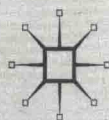


# MODERNIST NOWHERES

POLITICS AND UTOPIA IN EARLY  
MODERNIST WRITING, 1900-1920



NATHAN WADDELL



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Nathan Waddell

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MODERN JOHN BUCHAN: A Critical Introduction

WYNDHAM LEWIS AND THE CULTURES OF MODERNITY

*(edited with Andrzej Gąsiorek and Alice Reeve-Tucker)*

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Nathan Waddell  
Birmingham

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# Introduction: Maps Worth Studying

Early modernist writings – that is, those modernist writings produced in the rough period between the turn of the twentieth century and the years of the First World War – are filled with allusions to utopian themes.<sup>1</sup> From Ford Madox Ford's anonymous essay 'Nice People' (1903), which invokes a scare-quoted fifteen minutes 'over a table' as a magic 'solvent of all disagreements' (1903, p. 578); to Joseph Conrad's *Victory* (1915), which explores the allegedly 'utopist' (1915, p. 11) character of Axel Heyst; to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), in which Stephen Dedalus aims 'to forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race' (1916, p. 213), as well as much more besides, early modernism is chock-full of references to different kinds of idealistic scenarios in which various socio-political yearnings find their 'voice'. But such passing references to utopian ideas of the kind just quoted do not a complex literary discourse make. On the contrary, it is from the questioning of such ideas, along with the politics to which they respond, that such complexity emerges in early modernism's varied textual forms. These questionings of utopian themes appear frequently in novels but just as often in short stories, poems, magazine articles, essays, autobiographies, and works of cultural criticism and reminiscence. They remain not just aesthetically mesmerizing but politically relevant due to the self-reflexivity with which their grasp of ideological processes is advanced. Moreover, these questionings refute descriptions of modernist literary cultures as narrowly inward-looking; modernism was not, as was for so long held, obsessed with Art and indifferent to exterior realities. As the New Modernist Studies have shown, literary

modernist cultures were profoundly focused on socio-political matters. *Modernist Nowheres: Politics and Utopia in Early Modernist Writing, 1900–1920*, inevitably partial and selective though it is, intervenes in this field by considering early modernism's investigations of a broad set of political and existential problems, centrally among them questions of utopianism, meliorism, and perfectibility.

In recent years scholars have extended the range of artistic cultures and productions viewed beneath the heading of 'modernism' to include a substantial amount of creative attitudes, stylistic currents, national traditions, and ideological vantage points operant between the end of the 1890s and the mid-1940s. Jane Goldman's argument that the contours and limits of the literary history of modernism fluctuate depending on which artistic trajectories are spotlighted and which evaluative approaches are taken by its constructors is exemplified by the multitude of different writers, textual objects, and literary structures deemed 'modernist' by a seemingly ever-expanding field of inquiry (see Goldman, 2004, p. xiv). Although this inflated field has added much to the pioneering, broadly formalist accounts of modernism provided by such mid- to late twentieth-century academics as Malcolm Bradbury, Joseph Frank, Hugh Kenner, and James McFarlane, it has nonetheless become a commonplace to limit the applicability of 'modernism' as a signifying term to the customs and conventions associated with artworks which, to quote Peter Brooker, exhibit 'a high degree of conspicuous formal experiment where this can be understood as a response, one way or the other, to the conditions of modernity' (2007, p. 33). On these grounds, modernism is often further specified as defined by narrative ambiguity, anti-traditionalism, textual difficulty, multi-perspectivalism, and linguistic innovation. But, even as modernism has continued to be viewed according to these provisions, studies have emerged that focus not just on modernism's formally experimental artworks but also on the extensive range of alternative writings and projects that the modernists undertook in tandem, and frequently in dialogue, with their more famous literary creations.

It has become necessary to take a broad view of early twentieth-century 'advanced' writing that sees its histories less in terms of a succession of isolated masterpieces and more in terms of a complex series of negotiations between various commitments and textual forms, such as journalism, essays, contributions to 'little' magazines,

polemics, and autobiografiction.<sup>2</sup> The idea of an ‘early’ modernism in the years prior to the First World War is relevant here inasmuch as it can be used not only to give greater specificity to the historical contexts in which these forms were advanced, but also to signal an emergent period of formal and thematic transition. Early modernism might be taken simply to mean the period prior to the emergence of the ‘high’ modernism traditionally presented as typified by certain parts of the outputs of T. S. Eliot, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf; or it might more sensitively be understood to imply a distinct phase in twentieth-century literary history during which older literary styles and institutions began to be displaced by renewed attention to, and exploitations of, the formal possibilities of literary writing. A complicating factor here, as Brooker notes, is that while the designation ‘early modernism’ counters teleological literary histories by allowing us ‘to think of modernism as a process and development rather than an evolution “upwards” towards an achieved end [i.e. high modernism] from which there is then a falling away’, it also forces us to face up to ‘the simple fact that individual writers [...] became “more modernist”, along with the more complex fact that a “more modernist” text, by Henry James or Joseph Conrad, for example, might have appeared before the early “less modernist” Joyce or Woolf’ (2007, p. 33). In addition to these points one might note that the modernists of this early period often wrote more formally traditional texts alongside (and sometimes as counterparts to) their more visibly ‘experimental’ inscriptions, often as a way of articulating particular sorts of commentary or storytelling to different kinds of audience, but just as often simply to profit from their writing in ways denied by more forbidding experimental textualities.<sup>3</sup>

There is the added nuance that modernism in the period before and during the First World War might best be described as a modernism ‘of the magazines’ (see Scholes and Wulfman, 2010), in that early modernism was inseparable from the magazine cultures through which it was largely conveyed – and in some ways more visibly so than the so-called periods of ‘high’ and ‘late’ modernism which came after it. For instance, *The English Review*, which was edited by Ford Madox Ford between 1908 and 1910, operated as a focal point to which at different points, and for different reasons, numerous early modernist writers were drawn. All of the writers prioritized in this book (Joseph Conrad, Ford, D. H. Lawrence, and Wyndham Lewis),

as well as many more besides, appeared in the pages of *The English Review*. They often shared print space with essayists, journalists, and political figures who are inextricable from early modernist literary cultures – the differing contexts of textual transmission; relations between authors, literary agents, and publishers; the marketing codes upon which a given author's survival depended; and so forth. Moreover, an example like the Vorticist magazine *BLAST*, edited by Lewis from 1914 to 1915, demonstrates how such literary cultures in significant ways intersected with avant-gardist artistic circles and traditions. The fact that *BLAST* functioned as a 'review' of its immediate cultural context aligns it to some extent with the 'intellectual' journals of the period (e.g. *The New Age*, *The Egoist*) to which nonetheless it was in other ways an alternative. But at the same time the textural qualities of the first issue of *BLAST* especially mark it out as something of a modernist text in its own right, an early and uniquely accomplished instance of an imagistic, expressionistic, and multi-authored narrative put to the public by an editor and individual, Lewis, whose contributions to *BLAST* have an equally complex corollary in his pre-war and wartime paintings.

Mapping the intersections between politics and early modernism reveals a similarly complex array of allegiances, oppositions, influences, echoes, legacies, and interventions. Bruce Clarke has written that 'early modernism manifested its antitraditionalism as an obligatory iconoclasm, the literary corollary of the political mood running throughout western culture' (1996, p. 5). To this Clarke adds the point that early modernism 'attacked the gradualist reformism of bourgeois liberalism' (p. 5) as it took shape as 'a complex extremism exhibiting the general problematics of political anarchism' (p. 6). Up to a point this is a good description of early modernism's interactions with the political trajectories of its time. Early modernism represents one of the best sources of anti-liberal sentiment in the early twentieth century (see Potter, 2006), and in various ways early modernist writers sought new social configurations using rhetorics which align them with certain strands within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anarchist idioms (see Weir, 1997; and Antliff, 2001). However, early modernism's political attitudes do not fit quite so easily with the 'general problematics of political anarchism' as Clarke suggests, in spite of the fact that selected modernisms exhibit a 'mosaic' constitution which connects them with a kind of 'cultural' anarchism.

By this means, as David Kadlec explains, particular writers 'sought to overcome the stasis of representation' by 'looking for ways that language might be made to embody dynamic experience' (2000, p. 2). However, although political anarchism's attempts to bring about a stateless utopia bear some likeness with early modernism's efforts to decouple itself from the lingering effects of Victorian realism, on the one hand, and to provide a critique of turn-of-the-century liberalism, on the other, early modernism's political critiques ought not to be reduced to the 'merely' anarchistic. Early modernist literary cultures are marked by assessments of a number of political movements and, more importantly, by a richness of utopian speculations that calls for a correspondingly protean literary-historical treatment.

What was the character of early modernist interest in utopia? And how was that interest caught up in problems of individual identity, social organization, and communal politics? These, frankly put, are the preliminary questions of this book, which deals with written responses to politics and utopian thinking in British modernist literary cultures between a roughly defined period of 1900 to 1920. Certain early modernist writers expressed utopian ambitions; others subjected utopianism to critique using a variety of discursive textures; all took an interest in the political traditions of their epoch. However, not one of the early modernist writers foregrounded in this book sought a utopia of the kind in which all human desires are to be satisfied, those 'transcendental' utopias rightly dismissed by John Gray as 'dreams of collective deliverance that in waking life are found to be nightmares' (2008, p. 24).<sup>4</sup> All these writers took notice of the politics of their day as well as those of the eras preceding their moments in history; explored the nuances and contradictions of contemporary political programmes in order to provide their own visions of better socio-political or cultural futures; and, in certain instances, explicitly invoked the discourse of utopianism as a way of dismissing kinds of thought which they deemed impractical, misleading, or dangerous.<sup>5</sup> Taking the word 'utopia' to mean, by and large, 'an impossibly ideal scheme, especially for social improvement' (*OED*-2b), these early modernist writers rejected particular trajectories within the emergent flow of twentieth-century politics as 'utopian' in the sense of being hopelessly idealistic or unworkable. However, these often turbulent discussions did not mean that these early modernists found viable what Hulme in 'Cinders' (1906-7) termed 'the denial of all Utopias'

(1906–7, p. 8). Dialogue and dispute inspired them to pick and choose between socio-political dispositions, to discard some while retaining others, so as better to understand their world and the languages through which it might be changed.

But can early modernist writers themselves be considered ‘utopian’ in a more affirmative sense? That, no less frankly put, is the secondary question I will be pondering here, and it is answered with a resounding ‘yes’. I write in my previous sentence modernist ‘writers’ rather than modernist ‘texts’ for the simple reason that I am not in the first instance in this book concerned with the potentially utopian ‘character’ of modernist textualities. That is to say, I am not interested in re-describing modernist texts according to the typologies of the literary utopian tradition running through Sir Thomas More, William Morris, and others. Nor am I interested in re-claiming modernist fictions as offering narrative ‘havens’ in response to the psychologically deadening effects of early twentieth-century capitalism.<sup>6</sup> That said, I am interested in the ways certain early modernist writers positioned different kinds of literary and non-literary writing as having a utopian ‘freight’ or ‘implication’, especially in the sense of providing their readers with a means of more effectively grasping (and thereby perhaps in time resolving) the contradictions of the social conditions by which they were, at the outset of the twentieth century, encircled. Throughout this book I will be resisting broad claims about the utopian potential of ‘modernism’ in its entirety while presenting, among other things, specific and historically-grounded readings of the utopian possibilities of individual early modernist writers and texts. As we will see, a productive way of articulating such readings is to approach early modernism through the twin lenses of ‘meliorism’ and ‘perfectibility’, ideas with an obvious relevance to utopian questions but which have tended not to receive sustained attention in modernist scholarship.

Modernist writers prior to the moment of what some have called ‘high’ modernism differed in their assessments of art’s utility as a space in which to explore the natures of man and society, on the one hand, and the complex relationship between art and social betterment, on the other. Whereas Ford hypothesized an impressionist modernism that sought to improve society by presenting life ‘as it really was’ in ways divorced from any didactic intent, his friend and artistic collaborator Conrad saw the novel as inseparable from an

optimism that nonetheless did not in any clear-cut way lead to socio-political expediency. As Conrad wrote: 'To be hopeful in an artistic sense it is not necessary to think that the world is good. It is enough to believe that there is no impossibility of its being made so' (1905b, p. 13). This artistic 'optimism' differed in important ways, as we will see, from his steadfastly pessimistic distrust of the processes and possibility of ameliorative politics. Lawrence, by contrast, viewed novels as part and parcel of his attempts to elaborate a new conception of the individual self (and, indeed, of the social forms most appropriate to ensure its survival), and yet resisted any simplistic understanding of the novel as an expository genre: 'every novel must have the background or the structural skeleton of some theory of being, some metaphysic. But the metaphysic must always subserve the artistic purpose beyond the artist's conscious aim. Otherwise the novel becomes a treatise' (1936d, p. 91). Lewis likewise viewed art and literature as means with which to suggest new kinds of subjectivity and social being, even as he problematized the link between artistic forms and propaganda. Vorticism, the pre-War avant-garde in which Lewis played such a key part, deployed art and literature in an attempt to bring about an innovative mode of consciousness without specifying the precise contours of the new world to which that consciousness might lead.

Conrad, Ford, Lawrence, and Lewis saw various political dynamics of their period as grasping for utopian 'nowheres' in the pejorative sense of aiming for goals which they understood as being misleadingly transcendental (and therefore, by definition, unreachable). That is, these writers conformed to Karl Mannheim's key point that 'the representatives of a given order will label as utopian all conceptions of existence which *from their point of view* can in principle never be realized' (1929, p. 196). In certain cases the early modernists used the word 'utopia' itself in this context; at others they talked about their contemporary political world in ways which made the use of that word unnecessary. To this extent in this book I will be discussing how these writers construed the politics of a selection of their contemporaries in order more accurately to define their own political views. And yet, at the same time we might say that these writers in very different senses desired their own 'nowheres', utopian non-places seen by the early modernists themselves as desirable, if not necessarily as reachable, in the material and psychological conditions

of post-Victorian modernity. Conrad, Ford, Lawrence, and Lewis in different ways and in different configurations participated in several of the key artistic co-operative enterprises of the early twentieth century, and in a certain sense they all shared the goal of hoping to install in their audiences a heightened capacity for engagement with circumjacent realities. However, the tonal differences between the ways in which they approached this goal reveal a complex spectrum of dispositions that it is the project of this book to chart and explore.

It ought already to be clear that a key hurdle facing any account of the links between early modernism and utopian thought is the hugely over-determined nature of the concept of 'utopianism' itself. Is it right, for instance, to translate 'utopia' as 'nowhere' in the senses already offered above? What are the differences between such terms as 'utopia', 'utopian', 'utopist', and 'utopianism'? And how is it possible to speak about early modernist writers as concerned with utopia in one particular and fairly familiar sense (as a word used to categorize impossibly ideal political objectives), on the one hand, and yet also hope to re-characterize their activities as affirmatively utopian in some more profitable manner, on the other? Does this not entail a problematic 'double focus' in which the specificity of these terms slides from view, and the relationships between their historical and modern use-values become unnecessarily tangled? These are appropriate questions to ask here, as inattention to these difficulties can only lead to conceptual imprecision. Due to space restrictions I will not be entering into a lengthy exploration of these terminological nuances. However, given that one of the assumptions of my argument is that modernist scholars have loosely deployed the term 'utopia' and its cognates when accounting for political points of view within modernist literary cultures, I want to spend some time defining how the word 'utopia' and its related terms are going to be used throughout this book before considering early modernism's political and utopian emphases in more detail.

### **Early modernism and utopianism**

Sir Thomas More's neologism 'utopia' entails, as everybody knows, a complex semantic toing-and-froing in which 'utopia' means both a place that is not (a 'nowhere') and a place that is good. Hence the number of definitions which understand the term as meaning

a good, and usually perfect, place that is ‘nowhere’ in the sense of being ideal, transcendent, and unavailable. Such ‘nowheres’ are not the focus of this book, which in part explores modernist proposals for good places or states of affairs which are ‘not’ in the sense of being, to quote the philosopher Ernst Bloch, ‘transcendent without transcendence’.<sup>7</sup> Put another way, the early modernist proposals for utopian change explored in this book in relation to early twentieth-century politics are those good places not yet existent but whose potential existences are concealed in already present modes of discourse, institutional configurations, and collective practices. Such nowheres are ‘good’ to the extent that they are deemed so by those who campaign on their behalf, but they are ‘not’ in the Blochian sense of being ‘not yet’ – of being part of the realities they purport to revolutionize despite appearing to be drawn from some place beyond their borders. Early modernism, in other words, is viewed in this book not just as having valuable things to say about politics but, moreover, about a kind of political engagement (utopianism) often dismissed as naïve or anti-democratic. Utopianism tends to be dismissed in this way because it is often taken as trivial or totalitarian, even if these associations have been shown to be possible, rather than necessary, outcomes of utopian desire (see Goodwin, 2007, pp. 187–8).

As a discourse, then, utopianism is unusually troublesome. Although ‘utopia’ seems to imply a singular thing, the word can mean several things according to the varied contexts in which it is used. For Marie Louise Berneri, an important if little-known historian of utopian literature, utopias have been ‘plans of societies functioning mechanically’ or ‘dead structures conceived by economists, politicians, and moralists’, even as they have ‘been the living dreams of poets’ (1982, p. 317). In its history ‘utopia’ has signified, and continues to denote, a particular breed of textual production, even as the broader category of ‘utopianism’ has simultaneously referred to, and continues to indicate, a range of desires for ideal forms of life linked with highly disparate structural emphases. If utopianism has had a persistent link with a number of socialist traditions, it is not reducible to socialism alone. According to Krishan Kumar, utopias are mechanisms of ontological analysis inasmuch as they represent ‘quite different possibilities for speculating on the human condition’ (1991, p. 19). In this definition, to imagine a utopia means to reflect on what it is to be human, to