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The Social Dreamer Who Chose Utopia

Raffaella Baccolini

This is a personal recollection of Lyman Tower Sargent that stresses his enormous contribution—personal and academic—to the community of utopian studies. After a brief recollection of our academic interactions, the short contribution pays homage to a “social dreamer” who is aware that utopia can be dangerous but is equally sure that it is absolutely essential if we are to survive.

Keywords: personal recollection, utopian studies, Lyman Tower Sargent

I first met Lyman Tower Sargent at the international conference “Per una definizione dell’utopia: Metodologie e discipline a confronto” (For a Definition of Utopia: Comparing Methodologies and Disciplines), which was held in the Tuscan town Bagni di Lucca in 1990. I had just started working on dystopia, and the conference was my first real encounter with the world of utopian studies. From among the scholars present at the conference, Lyman immediately struck me with his generosity and his somewhat “severe, stark” attitude. Those of you who know Lyman know what I mean. I would bet that all of you have received an e-mail from Lyman whose entire message consisted in a laconic “Yes,” “No,” or “Looks good to me” if he was in a good mood. But if you know Lyman, it’s also very likely that you’ve been the recipient of his great generosity. Through the years, I—as many others, especially young scholars—have benefited from his genuine interest in my work, his insightful suggestions, and his ready availability to share his knowledge with the community of utopians. All this graced by a sharp, yet gentle sense of humor.

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The conference where I met Lyman took place in the beautiful Villa la Torre, which the Clarke sisters had donated to the University of Bologna in the 1970s. When I gave what was one of my first presentations, we were all seated around a long series of tables in the beautiful but unadorned seminar room of the villa. As I delivered my talk, I apparently was wagging one of my legs back and forth—nervously and vigorously, it seems. I hadn't noticed. Lyman had, however, and at the end of the day, he gently let me know it. But while at the time he made fun of my anxiety, it was also when he first encouraged me to pursue my work on dystopia, which is something he has continued to do ever since.

In the 1990s I also worked as Lyman's assistant editor for *Utopian Studies*, the journal he founded and which has become the main point of reference for the community of utopian scholars. I learned a lot working there—I was in charge of editing reviews, which I did by hand and then exchanged them with Lyman through snail mail (!). And like the journal, his scholarly work has also become a reference point for many, starting with his foundational essay "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited" (1994)—the first thing I have any student who wants to work on utopian literature read.

Through the years we have worked together on many different projects—each time an opportunity to learn from Lyman and appreciate his pragmatic, no-frills approach. But as I have developed my own ideas on dystopia, there has emerged a difference in how we regard our relationship to utopia. Like the majority of my colleagues and friends, Lyman was and still is part of the community because of utopia, because *he is* utopian. Lyman is a person who chose utopia from the very beginning. I, on the other hand, joined the community because of my interest in dystopia. I have often wondered what that said about me. Jokingly, Lyman once told me it was because I had no use for imagination and dreams. The joke, however (as jokes often do), reveals for me two significant "truths." On the one hand, Lyman's remark about dreams and imagination nagged me for quite some time, but it also urged me to think about the importance and the use of dystopia in sustaining and maintaining utopia and hope. But it also reveals Lyman's stance on the importance of utopia, as he has so forcefully advocated in "Choosing Utopia: Utopianism as an Essential

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Element in Political Thought and Action.” While he is aware that utopia “can be dangerous,” he is equally sure that it is “absolutely essential” if we are to survive. And he quotes the King James Version of the Bible to support his thesis: “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (2007, 303). As a founding and fundamental member of the community of utopian studies, Lyman and his work—whether in political thought, in communitarianism, or in the enormous bibliography he has made available to us all through open access (2016–)—are a reminder of the importance to choose and work for utopia, in order to nourish an attitude for change: “Thus, we must choose Utopia. We must choose the belief that the world can be radically improved; we must dream socially; and we must allow our social dreams to affect our lives. The choice for Utopia is a choice that the world can be radically improved” (2007, 306).

I am extremely grateful for and regardful of how much Lyman has touched my life.

Raffaella Baccolini teaches British and American literature and gender studies at the University of Bologna, Forlì Campus. She has published several articles on women’s writing, dystopia and science fiction, trauma and memory, modernism, and young adult literature. She has edited several volumes, among which are *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (with Tom Moylan, Routledge, 2003) and *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming* (also with Tom Moylan, Peter Lang, 2007). She is currently working on kindness, solidarity, and feminist education as utopian, political acts.

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