



## Dante Among the Machines: Margaret Oliphant's 'The Land of Darkness'

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In this week's Dispatches from the Secret Library, Dr Oliver Tearle considers a curious dystopian story by Queen Victoria's favourite novelist

The terms 'dystopian' and 'ecology' both gained currency in the mid-nineteenth century, although 'dystopia' has been traced back even earlier. The Victorian era witnessed the emergence of a new genre of science fiction, dystopian literature, which would produce several classic novels of the twentieth century. Victorian writers used this new genre to fashion responses to the dramatic social and technological changes they were living through, chiefly the discovery of Darwinian evolution and the rise of industrialisation in the period. The changing landscape of Victorian Britain played an important part in how authors of early dystopian works addressed questions about what we now call 'the environment': in both Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885) and H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), the crowded smoggy metropolis of contemporary London was refigured in some future age as a wild garden, following some dramatic alteration in the world's climate.

These two novels are widely known, and although they touch upon the subject of climate change, this issue forms only a small part of their narratives. Other, more neglected works of fiction from the period considered the impact of industrialisation and scientific change on the landscape of England more fully. W. H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887), for instance, posited a utopian future world where mankind has reverted to a pastoral ideal involving the rejection of technology in favour of more agrarian principles. This work of 'ecological mysticism' would influence a number of later novels in this subgenre. But although Hudson's novel is poised between utopia and dystopia – his narrator, 'Smith', discovers that the pastoral paradise of the future has eradicated romantic love and has no need for deeper human relationships – other fictional texts from the period are firmly dystopian in their outlook. Margaret Oliphant's short story 'The Land of Darkness' is an important and overlooked example of this emerging genre.

'The Land of Darkness' was written in late 1886 and published in the January edition of Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine* the following year. Although it was largely forgotten after its

publication, it is an important early example of dystopian fiction. In his critical biography of Oliphant, Merryn Williams points up the fact that Oliphant anticipates the great dystopian writers of the twentieth century. Jenni Calder has analysed 'The Land of Darkness' as a reflection of Oliphant's fears about the modern world, a hell on earth lacking in spiritual depth or enlightenment. The most obvious inspiration for the story is Dante, the poet who had charted the allegorical journey from the inferno of hell through to the paradise of heaven, but the title seems to have been suggested to Oliphant by a biblical passage from the Book of Job: 'Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death' (10:21). The bitter undercurrent to Oliphant's story is that, just as there is no return from death, so there is no return from the hellish industrial and scientific 'progress' which the nineteenth century had advanced.

'The Land of Darkness', which is nominally a part of Oliphant's series of stories featuring a character known as the Little Pilgrim, but is in many ways distinct from other tales in the series, purports to be 'drawn from the Archives' which the female Pilgrim has learned about. The nameless male narrator finds himself in the afterlife, a hellish world in which, he soon discovers, self-interest and self-preservation are the primary goals of every inhabitant. This Darwinian world is also highly urban, with traffic and brightly lit shops among the first things the narrator encounters. The narrator learns that all the institutions he held dear in the Victorian world he has left behind, such as hospitals, the police, and the legal system, are unheard of in this infernal world. In the course of the story, and as he wanders through this world, the narrator encounters a man being tortured – in what looks like a live vivisection – on an operating table, descends into the underground mines where he finds scores of men slaving away for gold, finds a place of excessive pleasure which proves just as unbearable as the mines, and finally encounters robotic creatures which are being made to do the work of men, in a vision of work which is poised between a depiction of real-life Victorian manual labour and a hellish Dantean future.

The story is evidently meant to reflect Oliphant's contemporary Victorian world as she saw it: for the deeply religious novelist, Christian values were being eroded and scientific experimentation and technological progress were now man's chief passion. The Dantean and Christian elements to the story were what initial reviewers chose to focus on, but it is the story's depiction of a dystopian world of machinery and slave labour – and, above all, a sort of proto-robotics – that makes it most relevant to a modern readership. 'The Land of Darkness' is preoccupied with the increasing industrialisation and urbanisation of the Victorian period, and the implications this has for morality and human relations. Hell is the dystopia of dystopias, for 'dystopia' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible' and hell is man's supreme imaginative vision of such a place.

What sets apart Oliphant's story from the dystopian visions of future writers such as Huxley and Orwell is that, rather than projecting her negative world into some future period, she instead chooses to set her dystopia in the afterlife, making her dystopia a literal rather than merely metaphorical hell. The story is noteworthy for its images of machinery which equate industrial technology with hellish torture devices. The fires of the gold mines and the infernal flames of eternal torment are merely two sides of the same coin. In this respect, Oliphant prefigures Thomas Hardy's famous images of infernal agricultural machinery in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). But Oliphant's story is also an extension of the dystopian world glimpsed in Samuel Butler's influential anti-utopian novel *Erewhon*, published in 1872.

In Butler's novel, the world of *Erewhon* ('nowhere', or utopia, almost perfectly inverted) has banned machines because they pose a threat to the future of humanity, since machinery is evolving faster than organic life and is therefore likely to take over as the dominant force in the world, if its progress goes unchecked. Additionally, in Oliphant's story, the narrator's journey into the

underground mines echoes not only the journey into the underworld in Greek and Roman mythology but also the narrator's descent in the mineshaft in Bulwer-Lytton's earlier dystopian romance, *The Coming Race* (1871). It also prefigures the underground descent made by 'Smith', the protagonist of W. H. Hudson's novel *A Crystal Age*, published in the same year as Oliphant's story.

'The Land of Darkness' was out of print for decades, but it was reprinted a few years ago in *The Beleaguered City: and Other Tales of the Seen and the Unseen* (Canongate Classics) by Oliphant, Margaret (2009) Paperback. Like these earlier texts – and like E. M. Forster's later and more famous story 'The Machine Stops' (1909), which also offers a modern version of hell centred on a subterranean machine-dominated world – Oliphant's story equates man with machine, suggesting that humanity is being negatively altered by its increasing reliance on steam engines, coal-mining, and other technological and industrial advancements. The fact that it is a gold mine adds an extra soupçon of significance: Oliphant is also criticising the rampant capitalism of the age. Oliphant's story is thus another product of post-Darwinian thinking that sees people as soulless biological entities, whose actions and attitudes have now also become further mechanised in the wake of industrialisation. The pious Oliphant wishes to rescue humanity from the stark mechanistic clutches of technology, and redeem and restore the spiritual and moral aspects of mankind that technological progress, in her view, had eroded.

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Image: picture of Margaret Oliphant via Wikimedia Commons.