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The Emergence of the Anti-Utopian Genre in France : Souvestre, Giraudeau, Robida, *et al.*

My object in this essay is to trace the emergence of the anti-utopian genre in France from the middle of the 19th century up until the First World War. In doing so, I will pursue a certain number of convergent lines of inquiry. First of all, I will highlight a *tradition* evincing a continuity which is ongoing, even though that tradition comprises works now almost completely forgotten (which is not to say that they were unnoticed at and from the moment of their appearance; the success of non-canonical texts is often as vivid as it is fugitive). Second, I will, in describing this tradition, make apparent that certain thematic constants in it are linked from the outset to certain ideological strategies and that together these directly determine the *identity* of the anti-utopian genre. Through this exercise in literary archeology, I mean to correct one way of apprehending the dystopias of Orwell or Aldous Huxley. It cannot properly be said that theirs are literary operations connected with a conjunction of factors peculiar to their epoch; for the genre of anti-utopia makes its appearance a full century before 1984. In France, its conception is precisely datable as 1846 - which is to say (what is worthy of immediate note), two years before the first wave of democratic revolutions in Europe.

My analysis of the relevant texts will be deliberately summary. Rather than exploring in depth and at length the particular ideological strategy of each author I will treat of, my aim is to show that they all repeatedly impose on their materials a quite specific ideological-literary formula which remains stable throughout the 19th century.

1. Anti-utopia does not define itself as a reversal of the axioms of the literary utopia. In place of the depiction of a society which is ideally better than the author's empirical world, it does not simply substitute one which is in every regard worse than that world. Instead, and from its beginning, anti-utopia offers itself as a polemical counterpart to both the utopian genre in itself and to the utopian conceptions (in Karl Mannheim's sense) prevalent in a given state of social affairs. The chief utopian concepts for the period I am dealing with are the bourgeois notion of Progress, which supposes that the inevitable march of science and technology has its parallel in the advance of morality, and the socialist idea of an evolution necessarily tending towards egalitarianism, towards a society organized with a view to increasing the justness and rationality of social relations. The anti-utopia presents itself as a literally reactionary protest to both of these utopian conceptions. On the basis of a traditional understanding of the needs and prerogatives of the individual, it radically dissociates the idea of scientific and industrial progress from that of ethical progress, on the one hand, while on the other disjoining - and demonstrating the antagonism between - the requirements for individual fulfillment and the principles of a collective rationality. Every impulse to revolutionize the social order in the name of supposedly rational political doctrines, or by reason of the accelerated development of means of production or of technology in general, the anti-utopist represents as being anti-human in essence - tyrannical, cynical, oppressive, and destructive of everything which characterizes the fundamental and unchanging nature of humankind. The anti-utopia constitutes itself directly around the negative

image of the hive or the termite nest as metaphor for the rationality of the State which subordinates the individual to foreign ends, which entails creeping dehumanization, and which alienates the social from the human on the fallacious pretext of bettering societal conditions and increasing efficiency. Furthermore, all anti-utopias present themselves as *anticipations*, which from certain negative tendencies perceived in actual social evolution, extrapolate a systematic and monstrous image of a future social order embodying values foreign to the “natural” needs and desires of individuals. For that reason it can be said that anti-utopia depicts not merely an inhumane social order worse than the one which actually exists, but also a society which, thanks to its dominant ideology, perpetually prides itself on its progress and its achievements even as the narrator, surreptitiously and with the eventual complicity of some of the fictive personages, seeks to expose it as irremediably crushing, denying, caricaturing, or degrading those values conceived to be eternally human.

From its outset, the anti-utopia thus draws its admonitions, its warnings, its images of dehumanization at once from liberal capitalist ideals of unlimited technical and industrial progress *and* from the Jacobin or socialist ideals of equal justice, of State rationality, of social order premised on a collective cohesiveness and on those “scientific” doctrines aiming to revolutionize social relationships. The anti-society to come, the formicary of the future, representing the triumph of quantitative rationality over the qualitative and the individual is to be understood both in relation to an official mode of discourse which justifies that supposed rationality and by connection with the impotent protest of one or more dissidents whose indignant opposition to the logic of the State has its basis in “eternal” humanist values. The dissident is usually a temporal voyager from the 19th century.

2. Possessing these features and others which I am about to come to, the anti-utopia made its appearance in France in 1846 in a work of fiction which did not pass unnoticed : *Le Monde tel qu'il sera (The World as It Will be)* by Emile Souvestre, a conservative writer and moralist of Breton origin who enjoyed in his time a certain notoriety. “Souvestre sees the society of the year 3000 in terms resembling those of Huxley”, writes the utopologist Alexandre Cioranescu (p. 246). Cioranescu is right : the axioms of the genre all manifest themselves together in 1846 in forms which remain constant for more than a century. For my present purpose of clearly delineating those axioms, I will proceed to an account of Souvestre’s anti-utopia.

A young couple, Martha and Maurice, taken with the ideas of Saint-Simon and of Fourier, are put to sleep by Mr John Progress and wake up to a time when the entire Earth has become the “Republic of United Interests.” The action transpires in Tahiti, rebaptized the “Island of Animal-Black.” Instead of the ideal society which they naïvely dreamed of, the young people discover one that is inhumane, cynical, and scientific. Governed by the capitalist-socialist logic of efficiency at any price and of the division of labor, it obliges the two lovers to recognize it as the hideous incarnation of their progressivist reveries. This is not yet the equation of Marx with the Gulag; it does, however, amount to an analogous equation : of Saint-Simon with the Republic of United Interests, whose prosaic motto is “Everything Steam-Powered (“Tout à la vapeur”). Souvestre displays a future mechanized, industrialized, rationalized down to the core, where nature itself is denatured, *conditioned* in the biological sense. For example, there is lane (between giant artichoke plants) called “Marriage Avenue,” where nubile girls promenade wearing around their necks their address and the amount of their dowry; and thus the bureaucratic mechanism of a universal “matrimonial agency” which rationally organizes the choice of mate usurps the place of the poetry of love and emotion. “To fabricate human beings as

one fabricates cloth” (“Fabriquer l’homme à l’instar du calicot”) : that is the grand formula by which Souvestre sums up the ideology of the future. Contrary to the Kantian ethic which instructs us to treat human beings as the telos of all action, as an end in themselves, this futurological anti-morality proposes to regard them as a simple material to be fashioned while in addition supporting the imposture that such manipulations serve their evident interest.

It is in this overall context that Souvestre’s fiction displays all the aspects of life in an anti-utopian future as it makes plain - with a kind of reactionary “perspicacity” and by a steadfast *reductio ad absurdum reasoning* - the radically alienating logic which controls all attempts to speed up social evolution or to reform social relationships. This reactionary logic, together with its retinue of anxiety-producing themes, we encounter again in Souvestre’s successors, who enhance it with new variations.

3. I will pass quickly over other anti-utopian texts which accompany the brief history of the Second Republic (epitomized by the conservative satirist Louis Rebaud and his *Jérôme Paturot* [1848]) and also over various dystopian satires, notably Joseph Méry’s *Paris futur* [1854] and Victor Fournel’s *Paris nouveau, Paris futur* [1865], which in their sarcasm go along with the urban upheavals engineered by Georges Haussman and the general paper-shuffling of the Second Empire. I thus come to a second text of unusual ideological interest, *La Cité nouvelle* (*The New City*, 1868), an anonymous work attributed to Fernand Giraudeau. Henceforth, it is a certain lugubrious and contemptible image of the United States that serves in France for the anti-model of a society ruthlessly industrialized, democratized, commercialized, anonymized, and bureaucratized, “in the name of democracy confounding the anonymousness and cynicism of industrial capitalism and the socialist “rule of the working-class” (Van Herp : 125).

In Giraudeau’s book, a formicary society which has prevailed over its enemies (free enterprise, religious morality, and individualism) receives a visit from an upright representative of the 19th century who becomes a terrified witness to this future. Guided by the demon Asmodée, he observes the triumph of international *trusts* working in conjunction with labor unions, the faceless tyranny of State apparatus, its persecution of the Church (which separated from the State in 1950), a bureaucratic and incompetent medicare system, free abortion given publicity in newspapers, the institution of marriage overwhelmed by organized prostitution, the dominance of a convicts’ literature recounting in slang monotonous scenes of violence, barrack-like cities of row housing, the bureaucratic enumeration of individuals, obligatory identity cards (“Each citizen is required to have his name and address on his hat” : p. 16), frantic traffic thanks to vehicles with the brand name *Smash-All* (even when cars run over children, they’re not obligated to stop), and the cynical reign of money combined with the all-powerful rule of a corporatist syndicalism. The French language itself has become in the space of 130 years (we are in 1995) a pidginized lingo : “Today finally laborer happy. Laborer hardly work,...little work, much pay” (p. 35). Malingerers (“anti-utilitaires”) and other dissidents are incarcerated in special camps (p. 58). Thunderous advertisements take the place of both oral and written culture, journalism has reached that point of corruption where every principle of objectivity and criticism has disappeared. Faced with such phenomena, the witness from the past concludes : “You represent the full development of what used to be American society. You are the paroxysm of a frenetic demagoguery, without genius, without principle, without talent, without *esprit*” (p. 89).

4. Affined to Giraudeau in the nature of his literary visions if not in their ideology is Albert Robida. This talented caricaturist is the author of several novels of anticipation set in the mid-

20th century, novels which appeared in the early years of the Third Republic (and some of which have recently been reissued). Especially noteworthy is the sequence beginning with *Le Vingtième siècle* (*The Twentieth Century*, 1883) followed by *La Vie électrique* (*The Electric Life*, 1891) and completed by *Voyage de fiançailles au XX^e siècle* (*The Fiancés' Trip in the 20th Century*, 1892). Robida is considered to be the great master of anticipatory conjecture : after all, he “invented” television (or rather the “téléphonoscope”), highways, civil aviation and its airports for aircraft (“aéronefs”), and especially the paraphernalia of future wars (asphyxiating gases, incendiary bombs, etc.). As I see him, however, Robida is primarily the great *fin-de-siècle* master of the futuristic anti-utopia. The kind of society he envisions is odious enough, but it is less stifling than that of Giraudeau, who combines the triumph of technology and democracy with a general decadence in mores and institutions.

If SF be thought of in terms of prophecies later fulfilled (which they seldom are), only Robida has consistently seen aright - and with a compelling satiric charm - the shape of things to come. Between newscasts sensationalist in the extreme transmitted by television and world wars which end in coldly deliberate genocide, we meet with the advent of “fast food”, the successes of a “feminist” party, a student revolt complete with barricades in the streets of Paris in 1954 (not 1968-small mistake). Indeed, Robida seems to have foreseen everything : the transformation of French beaches into concrete sidewalks lined with skyscrapers; former African colonies with their parody parliaments (whose sessions at Timbuktu Robida shows us); the rewriting of the classics, interpolating parts for mimes and acrobats into the tragedies of Corneille; the humanitarianism - ridiculous in his eyes - which fancies it can rehabilitate criminals in comfortable resorts.

Robida’s anti-utopias, however, do not entirely conform to the model I have outlined. He lacks totalitaristic anguish. 20th-century society as he depicts it is grotesque and ridiculous; but human beings remain there what they have always been : gullible, vain, muddle-headed, and slaves to their emotions. He also represents them as naïve enthusiasts of “progress”, on the basis of which they convince themselves that they are all excellent and happy as they pursue their tawdry dreams through a world whose evolution - in regard to both mores and technics - they have, in the final analysis, no control over. Robida, then, does not oppose eternal human values to doctrinaire and inhuman Progress. Radically pessimistic, he views social changes as infantile patchwork, all on the same level of ineptitude. In this respect, the struggles of “feminists” are no different from “fast food”, a civilization of organized leisure, or a public education system propagating cultural ignorance and taking pains not to “overwork” students.¹

5. Robida, as I have said, is the exception. His contemporaries as a rule were haunted by totalitarian fantasies of a humanity manipulated by powerful scientifico-political machineries and finally losing its whole identity to tyrannical Progress. Two classic examples of this type of anti-utopian scenario are Fernand Kolney’s in *L’Amour dans cinq mille ans* (*Love Five Thousand Years from Now*, 1905) and Jean Jullien’s *L’Enquête sur le monde futur* (*Investigation of the Future World*, 1909).²

Kolney shows us a future human race called “the Fully Fledged” (“les Parachevés”),

¹ For a further discussion of Robida, see my review-article in SFS No. 30 (pp. 237-40).

² Also worth mentioning in this context is an anti-republican dystopia, *L’Incroyable aventure de Sir John Bernard*, by G. Renouard (Paris : SFIL, 1906).

asexual, sterilized, and rationally submissive to artificial insemination. Supposing that nothing can be more irrational than the reproductive instinct, he envisions how a scientific technostructure could systematically regulate the erratic character of sexual desires. The intellectual control of libidinous disorder is a very old utopian motif; for the anti-utopist, that motif serves as a kind of allegorical synecdoche for those factors in the individual which resist being reduced by collective rationality.

Jullien's is an anti-utopia emanating from a caricature image of the US. The author imagines a world in which the doctrinians of Progress have imposed accelerative processes on every domain of human activity - on medicine, pedagogy, engineering, religion, the social sciences, etc. But failing to take account of the contingencies of human nature, they have merely produced a robotized society, susceptible to manipulations which, odious as they are, do not trouble the consciences of its dogmatic governors. They do not envisage even the possibility of dissidence. Nevertheless, love enters into Jullien's book as it does Kolney's : as a form of psychological alienation (see *l'Enquête*, pp. 151ff).

The texts spanning the development of anti-utopia in France as I have briefly surveyed it have links to others in cognate genres, and most notably to future-war fictions, to pastoral utopias with their reactionary and anti-technological formulas, and to straight satires of Cabet's, Fourier's, and Saint-Simon's utopian paradigms. Typifying the 19th-century anti-utopia is an ideological strategy dictated by a conservative anarchism hostile to industrialization and to socialism alike. Those two sources - and images - of social transformation the anti-utopist right away strategically conflates while implicitly extolling a status quo founded on a static conception of immutable human(e) values. The narrative axiomatically proceeds from an asymptotic extrapolation which aims to inscribe the doctrines of Progress in a concrete story so as to expose their ultimately despotic, immoral, and inhuman character. Such anti-utopian fictions present the reader with a simple (and simplistic) *reductio ad absurdum* : they seek to demonstrate that a certain principle is evil because its final - probable - consequences are loathesome. Fetishizing commonsensical values and evincing a promiscuous contempt for accelerating social changes in the industrial age, they also provide an outlet for the reader's anxieties by holding up the status quo as the sole end consistent with human prudence.

The idea of totalitarianism as it would emerge in the specific and propitious climate of the 20th century is precisely figured, *avant la lettre*, in the elsewhere slightly antiquated fictions of Souvestre and Giraudeau. Their books, along with Robida's and others' I have mentioned, constitute a long history of radical contempt for technological evolution and egalitarian-democratic change. It is in the literary-historical context which they provide that we can place Zamyatin, Huxley, Orwell, and so forth - authors whose anti-utopias we can look upon as the belated avatars of a genre born in France (but also in England and the US) in the first half of the 19th century.

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RÉSUMÉ

*Marc Angenot. **Emergence du genre anti-utopique en France : Souvestre, Giraudeau, Robida, et al.** - Les grandes anti-utopies du XX e siècle peuvent se situer dans une tradition don't les constantes thématiques liées aux préoccupations idéologiques ont vu le jour au siècle dernier. Avant Orwell, Zamyathine, Huxley et autres, l'anti-utopie émerge en France au milieu du XIXe siècle et elle représente une formule idéologique stable et spécifique. En effet, des écrivains comme Souvestre, Giraudeau, Robida et plus tard Kolney et Jullien exploitent un genre qui suscite la méfiance à l'égard de technologies poussées et de changements sociaux qui pourraient perturber le statu-quo. Cet anarchisme conservateur est hostile à la fois à l'industrialisation et au socialisme. Il plaide en faveur du statu-quo basé sur une conception statique de valeurs humaines dites immuables et oppose les besoins et aspirations de l'individu à la rationalité collective engagée dans un processus évolutif. Quant à la démarche narrative, elle se distingue par une mise en situation des doctrines de progrès dans l'histoire concrète afin d'en dégager des caractéristiques uniquement négatives : despotisme, immoralité et déshumanisation. (LM)*

Abstract. - *The great anti-utopias of the 20th century can be placed in a tradition whose thematic constants, along with the ideological preoccupations attending them, are the creation of the previous century. Before Orwell, Huxley, Zamyatin, and others, the anti-utopia emerged - in mid-19th-century France - as a specific and stable ideological formula. In effect, writers like Souvestre, Giraudeau, and Robida, and later Kolney and Jullien, resorted to a genre which looked with contempt upon emergent technologies and social developments tending to upset the status quo. These anti-utopists evince a conservative anarchism hostile to industrialization and socialism alike. Basing their plea for the status quo upon a static conception of human values as something immutable, they oppose the "natural" needs and aspirations of the individual to the collective rationality of "progress". Their narratives typically attempt to subject "progress" to a reductio ad absurdum reasoning which would expose it as despotic, immoral, dehumanizing. (RMP).*