Heterosexual Utopianism

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'When people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times we have the unhappiness to live in, what will they say?' Sue Bridehead's question – or rather exclamation – in *Jude the Obscure* – is, of course, rhetorical; and Hardy has surely been vindicated in this appeal to the enlightenment of later times to put to shame the mores of his own. We who are in a position to do the saying, do indeed deplore the particular constraints under which Sue and Jude were labouring as the bigotries of a darker age relative to our own. In a sense, then, there is no more to be said about this 'what will they say?' other than to say that when the time came, 'they' were mostly true to the word that Hardy had scripted for them.

I propose here, however, to pursue the issue of what later times say about earlier ones a little further, though not so much with respect to Sue's particular question, as to some others circling in its general orbit: How do we assess progress in the feminist cause, particularly where this relates to its impact on sexuality and relations between the sexes? What interpretative framework should we bring to its shifts of utopian focus? How do these relate to the appraisals which feminism, at a later stage of its advance, may retrospectively offer upon the utopian aspirations through which it was promoted at an earlier?

These ruminations have been prompted partly by personal experience and partly by theoretical uncertainty. The experience in question is that of the particular amities and abrasions which feminism has introduced into relations between the sexes; the theoretical uncertainty has to do with the difficulties – to which the deconstructivist turn in social theory has made us more alert – of formulating a view of 'progress' which can give due recognition to the cultural relativity of the conceptions we bring to it. The former led me to ponder why it is that feminism today, relative to earlier phases in its development, offers so few reflections on its own role in transforming heterosexual relations, and is notably short on any very positive commentary on its potential in this respect. The latter led me to consider how one might account for this contrast of 'utopian' outlook, and what were the implications of any account provided for the understanding of 'progress' in the feminist cause. My engagement here, then, is part philosophical, part historical, my aim being to outline a conceptual framework in which to consider the effects of the feminist movement on relations between the sexes, and the significance of the varying degrees of concern it has expressed at different stages with their amelioration. I here compare what I call the 'utopian discourses' which have been offered in defence of feminism, focussing in particular on the shifts that have taken place in respect of the importance attributed to its role in transforming heterosexual relations. But I also pose some questions about the relations (or maybe it is more accurate to speak of 'dislocations') between the achievements of feminism at any point in its history and its earlier utopian projections. Since progressive movements seldom seem to advance their emancipatory causes in a form which is thought to realise or coincide with the visionary aspirations by which they were at a prior stage legitimated (and this, I think, may be particularly true in the case of sexual emancipation),[1] the question arises as to whether later gains can, in any sense, be said to realise, rather than confound, earlier aims; and if they can, by what criteria we might want to claim this to be the case.

As suggested, the main vehicle for this enquiry is the differential and shifting attitudes that have been expressed within the feminist movement to what I shall henceforth term 'heterosexual utopianism', though I would emphasise that the review I offer of these mutations is extremely synoptic, and too schematic to do justice to the complexities of the cultural and political history of the pretty extensive period to which I shall be relating.[2] By 'heterosexual utopianism', I refer to the claim that the emancipation of women will prove the condition of unprecedented union and understanding

between the sexes, and allow both to enjoy previously unrealised forms of erotic gratification. Any discourse on female emancipation may be said to endorse this claim insofar as it sees improvement in the social and economic status of women as leading to more harmonious and reciprocal relations between the sexes, and regards this as an important (if not the only) reason for advancing the feminist cause.

One hope within two wills

There is no period in the history of feminism in which the core ideas of'heterosexual utopianism' have not found expression in some form or other, but as an explicitly formulated utopian discourse it played a particularly key role in the legitimation of a first phase of feminist agitation in the nineteenth century. In the headier formulations of this argument, feminism, it was said, would not only transform heterosexual relations but in doing so lead the way to a moral renaissance of the species in all its dimensions of existence. But even when confined to the erotic sphere, it was fulsome enough: the freedom of women from their enslavement to men would allow both parties to enter a new paradise wherein it would no longer be, as Milton put it, 'Hee for God only, shee for God in him',[3] but both equally united in a secular and mutually balanced love, respect and sexual requitement. The promise was of heterosexual reunion, or perhaps more accurately, transcendence of all the previous relations of asymmetry and inequality whereby the sexes in their previous existence had perforce had to contrive what reconciliation they could.

This argument is first sounded in abstract and metaphysical fashion in the androgynous images and aspirations of Romanticism and its free love ethic, with Blake and Shelley providing some of the more obvious examples. To cite here but one instance: Shelley's 'Epipsychidion' (which like Blake's 'Visions of the Daughters of Albion' is a paean to free love), projects a vision of sexual union in which:

> We shall become the same, we shall be one
> Spirit within two frames, oh! wherefore two?
> One passion in twin-hearts, which grows and grew,
> Till like two meteors of expanding flame,
> Those spheres instinct with it become the same,
> Touch, mingle, are transfigured; ever still
> Burning, yet ever inconsumable;
> In one another's substance finding food,
> Like flames too pure and light and unimbued
> To nourish their bright lives with baser prey,
> Which point to Heaven and cannot pass away;
> One hope within two wills, one will beneath
> Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death
> One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality,
> And one annihilation.

Of course, images of heterosexual fusion are found in much earlier writing,[4] but it is arguable that it is only in the Romantic vision that they are linked to aspirations of a more social and recognisably feminist kind. Blake's allegories and symbolism, and Shelley's projections are clearly prompted by their dissatisfaction with the historical condition of the sexes, and in particular with what they regarded as the impoverished and destructive sexual mores of their times. In their conception, moreover, the distraints placed on the possibilities of heterosexual joy and transfiguration are directly related to the subordinate and unfree status of women. This does not mean, of course, that the perspective of these Romantic visions of heterosexual liberation was not profoundly androcentric.[5] But despite their sexual bias and gender asymmetry, it would be a mistake to present them as consciously manipulative. Moreover, androcentric though they may be in certain respects, their images of unfettered conjugality are not a prurient and hypocritical cover for male licentiousness, but expressions of conviction in the transformative potential for both sexes of their mutual release from the shackles of conventional morality. They are also the vehicle for a new kind of celebration of the feminine principle, whereby this is depicted not so much as the complement to an inherently superior masculinity, but as the essential element of spiritual regeneration for humanity as a whole, and even, at times, as the guiding light of the process.[6]

Both these themes are given a more prosaic and explicitly political expression in the feminist argument of the Owenite and Saint-Simonian movements of the 1830s–40s, Fourier having set the tone with his claims that 'the degree of emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation', and that the 'progressive liberation of women is the fundamental cause of all social progress'.[7] The Owenites remained passionate advocates of the idea that women held the key to a more general moral renaissance, even though there were ambiguities in their arguments, and definite shifts of opinion over time as to whether this would be accomplished within the marital relationship, or only with the abolition of the constraints imposed on heterosexual relating by marriage and its monogamous demands. By and large, it was the free love ethic which prevailed in the high phase of Owenism (1830–40), whereas by the early 1840s the Owenites were preaching and practising a form of sexual union more in conformity

with the general mores of Victorian society. Thus Owen's early fulminations against marriage ('a Satanic device of the priesthood to place and keep mankind with their slavish superstitions'), and monogamy ('you commit a crime against the everlasting laws of nature when you say that you will "love and cherish" what your organisation may compel you to dislike and loath, even in a few hours'),[8] are in marked contrast to the 'Hymn to Marriage' sung at the secular ceremonies which had been devised for Owenite couples in the movement's final years:

> United by love then alone
> in goodness, in truth and in heart
> They both are so perfectly one
> Their bonds they never can part.
> Their union has love for its ground
> The love of the man and his bride,
> And hence in affliction they're bound
> So close they can never divide.[9]

But that Owenism, in the end, was forced to capitulate to the prevailing protocols of sexual union, does not imply any significant rupture with 'heterosexual utopianism'. Whether the unions of man and woman are conceived, ideally, as multiple and easily dissolved, or as singular life commitments; whether the bond is that of legality or that of the heart, the utopian message remains constant: the cause of female freedom is co-extensive with heterosexual regeneration.

This, moreover, provides the utopian framework for the liberal feminism professed by Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill in the latter half of the century, despite its very considerable difference of temperament. Mill's whole essay, for example, on *The Subjection of Women* is moved by deep-felt conviction that the liberation of women will not only prove of equal and immense advantage to men, but will enable the 'most universal and pervading of all human relations' to become the source of general moral revitalisation. Thus he writes in one of his more 'utopian' passages:

> What marriage may be in the case of two persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinions and purposes, between whom there exists that best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in them – so that each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other, and can have alternately the pleasure of leading and being led in the path of development – I will not attempt to describe. To those who can conceive it, there is no need; to those who cannot, it would appear the dream of an enthusiast. But I maintain, with the profoundest conviction, that this, and this only is the ideal of marriage; and that all opinions, customs and institutions which favour any other notion of it, or turn the conceptions and aspirations connected with it into any other direction, by whatever pretences they may be coloured, are relics of primitive barbarism. The moral regeneration of mankind will only really commence, when the most fundamental of social relations is placed under the rule of equal justice, and when human beings learn to cultivate their strongest sympathy with an equal in rights and civilisation.[10]

By comparison with the sensual and socialist emphases of Owenite literature, this may seem both a class-blinkered and overly cerebral conception of marital union, but it is certainly no less impassioned (maybe more so) in its defence of the revolutionary impact of sexual equality on relations between the sexes.

A socialist defence of the core idea of 'heterosexual utopianism' does, in any case, resurface in Engels' *Origin of the Family,* in Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling's argument in *The Woman Question* (1886) and, of course, in Kollontai's writings on love:

> In the achieved communist society, love, 'the winged Eros' will appear in a different, transformed, and completely unrecognisable form. By that time, the 'sympathetic bonds' between all members of the new society will have grown and strengthened, the 'love potential' will have been raised, and solidarity love will have become the same kind of moving force as competition and self-love are in the bourgeois order.[11]

The ideal of sexual reconciliation is also the inspiration of *fin de siècle* fictional utopias of sexual equality, and given a particular forceful, if somewhat far-fetched, expression in Olive Schreiner's image of a love between the sexes which changes from a 'dull slow-creeping worm' to a 'torpid, earthy crysallis', to a 'full-winged insect glorious in the sunshine of the future'. Expanding on this vision of a sexual love allowing for complete spiritual, intellectual and physical expression for both men and women, Schreiner writes:

> To those of us who at the beginning of a new century stand with shaded eyes gazing into the future, striving to descry the outlines of the shadowy figures which loom before us in the future, nothing seems of so gracious a promise as the outline we seem to discern of a condition of human life in which a closer union than the world has yet seen shall exist between the man and the woman.[12]

To this one might add that a good deal of what was deemed progressive thinking about issues of sexuality in the later decades of 'first wave' feminism was conceptualised within the heterosexual utopian framework. Darwinian theory and eugenics were invoked in support of the idea that women could prove the vehicles not only of spiritual revival, but of improved health and physique for both sexes;[13] 'free union' thinking, dress reform, support for the idea of more liberated heterosexual engagements; Reichian theory, Lawrentian celebrations of the 'animal instinct', the cult of the 'priests and priestesses of love': all this, though it would clearly be absurd to assimilate it directly to feminism, was widely thought of as in some sense friendly to that cause, and all of it was inspired by a certain ideal of what could – and should – be taking place *between* the sexes. There was rather little in this argument and practice which registered the idea that heterosexual reconciliation and erotic union might not be the goal of female emancipation, and may even have been problematised and disabled by such advances as were being made in that direction. Of course, a great deal of reactionary anxiety was expressed – much of it by men – regarding the conseqences for heterosexual love of female advancement; a misogynist or anti-feminist response which feared the emasculating impact of the new woman, and held out the threat of a total collapse of male-female bonding as a warning against allowing female emancipation to proceed. But such reactions are very different from an anxiety expressed from within a position more sympathetic to the female case; and it is this, I am suggesting, which is given rather little consideration in these forms of 'progressive' thinking on sexuality.

Uncoupling discourses

In pointing to the persistence within 'first wave' feminism of the'heterosexual utopian' idea, and the passionate expression it was given, I do not mean, however, to imply that there were no countervailing voices, or that a more sceptical and separatist vein of argument might not be said to be more representative of its later stages. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the legitimating framework of assumptions of 'heterosexual utopianism' was challenged from a number of differing perspectives, whose rhetorical appeals are to the joys of celibacy and autonomy rather than those of sexual congress. The sexual exploitation of women, and the deleterious effects of heterosexual relations, were targeted by a number of those involved in the agitation around the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s and the social purity movement into which it fed in the 1880s.[14] The suffrage movement, too, especially in the period 1906–1914, was the vehicle of much anti-heterosexual sentiment and advocacy of political separatism. This was expressed in summary form in Christobel Pankhurst's 'Votes for Women: and chastity for men', and there were a number of women who followed Pankhurst in viewing spinsterhood as the only political response to the existing conditions of sexual servitude.[15] By the latter part of the century, then, female liberation had come to be viewed by many as perfectly consistent with, and maybe dependent on, the rejection of heterosexual union, at least in its existing sexual and marital form. The liberated woman is to realise herself not in the relationship of equality as conceived by Mill, but by going it alone: a stance which insists on the importance of economic autonomy for the woman, and mocks the mockers of the love-famished old maid by revealing the 'odd' or 'redundant' female to be far more enviable and dignified in her celibacy than those of her sisters who had succumbed to the 'prostitution' of marriage. The 'new' woman is the self-made woman, the woman who by dint of her own efforts (particularly her efforts to achieve an education and to dignify herself through work) will place herself above the squalid marriage market, and in exchange for that will enjoy the fruits of economic independence and a sexual autonomy denied to all those 'angels in the house' whose lives are daily, and nightly, contaminated by their association with the male.

This more overtly separatist position on the 'woman question' is clearly reflected in much female authored 'New Woman' fiction of the period, and also in the writing of Gissing, Meredith and George Moore. What is also registered in some of the more female empathetic fiction of the time is a non-misogynistic sense of the possible delusions of the 'heterosexual utopian' philosophy. Both *Jude the Obscure* and *The Odd Women* may be read as expressing some scepticism about the whole idea that female emancipation is compatible with the promotion of heterosexual harmony. Though Elaine Showalter has interpreted *Jude the Obscure* as an anti-feminist caution (Hardy is here hinting, she suggests 'that the New Woman, Sue Bridehead, was in some way perverse'),[16] the novel is better seen as responding to a certain feminist and anti-marriage 'new woman' fiction which had taken the 'free union' as a potential guarantee of the freedom of women. Sue's tragedy suggests that even the 'free union', conceived as a basis for human moral evolution which might substitute for the degrading economic basis of legal marriage, offers no obvious route to emancipation.[17] Indeed one might even go further and see the novel as problematising not just the limitations of

the 'free union' from the female point of view, but as raising the question of happy heterosexual endings between partners possessed of Jude's and Sue's emancipated sensibilities. There is, as it were, a prefiguring here of the idea that heterosexual happiness may be more complicated than it is advanced by the forms of thinking about sexuality and sexual identity which are introduced by feminist enlightenment.[18] Gissing's novel, too, is an essentially empathetic work in which no heterosexual harmony is finally achieved (Rhoda Nunn cannot, in the end, allow herself to marry Barfoot, whereas Monica Madden's sexual liaisons bring only unhappiness).[19]

Let us add here, too, in further qualification, that even if it is only towards the end of the century that we encounter a confident celebration of the 'free' woman, and unashamed idealisation of spinsterhood, such themes are prefigured in a more muted and ambiguous form in the sympathetic treatment accorded the 'single' woman in a good deal of earlier (especially female authored) writing. Jane Eyre, and Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, for example, do not make a conscious option for spinsterhood, and their respective careers are intimately bound up with their affections for men, and even in a sense (though pretty equivocally) are brought to their culmination in their cementing a heterosexual union. But they are among the more striking representations of a new type of female heroine, whose cultural oppression and marginalisation is depicted as the source and grounds for the development of an inner strength, and who is commended to us precisely in virtue of all those attributes and circumstances of life in which she diverges from the conventional *femme fatale*. It is with the struggles of these 'plain' governesses, cast back on their own resources, destined seemingly for loveless spinsterhood, that the reader is invited to empathise in a fictional genre that has broken with the idea that the nature and fate of women are exclusively determined by their romantic attachments, and the fortunes or misfortunes they meet at the hands of suitors and marital partners. Some time, then, before the novel registers the fully self-conscious and explicitly feminist advocacy of the single life, this feminist politics is intimated in the sympathetic chronicling of the quest for autonomy of the anti-heroines of Charlotte Bronte and other writers.

To this we might add that, quite independently of the advocacy of the single woman within the feminist movement, a certain empathy for the independent female was also being sounded in what might be termed the 'official heroics' of Victorian culture, which could put a Florence Nightingale on a pedestal even as it ridiculed the crabbed and male-hungry old maids.[20] Indeed, it

became almost impossible for Victorian culture to celebrate the self-sacrificial virtues of the 'angelic' female without endowing her with almost preternatural powers of endurance and an initiative and capacity for solitude quite at odds with the official discourse of feminine passivity and dependence. In the persistence and ingenuity they bring to the service of men and the salvation of family values, Dickens' 'little' heroines display, alongside their feminine patience, all those virtues of fortitude, autonomy and simple ability to get by on their own which were supposedly the exclusive property of the male (and in which, to add to the irony, the men of Dickens' fiction are frequently somewhat lacking themselves).[21]

For all these reasons, it would be mistaken to suppose that reflection upon the condition of women, and support for her emancipation, found expression even in the earlier part of the century only within the legitimating discourse of heterosexual utopianism; and certainly in the later stages of 'first wave' feminism there was a definite shift away from what might be termed the instrumental conception of female liberation towards a more self-justifying logic, with the emphasis coming to fall rather more on the pleasures of female autonomy itself, and rather less on the ways in which advances in educational, legal and economic independence would prove the enabling condition of a more general sexual freedom and revitalized form of union between the sexes.

It is, however, I think, debatable how far these shifts represent a complete rupture, as opposed to an attenuation of the commitment to the overall conception of 'humanist' amelioration through heterosexual reconciliation. Some separatist voices can certainly be regarded as questioning this whole framework of thinking. Others, however, might be said to have been advocating separatism as an essentially strategic move rather than inviting any extensive rethinking of the transformative effects of female liberation. Insofar, that is, as they target the institution of marriage as the main obstacle to female self-realisation, they represent a pragmatic concentration on the immediate means and present possibilities for change in the status of women, rather than a challenge to the long-term goals of reciprocity and sexual union.[22] Certainly, this pragmatism is in contrast both to Owenite futurism and to Millian reformist utopianism, since it draws back from speculation on the ultimate consequences for gender relations of the improvement in the social standing of women, while also rejecting Mill's faith in the compatibility of marriage with any such improvement. But it does not necessarily imply a head-on contestation with the idea that female emancipation is directed at improved relations between the sexes.

The reviled 'norm'

In any case – to turn now to the main contrast I wish to focus on between earlier and contemporary feminism – however compromised, qualified and indefinitely postponed the 'utopia' of sexual reconciliation becomes; and whatever prefigurings there may have been of the eventual legitimation crisis of heterosexual utopianism, there is little doubt that this crisis was yet to emerge; and that there is little in earlier feminism which compares with the forms of dissent registered by feminists in our own *fin de siècle* to the whole idea that there is a necessary and constructive interconnection between improvement in the social status of women, and the transfiguration of heterosexual relations.

Here, too, I must emphasise that I am not here speaking of modern feminism as a whole, but referring only to an influential discourse within it at the present time. Just as it would be wrong to overlook the divergent positions within 'first wave' feminism, so it would be mistaken to imply that 'second wave' feminism offers no other arguments than those opposed to the 'heterosexual utopian' framework of thinking. Indeed, some of the more influential voices in the modern movement have tended always in the other direction. Though her work is keenly sensitive to everything distraining on their achievement, de Beauvoir remained committed throughout to the goals of sexual reciprocity. Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, and many others defending a socialist feminist position have always resisted the demonisation of heterosexuality, and the attempt to present it as in some sense inherently opposed to feminist interests.[23] The 'line' adopted by radical lesbianism in the 1970s – that it was impossible to be both feminist and engage in heterosexual relations – brought forth a storm of protest at the time, and there have been very few prepared to endorse the policing of heterosexual practice implied by such a conception of feminist 'orthodoxy'.[24]

Yet there is no doubt, either, that there is a very pervasive tendency within current feminist theory to depict heterosexuality as a negative and coercive construct which is preemptive of feminist emancipation, or at any rate distraining upon its achievement. In the present context, so much emphasis has come to be placed on the exclusionary dimensions of 'binary' sexuality, rather than on the potentials for a more rapturous form of heterosexual relating, that it has come to seem almost heretical for feminists to present themselves as celebrants of love between the sexes, and it is the Conservatives and popular sexologists who tend to exercize a monopoly over the positive representations of heterosexual union. In this sense, one may argue that heterosexual reconciliation has come to figure less as the promise of feminist progress than as a problem standing in the way of it, and there is much in the argument and rhetoric of contemporary feminism that runs directly counter to the thematic of 'heterosexual utopianism'.

As suggested, this antipathy to heterosexuality finds its most forceful expression in the writing of those women for whom feminism has provided the space for the liberation of lesbian sexuality, and who have argued in some cases that liberation for women as a whole is very closely bound up with, if not directly co-extensive with, the realisation of desires and modes of sensuality of a more self-regarding and specifically female character. For them, feminism is precisely not the cause of heterosexual reconciliation, but the release from the oppressive constraints it has imposed on a distinctive female pleasure and erotic gratification. Adrienne Rich's critique of 'compulsory' heterosexuality, Monique Wittig's celebration of the 'Lesbian Body', Luce Iragaray's *parler femme*, Sheila Jeffrey's account of heterosexual desire as 'eroticized power difference', Judith Butler's recent assaults on the heterosexual 'imperative' – all this, and much more one might mention, is in both tone and message a far cry from the images of heterosexual union to be found in *Episychidion* or *The Subjection of Women.*[25] (I must emphasise here

that I am pointing to similarities of rhetoric and general theoretical disposition, and not denying that there are considerable divergences between these writers in respect of their specific concerns and political recommendations).

Most feminists today, moreover, whether or not explicit advocates of a separatist erotic, would want to argue that one of the great advances of the politics of sexual difference opened up by feminism, is that we are no longer so fixated on the supposedly all-consuming passions of heterosexual desire, and that other modes of sexuality have been able to challenge their propriety and authenticity, establishing in the process their own claims to attention and social acceptance. Many would agree, too, that the binary gender system and its coding of roles and attributes has served, even reinforced, a certain model of heterosexual relations, and that this model is itself hierarchical – designed to secure the interests of the male partners in the arrangement rather than those of women. For all these reasons, heterosexuality has been treated in much recent feminist literature and sexual difference theory as a 'norm' of relations which is symbolic of the dominion of patriarchy, oppressive of gay and lesbian sexuality, and inimical to the realisation and expression of subjectivity; and even where this position is not being expressly defended, it is often gesturally acknowledged in the form of reflex rhetorical references to the 'heterosexual norm' and its disciplinary codes.

What has come to be targeted in these perspectives, then, is not so much the 'barbarous' customs of heterosexuality (marriage or enforced monogamy) but the relationship itself as a form of coercion on women which is inimical to their liberation. Here we are asked to view heterosexual identity itself as an imposed and inherently unstable construct – a form of 'discipline' which may secure the reproduction of the species, but does not speak to any preordained biological desire, and may even run athwart it.

These approaches, I submit, represent a marked shift or displacement of utopian focus, whereby the prospect of improved relations between men and women ceases to function as any kind of legitimation for the advancement of the feminist cause, and begins to figure rather as the obstacle to the furtherance of its ends. Here we are no longer being asked to think in terms of removing barriers to the expression of pre-given sexual identities, but of liberating subjects from the fixity of sexual identity itself; and what is denounced as oppressive is not so much the gendered constructions associated with heterosexuality, but heterosexuality as a limit on the otherwise plural and indefinite sexualities available to individuals – male and female alike. Hence those futurist scenarios to which various post-structuralist theories have beckoned us (the sexually confused or polysexual culture, the sexually in-different society, the society of 'bodies and pleasures' and so forth).

Revealed agendas or hidden achievements?

Now, it seems to me that these kinds of arguments demonize (and, in the process, essentialise) heterosexuality in ways which are far too ready to abstract from the impact on heterosexual desire, identity and relations, of the transformations brought about by feminism and the rethinking of gender relations more generally. For as desiring subjects, with definite sexual and social needs, heterosexuals in our culture have also been caught up in the convulsions around identity which these have introduced. There is, moreover, something of a paradox in presenting heterosexuality as if it were an external fixity preemptive of choice, since this would seem to undermine the possibility of the mutations at the level of subjectivity which polysexual utopias project as a desirable alternative. However, I think these issues are best approached not by focussing on the pros and cons of the arguments which go into this new utopian framework (and to do that, in any case, would be to undertake a much lengthier analysis than is possible here), but by focussing on the shift itself, and the mode of its interpretation. What is it that this shift is revealing (or concealing) about the impact of feminism on heterosexual relations? What is it saying about the truth or falsity of heterosexual utopianism as a legitimating discourse? With a view to addressing these questions, in ways that bring out their bearing on my opening remarks about 'progress', I propose here to consider two rather differing possible lines of response they may elicit.

The one argues that since the visions of conjugal bliss and humanist renewal projected in the earliest stages of feminist thinking have not been realised, despite significant advances in female emancipation in socio-economic and legal terms, and do not speak to current conceptions of progress, this first phase of feminism got its utopian vision wrong: the feminist cause was not to be the cause of improvement in heterosexual relations, was never in reality the promise of this, and carried no guarantee that this would be the outcome of gains in female status. The gradual demise of heterosexual utopianism therefore reflects a distinct rupture with previous perceptions of the likely achievements of the feminist movement, and a recognition of the ideological delusions of earlier feminism. Modern feminists can now

'see' what many of their precursors did not: that the aspiration to 'liberate' women towards the goals of heterosexual reconciliation was trapped within the modes of thinking and desiring which served to perpetuate their oppression.

The feminists of the nineteenth century, in other words, initially conceived their cause under the influence of an essentially 'masculine erotic' ideal of sexual union, which still determined the role of woman as partner, helpmate and complement to the male. This was inevitable to the extent that even contesting voices are conditioned by their own ideological context, and, in any case, heterosexual utopianism was the necessary legitimating discourse of a movement whose latent promise was much more sinister: the death of marriage and romantic love, the convulsion of all previously established ties of amity and dependence between the sexes. Feminism at this stage was ideologically 'obliged', so this argument might have it, to mask its more threatening implications by showing its progress to be consistent with – indeed, to be more likely to realise – certain ideals of love and sexual union that were themselves complicit in the protraction of female suppression insofar as they were espoused by patriarchy itself. Its immanent critique played on the gap between the social reality of heterosexual oppression and its justifying discourses, rather than exposing the profounder source of this oppression in the *very requirement* that the empowerment of women should coincide with the realisation of the 'truth' of male desire, the equalisation of happiness, and the moral regeneration of the species as a whole.

The other line of response, however, is to say: no, this is a very partial reading of the evidence, and we can certainly challenge its underlying presumption that feminism and gender politics have had no positive transformative impact on relations between the sexes (particularly over the period of modern feminism, since surveys consistently suggest that women have become much happier in their heterosexual relations since the 1950s).[26] To pursue this line is to focus on the forms of freedom, good will and co-operation between the sexes that were absent at earlier stages, introducing in the process a different appraisal of the demise of heterosexual utopianism. To approach things this way on, would be to entertain the idea that *some* of the programme of heterosexual utopianism may indeed have been realised (and to that extent earlier feminism proved correct in its projections); only realised, we would have to say, along lines which earlier discourse did not imagine, and which we, who are immersed in this realised actuality, no longer conceive as part of utopian aspiration.

To give but one example: Mill offers us a vision of heterosexual harmony in justification of female emancipation, which many couples who are today attempting to live in the light of feminist principles would find quite ludicrous and belying of their own union, both because it fails to register the tension-ridden and often quite explosive nature of their relations, and because its pieties seem so wide of the mark of their own forms of hedonism. Yet insofar as such couples have broken with the sexual division of roles, both emotionally and materially in ways which advance them beyond conventional conceptions of what conduces to marital 'harmony', they could be said to be engaging in far more 'reconciled' and mutually supportive modes of relating than Mill ever dreamt of. Thus, it might be said that although feminist progress has introduced new sources of anxiety, bitterness, guilt and rancour, some of them feeding directly into reactionary responses of the 'Iron John' variety, it has also opened up forms of co-operation, erotic engagement and communication in comparison with which earlier projections of heterosexual utopianism now seem incredibly limited.

Heterosexual relations, it can be granted, have been afflicted by some quite specific pains and stresses as a consequence of feminism: male envy of the subordinate status and resentment of always being the 'sex in the wrong'; male jealousy of feminist solidarity and empowerment of women (but also guilt over feeling the jealousy); female resentment of these resentments (but also, maybe, a certain unease about the licence feminism gives to manipulate and reinforce male guilts); distress on the part of both sexes over the effects of the de-sanctification of heterosexual love, and over the misfits between the impulses of desire and the dictates of ideological correctness; and also, as suggested earlier, anxieties about the 'authenticity' of one's heterosexual identity.[27] But at the same time, it can be argued that it is only possible to be subject to these kinds of tensions and self-critical reflexes, if you are already enjoying an extensive intimacy and empathy with the opposite sex. That it is only on the basis of a certain closeness that you can be subject to these particular forms of alienation; only on the basis of a certain overlap of experience (co-parenting, for example, shared spheres of work, power and pleasure) of a kind which feminism has helped to bring about, and which Mill could scarcely have imagined, that – to invoke Slavoj Zizek's phrase – men and women together 'go through the fantasy' of a Millian imagined harmony in order, dare one say it, to arrive at a higher state of communion and enjoyment. In this connection, one might note, too, all those ways in which

relations between the sexes have been enhanced, rendered more fulfilling, in a sense *realised*, precisely as a consequence of the relative desexualisation of those relations. For to a significant degree in Western culture today, we are freed, not only from Sue Bridehead's 'barbarous customs' and 'superstitions', but from a 'gender alertness' – a constant awareness and wariness of the sex of the other – which even she might have had difficulty in conceiving as dissoluble. In this sense, the very emphasis on heterosexuality may be functioning as a kind of throw-back: a reading of a more sharply eroticized past into a present in which, in reality, it no longer so clearly applies. It would be wrong to overstate the advances made on this score, but neither should we overlook the mutations that have taken place at this level by comparison with a past in which sex-difference figured as the ever present and inescapable grid through which men and women lived their relations to each other.

At any rate, to look at the issue from this optic would be to argue that it was not so much that 'heterosexual utopian' feminism got it wrong in an abstract sense about what it would achieve in the way of improving heterosexual relations, but that it was incapable of foreseeing the particular forms in which such improvement would come to pass. It was not that it was deluded in advancing the goal of amelioration between the sexes, but that its vision was limited by the historical conceptions it brought to the goal itself. If heterosexual utopianism no longer looms so large in the vocabulary of contemporary feminism, this is not because the latter has exposed the mistakenness of the very idea it incorporated, but because feminism has contributed to the realisation of the idea in ways which reveal the now anachronistic quality of its earlier representations.

I have sketched two alternative ways of thinking about the question of feminism's achievements, and pointed to some divergences in the constructions they invite us to place on earlier utopian discourse. The first approach charts the limitations and misconceptions of earlier aspirations relative to a truer understanding at which we have now arrived. The second directs us to the changing contents wherein the formal and open-ended categories of a progressive movement such as feminism may find themselves historically realised. The first gives a picture of society as containing inherently masculine privileging structures – in this instance 'heterosexuality' – which present a barrier to female emancipation, and must be transcended as a condition of liberation; the 'utopia' is, as it were, the place beyond that barrier. The alternative focusses on the dialectical transformation of the structure itself as a consequence of actual feminist advance. Its 'utopia' is, so to speak, unfolding in the here and now, but must be seen to involve a continual changing or reperception of the goalposts as the goals themselves are reached. There are therefore no clearly specifiable ends which allow us finally to discriminate between developments which might be said to 'realise', as opposed to 'deviate' from, the feminist agenda. Insofar as utopian projections can be said to be realised, and ends achieved, it is only in ways which so far depart from their specified content, that they can hardly be said to represent its actualisation; and they are also, it would appear, only achieved at the cost of generating new modes of desire and hence new agendas for progress.

Both these approaches may be said to register, if not to resolve, the dilemma of bringing the enlightenment shed by a social movement such as feminism to bear on its own self-representations. The one does so by directing attention to a 'real content' of its agenda which is ideologically veiled by utopian discourse; the other by looking to the changing content wherein the essential 'truth' of utopian discourse finds itself realised. The former approach makes a clean distinction, as it were, between the cultural packaging of a progressive movement, and its objective and independently specifiable goals or consequences; the latter recognises only a dislocation between the cultural packaging and the actual achievements of the movement: it is altogether fuzzier about the exact criteria of progress. Both have their points of strength, but also their weaknesses. The first provides a clearer criterion by which to demarcate between more or less progressive developments within the movement, but it is vulnerable to having that same logic turned against its own claims to know the truth of the feminist agenda. If heterosexual utopianism misrepresented the 'truth' of feminism at an earlier stage of its advance, what guarantees that more separatist conceptions of these ends will not in turn be exposed as ideological miscontructions of its purposes at a later stage in its history? The second avoids this problem by fixing on the imprecise and open-ended nature of the goals of feminism, but arguably only at the cost of being so elastic about criteria that it comes close to allowing the utopian projections of the movement to be realised in any and every development which it induces.

These respective limitations might be said to have their counterpart in the restricted purchase which both perspectives, if taken in isolation, have on current political realities. For to raise the question as to whether feminism has issued in more harmonious relations between the sexes, is to accept that there is some empirical support for both perspectives, but that each can be contested through the evidence adduced in support of the other. I have tried to show that there are grounds for

arguing that feminism has been responsible for, or contains the potential for, a transfiguration of heterosexual relations which is in many ways 'in excess' of the imagined pleasures of those who invoked the discourse of 'heterosexual utopianism' to legitimate the feminist cause; and that, in this sense, a reflex rejection of this discourse as a false or ideological register of feminist progress would be inappropriate. But it is also true that it has disturbed previous sources of harmony and introduced new tensions of a kind which do indeed undermine any simple confidence in the idea that feminism and sexual reconciliation can proceed together. In this sense, a more separatist utopian discourse is also registering something of the truth of the conditions which feminism has brought into being. For perhaps from where we are now, we can see that a question arises as to whether the project of heterosexual reconciliation has not depended on a covert assumption of differential roles and powers of a kind which modern feminism is systematically dismantling.

At any rate, it would seem at least pertinent to ask whether the revolution in our thinking about gender and sexual identity which feminism has helped to stimulate is ultimately compatible with any very stable or harmonious pattern of sexual relating. Perhaps relations between the sexes have become more estranged than reconciled as a consequence of feminism, and it will continue that way. On the other hand, one would also have to recognise the role of feminism in generating dissatisfaction with earlier forms of co-existence and communion, in exposing the limits of previous 'contentment', and thus in generating the desire to break with the estranging conventions of older modes of intimacy. Or, to put the point more positively, we would have to acknowledge its transfigurative role in the creation of new and altogether more pleasurable forms of co-existence between the sexes. Feminism in this sense, one might say, has both exposed the falsity of its earlier utopian promises and served to realise their truth. Whether people of a later age will say anything of this sort about it, of course, remains to be seen.

Notes

1 It would be a mistake, all the same, to dwell too exclusively on the dislocations between the progressive aims and actual achievements of progressive causes at the cost of recognising the extent to which these can be fixed on finite and absolute goals. The campaign for the abolition of slavery, for example, may in a sense have been continued into the anti-apartheid and anti-racist movements of our times, but it would be misleading to identify these later initiatives with the anti-slavery campaign itself, or to suggest that the latter had not been targeted on fairly precise, and now largely realised, objectives. It will be part of my aim here to expose the interrelationship between the 'openness' of the goals of progressive movements and the transmutations of their utopian discourses.

2 For accounts which provide both an overview of the rise and development of the feminist movement and a sense of its historical complexities, see Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*, Pluto Press, London, 1974; *Women, Resistance and Revolution,* Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974; *Women in Movement* , Routledge, London, 1992.

3 *Paradise Lost* , IV, 299.

4 The Metaphysical poets are a case in point (one thinks here of poems such as Donne's 'Extasie' or 'The Good Morrow'); Dante's Beatrice, moreover, to trace some of these conceptions further back, provides inspiration for Shelley's presentation of the beloved woman as the medium through whom both sexes will attain to a more sublime state of existence; and maybe something of this idea is presented in the figure of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* (also the site, of course, of Aristosphanes' fable of an original sexual union).

5 As witness Blake's idyll in 'Visions of the Daughters of Albion', Plate 11, 24-30:

> But silken nets and traps of adamant will Oothoon spread,
> and catch for thee girls of mild silver, or of furious gold;
> I'll lie beside thee on a bank and view their wanton play
> In lovely copulation bliss on bliss with Theotormon:
> Red as the rosy morning, lustful as the first born beam,
> Oothoon shall view his dear delight, nor e'er with jealous cloud
> Come in the heaven of generous love; nor selfish blightings bring.

It should be said, too, that to the extent that this vision became translated into practice, as it did in modest fashion among certain pockets of Owenite socialist-feminism, it did not prove altogether lyrical, least of all for the female parties to the experiment (see Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, Virago, London, 1983, pp. 43-8).

6 For a discussion of some of these themes in German Romanticism, see Ursula Vogel, 'Humboldt and the Romantics: Neither *Hausfrau* nor *Citoyenne* . The Idea of "Self-Reliant Femininity" in German Romanticism', in Ellen Kennedy and Susan Mendus, eds, *Women in Western Political Philosophy*, Wheatsheaf, Brighton, 1987, pp. 106-26.

7 Charles Fourier, *Oeuvres Complètes,* Anthropos, Paris, 1966, I, pp. 131-3. With this we may compare Frances Wrights's comment that 'women, however high or low in the scale of civilisation, hold the destinies of mankind'; or William Thompson's that 'a comparative sketch ... of the state of married women in different countries ... would show that the happiness ... of the whole of society, is in direct ratio to an approach of equality'; or that of Annie Wheeler: 'When I advocate the rights of women ... I do it under the most perfect conviction that I am also pleading the cause of men by showing the mighty influence women hold over the happiness or misery of men themselves, according as they are instructed or ignorant, fettered or free' (all cited in Taylor, pp. 29-30).

8 Robert Owen, *Lectures on the Marriages of the Priesthood in the Old Immoral World*, quoted in Taylor, op. cit., p. 42.

9 From the *Socialists Social Hymnbook*, quoted in Taylor, op. cit., p. 209.

10 J.S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, Virago, London, 1983, p. 177.

11 Quoted in H. Kent Geiger, *The Family in Soviet Russia*,

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1968; cf. Rowbotham, *Women , Resistance and Revolution*, 1972, Ch. 6, esp. pp. 140-158.

12 Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour*, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1911, pp. 296-7; cf. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, Virago, London, 1992, p. 48.

13 Thus Keith Pearson: 'Feminists must show that the emancipation of women will tend not only to increase the stability of society and the general happiness of mankind, but will favour the health and physique of both sexes' (*The Ethics of Free Thought. A Selection of Essays*, London, 1988, p. 391); Havelock Ellis argued that women will bring a 'reinvigoration as complete as any brought by the barbarians to an effete and degenerating civilisation' (*The New Spirit*, London, 1890, p. 9). According to Penny Boumelha (*Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*, Harvester, Hassocks, 1982) 'new woman' fiction of the 1880s-90s is to be read as very concerned with the new moral mission to use female 'influence' to reform society.

14 See Sheila Jeffreys, '"Free from all uninvited touch of man": Women's campaigns around sexuality, 1880-1914', in Elizabeth Sarah, ed. *Reassessments of 'First Wave' Feminism*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1982, pp. 629-46; and *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, Pandora, London, 1985. Cf. Lucy Bland, 'Feminist Vigilantes in Late Victorian England', in Carol Smart, ed., *Regulating Womanhood*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 33-52.

15 Cristobel Pankhurst, *Plain Facts about a Great Evil (the Great Scourge and How to End it)*, Women's Social and Political Union, London, 1913, p. 3f. Cf. Jeffreys, op. cit., p. 640.

16 Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* , p. 171.

17 Cf. Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women,* pp. 146-7; cf. p. 150.

18 One might contrast Hardy with Lawrence in this respect. Whereas in Hardy's case, it would seem mistaken to construe any intimations to be found in his work of the 'difficulties' posed by feminism for heterosexual relating as an 'anti-feminist' warning of the consequences of female advance, this is much less clearly the case with Lawrence – whose fears of 'some ghastly Clytemnestra victory ahead for the women' (letter to Robert Mountsier, 20 January 1917, quoted in H. Simpson, *D.H. Lawrence and Feminism*, Northern Illinois Press, Illinois, 1982, p. 67) clearly speak in this direction. It is arguable, in fact, that despite his interest in an androgynous fusing of male and female principles, Lawrence in the end reverts to a classic ideology of complementary but separate spheres . On the other hand, fears of the emasculating effects of feminism must be a factor to be born in mind in considering the actual import of female emancipation for erotic relations between the sexes.

19 This pessimism, we might note, was by no means to everyone's taste, and indeed provoked some feminist criticism formulated from within the heterosexual utopian framework of thinking. We feel, wrote the reviewer in the *Illustrated London News* in 1893: 'that between two persons so clear-sighted, so outspoken and so fully aware of the pitfalls of married life, the natural end would be a real marriage – that is to say, an equal union, in which each would respect the freedom and individuality of the other, and in which each would find the completest development' (quoted in Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 33).

20 Nina Auerbach has remarked that Victoria herself, hostile as she was to feminism, and as committed as any woman of her time could be to the sanctity of marriage, and conventionally subordinate role of women within it, becomes iconic of an indomitable feminine solitude in the very perdurance of her widowed condition (*Woman and the Demon* , Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1982, pp. 119-20).

21 On this too, see Auerbach, pp. 82-8.

22 Barbara Caine has rejected any interpretation of 'first wave' feminism as concerned only with the single woman, and argues that the campaign for the reform of the legal situation of married women was the first one around which the movement organised a sustained campaign, occupying the attention of almost all the prominent members until the passage of the Married Women's Property Act in 1982 ('Feminism, Suffrage and the Nineteenth Century English Women's Movement', in Sarah, op. cit., pp. 541-2). Even so vocal a critic of marital dependency as Frances Cobbe, defended its 'rightness': 'For the mass of mankind, marriage is the right condition, the happiest, and the most conductive to virtue' (quoted in Caine, p. 543). Josephine Butler, too, who led the agitation against the Contagious Diseases Act from 1869 onwards, is said to have viewed feminism as directed ultimately to expanding the moral sway of women with a view to the transformation of men, ibid. p. 547.

23 For a critique of the radical and cultural feminist 'retreat' from the more 'utopian' agenda of 1970s feminism, see Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female?,* Virago, London, 1986, esp. ch. 2, 3, 6. While Segal makes out a powerful case for viewing these forms of feminist argument as a reactionary betrayal of the promise of feminism, she also makes the important point that the relative silence within the 1970s movement on heterosexuality contributed to the strength of the separatist lesbian analysis in the post-1978 period (pp. 87-8). See also, Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments*, Merlin, London, 1979; Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, Virago, London, 1990; Anna Coote and Bea Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, Picador/Pan, London, 1982. Unfortunately, Segal's *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure,* Virago, London, 1994 – a full scale attempt to make good the silence of the 1970s – was published too late to take into account here.

24 For an account of some of these reactions, and a defence of the lesbian position, see Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax,* The Womens Press, 1990, pp. 287-316 (now reprinted in *The Woman Question,* second edition, ed. Mary Evans, Sage, London, 1994, pp. 54-75).

25 Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in *The Signs Reader,* eds Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983 (also in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow *et al.*, Virago, London, 1984); Monique Wittig, 'The Straight Mind', *Feminist Issues*, Fall 1980, pp. 103-11; 'One is Not Born a Woman', *Feminist Issues*, Fall 1981, pp. 47-54; *The Lesbian Body*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1973; Luce Irigaray, *Speculum*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1985; *This Sex Which Is Not One,* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1985 (and see the bibliography in Margaret Whitford, ed.*The Irigaray Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991); Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, London, 1990; *Bodies that Matter*, Routledge, London, 1993 (where it is argued that the 'regulatory norms of "sex" work in a performative fashion ... to materialize sexual difference in the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative', p. 2).

26 For some discussion of feminism's impact in this respect, see Segal, *Slow Motion*, pp. 276ff.

27 These issues are extensively discussed in Segal, *Slow Motion*, see esp. pp. 280ff; cf Victor Seidler, ed.,*The Achilles Heel Reader: Men, Sexual Politics and Socialism*, Routledge, London, 1991; and Seidler, *Unreasonable Men*, London, Routledge, 1994, pp. 94-120.