Abandon hope all ye who enter here: a society cannot be truly dystopian if travellers can come and go freely. Anti-utopias and ‘satirical utopias’ – that is, societies considered perfect by their advocates but not by the implied reader – must be well-regulated enough to prevent the possible disruption caused by a visitor. There is no exit at all from the classic twentieth-century dystopias, which end either in an actual death, like that of the Savage in Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), or in a spiritual death like Winston Smith’s in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Any glimmers of hope that the protagonist may have felt are quickly destroyed.

There is no question of entering the classic twentieth-century dystopias, since the protagonist is already there. At most we might expect a brief, inconsequential use of the figures of the visitor and the tour-guide inherited from earlier utopian writing. *Brave New World*, for example, opens with a group of new students being shown around the Central London Hatchery by its Director. We must wonder about these students, since surely they must be products of the very processes of cloning and conditioning they are being shown. The processes, however, are state secrets, and the students are future technicians being inducted on a ‘need to know’ basis, ‘For of course some sort of general idea they must have, if they were to do their work intelligently – though as little of one, if they were to be good and happy members of society, as possible’, the Director reflects.1 Presumably the conditioning they have been subjected to includes the removal of all memory of the techniques the Director shows them. In both Huxley’s twenty-fifth-century London and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the clocks are already striking thirteen.

But it was not always so, and the late-nineteenth century saw a remarkable last flowering of the dystopian romance, in which the narrative standpoint is external to dystopia and the plot is that of a travelogue or adventure tale. The protagonist visits a supposedly...
utopian society, falls in love there – these stories are both exotic and sexual romances – and, in most cases, narrowly escapes to tell the tale. The protagonist is invariably male, and both his entry and exit are arduous and challenging. The nature of the utopian/dystopian society comes as a distinct shock to him; at first it is merely strange and eccentric, but the more his understanding develops, the more it seems threatening and horrifying. The inhabitants are happily unconscious of their own servitude, so that novels like Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872) and W. H. Hudson’s *A Crystal Age* (1887) belong in the category of satirical or anti-utopias. (As with earlier examples such as *Gulliver’s Travels* and Cyrano de Bergerac’s *Voyages to the Moon and Sun*, it is not always immediately obvious exactly who or what is being satirised.) Nevertheless, the underlying threat and horror are fleetingly glimpsed at the moment of entry into the new society.

One of the defining features of the modern dystopia is its secrecy. There is something about these societies which cannot be admitted, something the inhabitants are not supposed to know. Thus not only is the principle of secrecy stated at the beginning of *Brave New World*, but Huxley’s plot turns on the long-concealed scandal of the Savage’s parentage and birth. Similarly, the plot of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* turns on ‘doublethink’ and the ability of O’Brien and the Inner Party to conceal their real character and motivation. Secrecy, admittedly, was admissible in the earliest utopias – thus Socrates declares in the *Republic* that ‘our rulers will find a considerable dose of falsehood and deceit necessary for the good of their subjects’ – but in any acceptable modern utopia freedom of information is surely indispensable. The satirical utopia, too, may startle the visitor with its attractive candour. In *Gulliver’s Travels* the protagonist is deeply impressed by the Houyhnhnms’ apparent inability to lie. The tour-guide in these utopias is only too willing to explain their social intricacies, and his frankness proves highly embarrassing to the less-than-utopian visitor. The Houyhnhnms, for example, find Gulliver’s anxiety to cover up his own nakedness deeply puzzling. At first they do not realise that he is wearing clothes; later, when forced to reveal what he calls ‘the Secret of my having a false covering to my Body’, he still manages to conceal his private parts. Gulliver persuades his master to keep this ‘Secret’ of his, so that his presence disrupts the Houyhnhnms’ utopia by introducing the necessity of secrecy. When the Houyhnhnms hold a Grand Council his master is ‘pleased to conceal one Particular’ of its deliberations, the decision that Gulliver
must either be treated like a Yahoo or be expelled. In fact, what is hidden by the Houyhnhnms' strained politeness towards Gulliver was strongly hinted at in the moment of arrival when he was cornered by a group of Yahoos who stared at him, made odious faces at him, and rained down their excrements on him from a tree.

The reason why Gulliver's master concealed the Grand Council's decision was, of course, that he had grown fond of his visitor. In the late nineteenth-century dystopian romances, the society's secret always bears some relation to the love interest which, I have suggested, is a defining generic feature of these romances. By linking the visitor's amorous susceptibility to the society's secret, the dystopian romance avoids the logical flaw which threatens to undermine contemporary romances depicting a positive utopia. It is true that William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) avoids this trap by deftly foiling its narrator's growing tenderness for the utopian Ellen. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* (1889), however, falls straight into it. Bellamy's nineteenth-century visitor Julian West marries and settles down with his twenty-first century beloved, regardless of the fact that her educational and eugenic standards are supposedly far in advance of his. She is a utopian and he is a visitor from the unenlightened nineteenth century, yet, far from being a forbidden love, her sexual choice is approved and encouraged by her parents. If Bellamy is unwilling to follow the logic of his utopia through to its conclusion, he also rules out the portrayal of illicit passion typical of the dystopian romance of the same period. Utopian love, it would seem, cannot be illicit. A dystopian heroine ought not to fall in love with an unsuitable partner (but doubtless she will do so); a utopian heroine will not fall in love unsuitably, since the mechanism of sexual selection has been perfected in her society. At the same time, in the dystopian romance as opposed to other kinds of erotic romance the hero's 'unsuitability' is determined in advance and before he ever meets the object of his love, since he is a visitor and an alien. Yet the hero is often naively unaware of the society's prohibitions, although his experience in entering the dystopia should have given him ample warning.

Of all the nineteenth-century utopian and dystopian romances *Erewhon* has proved to be the most baffling, as well as one of the most popular and most widely enjoyed. Unlike *A Crystal Age* or Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), it has never gone out of print since first publication. Samuel Butler's earliest readers were puzzled by his text,
and subsequent criticism and scholarship have done disappointingly little to clear up the mystery. Since it apparently resists social and political explication, *Erewhon* has not been much favoured within present-day utopian studies. The *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* calls Butler a ‘compulsive speculator in and chivvier at ideas’, a recent *Dictionary of Literary Utopias* speaks of *Erewhon*’s ‘uncertainty of purpose’, and the influential utopian scholar Darko Suvin concludes that ‘for all its qualities [Butler’s novel] might have been written by the Erewhonian professor of Inconsistency and Evasion’. Perhaps it is significant, then, that the narrative of entry into Butler’s dystopia is lengthier and more elaborate than that of any comparable late nineteenth-century romance, its only possible rival in this respect being H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895). It is, I believe, in the narrative of entry that we can track down *Erewhon*’s elusive secret.

The novel begins with a journey into the outback which rapidly becomes an allegorical pilgrimage. The narrator, who is named as Higgs only in Butler’s vastly inferior sequel *Erewhon Revisited* (1901), is a prospecting sheep-farmer in a country in the southern hemisphere evidently based on New Zealand, where Butler himself farmed between 1859 and 1864. He tries to lead Chowbok, his superstitious native guide, into a forbidden valley, but Chowbok deserts him in terror. The narrator then has to build a raft to make a perilous river crossing. Losing control of the raft, he comes aground in a strangely Crusoe-like manner without most of his stores. The next day he climbs to the pass over a range of mountains leading to a beautiful and fertile land, evidently good ranching country, which he has glimpsed from afar. At the head of the pass is a ring of giant statues looming out of the mist, ‘a sort of Stonehenge of rude and barbaric figures’ with a ‘superhumanly malevolent expression on their faces’. The wind blowing through the hollowed-out statues howls with a melody that he has earlier heard performed, with terrible grimaces, by Chowbok. The narrator falls into a dead faint, but recovers and follows the path downhill into Erewhon. The prospect before him is that of a promised land such as Moses saw, but the statues seem darkly ominous:

I was too glad to have an easy track for my flight, to lay hold of the full significance of its existence. The thought, however, soon presented itself to me that I must be in an inhabited country, but one which was yet unknown. What, then, was to be my fate at the hands of its inhabitants? Should I be taken and offered up as a burnt-offering to those hideous guardians of the pass? It might be so. (70)
The first sentence here is typical of Butler’s habit of teasing the reader, since we are never told the ‘full significance’ of the ‘easy track’ leading to the ancient ring of statues. Are they, or are they not, still frequently visited by the Erewhonians? The narrator’s forebodings about his possible fate suggest that the long narrative of entry constitutes only the first stage in what will prove a hazardous and adventurous quest for knowledge. In this respect the entry narrative follows a pattern that can be traced in many other dystopian romances of the period. Using the well-known terminology of anthropologists such as Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, it may be described as the representation of a rite of passage.

Van Gennep divided such rites into three stages, the preliminal (rites of separation), liminal (rites of transition), and postliminal (rites of incorporation).7 Modern anthropology, under the influence of Victor Turner, has focused on the liminal rites and on the uncertainties of transition or in-betweenness, rather than on the ultimate goal of reincorporation into the social structure. The transitional stage is a time of ‘reflexivity’ during which ‘Individuals (as well as the society itself) may be moved to the edge of profound self-investigation and exploration; social categories are played with, inverted, suspended; social borders are liquidated, crossed, blurred; identity symbols are stripped away and affixed anew’.8 This suggests that reading literary utopias and dystopias might itself offer some kind of liminal experience, and, indeed, the theory of liminality as developed by Turner in the late 1960s has a strongly utopian ring. Turner associates liminality with what he calls ‘communitas’ or an egalitarian, comradely, and non-hierarchical society, although he remarks that liminality may also have the reverse effect of de-socializing individuals to the point where they are engaged in a ‘Hobbesian war of all against all’.9 We should note, however, that it is the reader or, at least, the reader’s representative – the traveller or visitor from outside – and not the inhabitant of a utopia or dystopia who undergoes an experience of reflexivity challenging his or her sense of identity. Turner writes that ‘it is the fate of all spontaneous communities in history to undergo what most people see as a “decline and fall” into structure and law’, and even the most non-hierarchical utopian societies tend to represent the end-product of such a decline and fall.10 They may have passed through the stages of separation, transition and reincorporation, but the present-day citizens whom the visitor meets have usually had to learn about the society’s past through history.
lessons. Insofar as the utopia or dystopia represents a metaphorical future society, the traveller journeying towards and entering it is experiencing a speeded-up version of the society’s history.

In the late Victorian dystopian romances there is a loose narrative formula involving, I would suggest, five distinct features of the experience of liminality as outlined by van Gennep and Turner. First there is the protagonist’s separation from the structures of his society, leading to isolation, fratricidal strife, or a denial of the claims of others. Secondly, the narrator must pass a forbidden boundary, a portal which marks the end of the old world and the beginning of the new. Thirdly, the liminal state of moving between worlds involves a timeless condition, or as Turner puts it a “moment in and out of time,” or [...] a state to which the structural view of time is not applicable’. Fourthly, the moment of liminality is anthropomorphically transgressive: it is a ‘time of marvels’ in which ‘[m]asked figures, representing gods, ancestors, or chthonic powers may appear in grotesque, monstrous, or beautiful forms’. Finally, the rite of passage is, symbolically, an experience of death leading to rebirth in which the ‘biological order of birth and death is reversed’ and ‘one dies to “become a little child”’. The late nineteenth-century dystopias conform to these five conditions, and to them we may add a sixth: that the moment of rebirth or second birth is invariably shadowed by the prospect of a second death. If the visitor to dystopia has become as a little child, his is a second childhood leading not to full citizenship but to the sense of impotence and gathering exclusion associated with old age.

A comparison of the liminal episodes in four late nineteenth-century dystopian romances, The Coming Race, Erewhon, A Crystal Age and The Time Machine, is set out in the following table. The numbers 1 to 5 represent the five features of utopian/dystopian liminality:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Coming Race</th>
<th>Erewhon</th>
<th>A Crystal Age</th>
<th>The Time Machine</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rock-fall and concussion</td>
<td>Faints in front of statues.</td>
<td>Loses consciousness, entangled in roots, face in ‘mirror.’</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Engineer’s death; Vril-ya’s magical touch.</td>
<td>Near-drowning, shipwreck, entry to ‘promised land.’</td>
<td>Young man’s funeral; Smith as his replacement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Key: 1. Separation, isolation, the ‘war of all against all’; 2. Forbidden boundary or portal; 3. ‘Moment in and out of time’; 4. ‘Time of marvels’, masked figures, monsters; 5. Death or near-death leading to rebirth and (second) childhood.*

In *The Coming Race* two comrades, the narrator and a mining engineer, set out to explore a forgotten mineshaft together. By the time that they make their descent they are ‘like men afraid to speak to each other’, and soon afterwards the narrator selfishly abandons his dead or injured companion. The parting between Butler’s narrator and Chowbok has already been mentioned. Smith, the narrator of *Crystal Age*, is on a lone botanizing expedition when he falls into a deep pit. Wells’s Time Traveller shows the machine he has built to a group of dinner-guests, but then sets off alone into the future, travelling so fast that he is invisible to any other human beings whose time-space he may have crossed. This is the first stage of separation, isolating the protagonist from the rest of humankind.

Next there is the passing of a forbidden boundary or boundaries. The underground descents in the novels by Lytton and Hudson imply entry into the undiscovered country beyond the grave. The engineer in *The Coming Race* at first lacks the courage to go down into the newly opened mineshaft. The pit into which Smith falls is a kind of open grave, and, rising from the dead thousands of years later, he remains in a no man’s land with no signs of human settlement until he encounters a second open grave with a funeral procession coming towards it. Butler’s narrator enters Erewhon by passing the ring of statues, just as Lytton’s traveller is greeted in the underground world.
of the Vril-ya by a terrifying, semi-human figure with a face like ‘the sculptured sphinx’ (25). Van Gennep mentions the classical use of statues to mark a magical and forbidden boundary.14 The Time Traveller’s arrival in the world of the Eloi and Morlocks is marked by the statue of the White Sphinx. The time-travelling episode immediately before this is a journey through no man’s land providing the ‘out of time’ experience which is the third feature of the liminal passage. Time travel is an implicit feature of the romances by Hudson, Butler and Lytton, since Hudson’s ‘crystal age’ is presented as an actual far future, while Erewhon portrays a virtual or parallel future six hundred years after the first industrial revolution and four hundred years after the abolition of machinery. The Vril-ya are the ‘coming race’ in the sense that their immense technological superiority will facilitate an eventual conquest of the earth’s surface. All four dystopian romances thus offer us images of possible futures.

But each romance also includes a literal ‘out of time’ experience in which the trauma of entry brings on a fainting fit and loss of consciousness. In The Coming Race the rock-fall which kills or stuns the engineer renders the narrator unconscious. Afterwards he has a ‘sense of sickly faintness’, and while being nursed by the Vril-ya he remains unconscious ‘for many days, even for some weeks, according to our computation of time’ (28, 38). The narrator of Erewhon tells us that in front of the ring of statues ‘I suppose I must have fainted, for I found myself some time afterwards sitting upon the ground, sick and deadly cold’ (66). Smith is ‘rendered unconscious’ by his fall into the pit; when he comes to, not only has his watch disappeared but his skin and hair have become thickly encrusted with clay and roots.15 Wells’s Time Traveller falls into a mesmerized state in front of the White Sphinx, spending ‘half-a-minute, perhaps, or half-an-hour’ gazing at the statue in a trance.16

In The Time Machine it is the statue itself, half-animal, half-man, with its monstrous shape and diseased and sightless eyes that heralds the ‘time of marvels’ incorporated into the liminal passage. The sphinx, associated with the riddle of the future and the mystery of ageing, is a perfect liminal figure. No doubt this is why the Vril-ya also have sphinx-like heads. But while descending the mineshaft Lytton’s protagonist encounters another subterranean monster, a giant carnivorous reptile with a ‘vast and terrible head’ (21). The statues in Erewhon are like an ‘assembly of fiends’ (65–6). In A Crystal Age, however, it is Smith himself, not his surroundings, who for a time
becomes the embodiment of monstrosity. He drinks in a stream ‘animal fashion’ and finds the face reflected in the water completely unrecognizable. Sheep and horses shy away from him, and even the birds mistake him for an ‘unnatural monster’ (7). The people in the funeral procession think he must be suffering from brain damage.

Finally, the protagonist in each romance passes through a death or near-death experience. In *The Coming Race* the narrator is first concussed by the rock-fall and then confronted by one of the Vril-ya, whose approach awakens an instinct of danger as if he were facing a wild animal. He feels a ‘cold shudder’ (25) and falls on his knees, but the Vril-ya speaks to him, puts a hand on his forehead and touches his shoulder with a staff. The staff’s ‘magical’ touch is the moment of rebirth (26), but the narrator’s instinctive sense of alarm was not misplaced. The staff is the medium of a terrifying energy and the Vril-ya do eventually decide to kill him.

By being projected into the far future, both Smith and the Time Traveller have passed through the time of their own deaths. While looking at the Sphinx, the Time Traveller, like Butler’s narrator, has a moment of panic:

> What might appear when that hazy curtain was altogether withdrawn? What might not have happened to men? What if cruelty had grown into a common passion? […] I might seem some old-world savage animal, only the more dreadful and disgusting for our common likeness — a foul creature to be incontinently slain. (34)

But his sense of vulnerability is also a kind of rebirth, since he feels ‘naked in a strange world’ (35). Although he is temporarily lulled by the approach of the beautiful and graceful Eloi, the world he has come to is so dangerous that he will soon be driven to make a hair’s-breadth escape. *A Crystal Age* lacks the adventure narrative culminating in escape that the other three romances provide; indeed, just how Smith’s story has been brought back to our own time is never explained. The funeral procession leading to the burial of a young man at the moment of his entry into the future society means that there is, as it were, an empty space in the community for him to fill. The young man was betrothed to Yoletta, the daughter and heiress of a feudal household; Yoletta singles out Smith, and it soon seems that he is destined to succeed the young man as her future husband. But he is so ignorant of this strange, pastoral society that at first he must be treated like a child.
Hudson’s people of the future have a ‘crystal nature’, according to Smith, because they are transparent beings with nothing to hide from one another (93). But these epicene, beardless people are curiously devoid of emotion, and Smith’s susceptibility to sexual passion apparently makes him an outcast. His advances towards Yoletta are subtly foiled, and soon he begins to suspect that the society has a secret which he can never penetrate. The more the elders seem prepared to take him into their confidence, the more he succumbs to depression. Finally he is allowed to read their sacred book, *The Renewal of the Family*, but by the time that he stumbles upon its crucial pages he has already given way to his suicidal impulses and taken poison. It seems likely that the young man who was buried at the beginning was another failed pilgrim like himself, and that the sudden conclusion of Smith’s narrative precedes a second funeral procession. Will Yoletta, the eternal *femme fatale*, find another emotion-wracked visitor from the ancient world to work her charms upon? Smith’s doomed love for Yoletta is by far the most intriguing version of the (sometimes rather perfunctory) sexual romance plots of late nineteenth-century utopias and dystopias. Wells’s *Time Traveller* feels a platonic attachment for Weena, the young Eloi woman whose name recalls Butler’s heroine Arowhena. Wells’s protagonist has no choice but to leave Weena to her fate, while Arowhena and Butler’s narrator escape from Erewhon in a balloon. In *The Coming Race* the narrator owes his survival to the devotion of Princess Zee, but he finally bids her a tearful farewell since he cannot bring her back to the earth’s surface. Hudson and Wells portray a decadent humanity, and Lytton an ascendant super-race, but the central dilemma in all three romances is summed up in the title of the crystal age’s sacred book: how, if at all, is the human family to be renewed? And this, less obviously, is the central dilemma in *Erewhon* as well.

If dystopia always sets us a riddle, its authors normally make sure that it is one we can solve. The author is both questioner and sphinx, and, given the sphinx’s prominence as an icon in the literature and art of the late nineteenth century, it is not surprising that our dystopian romantic travellers should so often confront a symbol of monstrous inscrutability at the moment of entering the new society. In *A Crystal Age*, it is true – despite Smith’s experience of the rites of passage as he enters the future society – the symbolisation of the riddle of the future is withheld until much later in the story. First there is the ailing, hidden Mother of the household, whose presence Smith is at last allowed to enter; then there
is the sacred book containing the house’s unspoken secret. By the end of *The Coming Race*, *The Time Machine* and (less certainly, perhaps) *A Crystal Age* we have been given more than enough clues to make out what the secrets are. What shall we make, then, of *Erewhon*, where the ring of giant statues presents a sphinx-like mystery at the moment of entry, but the riddles of Butler’s imagined society pile up one after another until there are apparently too many of them, far more than the story’s readers have been able to solve? The intricacies of the Musical Banks, the Ydgrunites, the Colleges of Unreason, the Book of the Machines, and the myth of the world of the unborn have led critics to assume that the book has no more than an irresponsible topsy-turvey logic, highly ingenious but ultimately rather childish, as in the back-to-front names of Erewhonian characters such as Nosnibor and Thims. The suspicion that *Erewhon* belongs more to the world of Lewis Carroll than to the serious dystopian literary tradition has led to numerous expressions of critical impatience. Peter Raby remarks that ‘it is as though one is viewing Victorian England through a series of distorting mirrors, and mirrors that distort in different ways’.1 Darko Suvin’s accusation of inconsistency is paralleled by scholars like J. C. Garrett, who finds the ring of giant statues ‘incongruous’ because ‘they cannot be related in any satisfactory sense to Erewhonian scenery or civilization’, and Herbert L. Sussman who complains that there is no correlation between the absence of machinery and the quality of Erewhonian life.18 Nevertheless, the logic of liminality suggests that if there is a key to Erewhonian society it must be found in the ring of statues. The statues are often taken to be of primarily theological import. Peter Raby says they are ‘a representation of the dreadful gods that man has set to guard received tradition and convention’, and A. Dwight Culler associates them with the Ten Commandments.19 But this line of interpretation has proved unhelpful. We may suggest, instead, that the conspectus of pain, idiocy and suffering expressed by the statues represents the history of humanity as well as its gods – the history of humanity, that is, seen in the terms popularised by the Victorian rationalist Winwood Reade as a ‘martyrdom of man’.20 They suggest the barbaric past that any modern civilization and, still more, any progressive utopia must claim to have permanently superseded:

They had all been seated, but two had fallen. [...] They were six or seven times larger than life, of great antiquity, worn and lichen grown. [...] One was raging furiously, as in pain, and a great despair; another was lean and
cadaverous with famine; another cruel and idiotic, but with the silliest simper that can be conceived – this one had fallen, and looked exquisitely ludicrous in his fall – the mouths of all were more or less open, and as I looked at them from behind, I saw that their heads had been hollowed. […] The inhuman beings into whose hearts the Evil One had put it to conceive these statues, had made their heads into a sort of organ-pipe, so that their mouths should catch the wind and sound with its blowing. (66–7)

The statues that form the ancient portal into Erewhon can, if we look closely enough, be related to the two most salient features of contemporary Erewhonian society: its abolition of machinery, and its cult of health, strength and physical beauty. Butler, indeed, tells us that the statues were intended both as a warning to alien intruders and as a place of sacrifice designed 'to propitiate the gods of deformity and disease. In former times it had been the custom to make expeditions over the ranges, and capture the ugliest of Chowbok’s ancestors whom they could find, in order to sacrifice them in the presence of these deities, and thus avert ugliness and disease from the Erewhonians themselves'. It is also rumoured that some of the uglier or more diseased Erewhonians were once butchered there; but such customs have been ‘long discontinued’ (96). The statues represent the origins of Erewhonian eugenics.

Soon after he has passed the statues Butler’s narrator is arrested, taken before a magistrate, and subjected to a medical examination which (luckily for him) he is fit enough to pass. He is then thrown into jail for possessing a watch. He owes his eventual release to the fact that, unlike black aliens such as Chowbok, he has the ‘very great merit’ of possessing fair hair (83), a merit which makes him highly attractive to Erewhonian females. His watch, however, is not released with him, but put on display among the rusty, broken and archaic machinery in the town museum. As he travels to the metropolis he finds other instances of what seems like a Victorian industrial society fallen into decay. The main road was formerly a railway, terminating in an old station whose ‘magnificent and venerable ruins’ are carefully preserved (98–9). The Musical Banks suggest the great edifices of Victorian financial institutions, now half-empty like European churches and cathedrals. The Colleges of Unreason perhaps represent an unreformed Oxford and Cambridge mauldering away in perpetuity. When the narrator asks about the ban on machinery and the ‘apparent retrogression in all arts, sciences, and inventions’ (97), the answer he is eventually given takes the form of the ‘Book of the Machines’.
Butler was not personally anti-machine – he invested the capital he brought back from New Zealand in machine-tool production – but the Book of the Machines is based on ‘Darwin Among the Machines’ (1863), the first of three essays on the topic that Butler had published in New Zealand. The articles follow a rough dialectical progression of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, with the thesis consisting of arguments for abolishing machinery. The author of the ‘Book of the Machines’ argues that machines must be destined to follow an evolutionary development comparable to that undergone by life on earth, and that the end of this development can only be human enslavement or extinction. Against this, Butler’s second essay, ‘Lucubratio Ebra’ (1865), maintained that machines as ‘mechanical limbs’ were the instruments of humanity’s future evolution, but that increased reliance on them would bring about the physical degeneration of the human race. The third essay, ‘The Mechanical Creation’ (1865), argues that it is in humanity’s best interests to accept that our lives will come to be dominated by machinery. Butler was, perhaps, the first prophet of a cyborg future based on the developing symbiosis between human and machine. He contrasts the spade, which is merely a mechanical limb, with the steam engine which has a life of its own. Should the further evolution of machinery turn human beings into lower creatures than the machinery which surrounds them, Butler argues that the two species will nevertheless remain mutually dependent. The prospect is one of grudging coexistence based on a kind of mutually assured destruction, since it is in neither’s interest to exterminate the other. But the Erewhonians, with their intense eugenic anxieties, have tried to put a stop to the coming cyborgisation of life after a prolonged civil war between the machinists and the anti-machinists. If the source of Butler’s arguments is, ultimately, Darwin’s theory of evolution, then the Erewhonian abolition of machinery is an attempt to put evolution into reverse.

Since the giant statues have been hollowed out to function as organ-pipes, they are in Butler’s terms a ‘mechanical limb’ like the spade. That is, they represent not just the primitive but also the most advanced (post-industrial) level of Erewhonian technology. At the same time, their ugliness is sharply at odds with the aesthetics of a society that has long been dominated by the cult of beauty and physical fitness. The beauty of the people is ‘simply amazing’ (79), and a pervasive feature of their society is the presence of small beautiful figurines (the opposite of the giant statues) in wayside shrines which the Erewhonians never pass without bowing their heads. The law of Erewhon outlaws physical
rather than moral deviations, punishing disease and physical disability while treating acts of dishonesty and theft in the way that we would treat illnesses. The narrator watches a man in the last stages of tuberculosis being sentenced to life imprisonment.

The judge who passes this sentence gives full vent to the eugenic anxieties underlying the Erewhonian persecution of disability, disease and physical weakness. He explains to the unhappy prisoner that, if harsh measures were not taken against disease, 'a time of universal dephysicalisation would ensue' (117). Society, he alleges, is full of clandestine physicians who minister to those able to conceal their disease and deformity. The narrator, in fact, becomes aware of the Erewhonians' cosmetic dependence, casting doubt on his first impression of their striking natural beauty: 'they painted their faces with such consummate skill - they repaired the decay of time and the effects of mischance with such profound dissimulation - that it was really impossible to say whether any one was well or ill till after an intimate acquaintance of months or years' (136). In the past, as we have seen, ugly people were put to death, but the Erewhonians frequently reassure the narrator that this could no longer happen.

This brings us back to the question of Chowbok's terror. Thanks to its physical and geographical isolation and the fear it instils in neighbouring peoples, Erewhon has an increasingly inbred population with a restricted gene-pool. Chowbok's tribe have learned never to cross the frontier, but what would happen if they did? The answer the narrator receives is that 'They would be too ugly to be allowed to go at large, but not so much as to be criminally liable. [...] Possibly they would be consigned to the Hospital for Incurable Bores' (96). The narrator's discomfort at this whole topic is reflected in his feeble joke that being confined to the company of the Incurable Bores must be a fate worse than death, since 'the agony of [Chowbok's] fear had been too great to have been inspired by the mere threat of being burnt alive before the statues' (97). The eugenic rationale of treating illness as a crime and excluding all dark-skinned foreigners is, nevertheless, obvious even though the narrator himself does not comment on it directly. He does, however, remark that the Erewhonians' cosmetic dependence leads to unpleasant surprises when people get married (136). The eugenic controls in Erewhon are thus highly elaborate without being entirely effective.

The Erewhonians are, as the narrator remarks in a passage added for the second (1901) edition, 'a meek and long-suffering people, easily led by the nose' (227). The possible physical decadence of their society is
merely hinted at – it is notable, for example, that the narrator nowhere encounters any young children – but there can be no doubt that Erewhon has become intellectually decadent. (Indeed, this is foreshadowed by the ‘cruel and idiotic’ figure among the ring of statues.) One sign of this decadence is that when Higgs returns in Erewhon Revisited, he finds that he has become a revolutionary prophet of the same order as the author of the ‘Book of the Machines’. The Erewhonians’ earlier rejection of Butler’s protagonist, as well as their later worship of him, seems somewhat feeble-minded. His escape with Arowhena suggests that the Erewhonian ‘family’ can only be renewed and revitalized if some of its members are willing to contract exogamous marriages and go into exile. There is, admittedly, nothing new in arguing as I have done that the late nineteenth-century dystopian romances reflect post-Darwinian anxieties about species degeneration, ‘dephysicalisation’ and inbreeding. What is more important, perhaps, is the extent to which eugenic aspirations and intimations of possible species decline are present throughout the tradition of utopian writing, from Plato’s Republic to such a recent example as Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985). Samuel Butler’s satirical romance is not the playful and ultimately pointless anomaly that so many of its critics have thought. It is a major work in the eugenic utopian tradition.

If anything constitutes a necessary condition of the literary utopia, it is (I suggest) the prevalence of beautiful people and the absence of ugliness. Moreover, utopian writers almost invariably give reasons why the next and succeeding generations will be as beautiful as the current one. To the extent that beauty symbolizes physical, mental and moral health and the potential for happiness, we may say that utopia proudly possesses the secret of beauty while dystopias hide the secret of their ugliness. Beauty, with its instant appeal to the eye, is always a part of the first impression of utopia, while ugliness takes precedence at the frontiers of dystopia. We should, therefore, be instantly suspicious of any society where a barrier of ugliness has to be passed in order to reach a promised land of apparently beautiful people. It is at the margins and on the threshold of dystopia that we are likely to find whatever is meant to remain unseen and unconsidered by the ordinary citizens. In the examples discussed in this essay Gulliver encounters the Yahoos before he does the Houyhnhnms, Butler’s narrator has to pass the ring of statues, Lytton’s protagonist confronts a prehistoric monster, Smith chances upon a funeral procession and an open grave, and the Time Traveller gazes on
the diseased and weather-worn Sphinx. The enigma of arrival (to use
V. S. Naipaul’s term) and the mystery of entry reveal what the rulers
dystopia want to keep hidden.

Notes
