

The Iron City



Salvador Rueda

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There are many utopias written as novels, such as William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890). Less well known are the lyrical ones written in verse in the form of hymns. Hymns are usually written in order to be sung in public in praise of God or the gods and, in modern times, of the very people who sing it as members of a nation or of any community. Their solemn tone is one of their defining features, aiming to arouse an emotional consensus around the worship of the corresponding divinity, or the pride of belonging to a particular group. Their collective character distinguishes them from lyric poems, where individual subjectivity is paramount, and brings them closer to epics, since hymns often indicate the reasons for the praise in the form of concise narratives telling of the extraordinary, supernatural or heroic acts performed by the sung entity.

Hymns, which were mainly religious in nature at the beginning, became increasingly secular and even utopian in content following the consolidation of revolutionary theory and practice from 1789 onwards. Indeed, there are several lyrical, descriptive and narrative hymns in verse praising and portraying future utopias. These are diverse and range from secularised and socialist paradises such as the "Holy City" ("Sfânta cetate," 1856), sung by the Romanian romantic poet Ion

Heliade-Rădulescu (1802-1872), to the egalitarian socialist or anarchist ones praised in hymns written by proletarian authors such as Eugène Pottier (1816-1887) in France and Pietro Gori (1865-1911) in Italy. Later on, in the age of the Aesthetic Movement, utopias had to be not only fair and equal, but also artistically beautiful. Such is "The Iron City" ("La ciudad de hierro" in the Castilian original published in the collection *Fuente de salud*, or 'Source of Health,' in 1906) by Spanish poet Salvador Rueda (1857-1933).¹

Rueda's iron city corresponds to a mentality that embraces technological and industrial progress, symbolised by metal buildings such as the Parisian Eiffel Tower. These were considered to be the manifestation par excellence of technical modernity in engineering back then, but they also showed a pleasant wealth of decorative details with no other function than to confer the building a clear artistic value. This kind of Modern

¹ The English translation below is based on the following edition: Salvador Rueda, "La ciudad de hierro", *Obras completas: Poesía III (1901-1906)*, edición, introducción y notas de María Dolores Gutiérrez Navas, Málaga, Universidad de Málaga, 2016, pp. 425-425. We warmly thank Jonathan Deroo for his revising the English text of the translation and the introductory note.

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Style architecture is the one prevailing in the iron city superbly described by Rueda. Even schools and factories are built following that model. However, their significance is not only aesthetic. The functional iron constructions are also visual signs of a new faith in scientific, technological and social progress. They are cathedrals dedicated to a Christ yet to come. This Christ is not the one portrayed in *The Book of Revelation* but a “Christ of labour and ideas” who will bring us a

Gospel of Peace, thus ushering onto Earth a utopian order of a clearly technocratic nature. This order also embraces, however, both faith and beauty. Perhaps the second coming of Christ will be needed to make this social and aesthetic utopia happen, considering the little signs of it in our times and in the foreseeable future. While we await it, we can still enjoy the beauty of Rueda’s inspiring epic hymn.

Salvador Rueda

The Iron City

It is the city of times future. It soars magnificent in the mind – a radiant vision with a Babylonian profile. When the sun pours forth its rays of gold the city shimmers, commanding, in the vast forum, filling the air with its towers galore.

It is the future city. Its palaces are a miraculous creation of space. Resolutely they rise from base to summit: thinner than glass and subtler, finer than lace and lovelier, like a doiley of intangible light.

Its pleasing homes' ceilings emulate the concavities of elegant emporiums, draped with kind majesty. Bright clarity rushes through its rooms' cheerful balconies and ironwork – chiselled into flowery motives. The mighty arches of its bridges, like brave caryatids, bend their backs in virile strain, while above, vehicles march in swift and coarse procession, booming hoarsely.

From the unique dikes of its dams wide as seas stem rust-coloured veins of effective virtue, and in its liquid caverns the crystal-clear miracle of water is forged with atoms of iron and health.

In their iron courtyards, the encampments mix their sounds and martial crowds, producing dazzling confusion: walls of iron, canons of iron, brave squadrons of iron and, likewise, the invincible heart of iron.

The classrooms – ovaries where the light of word carves the minds, settling foundations and endowing them with masculine strength – shall bring steely truths to light and shall turn the incipient wills into heroic outbursts and virile resolution.

The cathedrals, tearing veils apart, shall shoot their towers to the skies, needed of new Tables of the Law, and their naves – extraordinary workshops – shall raise their religious altars to a God awaited, but yet still to come.

It is the Christ of incandescent iron, of the uncrowned brow sublime, of the unbruised face divine. It is the Christ of labour and ideas, the Christ that hammers on the anvil of the workshop and writes the Gospel of peace.