Utopian Literature, Critique and Educational Priorities

Critical thought requires ideas of the good life and critical approaches to value systems if it is to be something more than just effective accomplishment of pre-set and heteronomously authorized tasks. Anti-utopian critical thought tends to always be immanent, i.e. to avoid going beyond thin, minimal and safe value paths. By contrast, Ernst Bloch, who had been a leading utopian figure of the 20th century, saw critical thinking as a ‘venturing beyond’, a formulation that captures the complex relation of new contents of thought with the existing reality from which they emanate but which they transcend by the force of an extreme effort of will.¹ Moreover, even now that most liberal philosophers converge on the priority of the right over the good, utopian thinkers emphasize the significance of futurity and of conceptions of the good for a truly critical thinking. ‘Without some, more or less determinate, guiding idea of the good society, critical social thinking would be inconceivable: it would lack an ethical basis for its critical diagnoses and its endeavor to stimulate social and cognitive transformation would have no ethical point’.²

However, while critique was associated in modernity either with the coming of age of humanity (Kant) or the radical change of the world (Marx) and was accompanied with revolutionary enthusiasm regarding those two possibilities, nowadays it is often attached to a mere refinement of established orders. Thus, although critique continues to be an enshrined ideal of education, the very moment it takes the shape of critical thinking in its dominant conception, it loses its internal connection to theoretical endeavour and becomes a means for developing skills and performing specific tasks.
It is thought that criticality must steer clear from conceptions of the good life and avoid any prioritization of one ethical ideal over others.

This effects not just the domestication of critique that is now being widely discussed, but also its subjugation to technicist and performative purposes with negative implications for education’s relation to vision, humanities, and the experience of time. Thus, ‘with the end of realistic socialism in Europe, any vision featuring a perspective that might transcend the status quo seems doomed – the political project of humanising society’ is in crisis. Not that vision as such is given up; vision is still a guiding thread of human and educational action but now vision is canalized in individualist and materialist outlets. As futuristic visions are increasingly linked to technological progress’, they acquire the status of psychic discharge operating around a singularly ‘practical realisation of perfection’. Evidently, human sciences (humanities) and cultural or educational experiences related to futurity (combined with criticality and conception of the common good) or presupposed by it suffer the consequences of the change that critique and vision have undergone. The time that is given to them, e.g. curricular and classroom time or leisure time spent on them, is gradually contested, as it bears more and more the condescension of conceded time or the discontent of wasted time.

Michael Wimmer formulates the paradoxes of the contemporary world in a way that brings all these notions together: ‘reflexive modernisation produces a devaluation of reflection; acceleration of all processes to save time produces lack of time; and society’s high estimation of science makes it into an enemy of theoretical thought’.
In this context, literature is emphatically understood as fiction, in the sense of the unreal that is counterposed to real life facts and data. The latter is now the myth-averse slogan of the realities of contemporary society which has, in being itself a cliché, turned into a myth. Literature as fiction is then connected to leisure, a leisure that is more and more rare and unavailable, opposed to the urgency of results, standards and pressures for increased productivity and trapped in the “time – lack of time” paradox. The fastfoodization of knowledge that is connected with deadlines, performance and achievement devalues whatever can be postponed to be carried out at a more convenient time. The increasingly frequent response that students give to the question about the extramural books they read is their “lacking time for such things”, rendering a further question about the way literature influences their life and thought redundant or pointless. Worse, “I don’t read fiction” no longer comes apologetically or accompanied with any discomfort and any sense of missing something valuable. It now comes naturally and even with an air of self-importance: the more you disqualify things that do not fit in your timetable the more organized, dedicated and hard-working you seem to appear. Now, if we realize that ‘with the development of computer technology, text has expanded into the digital realm and new options such as literary hypertext or e-literature are gaining a presence’, the paradoxical nature of our era and its capacity to disable the enabling new opportunities and to block the possibilities for a harmonious interplay between science and humanities become manifest. Even when literature is accommodated in schooling, the employment of it is often narrow, flat, uncritical and uninspiring. Hence the plea of many theorists coming not only from purely literary contexts but also from the social sciences context to reconsider the educational handling of reading comes as no
surprise. ‘Teachers need to interrupt the superficial reading practices of students that are now supported by school curricula and mandatory high-stakes testing regimes.

Many students use the text to confirm rather than to question their own beliefs’. What we described briefly above as a toning down of critique and vision regarding practice more generally reappears here as a fact concerning reading more specifically.

Given the cultural and educational context that I have briefly sketched, the challenge for education today is, amongst other things, to escape its entrapment in what Sartre called the realm of the “practico-inert”, a realm that has reduced education to a conservative and social-reproductive institution. In this paper, I explore and defend the claim that, in a world that gives priority to scientistic and technicist ideals and effects a truncating (Adorno) of thought, literature should not only become educationally rehabilitated but it must also become an actively intervening force of educational redirection. If literature “can teach how to live better”, as this workshop rightly emphasizes, then the genre that concerns images of a better life or a life as it should be seems the most appropriate to suit critical educational aims. The genre in question is the utopian. Apart from offering images of a better life, that is, apart from giving a possible content to teaching about a worthwhile life, literary utopias have another connection to education: both assume the pliability of humanity and operate in virtue of the feasibility of change for the better. Many utopian/dystopian works see the child as the source of new hope (e.g. Platonov’s The Foundation Pit) and reassert in this way that the plasticity of humanity is education’s primary concern, while revealing the dangers lurking in accounts of education that eliminate imagination.
Within the utopian genre itself, there have been varieties and variations of themes that
tackle in different and rich ways what “better” might be. Now, since the socio-
historical and, consequently, the educational context favour practical-technological,
instead of ethico-political, aspirations to perfection, those kinds of utopia that
revolve primarily around scientism and technicism would arguably be part of the
above mentioned problems rather than their solution. The most popular and therefore
culturally and educationally less neglected literary works are usually cybertopias and
sci-fi; the opposite seems to hold for literature that involves some form of collective
ideal of perfection or an explicit political utopianism. Whilst much futurism revolves
around an unhindered flow of communication and a pharmacological, surgical or
 genetic (in fact, eugenic) ‘enhancement’ of humanity and prolongation of vitality and
youth, ironically, society recoils in the idea of political vision. Hence, here, although I
am aware of the fact that some sci-fi works are commendably political even up to the
concrete aspect of movementism (e.g. Ursula LeGuin´s books), I shall defend the
significance of those utopias that have an ethico-political direction and not a
communicative, scientific, technological and medical direction.

Before I proceed to some examples of what this genre has to offer, I would like to
register some more reasons why the turn to political utopianism may enrich the
relation of education and literature. Literature in educational settings has usually
being seen as a means for cultivating narrative imagination and identification with
various existing others within a community and outside of it. The starting point is,
often unconsciously, the self, the self-consciousness and the perception of the other in
consciousness. In a way, this is an individualist frame of thinking about literature
which is important but inadequate in itself to cover the whole ground of what
literature offers to people. What it leaves out is the literary portrayal of alternative and possible worlds, of collectivities of the future and fresh ways of handling world politics beyond the issues of individual rights and respect for pluralism.

My rehabilitation of the educational significance of political utopian literary works presupposes that literature is valuable not just for identification with the right models or empathic understanding of otherness, as it is widely assumed, but also for enlarged thought and an active life [*vita activa*] (to use Hannah Arendt’s terms). Nothing compels us to view the educational significance of literature exclusively through the lens of empathy, but, on the contrary, we have reasons to question the paradigmatic reliance on it. The focus on empathy has been rightly criticized for its facile assumptions and it can also be criticized as didactic and committed in a rather costly way. The major difference I see in the empathetic and the utopian perspective is that the former revolves around an axis of actuality, whereas the latter is oriented toward possibility. My claim is that enlarged thought is assisted by utopian literature because of the latter’s relation to vision. The self constructs images of alternative realities that heighten awareness of present societal flaws, instead of just being identified with various others and their consciousness. Then, the self might be drawn into something better by the force of the evocative and seductive literary portrayal of as yet unexplored ethical possibility. By contrast, the empathetic focus on literature associates it solely with individualist ideals of a more sensitive self that is valuable to society only by implication.

The examples below aim to illustrate, first, that the utopian perspective makes world literature rather than restrictively Western literature important for education (spatial
dimension); second, that much utopian literature of the past has been path-breaking for education (diachronic dimension); and third, that contemporary works reveal social pathologies that educationists must bear in mind and aim to avoid as well as provide ethico-political images of the collective Good (synchronous dimension). An abundance of Golden Age narratives throughout history and around the globe testifies to the fact that literature has often mapped the human desire for a better world and the political effort for realizing it. But also literature in the form of novel from western and non-western antiquity to the present provides us with a very rich material of literary portrayals of a better life of all kinds and for various social groups. As an example, consider the feminist utopia of China. In the 18th century, we encounter the first feminist Chinese utopian novel authored by Li-Ju-chen (c. 1763-1830) and entitled The Mirror of the Flowers. ‘The novel is set in the 7th century […] and describes the adventures of a hundred talented women in imaginary kingdoms; the description gives rise to an acid criticism of China under the Manchu dynasty. In these kingdoms women have the right to sit for public examinations, they study, they marry freely, [and] they do not have to bind their feet or serve as concubines’. The list of examples could be endless here regarding various aspects of non-Western or ancient Western utopian constructions of worlds in which the ‘no-count’, i.e. Jacques Ranciere’s (1999) politically marginalized societal groups gain voice and intervening force in a manner which can be universalized. The upshot is that political utopianism in its spatial and temporal dimensions is not just an ideal that draws mainly from western, modern literary sources; in being more encompassing, political utopianism in its literary form can serve cosmopolitanism in ways that have, despite intentions, not been utilized by standard, empathetic approaches to education and literature.
As an example of what I termed the diachronic dimension we may use Owen’s *New Lanark* which concerns the creation of a small society where there is no place for poverty, neglect of health and crime, and where education is put centre stage and materialized by a school that employs methods that can be characterized progressive even by contemporary standards, e.g. the use of play for learning purposes in the early years. In *New Lanark*, Owen ‘pinpointed with astonishing prescience the disastrous flaws in the “created opposition of interests” on which the early capitalist systems of production, exchange and consumption were based, finding “true civilization” impossible under such disabling conditions. As a result, the children at *New Lanark* were taught to compete in “friendly emulation” but also to value “going forward with their companions” over “leaving them behind”.

Owen’s views are a telling example of the fact that the educational element in utopias was not serving purely rhetorical or literary purposes but it was rather a significant source of inspiration and intervention in actual educational discourses. His emphasis on the cultivation of imagination, on the significance of cooperation and his employment of other related terms, such as energy, emulation, activity, liveliness, play, curiosity, etc., often nourished what came to be seen as an educationally libertarian lexicon against the then commonly held oppressive educational tenets. Utopia critiqued the modernist instrumentalist and performative priorities of education and the concomitant goal-setting.

Another useful example here could be Fourier’s utopian work, for it outlined ‘a projected future where passions, the basic unit of humanity, rather than Marx’s labor, would be liberated, allowing for free associations through sex, love and artistic
These forms of passion are retarded by commercialism which, along with other operations of capitalism, effects also a transformation of the self and the other into abstract entities. In the embodied and sensual dimensions of humanity that have to be redeemed, Fourier sees the possibility of a complete, other-oriented and harmonious humanity. This ideal of the *homo harmonicus* is accompanied by an ideal of harmonious education emphasizing neither ethics nor politics but human attraction. Despite the asphyxiating organization of daily life and the overdeterminacy of the utopian planning as well as other problems of the modernist, canonical conception of utopia from which neither Fourier (perhaps nor Owen) escaped, what remains important is that such works connect education with radical societal redirection for collective happiness and perfectibility.

To illustrate the synchronic significance of literature for a more reflective and transformative education, relying evidently only on indications, for reasons of space, we might employ the example of one of the most politically involved genres, namely utopian and dystopian fiction. Referring to works that pertain to this genre such as Owen’s *New Lanark*, Zamyatin’s *We*, Čapek’s *Rossum’s Universal Robots*, it can be shown that fiction can be valuable to combating scientism and positivism in education and questioning objectivist convention in schools (e.g. in Lilian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*). A 1934 play, *The Children’s Hour* is set in a school context while blurring the line that separates school and home and examines in a provocative and path-breaking manner how objectivism in societies reflected in schools creates the dystopian effect of persecution, self-reproach and cynical exploitation in various subjects of the established order. Many utopias and dystopias have, in their dimension that is critical of existing reality, warned us against social phenomena that
affect education dramatically, such as the now dominant combination of sexual puritanism and reactionary hedonism that join forces in consolidating commodification, as well as against epistemological tenets that enforce scientistic positivism (e.g. the dehumanization of a world ruled by mathematics and science).  

The above does not aim to minimize the significance of the empathy that can be cultivated through other literary genres or other approaches to literature in general. But, the major difference I see in the empathetic and the utopian perspective is that the former revolves around an axis of actuality and subjectivity, whereas the latter is oriented toward possibility and universality. My claim is that enlarged thought is assisted by utopian literature because of the latter’s relation to vision. Narrative imagination in utopias is extended beyond the actual and the individual. The self constructs images of alternative realities that heighten awareness of present societal flaws, instead of just being identified with various others and their consciousness. Then, the self might be drawn into something better by the force of the evocative and seductive literary portrayal of as yet unexplored ethical possibility. By contrast, the empathetic focus on literature associates it solely with individualist ideals of a more sensitive self that is valuable to society and the world only by implication. Finally, the emphasis on literary utopianism by no means entails that other literary genres are of secondary importance for education. It rather entails that, as a subset of literature, the utopian genre must be rehabilitated and its educational significance acknowledged in ways that the individualist, often didactic, focus on the character(s) of a novel and the individual psychology (or their social positioning) has not yet allowed.
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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid, 171.
8 Ibid, 238.
13 Jean Chesneaux, “Egalitarian and Utopian Traditions in the East”, *Diogenes* 16 (1968): 76-102, p. 84.


17 Ibid.

18 Ibid, 580.

19 Zeus Leonardo, “Reality on Trial: notes on ideology, education, and utopia”, *Policy Futures in Education* 1, 3: 504-525, p. 513.

20 Ibid.


23 Milner, “Framing Catastrophe”.