

Dystopian Discourse and Its Actuality

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The transformation of utopia into dystopia is, from the vantage point of the dynamics of forms, a necessary step for the survival of the utopian genre.

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WE COULD say without fear of being wrong that, as a genre, utopia has a totalitarian nature, allowing for a very limited number of liberties. Its main pursuit is the perfect society, and nothing can divert it from its path and from this precise goal. Authoritarian by virtue of its structure, involving an immutable imaginary design, utopia refuses to accept (or does it with extreme euphemistic caution) any change or revolt. However strong and independent, individualities end up by unconditionally surrendering to the constraints of the genre. The immanent authoritarianism of any utopia can easily become tyranny if the utopianist takes himself too seriously or if the product of his imagination seeks to become reality, as it unfortunately happened during the 20th century, when most utopian designs imperiously demanded a social materialization. As argued by Marie Louise Berneri, in the introduction to her comprehensive book *Journey through Utopia*, “Since the utopian institutions are considered as perfect, it goes without saying that they cannot be capable of improve-

ment. The Utopian State is essentially static and does not allow its citizens to fight or even to dream of a better utopia.”¹

In a most natural and predictable fashion, the immanent totalitarianism of the genre stirred considerable animosity. The satirical utopia took its distance from and ended up by distorting the utopian model, undermining it by way of irony and caricature. The same model would be utterly denied by the dystopian genre, which turned it upside down and finally annihilated it with its dominantly dissolutive vision. Paradoxical and astute as always, Gilles Lapouge² saw the negative utopianist as the quintessential rebel, the malcontent, the non-conformist rising against the genre’s absence of freedom and defending himself against history by denying it. Accordingly, the negative utopianist is no more than a “tramp,” a “hippie,” a marginal character or a *clochard* whose main field “is not freedom, but *Freedom*.” The final statement may be absolutely essential. After all, by denying it or by constantly questioning it, the dystopianist defends utopia against the excesses which it naturally tends to employ, by virtue of its internal structure.

Paradoxical here is the fact that traditional utopia, resorting exclusively to positive determinants and categories, comes to devise a model of bizarre perfection which intrinsically contains the seeds of its own destruction. Therefore, each and every time, the militant utopias that sought to become a social reality invariably became the precise opposite, “véritable jeux de massacre,” as someone used to say.

At a first glance, the negative utopia demolishes rather than constructs, it fails to establish a state, preferring to dismantle one, it refrains from proposing happy isles and presents instead ecological disasters, it promises no uchronian adventures or technicist eutopias, but rather infernal projections of the objectified human being, de-humanized by the almighty technology. By virtue of its purely negative constitutive factors, corroding to the point of annihilation all the utopian institutions propounded by the traditional form of the genre, dystopia destroys and effectively dismantles the utopian model, reversing it and, with superior detachment, turning it into its precise opposite. Seemingly devastating, the ostentatious liberating action of the dystopianist actually comes to rescue utopia. Distancing himself through irony, sarcasm, or negative vision, he issues a warning that—if taken too seriously or if allowed to take itself too seriously—utopia can have most unwanted, unpredictable, and sometimes abominable effects, becoming corrupt to the point of being “criminal,” as Lapouge put it.

Considered more in depth, in actual fact dystopia comes to redeem the utopian genre, be it only in terms of the side-effects of its vision. The terrifying, apocalyptic, catastrophic elements, the disintegrating and destructuring visions,

are actually cathartic in nature. If the humanist utopia often slips into nihilism, the intrinsic nihilism of dystopia actually plays a liberating function.

Unfortunately, utopias ended up demonstrating that hell is the best of all possible worlds. Dystopias warn against the possible social concretization of utopias, a danger that also frightened Berdyaev, and against the nefarious consequences of this concretization. Just like the modern revolutionist who, as Camus said, becomes in the end an oppressor or a heretic, the utopianist unavoidably ends up either a prisoner of the model (“the shortsighted utopianist,” to quote Melvin J. Lasky), or a vehement critic of it. According to other commentators,³ dystopia is but the alter ego of utopia. The presence of this avatar has undoubtedly stimulated the genre, and the numerous scientific or social experiments that nearly always led to dubious results and, more recently, have come to revive apocalyptic fears, bestowed upon it the vigor and the organic substance it so badly needed.

Arrigo Colombo⁴ is convinced of the fact that the two facets of utopia are in fact two distinct genres, radically opposed to one another. Utopias present the model of a just, fraternal society, while dystopias present the model of a perverted society, reversing the motif of the ideal society in order to expose evil, or projecting extremely destructive tensions in real time in order to outline a social model that is fundamentally evil. The Italian philosopher believes that in the 20th century the destructive impulses (“le tensioni perverse”) were essentially related to the powers-that-be, stemming from the understanding of the latter as a means of absolute control over individuals, or to technology, seen as an instrument of power and also as a means to degradation and destruction. Under these circumstances, according to the same Italian philosopher, utopia could be defined as a historical design, as opposed to dystopia, which would represent only “the path to be followed by an oppressive minority,” or indeed a model to be avoided.

We tend to believe that utopia and dystopia are complementary rather than antinomic.⁵ Unfortunate, both time and history worked markedly in favor of dystopia, and in many cases all that the negative utopian had to do was to document the insanity of existing governing methods, which provided him with countless terrifying visions, fears, examples of cruelty and degradation. Dystopia is characterized by dominantly visual elements and shocking images. Fundamentally subversive, it disintegrates the social model, undermining any trace of congruence and proposing a plethora of images of dissolution and incongruence. Dystopian perspectives are essentially de-structuring, similar to the terrifying eye of Big Brother, who cynically atomizes social reality, placing it under constant and unflinching supervision. Dystopia flourished right after the traumatic experience of the First World War, which brutally ended a world that

still believed in the possibility of reason, progress, and universal happiness. History violently proved the precise opposite, and all those who had been seduced by utopian social designs (such as Koestler's heroes) fell victim to their own delusions. When human dignity was being debased and there was nothing of the promised general happiness, when despair came to brutally replace the hope in common bliss, dystopia became necessary as a warning to the modern conscience, easily seduced by utopian phantasms.

History, power, revolution, totalitarian practices, science, alienation, hybridization, reification, all of these frightening themes and actual fears came to nurture the dystopian designs of the 20th century: "My tremendous perception and monstrous sight," the famous line from Caragiale's *Grand Hotel Victoria Română*, could be an excellent motto for the dystopian visions, whether we are dealing—for thematic purposes, of course—with the dystopia of totalitarian power, with the scientific dystopia, or indeed with the catastrophic one.

Undoubtedly and for obvious reasons, totalitarian dystopia was the one to enjoy the greatest notoriety and experience a most spectacular development. The horrors of the previous century (which does not mean that dystopian tendencies are absent in the present one) fit it like a glove.

On the gigantic billboards bearing the allseeing face of Big Brother and present in every city of Oceania, one could read the notorious apothegms: "War is Peace; Freedom is Slavery; Ignorance is Strength," synthetically capturing the devastating essence of the totalitarian machine. We are no longer dealing with the relatively benign mirror image found in *Erewhon*, where the world is turned upside down and seen in a distorting mirror, but rather with an ideological mystification claiming its own infallibility, with a world in which "2+2 =5" is a statement that refuses to be questioned. We find here the specific approach of totalitarian dystopia: the attempt to demystify, through fictional simulations, a fundamentally antihuman and constrictive hyper-reality.

If, as noticed by several critics of the genre, modern utopian impulses show considerable nostalgia (see also the study published by Judith Shklar,⁶ who defines the political theory of utopia on the basis of two aesthetic terms, "melancholy" and "nostalgia"), conservatism, and the desire to escape mundane reality, dystopias do exactly the opposite and energetically penetrate the very core and the—often corrupt—kernel of this contingent reality.

Quite paradoxical is the fact that while utopias tell of an escape from history, dystopias envisage precisely an immersion or rather a bold and painful attempted incursion into history, into what neo-Marxist critic Gary Saul Morson⁷ called a conflicting and uncertain contingent world. It was precisely because all utopian communities and ideologies sought to turn utopia (the place that does not exist) into eutopia (the land of happiness), that dystopia was forced to coun-

teract their impetus. Some totalitarian dystopias (such as Zamyatin's *Ū*) were written after World War I as a direct consequence of the triumph of the Russian socialist utopia, while others came in the wake of the even more terrifying experience of World War II. Right-wing or left-wing dictatorships, totalitarian societies, crimes against humanity, the Gulags, an unfortunate corpus of terror and manipulation, in one word, that "barbarie au visage humain" (to quote the famous phrase of Bernard-Henri Lévy) provided the basic raw material for totalitarian dystopias. Unfortunately, sometimes reality by far surpassed dystopian fiction.

It is obvious that the utopian thought of the 19th century and the practical application of social philosophies (for which, according to the controversial approach of Karl Mannheim,⁸ utopia is but an epiphenomenon) paved the way for dystopias. Faced with the broad ambitions of the utopian discourse, dystopia responded by questioning not only the possibility of giving actual social substance to utopias, but especially the desirability and the opportunity of such and endeavor. This because, as experience unfortunately demonstrated, no utopia can be implemented in the absence of terror. Terror, the suppression of human freedom, and then of the human beings themselves, unavoidably accompany the practical application of utopian ideologies. The sad historical irony is that all such designs, surrounded by the halo of messianic revolutionism, unavoidably create regimes of terror, while the promised freedom systematically turns into oppression. Totalitarian in terms of its vision, utopia fatally plants the seeds of its own destruction in the attempt to become reality. The egalitarian machine initially envisaged becomes an infernal mechanism devouring lives and destinies. Italian professor Giampaolo Zucchini,⁹ a critic of utopian thought, unequivocally concluded that we are not dealing with a mere totalitarian contamination of utopia, but with an actual process of germination (*germinazione*).

NEGATIVE UTOPIAS circulate a number of recurrent motifs, which invariably appear also in the Romanian dystopian discourse. First comes the suppression of the individual human being, the melting of the self into the greater masses. Authoritarianism, force, coercion, terror will always subordinate the individual to the totalizing society. The dystopian state can only maintain its cohesion by sacrificing the individual. Any utopian social construct is fundamentally totalitarian, absolutist, and exclusive, denying its citizens the access even to another utopia. Under these circumstances, in most cases the denizen of utopia emerges as a schizophrenic individual: alienated, doubled, reified, anaxiological, he becomes the prisoner of a concentrationary space, dominated by institutionalized lies. No element of social reality actually

corresponds to the model of the perfect society, meant to bring about the common good. The rewriting of truth and the reinvention of reality become part of the ideological game and of the state-sanctioned truth, while freedom becomes subversive a synonymous to disorder. Once in power, utopia becomes polymorphous, subordinating all social strata in the name of historical necessity, progress, class struggle, etc., and assumes the attributes of an immutable and unreachable state authority. We are very far from the hope expressed by Raymond Aron¹⁰ in one of his early texts, where he argued that “hope paralyzes utopian thought.” On the contrary, far from spoiling the utopian appetite, concrete experiences—and especially the prospect of failure—actually stimulate it, in its dystopian form, reducing the totalitarian state to the role of “defender of the faith,” ferociously aggressive in the name of the supreme dogma.

Dystopia, from Zamyatin through Koestler—whose *Darkness at Noon* is not actually a dystopia, but rather an astute and extremely minute dissection of the realities and the mechanisms underlying the totalitarian state—and finally to Orwell, took up and gave literary expression to this utopian engineering design, be it communist or of other extraction. At a time when, for instance, Boris Souvarine’s revelations about Stalin remained long unknown, when Panait Istrati’s confession in *Vers l’autre flamme* led not only to his “excommunication” from the socialist movement but also to the manifest hostility of Western literary circles, when the entire French intelligentsia was seduced by Soviet propaganda and a respectable character such as H. G. Wells was enticed by Stalin’s astuteness, it is little wonder that dystopia had to assume the undesirable task of awakening the spirits, at the price of shocking them out of their complacency.

Even since the early 1930s, dystopias adopted an approach radically opposed to the accommodating, gentle, semi-official visions, and the virulence of their discourse came as shock to the intellectual conscience. They poignantly and plausibly suggested something that would be pertinently demonstrated by Hannah Arendt and by the young French philosophers of the late 1970s, namely, the fact that totalitarianism is far from being a viable form of state organization and that it cannot last precisely because of its fundamentally antihuman nature, the nature of a *non-state*. According to the same Hannah Arendt,¹¹ totalitarian power is not the product of an atomized society, but the cause behind it. Dystopias take up the totalitarian synecdoche and expand it to a grotesque size. The part is suppressed in the name of the whole, the individual in the name of the collectivity: Koestler’s hero, the old party worker Rubashov, bitterly confessed that he was guilty of having placed the idea of man above that of humankind.¹²

Given the nefarious nature of the phenomenon, the confiscation of thought and the total control of information become favorite themes for dystopian authors. Orwell introduced us to “crimethought” and to the “Ministry of Truth.” The methods used in the subordination of thought and language are diabolically and perversely ingenious. For a more comprehensive and convincing analysis of the phenomenon, in all of its absurdity and magnitude, researchers often had to combine historical facts and realities with their imagined, dystopian representations. Czesław Miłosz¹³ was the first to do this, in order to indicate how free thinking was annihilated by the totalitarian Moloch. His demonstration drew on the dystopian novels and plays written by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. André Glucksmann¹⁴ followed suit, using Orwell as source material for political analysis. This surprising de-fictionalization clearly demonstrates the extent to which dystopias managed to decipher, in minute detail, the mechanisms of terror. The rigid, mutilated, officially sanctioned and purged language becomes “newspeak” and party jargon, the “Thought Police” or the “Ministry of Truth” are monstrous offshoots of manipulation, justice becomes the instrument of class struggle, trials and mere stage shows, as in Koestler’s novels, and society turns into a correctional universe in which the Gulags are anything but a fiction. At this point, dystopian writers come to meet Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak, or Grossman. The absurd, the doubling, schizophrenia come to affect the whole of society, as a fundamental prerequisite for survival. The best metaphor concerning totalitarian manipulation, taken up and successfully employed by dystopian fiction, are the miraculous Murti-Bing pills imagined by Witkiewicz in his novel *Insatiability*, pills that organically conveyed the desired “outlook on the world.”

Reality is replaced by a pseudo-reality, and this laborious endeavor is achieved with the help of instruments specialized in the distortion of truth—a false history, a false literature, false statistics, false myths—, as any form of totalitarianism creates a mythology adapted to its own agenda. Most of these pseudo-myths, turned into tools for the manipulation of totalitarian ideologies, are the product of corrupt utopian elements. In the framework of a global social design, all pseudo-myths (the new man, the revolution, the society free from exploitation, the founding fathers, etc.) are aimed at the brutal elimination of all social precedents and their complete reinvention. This happens in the context of state-sanctioned violence and of an implacable dictatorship, involving a brutal process of dissolution and, quite often, nihilist impulses. The collapse of the system of values and axiological distortion are the models cultivated by dystopias, from Zamyatin and Huxley to Bujor Nedelcovici or A. E. Baconsky. Any totalitarian dystopia will necessarily offer a prominent place to the figure or indeed to the cult of the Leader. This is little surprising in light of the fact

that a totalitarian state presents the supreme leader with all the levers that come with a pyramidal construction. Invariably, the latter soon begins to see himself beyond good and evil, instituting the cult of his own personality and discretionarily subjecting the whole state to his will. Images of this kind abound in literature: Jünger's *Senior Forester*, Koestler's *Number One*, Zamyatin's *Bene-factor*, Orwell's *Big Brother*, Oana Orlea's *Well-Beloved*, Nedelcovici's *Governor*, etc., but in each and every case the leader is the master who is always right, the great manipulator and, especially, the architect of the utopian edifice and the supreme guarantor of the functioning of the state.

Against the backdrop of this dystopian space, dominated by the nearly mythical figure of the One, the loss of the self and human alienation become recurrent themes. These extremely real themes were also identified by Alain Besançon¹⁵ in the work of Soviet authors such as Zinoviev or Erofeyev, who did not write dystopias, but rather novels, memoirs, and essays.

All of these features, and certainly many others as well, paint the rather unappealing portrait of a ruling utopia, or indeed of a totalitarian dystopia, seen as a literary response to utopian excesses. Before becoming elements of the dystopian discourse, the contempt for reason, the confiscation of thought, terror, the suppression of individualism, the exacerbation of egalitarianism and of planning were tropes excessively used in the political and ideological discourse, especially in connection to the socialist utopia. Far from liberating the human individual, in its desire to become dominant in the world the latter contaminated the network of social relations with unprecedented forms of servitude and spiritual sterility. The modern utopias (whose possible materialization so worried Berdyaev) entered history and set themselves in motion, triggering, under terrifying forms, a plethora of nightmarish consequences which the literary discourse rapidly took up and exploited in a dystopian vein.

The transformation of utopia into dystopia is, from the vantage point of the dynamics of forms, a necessary step for the survival of the utopian genre. On the other hand, dystopian projections profoundly resonate with the turmoil experienced by the modern conscience, and thus such writings become an accurate indicator of the fears and anxieties of the contemporary period. This is fully demonstrated by the prodigious success known by the genre in question. □

Notes

1. Marie Louise Berneri, *Journey through Utopia* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), 7.

2. Gilles Lapouge, *Utopie et civilisation* (Paris–Genève: Weber, 1973), 22–24.
3. Krishan Kumar, *Utopianismul*, trans. (Bucharest: DU Style, 1998), 81.
4. Arrigo Colombo, “Su questi saggi e la loro genesi sull’utopia e sulla distopia,” in *Utopia e Distopia*, ed. Arrigo Colombo (Bari: Dedalo, 1990), 11–12.
5. We agree with the conclusion formulated by Professor Dragan Klaić of the Amsterdam Conservatory for Dramatic Arts, whose study on the dystopian vision in modern drama entitled *The Plot of the Future* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991) mentions the same idea concerning the entwining of the two genres: “Dystopia is a gloomy paraphrase of Utopia and the last refuge of utopian hope.”
6. Judith Shklar, “The Political Theory of Utopia from Melancholy to Nostalgia,” in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Franck E. Manuel (Boston: Souvenir Press, 1966), 101–115.
7. Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky’s “Diary of a Writer” and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
8. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London–New York: Routledge, 1991), 173–236.
9. Giampaolo Zucchini, “Il fattore politico: La distopia totalitaria,” in *Utopia e Distopia*, 59–73.
10. Raymond Aron, *Histoire et dialectique de la violence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).
11. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951).
12. Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (New York: Macmillan, 1941).
13. Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953).
14. André Glucksmann, *La Cuisine et le Mangeur d’hommes: Essai sur les rapports entre l’État, le marxisme et les camps de concentration* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).
15. Alain Besançon, *Le Malheur du siècle: sur le communisme, le nazisme et l’unicité de la Shoah* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

Abstract

Dystopian Discourse and Its Actuality

The paper discusses the seemingly inevitable transformation of utopia into dystopia, a process seen as a necessary step for the survival of the utopian genre. Responsible for this process are the totalitarian and authoritarian tendencies intrinsic to the utopian discourse, which holds in it substance the seeds of its own destruction. As recent history came to demonstrate the nefarious consequences of virtually all attempts to put into practice utopian designs of any kind, the pursuit of a perfect society was replaced by the hyperbolic projection of the nefarious consequences of such attempts at social engineering. The actuality of the dystopian genre stems from the fact that its approach reflects the turmoil experienced by the modern conscience, turning it into a literary transfiguration of the fears and anxieties of the contemporary period.

Keywords

utopia, dystopia, utopian discourse, totalitarianism, cult of personality