 8, no. 4 [1996]: 438). The utopia imagined by the author of *Oroonoko* and *The Widdow Ranter* was predicated on “the natural privilege of noble blood lines,” an ideology drawn from royalist politics in England, where a bourgeois alternative was then in the ascendant. But the aristocrats in the Americas too fail to project their power and thereafter succumb to political upstarts. Utopia, then, proves impossible on both sides of the Atlantic. Another ECF essay, “Simon Berington’s *Adventures of Signor Gaudentio di Lucca*,” by A.D. Harvey and Jean-Michel Racault, looks at an ideal society imagined in the interior of Africa. That novel was a bestseller in its own day but is now sunk in obscurity, so Harvey and Racault must trace its bibliographic history, summarize its plot, and argue its artistic merits. We need to pay more attention to what Harvey and Racault call “the best-known communist text of the eighteenth century—other than Swift’s account of ... the Houyhnhnms, in *Gulliver’s Travels*” (12). In “‘No place where women are of such importance’: Female Friendship, Empire, and Utopia in *The History of Emily Montague*,” Jodi Wyett considers another space where positive facts were relatively sparse, at least for Europeans: the Canadian wilderness. Frances Brooke’s main characters, Emily and Arabella, praise the beauty of the land and the autonomy enjoyed by Indigenous women before ultimately resorting to the familiar constraints of marriage and domestic life back in England. However, the reversal is incomplete, since it allows both “romantic friendship” between women and the possibility of female intellectual pursuits: “Emily’s post-marital intellectual activity ... illustrates how expectations of femininity could be challenged even within marriage” (48, 53). This idea of female friendship and scholarship was imagined much more radically in Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall* (1762), a critical favourite—especially in this journal—for the last twenty years. I have singled out three essays here. J. David Macey considers the ways in which Scott and two others, Mary Astell and Françoise de Graffigny, reimagined the Paradise myth in “Eden Revisited: Revisions of the Garden in Astell’s *Serious Proposal*, Scott’s *Millenium Hall*, and Graffigny’s *Lettres d’une péruvienne*.” These authors engage in a “strategy of creative myth-making ... to produce new and richly suggestive mythologies which naturalize alternatives to married life” (163). Scott, in particular, implies that
“same-sex relationships are the truly ‘paradisial’ ones and that women will be able to reclaim Eve’s paradisial inheritance only by leaving Adam behind” (174). In “‘A Most Sensible Oeconomy’: From Spectacle to Surveillance in Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall,*” Nanette Morton takes a dimmer view of the feminotopia in question. On the one hand, the novel’s central characters are removed from public, sheltered from the male gaze that reduced women to objects on the marriage market. On the other, these women then turn a classist gaze on the estate’s lower orders, which in the end yields merely “a limited and tightly controlled feminism, in which a woman’s rights are defined by the rights of her class” (39). For William Wandless, the bounds of utopia preclude such incursions. His article, “Secretaries of the Interior: Narratorial Collaboration in Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall,*” argues that the male narrator and Mrs Maynard, the representative of Millenium Hall, act as intermediaries, exchanging information but also maintaining the autonomy on which the women of the community depend. Scott thus “makes it possible both to preserve and promote her paradise, to present it as a viable alternative while honouring the source of its alterity” (281).

Other novels present utopia as not a place at all but a deferred possibility that is attainable through specified practices. For example, in “Utopian Voyeurism: Androgyny and the Language of the Eyes in Haywood’s *Love Excess,*” Elizabeth Gargano argues that Eliza Haywood idealizes nonverbal communication, as opposed to writing or speaking, because the former allows women to express themselves more authentically than patriarchal England would allow by other means. Such physical signs lead to “an indescribable realm in which desire and satiation know no divide,” where there is no gender divide either (530). The problem is that this state of being remains indescribable, a space that can be hinted at and gestured towards but never explicitly articulated. A similar emphasis on activity—in this case, travel—inform Peter Wagstaff’s “There and Back Again: The Country and the City in the Fiction of Rétif de la Bretonne.” These narratives represent the country as wholesome, the city as corrupt; still, the country can be stifling, the city filled with opportunity. Neither, alone, is utopian. Nevertheless, Rétif “creates an intermediate space, defined by mobility and interchange, in which his characters can escape the fixity of either extreme” (454). April London turns to the English literature inspired by the French Revolution in “Radical Utopias: History and the Novel in the 1790s,” where she shows the importance of time and history, rather than space and geography, to representations of a better world.
Reformers looked to the future, rejecting the influence of the past—a past that conservatives celebrated. Such novels as Thomas Holcroft’s *Anna St. Ives* (1792) and Robert Bage’s *Hermesprong* (1796) “attempt to marry the rigorously collectivist and anti-historical conventions of formal utopias to the norms of a genre keenly interested in the reciprocities between private and social identities” (790). In other words, as fiction, rather than philosophy, “these novels aspire not simply to describe an alternate civic order but to encourage emulation of it by charting the inner transformation of the protagonist” (790).

Considering how many novels encourage emulation, perhaps we should treat utopia as not a niche fantasy but a central impulse in the history of the novel, before the 1790s and after. Additional work must be done along the lines already established, but also in new directions. To find utopian aspirations in new and unlikely places—as Ernst Bloch once did—is to discover the pervasiveness, if not the universality, of such hopes and desires. That lesson helps bridge the gap between utopias in the eighteenth century and realities in the twenty-first. How might this literature serve us not just intellectually but also practically, politically? A lingering commitment to New Historian styles of inquiry has pushed such questions to the side. It remains for today’s and tomorrow’s scholars to answer them.

**Jason H. Pearl** is Associate Professor of English, Florida International University, and Book Reviews Editor, *Digital Defoe*; he is the author of *Utopian Geographies and the Early English Novel* (2014).

**Further Reading**


