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# TRANSHUMANISM AND UTOPIA IN KENNETH FOLINGSBY'S *MEDA*: A TALE OF THE FUTURE

A b s t r a c t. The paper examines the evolutionary aspect of morality in Kenneth Folingsby's *Meda: A Tale of the Future*, a nineteenth-century utopia, in the context of the transhumanist tenets of progress and enhancement *sensu* Nick Bostrom, Max More, and others. A literary descendant of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*, the key evolutionary utopia of the late Victorian period, Folingsby's narrative depicts progressive disembodiment of the futuristic eutopia as a result of the unprecedented development of the human brain. Echoing Bulwer-Lytton's satirical stance on the implications of the evolutionary process, *Meda* attempts, thus, to delineate the guided evolution of the utopian community in terms of the correlation between moral progress and intellectual enhancement.

**Keywords:** transhumanism; utopia; brain; disembodiment.

On 3 June 1871, *The Spectator* published "Satiric Utopias," a review of selected utopian texts printed in the same year, such as George Tomkyns Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking*, Pieter Harting's *Anno Domini 2071*, and the most prominent amongst them, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*. The anonymous reviewer made no attempt to disguise his discontent with what he saw as "half-satiric, half-credulous fancies" (9) (with *The Coming Race* considered generously the "most elaborate of all" [9]):

> The point we wish to note is that the Utopian dreams of our day, while they are not, as in former days, savage satires on our actual world, and are even hopeful of physical progress, are laughingly incredulous of any other progress except what may be due to the stimulus of new physical conditions. (10)

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Such a conclusion, according to the author, is rooted in "the vagueness of the thought of our day in relation to moral ideals. In physics men know what to look for. In morals they do not" (11). The rather caustic accusation of the lack of any moral development, if not of downright indifference towards moral values, echoes some of the most fervent discussions on the relationship between progress and morality in the era of Darwin.[1] Yet, contrary to the reviewer's assertions, *The Coming Race*, Bulwer-Lytton's subterranean utopia, foregrounds the connection between the evolved physiology of the Vril-ya, the novel's superhuman race, and their advanced morality. As it happens, the Vril-ya, whose physiology was formed during thousands of years of isolated evolution, developed the so-called "moral organs," which account for their impeccable moral standards that seem both admirable and frightening to the human protagonist. These organs,

> such as conscientiousness and benevolence, are amazingly full; amativeness and combativeness are both small; adhesiveness large; the organ of destructiveness (i.e., of determined clearance of intervening obstacles) immense, but less than that of benevolence; and their philoprogenitiveness takes rather the character of compassion and tenderness to things that need aid or protection than of the animal love of offspring. (Bulwer-Lytton 116–117)

The Vril-ya's "moral perfection" (Bulwer-Lytton 79) is attainable only by those who have reached the sufficient level of evolutionary development, with other races perceived as incapable of physiological and, subsequently, moral excellence and therefore inherently corruptive to the state's socio-biological foundations; such is the case with the human narrator, who has to flee the un-

[1] Suffice to say, in 1871, the year of publication of both Darwin's seminal *The Descent of Man* and Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*, the disputes regarding the association of evolution and moral development seemed more relevant than ever before, spurred by frequent assumptions regarding the amoral machinist view of the natural world, typically ascribed to Darwin's theory. However, as Robert J. Richards observes, Darwin "articulated nature so as to display its moral spine" (105) in accordance with his conclusion that "[n]ature is a model not only of selflessness, but of care and industry" (113). Evolution, thus, "would have moulded the most primitive human beings to react altruistically to brothers and sisters; but over the ages, cultural learning, coupled with increased intelligence, would reveal just who those brothers and sisters might be," Richards contends. As a result, "[o]ur moral instincts, [Darwin] believed, would urge us to act for the benefit of others without calculating pleasures and pains for self" (Richards 112-113). Still, the issue whether we actually improve morally in the course of evolution was by no means settled even amongst Darwin's most ardent proponents. According to Julia Hermann, Thomas Henry Huxley and Herbert Spencer had a strikingly disparate answer to this question, the former claiming that "the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it" (qtd. in Hermann), contrasted with the latter's belief that "in order to achieve moral progress, we must let natural selection do its work" (Hermann).

derground commonwealth the moment he becomes a threat to the racial homogeneity of the utopian nation.

The Vrilyan example of the correlated transformation of physiology and morality evokes some of the key tenets of transhumanism, approached in the context of this paper as "an ethical claim to the effect that technological enhancement of human capacities is a desirable aim" (Roden 9).[2] "Transhumanist Declaration," perhaps the most recognizable proclamation of the transhumanist movement, endorses the necessity of including "responsible and inclusive moral vision," coupled with "moral responsibilities towards generations that will exist in the future" (54). While Nick Bostrom acknowledges that "[i]t is a separate question what the moral status would be of human and posthuman beings" ("Why I Want" 4), the possibility of moral progress cannot be discarded. "A posthuman could also be able to grow as a person in moral and spiritual dimensions without those extrinsic spurs that are sometimes necessary to affect such growth in humans," Bostrom argues. "The ability to spontaneously develop in these dimensions could be seen as an aspect of emotional capacity" (21). How extensive these spontaneous changes might be remains an open question, and as such, a fertile ground for speculation.

The transhumanist yearning for what Michael Hauskeller describes as "humanity's salvation in emerging and converging technologies and technological growth in general" (13) clearly aligns with the utopian belief in the betterment of human existence.[3] Bostrom's assertion regarding the need for "reconfigured physical situation" ("Letter" 4) is, therefore, based on the assumption that physiological modifications are fundamental to the creation of a transhumanist utopia. The correspondence between the perfected individual body and the welfare of the community reflects the utopian connection between the body natural and the body politic, one of the central precepts of a stable commonwealth. As Naomi Jacobs points out, the utopian framework involves, by definition, "the projection of new ways to manage populations of human bodies and to reform the individual body, with its inchoate and often social drives" (3). In what follows, the aspect of corporeality is perceived as "both as an obstacle to success in its stubborn disorderliness, and the territory

[2] Roden differentiates between transhumanism and speculative posthumanism, identifying posthumans as "technologically engendered beings that are no longer human" (9). For the sake of clarity, I approach both Victorian utopias in the article from the transhumanist perspective.

[3] Max More argues against conflating transhumanism with utopia, insisting that "[t]he former is essentially a process of perpetual change whereas the latter is a state of stasis" (More 14). However, Gregory Claeys clearly denounces such a perspective, arguing that "Utopia is not synonymous with perfectionism, but represents a guided improvement of human behaviour" (Claeys, "When Does Utopianism Produce Dystopia?" 44).

upon which any new order must ultimately be mapped" (Jacobs 3). As a site of control and contestation, the utopian body is, thus, re-appropriated by means of various procedures of population control, most notably eugenics and euthanasia, particularly common in nineteenth-century utopian narratives.[4]

In a transhumanist context, the inherent frailty of the organic body is remedied by diverse forms of (dis)embodiment, since, according to Max More, "[r]ather than denying the body, transhumanists typically want to choose its form and be able to inhabit different bodies, including virtual bodies" (15). The latter form (including the process of "mind uploading"—replicating neurological systems in machines that Roden calls "soul engines" [19]) is a matter of controversy for those post/transhumanist scholars who see such a transformation in the context of gradual dehumanization of the disembodied subject. "Interpreted through metaphors resonant with cultural meanings," N. Katherine Hayles elucidates, "the body itself is a congealed metaphor, a physical structure whose constraints and possibilities have been formed by an evolutionary history that intelligent machines do not share" (284). Charles T. Rubin makes a similar observation, arguing that "the progress of dehumanization runs from vile bodies to healthy bodies to redesigned bodies to no bodies at all" (74). In what seems a testimony to their everlasting validity, these are precisely the same hopes and fears expounded by the two late nineteenth-century utopias addressed in this paper—the already mentioned Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* and Kenneth Folingsby's *Meda: A Tale of the Future*, the focus of the analysis to follow. A progeny of its far more famous predecessor, *Meda* (1888) is based on a similar plot pattern based on the human protagonist's encounter with an evolutionary advanced utopian community. Thus, in both *Meda* and *The Coming Race* evolution (incidentally, the word appears neither in Folingsby's nor Bulwer-Lytton's work in Darwinian context) is the main impetus of the transhumanist transformation from the supposedly inferior human condition to Bostrom's vision of "lasting bliss" ("Letter" 2).[5]

Folingsby's narrative is an amalgam of a utopian narrative and dream allegory as an account of the first-person narrator's feverish vision during a prolonged bout of a mysterious illness.[6] Unlike the parallel reality of the Vril-

[4] For further information, see, for example, Gregory Claeys "Socialism and the 'Eugenic Turn' in British Utopianism, 1875-1900."

[5] For further analysis of *The Coming Race* as an evolutionary utopia, see, for instance, Richard Gerber, *Utopian Fantasy* and W.H.G. Armytage "Extrapolators and Exegetes of Evolution."

[6] There are actually two first-person narrators in the novel (whose full title includes the phrase "as related by Kenneth Folingsby," the name itself regarded today to be an authorial pseudonym):

ya, *Meda* is set in 5575 in Scotonia (former Scotland), whose inhabitants, Scotonians, belong to the global collective of the Modern British People. Yet, similarly to Bulwer-Lytton's narrative, *Meda* has a discernible satirical focus, made evident in the depiction of the utopians' evolved physiology, which functions as an example of the progressive disembodiment of the utopian commonwealth and, in extension, its dehumanization. *The Coming Race*'s statuesque physique is repurposed here into the small disproportionate body frame of the Scotonians, who are required to wear ankle weights in order to stay close to the ground. "These people must be a description of animated balloon" (Folingsby 34), the narrator contends as he observes his evolutionary descendants with "the big heads and the prominent liquid grave-looking eyes, and the little bits of legs taking prodigious strides, and spinning along over stones and brushwood at a speed of at least ten miles an hour" (35). Still, while initially perceived as grotesque, the altered physiology enables the utopians to eschew food and draw necessary nutrition from the atmosphere instead:

> We have worked in this direction for thousands of years, and the result has been that we now live purely by respiration, and have reduced their functions to that of supplying moisture to the body. You will notice that our chests are very large, because we require greater lung power, now that we have dispensed with solid food. This organ of respiration has been increased by nature to meet the requirements of the new conditions under which we live. In the present age it is only the lower animal creation that eat, and need the power of digestion. (57)

As the essential element of utopian disembodiment, effected by such disasters as overpopulation, warfare, and finally the impact of a comet, the gradual renunciation of food becomes an issue of an explicitly moral dimension, exemplified by the fact that "the free eaters" (Folingsby 159), those members of the society who refused to join the abstainers, died in the wake of the ecological catastrophe. The mass extinction of the "non-believers" (Folingsby 254) is interpreted here as the act of moral judgment upon the sinful city-dwellers, the epitome of "the lowest depths of degradation" (Folingsby 252), who perished in the environmental apocalypse.[7] Conse-

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the first one appears in the Introduction where he describes the circumstances of his meeting with one Kenneth Folingsby, who then recounts his oneiric visit to Scotonia. For the sake of clarity, I use the name Folingsby as a reference to the assumed author of the text in question.

[7] John M. Christensen makes an interesting observation about a certain inconsistency regarding the source of the global upheaval in *Meda*: "Here the city dwellers are destroyed, it is hinted, because they have offended God by becoming gluttons and by obscuring the natural beauty of His creation with hideous urban centers. But the means of their destruction implies a perspective

quently, the narrative repeatedly emphasizes the moral superiority of the non-eaters, "the stronger and more intelligent" (Folingsby 254) of the two factions, who have abandoned the cities for the puritan life in the countryside, and, as a result, "became more and more elevated" (Folingsby 253).

The evolutionary shift accounts for the organisation of the entire state, depicted in the narrative as the combination of advanced technology with a quasi-paradisiacal setting of a transhumanist Garden of Eden. Scotonians employ numerous high-tech devices, such as "a moonbeam telephone" (Folingsby 111) for long-distance communication, an advanced system of sending messages (proto-emails, one could assume), holograms, and a superb system of aerial and marine transportation, amongst others. At the same time, Scotonia is a decidedly rural state, as the cities, the symbols of the corrupt past, have been abandoned, with utopians residing in quaint villas and cottages (except for various administrative halls and the capital). While travelling around the country, the narrator sees landscape "dotted all over with small houses surrounded with gardens resplendent with beautiful flowers" (Folingsby 95). "The whole seemed to me like one great pleasure garden" (Folingsby 95), he mentions, with "no fields of corn, no utilitarian tillage—all appeared to be laid out for pleasure and intellectual enjoyment" (Folingsby 96). The juxtaposition of scientific prowess with the purposefully archaic body of the land (signalled by the lack of any utilitarian facilities) constitutes, hence, the reflection of Scotonians' disembodied physiology based on the predominance of the mental faculties over the physical.[8]

Similarly, Scotonian socio-political system reflects the aforementioned association of tradition and evolutionary progress in what seems a futurist rendition of the Victorian period. The British Empire of the future (of which Scotonia is a part) is still a Christian monarchy, its king ("[l]ike good, wise Queen Victoria of my era" [Folingsby 206]) assuming the role of the supreme judge, and the Central Government and the Assembly/Upper House functioning as the executive and the legislative branch respectively. Simultaneously, the social structure is stratified in correlation with the individual level of intellect, for "[a]n intellectual standard is the only standard of nobility that can

contrary to the theocentric one Folingsby wishes to affirm; as the climate changed over the centuries, it favored and preserved those self-disciplined few who fled the cities and became accustomed to the rigors of country life."

[8] Cultural canons and aesthetics are also re-appropriated in congruence with the new paradigms of beauty and harmony. During his visit to the Society for Arts and Science, the narrator observes students working upon the living model of "a large-headed, big-chested Venus" (Folingsby 74), which evokes horror in the protagonist astonished by "calling such monstrosities as these, models of the ancients" (Folingsby 75).

ever endure" (Folingsby 126). The resulting social hierarchy is therefore approached as the staple element of the dominant moral order, since "[i]n man the Creator has decreed that all shall not have mental equality; one mind must predominate over another" (Folingsby 68). To make matters even more intriguing, despite such assertions, the monarch is not supposed to be endowed with supreme intelligence, for "[i]f we had a king possessed of an overpowering intellect, that intellect would have some particular bent or inclination, that it might try and force on the people against their will" (Folingsby 208).[9]

In a state governed by the conjoined precepts of morality and intellect, the human narrator is a remnant of the sinful days of gluttony, whose inferior evolutionary status is accentuated by his byname of a Specimen; as he contends, his utopian host "seemed to care for me as one in my day would have cared for a favourite horse or dog" (Folingsby 115).[10] Accordingly, the protagonist physiological condition is a reflection of his unevolved morality; when the narrator sees his own internal organs by means of a three-dimensional X-ray device, he reacts with shame and revulsion: "I never had my badness so fully laid bare to me before," he admits, "and I hope I shall never experience the same humiliation again" (Folingsby 85–86). Nevertheless, despite his initial apprehension, he eventually comes to recognize Scotonians' evolutionary superiority. As his own body begins to adapt to the new environment, the narrator falls in love with Meda, his host's daughter, marries her, and begins a life of "the most supreme happiness" (Folingsby 276). In his own words,

> I fully realised now that I was amid new scenes, in what was to me a new world, and among a new people—a people so full of interest, so full of wisdom, so devoted to science and art, and apparently so devoid of vice, that I believed that the human race had at last arrived at something nearly approaching perfection, if not perfection itself. (Folingsby 182)

The gradual re-appropriation of the narrator's body constitutes, hence, the key aspect of the underlying process of disembodiment as the indispensable element of the utopian condition.[11] Foregrounded here is the symbolic

[9] The largely monolithic state is also based on a unified language and a national religion, which is described briefly as Christianity "in its pure simplicity" (Folingsby 134), stripped of what Scotonians consider "all sectarian dogmas which were purely the creations of man" (Folingsby 134).

[10] Similarly, in *The Coming Race* the human narrator was nicknamed Tish, meaning "a small barbarian" (Bulwer-Lytton 176).

[11] In contrast to More's aforementioned assumptions, Scotonia is by no means a static model. On the contrary, it is always developing, since "perfection—that is a goal we can never attain" (Folingsby 140).

significance of the human brain, whose extraordinary development reflects Scotonians' evolutionary superiority; in a particularly poignant scene the narrator visits the local Museum where he admires its main exhibit, "a great model of a Brain" (Folingsby 81–82), in comparison to which the narrator's brain is "diminutive in size, […] crude in construction, […] uncultivated" (Folingsby 85). What seems particularly interesting, various components of the presented world in *Meda* assume the symbolic function of cerebral elements. The diminutive bodies of the utopians, capable of transmitting electrical charge, are reminiscent of neural activity (as a matter of fact, the narrator's host is called the Recorder). What is more, their telepathic abilities and methods of rapid transportation facilitated by the so-called lines of force (explained in the text as a combination of electricity and magnetism) evoke the connotation with synapses in the utopian global brain *sensu* Francis Heylighen as "the emerging intelligent network that is formed by all people on this planet together with the computers, knowledge bases and communication links that connect them together" (Heylighen 2). In what follows, Heylighen's metaphor aptly accentuates *Meda*'s focus on technological acuity as the cornerstone of the evolved utopian state in which the inhabitants of utopia resemble transhumanist "flesh made data" (Miller 215).

However, the progressive renunciation of the body becomes the main dehumanizing factor in Folingsby's narrative. In a curious revision (mutation, one is tempted to add) of *The Coming Race*, the utopian morality in *Meda* becomes the faculty of the intellect, and of intellect only. Consequently, as the narrator learns from his host, "immorality is unknown, the fact being that intelligence has gained such a control over our people's passions that everything is held subservient to it" (Folingsby 143). Akin to other utopian narratives of the period, the startling level of technological development in *Meda* is paired with an extremely conservative social model, whose tenets ban consecutive marriages as well as introduce methods of population control (no more than four children for a married couple), class discrimination (termed as the requirement of "a presumed educational equality" [Folingsby 141] between partners), and eugenics. Unable to comply with these standards assumedly due to his evolutionary deficiency, the narrator commits a cardinal transgression by accidentally mentioning his first marriage back in the nineteenth century. Immediately arrested and put on trial, he is eventually sentenced to the most severe of punishments in Scotonia, during which the culprits are released from their ankle weights to drift forever in space. Therefore, what the narrator sees as "an intellectual

refinement of cruelty" (Folingsby 250) constitutes the ultimate breach between the utopian body natural and the body politic, with the transgressor banished into the state of perpetual exile: "Only think of a living being floating away into an interminable space, and that being one who could live without food,—a being that had a mind, that could think, and hope, and fear" (Folingsby 250).[12] After a long period of floating in "terrible solitude" (Folingsby 315) and despairing over the seemingly incomprehensible discrepancy between the utopian benevolence and severity (both which, it should be added, constitute the foundations of the evolved utopian state in *Meda* and *The Coming Race*), the protagonist finally awakes from what turns out to be a terrible dream. Restored to consciousness in his Victorian home, alongside his faithful Victorian wife, the narrator arrives at the conclusion that his vision was a warning to his fellow humans "of what is to come" (Folingsby 325), a prophecy of the world in which the frailty of human nature, inextricably linked with its imperfect physiology, becomes its greatest crime.

In a final reference to Bulwer-Lytton's "forewarnings of The Coming Race" (292), the revelatory purport of Folingsby's narrative highlights, thus, its satirical ambivalence towards the utopian fantasy of the future. Notwithstanding the utopian perfectibility, the world of Scotonia is afflicted by astounding ignorance as to the significance of the body as the vehicle of social, cultural, and ultimately ethical standards. To return to Hayles's acute assertion, "human being is first of all embodied being" (Hayles 283). Yet, the argument goes, there exists amongst scholars "a major blind spot when it comes to the significance of embodiment. […] The body is the net result of thousands of years of sedimented evolutionary history, and it is naive to think that this history does not affect human behaviours at every level of thought and action" (Hayles 284). Such a blind spot is the apparent focus of Folingsby's utopian satire in which the proto-transhumanist paradise of advanced morality eventually devolves into a nightmare of discarnate consciousness.

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[12] Yet, the narrator's punishment is mitigated by allowing the condemned to use a rudimentary steering device, which, as it turns out, does not lessen the ordeal.

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## TRANSHUMANIZM I UTOPIA W POWIEŚCI *MEDA: A TALE OF THE FUTURE* KENNETHA FOLINGSBY'EGO

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł analizuje ewolucyjny aspekt moralności w *Meda: A Tale of the Future*, dziewiętnastowiecznej utopii Kennetha Folingsby'ego, w kontekście transhumanistycznych rozważań dotyczących kwestii postępu w ujęciu Nicka Bostroma, Maxa More'a, i innych. Powieść Folingsby'ego, literackiego potomka *The Coming Race* Edwarda Bulwer-Lyttona, ważnej utopii ewolucyjnej późnej epoki wiktoriańskiej, ukazuje proces postępującego odcieleśnienia (*disembodiment*) futurystycznej eutopii jako skutku bezprecedensowego rozwoju ludzkiego mózgu. Podobnie jako ewolucyjna satyra Bulwera-Lyttona, *Meda* ukazuje tym samym transformację utopijnej społeczności w kontekście powiązania moralnego postępu z intelektualnym rozwojem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** transhumanism; utopia; mózg; odcieleśnienie.