THE ROAD TO SCIENCE FICTION #1

From Gilgamesh to Wells

Edited by James Gunn

A MENTOR BOOK
NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY
TIMES MIRROR
New York and Scarborough, Ontario
The New English Library Limited, London

The Good Place That Is No Place

Chaucer (c. 1340–1400) wrote his *Canterbury Tales* about 1387 and Malory his *Morte d'Arthur* in 1469. They were the last of the great works of the Middle Ages. Both had elements of the fantastic and the supernatural; both were expressions of a world view that demanded a necessary role for the supernatural. Even before Chaucer, however, indications already were accumulating that this particular world, with its system of obligations and responsibilities, its hierarchies and its divine intervention, was coming apart.

The Renaissance began in Italy about the beginning of the fourteenth century, a century in which gunpowder was introduced into Europe and began the process of turning warriors into soldiers. In England the portent was Roger Bacon (c. 1214–c. 1294), a Franciscan friar who began to espouse the virtues of natural science, experiment, and direct observation in a period when ignorance was valued more highly than knowledge. Saint Augustine (354–430) wrote, "Nothing is to be accepted save on the authority of Scripture, since greater is that authority than all powers of the human mind."

Bacon quarreled with many prominent people, was accused of magic and astrology, and was thrown into prison in 1277, where he remained for fifteen years. On his deathbed he is reputed to have said, "I repent of having given myself so much trouble to destroy ignorance." But his vision of a future of human accomplishment was like a foreshadowing of science fiction in the Middle Ages, and would largely come true. In one famous letter, he predicted:

> It is possible that great ships and sea-going vessels shall be made which can be guided by one man and will move with greater swiftness than if they were full of oarsmen.
>
> It is possible that a car shall be made which will move with intestimable speed, and the motion will be without the help of any living creature. . . .

> It is possible that a device for flying shall be made such that a man sitting in the middle of it and turning a crank shall cause artificial wings to beat the air after the manner of a bird's flight. . . .
>
> It is possible also easily to make an instrument by which a single man may violently pull a thousand men toward himself in spite of opposition, or other things which are tractable.
>
> It is possible also that devices can be made whereby, without bodily danger, a man may walk on the bottom of the sea or of a river. . . .
>
> Infinite other things can be made, as bridges over rivers without columns or supports, and machines, and unheard-of engines.

Between the publications of *The Canterbury Tales* and *Morte d'Arthur* came the invention of the Gutenberg press; it would begin the process of popularizing literature, by making inexpensive copies available to the general public, that would be completed in the nineteenth century by the development of general literacy. Making literature easily accessible also vulgarized it, in the sense that the ability of large numbers of the populace to buy books led to the writing of books for them. Many critics believe that the novel was invented by and produced for the new middle class that arose in the eighteenth century.

In 1492 Columbus made the first of his world-shaping voyages to the Americas, and Western Europe's concept of the world was changed—not merely from flat to round but in scope and image. In the new lands that were being discovered and explored were peoples and creatures as strange and as wonderful as any imagined in the medieval travel books, as much wealth as in Cathay and the fabulous kingdom of Prester John, and more land and rivers and mountains and forests than European man could ever explore.

From this point on, the isolated places of the world where authors would locate their adventures or their better societies would be undiscovered islands—until the process of exploration would leave no places of the world unexplored. Lost civilizations could still be imagined in Africa or at the poles as late as the 1930s (the 1950s in film), but even in the early part of the twentieth century authors were beginning to look toward the planets and other stars for new islands in the sky.

Rabelais (c. 1495–1553), a Benedictine monk and scholar, criticized society in two important satirical romances with major elements of the fantastic and the grotesque, *Pantagruel*

(1532) and *Gargantua* (1534), and gave his name to a kind of ribâld humor that would later be called Rabelaisian.

A few years earlier a work more important in the history of science fiction was created by a scholar and lawyer, a humanist who became a member of Parliament and later Lord Chancellor of England under King Henry VIII, was unable to approve the king's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, and was executed. His story was dramatized on stage and in film in recent years under the title of *A Man for All Seasons*. Between 1514 and 1516 Sir Thomas More (1478–1535) wrote a story about a perfect society, placed the society on a distant island, and named the island and the story *Utopia*. He invented the word, combining the Greek words "ou" meaning "not" and "topos" meaning "place."

Utopia means "no place," but because it describes a better way of organizing society, the word has come to mean "the good place" or "the beautiful place" as well—the good place that is no place, an irony implicit in every utopian vision. The irony, of course, is in part the result of narrative necessity: the utopia must be located in a place that is distant and nearly inaccessible or the reader would have heard of it before.

Although More was inspired by the philosophy of Plato and the accounts of travelers like Amerigo Vespucci (1507), his semifictionalized narrative was the start of a new way of organizing and dramatizing an author's ideas about how to improve human conditions. More's *Utopia* had many successors: Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1623); Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1624); Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), which also provided a starting point for the anti-utopia or "bad place"; Butler's *Erewhon* (1872); Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888); and Wells's *The New Utopia* and many of his other novels. Because science fiction is in large part a social fiction, the utopia and the anti-utopia, or dystopia, have been a persistent theme in science fiction down to the present.

As man began to change his own way of life, the possibility of changing it for the better became inescapable, as well, eventually, as the possibility that consciously or unconsciously he might change it for the worse. The more interesting part of *Utopia*, Book II, is narrated to More in Antwerp by Raphael Hythloday, a seaman who, according to More, accompanied Vespucci on his first three voyages and was left behind, at his own request, on the fourth. He set out on a journey of exploration with his companions and eventually reached the island of Utopia.

From Utopia

by Thomas More

BOOK II

The island of Utopia is in the middle two hundred miles broad, and holds almost at the same breadth over a great part of it; but it grows narrower towards both ends. Its figure is not unlike a crescent: between its horns, the sea comes in eleven miles broad, and spreads itself into a great bay, which is environed with land to the compass of about five hundred miles, and is well secured from winds. In this bay there is no great current, the whole coast is, as it were, one continued harbour, which gives all that live in the island great convenience for mutual commerce; but the entry into the bay, occasioned by rocks on the one hand, and shallows on the other, is very dangerous. In the middle of it there is one single rock which appears above water, and may therefore be easily avoided, and on the top of it there is a tower in which a garrison is kept, the other rocks lie under water, and are very dangerous. The channel is known only to the natives, so that if any stranger should enter into the bay, without one of their pilots, he would run great danger of shipwreck; for even they themselves could not pass it safe if some marks that are on the coast did not direct their way; and if these should be but a little shifted, any fleet that might come against them, how great soever it were, would be certainly lost. On the other side of the island there are likewise many harbours; and the coast is so fortified, both by nature and art, that a small number of men can hinder the descent of a great army. But

they report (and there remains good marks of it to make it credible) that this was no island at first, but a part of the continent. Utopus that conquered it (whose name it still carries, for Abraxa was its first name) brought the rude and uncivilized inhabitants into such a good government, and to that measure of politeness, that they now far excel all the rest of mankind; having soon subdued them, he designed to separate them from the continent, and to bring the sea quite round them. To accomplish this, he ordered a deep channel to be dug fifteen miles long; and that the natives might not think he treated them like slaves, he not only forced the inhabitants, but also his own soldiers, to labour in carrying it on. As he set a vast number of men to work, he beyond all men's expectations brought it to a speedy conclusion. And his neighbours who at first laughed at the folly of the undertaking, no sooner saw it brought to perfection, than they were struck with admiration and terror.

There are fifty-four cities in the island, all large and well built: the manners, customs, and laws of which are the same, and they are all contrived as near in the same manner as the ground on which they stand will allow. The nearest lie at least twenty-four miles' distance from one another, and the most remote are not so far distant, but that a man can go on foot in one day from it, to that which lies next it. Every city sends three of their wisest senators once a year to Amaurot, to consult about their common concerns; for that is chief town of the island, being situated near the centre of it, so that it is the most convenient place for their assemblies. The jurisdiction of every city extends at least twenty miles: and where the towns lie wider, they have much more ground: no town desires to enlarge its bounds, for the people consider themselves rather as tenants than landlords. They have built over all the country, farmhouses for husbandmen, which are well contrived, and are furnished with all things necessary for country labour. Inhabitants are sent by turns from the cities to dwell in them; no country family has fewer than forty men and women in it, besides two slaves. There is a master and a mistress set over every family; and over thirty families there is a magistrate. Every year twenty of this family come back to the town, after they have stayed two years in the country; and in their room there are other twenty sent from the town, that they may learn country work from those that have been already one year in the country, as they must teach those that

come to them the next from the town. By this means such as dwell in those country farms are never ignorant of agriculture, and so commit no errors, which might otherwise be fatal, and bring them under a scarcity of corn. But though there is every year such a shifting of the husbandmen, to prevent any man being forced against his will to follow that hard course of life too long; yet many among them take such pleasure in it, that they desire leave to continue in it many years. These husbandmen till the ground, breed cattle, hew wood, and convey it to the towns, either by land or water, as is most convenient. They breed an infinite multitude of chickens in a very curious manner; for the hens do not sit and hatch them, but vast number of eggs are laid in a gentle and equal heat, in order to be hatched, and they are no sooner out of the shell, and able to stir about, but they seem to consider those that feed them as their mothers, and follow them as other chicken do the hen that hatched them. They breed very few horses, but those they have are full of mettle, and are kept only for exercising their youth in the art of sitting and riding them; for they do not put them to any work, either of ploughing or carriage, in which they employ oxen; for though their horses are stronger, yet they find oxen can hold out longer; and as they are not subject to so many diseases, so they are kept upon a less charge, and with less trouble; and even when they are so worn out, that they are no more fit for labour, they are good meat at last. They sow no corn, but that which is to be their bread; for they drink either wine, cyder, or perry, and often water, sometimes boiled with honey or liquorice, with which they abound; and though they know exactly how much corn will serve every town, and all that tract of country which belongs to it, yet they sow much more, and breed more cattle than are necessary for their consumption; and they give that overplus of which they make no use to their neighbours. When they want anything in the country which it does not produce, they fetch that from the town, without carrying anything in exchange for it. And the magistrates of the town take care to see it given them; for they meet generally in the town once a month, upon a festival day. When the time of harvest comes, the magistrates in the country send to those in the towns, and let them know how many hands they will need for reaping the harvest; and the number they call for being sent to them, they commonly despatch it all in one day. . . .

Thus have I described to you, as particularly as I could, the constitution of that commonwealth, which I do not only think the best in the world, but indeed the only commonwealth that truly deserves that name. In all other places it is visible, that while people talk of a commonwealth, every man only seeks his own wealth; but there, where no man has any property, all men zealously pursue the good of the public: and, indeed, it is no wonder to see men act so differently; for in other commonwealths, every man knows that unless he provides for himself, how flourishing soever the commonwealth may be, he must die of hunger; so that he sees the necessity of preferring his own concerns to the public; but in Utopia, where every man has a right to everything, they all know that if care is taken to keep the public stores full, no private man can want anything; for among them there is no unequal distribution, so that no man is poor, none in necessity; and though no man has anything, yet they are all rich; for what can make a man so rich as to lead a serene and cheerful life, free from anxieties; neither apprehending want himself, nor vexed with the endless complaints of his wife? He is not afraid of the misery of his children, nor is he contriving how to raise a portion for his daughters, but is secure in this, that both he and his wife, his children and grandchildren, to as many generations as he can fancy, will all live both plentifully and happily; since among them there is no less care taken of those who were once engaged in labour, but grow afterwards unable to follow it, than there is elsewhere of these that continue still employed. I would gladly hear any man compare the justice that is among them with that of all other nations; among whom, may I perish, if I see anything that looks either like justice or equity: for what justice is there in this, that a nobleman, a goldsmith, a banker, or any other man, that either does nothing at all, or at best is employed in things that are of no use to the public, should live in great luxury and splendour, upon what is so ill acquired; and a mean man, a carter, a smith, or a ploughman, that works harder even than the beasts themselves, and is employed in labours so necessary, that no commonwealth could hold out a year without them, can only earn so poor a livelihood, and must lead so miserable a life, that the condition of the beasts is much better than theirs? For as the beasts do not work so constantly, so they feed almost as well, and with more pleasure; and have no anxiety about what is to come,

whilst these men are depressed by a barren and fruitless employment, and tormented with the apprehensions of want in their old age; since that which they get by their daily labour does but maintain them at present, and is consumed as fast as it comes in, there is no overplus left to lay up for old age.

Is not that government both unjust and ungrateful, that is so prodigal of its favours to those that are called gentlemen, or goldsmiths, or such others who are idle, or live either by flattery, or by contriving the arts of vain pleasure; and on the other hand, takes no care of those of a meaner sort, such as ploughmen, colliers, and smiths, without whom it could not subsist? But after the public has reaped all the advantage of their service, and they come to be oppressed with age, sickness, and want, all their labours and the good they have done is forgotten; and all the recompense given them is that they are left to die in great misery. The richer sort are often endeavouring to bring the hire of labourers lower, not only by their fraudulent practices, but by the laws which they procure to be made to that effect; so that though it is a thing most unjust in itself, to give such small rewards to those who deserve so well of the public, yet they have given those hardships the name and colour of justice, by procuring laws to be made for regulating them.

Therefore I must say that, as I hope for mercy, I can have no other notion of all the other governments that I see or know, than that they are a conspiracy of the rich, who on pretence of managing the public only pursue their private ends, and devise all the ways and arts they can find out; first, that they may, without danger, preserve all that they have so ill acquired, and then that they may engage the poor to toil and labour for them at as low rates as possible, and oppress them as much as they please. And if they can but prevail to get these contrivances established by the show of public authority, which is considered as the representative of the whole people, then they are accounted laws. Yet these wicked men after they have, by a most insatiable covetousness, divided that among themselves with which all the rest might have been well supplied, are far from that happiness that is enjoyed among the Utopians: for the use as well as the desire of money being extinguished, much anxiety and great occasions of mischief is cut off with it. And who does not see that the frauds, thefts, robberies, quarrels, tumults, contentions, seditions, murders, treacheries, and witchcrafts, which are

indeed rather punished than restrained by the severities of law, would all fall off, if money were not any more valued by the world? Men's fears, solicitudes, cares, labours, and watchings, would all perish in the same moment with the value of money: even poverty itself, for the relief of which money seems most necessary, would fall. But, in order to the apprehending this aright, take one instance.

Consider any year that has been so unfruitful that many thousands have died of hunger; and yet if at the end of that year a survey was made of the granaries of all the rich men that have hoarded up the corn, it would be found that there was enough among them to have prevented all that consumption of men that perished in misery; and that if it had been distributed among them, none would have felt the terrible effects of that scarcity; so easy a thing would it be to supply all the necessities of life, if that blessed thing called money, which is pretended to be invented for procuring them, was not really the only thing that obstructed their being procured!

I do not doubt but rich men are sensible of this, and that they well know how much a greater happiness it is to want nothing necessary than to abound in many superfluities, and to be rescued out of so much misery than to abound with so much wealth; and I cannot think but the sense of every man's interest, added to the authority of Christ's commands, who as He was infinitely wise, knew what was best, and was not less good in discovering it to us, would have drawn all the world over to the laws of the Utopians, if pride, that plague of human nature, that source of so much misery, did not hinder it; for this vice does not measure happiness so much by its own conveniences as by the miseries of others; and would not be satisfied with being thought a goddess, if none were left that were miserable, over whom she might insult. Pride thinks its own happiness shines the brighter by comparing it with the misfortunes of other persons; that by displaying its own wealth, they may feel their poverty the more sensibly. This is that infernal serpent that creeps into the breasts of mortals and possesses them too much to be easily drawn out; and therefore I am glad that the Utopians have fallen upon this form of government, in which I wish that all the world could be so wise as to imitate them; for they have indeed laid down such a scheme and foundation of policy, that as men live happily under it, so it is like to be of great continuance; for they having rotted out of the minds of their people all the

seeds both of ambition and faction, there is no danger of any commotion at home; which alone has been the ruin of many states, that seemed otherwise to be well secured; but as long as they live in peace at home, and are governed by such good laws, envy of all their neighbouring princes, who have often though in vain attempted their ruin, will never be able to put their state into any commotion or disorder.

When Raphael had thus made an end of speaking, though many things occurred to me, both concerning the manners and laws of that people, that seemed very absurd, as well as their way of making war, as in their notions of religion and divine matters; together with several other particulars, but chiefly what seemed the foundation of all the rest, their living in common, without the use of money, by which all nobility, magnificence, splendour, and majesty, which, according to the common opinion, are the true ornaments of a nation, would be quite taken away; yet since I perceived that Raphael was weary, and was not sure whether he could easily bear contradiction, remembering that he had taken notice of some who seemed to think they were bound in honour to support the credit of their own wisdom, by finding out something to censure in all other men's inventions, besides their own; I only commended their constitution, and the account he had given of it in general; and so taking him by the hand, carried him to supper, and told him I would find out some other time for examining this subject more particularly, and for discoursing more copiously upon it; and indeed I shall be glad to embrace an opportunity of doing it. In the meanwhile, though it must be confessed that he is both a very learned man, and a person who has obtained a great knowledge of the world, I cannot perfectly agree to everything he has related; however, there are many things in the Commonwealth of Utopia that I rather wish, than hope, to see followed in our governments.