From More's natural Utopia to Cordwainer Smith's artificial pseudo-utopia

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> *Utopian thinking is essential for our social, political, and psychological health, but, like everything else, utopian thinking is time- and place bound. One model does not fit all.*
>
> Lyman Tower Sargent (2004: 4)

Introduction

Two of the recurring debates surrounding utopia and its twin counterpart, dystopia, have been, in western culture, the difficulty of finding a balance between collective and individual domains, and the question of how to prescribe an evolutionary system of government for communities that, naturally, are based on evolution. When Elliott wrote his *The Shape of Utopia* (Elliott, 1970), the utopia/dystopia debate and literary production hanged, for several decades, strongly in favour of the negative view of a tightly regulated society, both as a menace for human individuality as well as for species' survival. The few who dared to write a utopian narrative were smeared by a "disillusioned" society.

This conflict between *eutopia* and dystopia started on the foundational narrative of the genre: Thomas More's *The Best State of a Commonwealth and the Island of Utopia* (MORE, 1965). *Utopia* shares with most of other foundational works the characteristic of enclosing all potential evolutions of the genre. Therefore, this kind of texts is generally open to multiple interpretations, according to the ever-changing cultural and historical evolutions. Many have read *Utopia* as a "political

manifesto"[1], others have disregarded the first book and commented or based their own utopias only on the second, others have disregarded the second book and commented or wrote new literary texts based only on the first book, developing the dystopian perspective.

Undoubtedly, *Utopia* encloses a profound political criticism, and that is probably the reason why it was not published in the English language until 1551, sixteen years after the author's death (More, 1551).[2] However, in my opinion, there should be no misunderstanding between utopia as a literary genre and utopianism as a social theory.[3] Both are inevitably linked, but they serve their political agendas through different media, and that makes all the difference. While utopianism as a social theory is concerned with a social and political reality, the literary utopias should be interpreted for what they are: literary texts that create fictional worlds, more or less similar to the author's actual world, and its state of affairs. This is the perspective I will adopt in this essay, namely, comparing *Utopia* and "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard" as literary utopias/dystopias. I will take into account the historical and cultural *milieu* in which they were written, to try to understand why they present such different fictional worlds and what messages may the actual reader construct after entering and travelling through those unfamiliar surroundings.

More's natural Utopia

When More wrote his most famous literary work, in 1515/16, Europe was on the verge of a radical cultural transformation. However, the times seemed to promise still, at least for the cultural elite formed by the Christian Humanists, a chance for peaceful and serene transformation, worked from within the Christian circles but having the Europeans in general as the main beneficiaries. They believed that it was possible to change society, the Church, and their practices using three complementary "weapons": first, reconstructing the biblical texts (particularly the New Testament) by means of more accurate Latin translations, based on both the Greek and the Hebrew texts. This should bring Christians nearer to the Gospel's message, correcting beliefs, practices, and ways of living both of the ecclesiastics and the laics. Secondly, the Humanists believed that through an ambitious program of education, aimed primarily at the upper classes, but also at women, in general it would be possible to change mentalities at the individual level, and later that would have inevitable reflexes on society as a whole. [4] Thirdly, the humanists were a product of civil society and assumed that theirs should be a practice of political and civic involvement, both as

counsellors of powerful kings and princes, and as ambassadors or representatives of common interests to cities or countries. [5]

Nevertheless, the program, as the movement itself, was neither coherent nor organized, and if one can find, nowadays, unquestionable marks of naïveté and lack of union, its common goals were quite revolutionary, in a period still profoundly marked by century old practices alongside the new challenges presented by ever-growing cities, with new economic and political demands.

The humanist movement was not a historical event but a cultural one. The Christian humanists' historical times marked the frontier between the Middle Ages and the Modern Ages they helped bring along. They were like a "bridge" where one can move forward and backward according to the circumstances.

Thomas More's *Utopia* is a mixture of new ideals and old traditions, as it is a mixture of satire and irony, of old and new knowledge, of bold ideas and reactionary ones. What the text is not, in my opinion, is a political manifesto *tout court*. In *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus proposes to give to Folly the right to advocate its double benefits: those of folly and those of wisdom, thus writing a strong critic of European institutions, attacking all social strata. *Utopia* should be the opposite, according to More's and Erasmus' common plan: it should be the encomium of sapience, which should confront the discourse of the insane sage (Raphael Hythlodaeus) with the scorn of the political "sane" elites. [6]

Both humanists shared the same thoughts concerning education, and the irony and satire they both admired in the works of Lucian of Samosata they had translated, proved to be a powerful instrument (though not free from dangers, as Erasmus would soon find out through the violent criticism his text unleashed).

Apparently, Thomas More, after his return from Antwerp, in 1515, revised his work and added a first book. This one functions as a counterpart to the second book, establishing, at the same time, a silent dialog between the dystopian state (More's London/England) and the land of Utopia, or Hagnopolis, as Budé calls it, the land "below the level of heaven but above the rabble of this known world" (More, 1965: 13). [7]

More had a long experience in the contact with different levels of society, due to his profession, and he was not a naïve man. He knew, both by experience and by study, that the human society would never be perfect, but it could definitely be

better. Though writing to his peers and fellow humanists, More is committed to the improvement of society as a whole (as any true humanist should) and he could not turn a blind eye to the appalling conditions of the vast majority of the people, contrasting with the luxury of the upper classes.

In *Utopia*, Thomas More tries to represent a country marked by egalitarianism, communion of goods, solidarity, and equal access to knowledge. These, considering sixteenth century English reality, are radical proposals, inconceivable to many. A complete subversion of the *status quo* that only a (wise) fool would dare to propose. However, these are also rational ideas, based on principles Thomas More found in the texts about the early church, in the monastic life (he himself experienced for some time) and in Plato's *Republic*. To these he even adds a certain Christianised Epicureanism. If Plato and Epicurus were part of the "new knowledge", the former were old news dating from the first Christians down to the Middle Ages. This constant mixture of "new" and old material marks most of Hythlodaeus' monologue on *Utopia*, but the seriousness of the message is always undermined by the use of nonsense in the naming, and by a subtle irony. This combination destroys, in my opinion, the possibility of interpreting the island of Utopia as being a perfect society, as many later writers have done, and opens the narrative to further discussions. [8]

The utopians live in community, are free to choose their profession according to their personal preferences, but they all have to work in the fields, even if temporarily, since agriculture was a common profession. Agriculture was the most important economic activity, the warrant that secured the equal division of goods and brought stability to society. They took pride in their gardens and orchards, and nature was the mother they all tended. All the other crafts and professions were subordinated, belonging to the individual sphere, but having the common good as their main goal. They lived long, natural, healthy lives, working six hours a day and enjoying the rest of the time pursuing their favourite hobbies. Most chose reading, by far the most common volunteer activity, for education was a constant endeavour. Sound body and sound mind would be an appropriate *motto* for utopian life, an epicurean society combining pleasure, reason and a mystic vision of life.

However, this apparently perfect society had a system of obligations that conditioned individual liberty in the benefit of the community. Professions such as butchers, that had in medieval times a negative connotation, are considered in Utopia as necessary but controlled and established outside the cities. Furthermore euthanasia was admitted, slavery was applied both to defeated foreigners warriors, and as

punishment of several crimes committed by utopians. The death penalty was also applied, though slavery remained the most common penalty since death of a convicted meant fewer workers for the common good.

A perfect society would not need such a system of justice, but utopians are humans, therefore imperfect. Compared to the reality of sixteenth century England, Utopia would be, for the vast majority of the people, a place very close to paradise, a true Hagnopolis. [9] It promised healthy conditions of life, long hours of leisure, and food on the table every day. Besides, the bases of this society were not strange to any Englishman living in small rural villages, since English society was still a patriarchal system, though less rigid. Losing individual liberty was not an issue for sixteenth century peasants, neither was it the compulsory agricultural work. Those who might protest were the nobles for whom these conditions would seem preposterous and unacceptable, a true dystopia.

Cordwainer Smith's artificial pseudo-utopia

Cordwainer Smith was an American science-fiction writer who wrote one novel and twenty-two short stories all revolving around the same subject: the extrapolation of a possible human history spanning for several millennia and ending precisely in the only novel he wrote (Smith, 1993b; 1994). [10]

Analysing Smith's published work the main feeling is that all his writings have two common denominators: the quest of human evolution in order to achieve a perfect society without losing its characteristics as a species; inquiring on what does it mean to be human. In the end no conclusion is definitive in a world were relativity and evolution are the main operators.

In the short story "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard", the reader is introduced to a fictional world where a utopian state of affairs is being destroyed. Apparently, around the year 16000, humanity had arrived precisely at that "country" in the map "at which Humanity is always landing. And when humanity lands there, it looks at it, and seeing a better country, sets sail" (Wilde, 1912: 43). Only, in this case, after founding utopia, humanity set sail to the past. [11]

> *We were drunk with happiness in those early years. (…) Reconstructing the old cultures, the old languages, and even the old troubles. The nightmare of perfection*

> *had taken our forefathers to the edge of suicide. (…) We had no idea when we would die. Formerly, I would be able to go to bed and think, "The government has given me four hundred years. Three hundred and seventy four years from now, they will stop the stroon injections and I will then die." Now I knew anything could happen. The safety devices had been turned off. The diseases ran free. With luck, and hope, and love, I might live a thousand years. Or I might die tomorrow. I was free. (Smith, 1993a: 375)*

Smith contradicts Oscar Wilde, for progress is not the answer. Perfection, if it means the end of all troubles, all diseases, all work, all efforts, kills the will to live, the ability to enjoy life precisely because it has become predictable, reliable, undervalued. Life is worth living because it is uncertain, unexpected. Because it can be long or cut short without any previous notification. The natural cycle of being born, maturing and dying had been disturbed, controlled, became rational and therefore unnatural.

The analysis of "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard" reveals an intertextual interference, not with More's *Utopia*, which, as demonstrated above, is not a perfect society though its inhabitants live a natural life, close to nature. Smith's main intertextual reference is a kind of romantic pastoral, a philosophical novel written by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, in 1789, *Paul et Virginie* (Saint-Pierre, 1984). The connection is made clear, though slowly, using the names of the main characters, Paul and Virginia. The delay in the identification is Smith's rhetorical device to force the reader to re-evaluate his/her assumptions. The *paratext* had predisposed the reader to a narrative of extrapolation into the future. However, the beginning gives rise to the first doubts. For the first time in many centuries, people were given names instead of numbers and the female character's name appears in the last paragraph of the first page (p. 375). The narrator's name, who is also the main character, pops up for the first time on page 381. Thus, the reader finds himself dealing with two quite different fictional worlds that, unlike *Utopia*, are not contiguous. They remain looming in the recesses of memory: the year of the first edition of *Paul et Virginie*, the same of the French revolution reminds the promise of *liberté, égalité et fraternité*.

The short story then becomes a much more composite of intertextualities. The end of utopia, decided by the supreme governors, intends to reconstruct the ancient cultures and let lose all controlled diseases. Paul and Virginia are part of the experiment, guinea pigs:

> *I myself went into a hospital and came out French. Of course, I remembered my early life; I remembered it, but it did not matter. Virginia was French, too, and we*

had the years of our future lying ahead of us like ripe fruit hanging in an orchard of perpetual summers. (SMITH, 1993a: 375)

If More, through the wordplay and continuous irony, constantly asks his readers to reconsider their expectations, Smith does the same by relying on the reader's literary culture. One who has read *Paul et Virginie* knows that the two main characters also expected to have "the years of [their] future lying ahead of [them] like ripe fruit hanging in an orchard of perpetual summers." However, the "perpetual summers" are cut short by a natural atmospheric event. [12]

While More's utopians live under the same rules established long before by their founder, the inhabitants of Smith's newfound and still forming dystopia/utopia have to discover the regulations at their own expenses. They are thrown into a new world with imprecise rules, but with the memories of the old order. They are not quite the narrators of a newfound society. They are the constructers of a new one using words they do not know the significance, practising acts, which objectively they ignore the meaning, and having to find them out with every mistake made. They are like infants without guidance thrown in a merciless society from which, suddenly, all safety devices have been removed. Unlike More's utopians, they cannot count on the solidarity of their fellow citizens because this new world is not one of *égalité et fraternité*. All they have left is freedom. Freedom to do whatever they want or feel like, to love or to hate, to trust or to suspect, to protect or to kill. The freedom afforded by the instincts let loose and memories made useless by lack of reference.

The keywords in Smith's short story are precisely equality and fraternity. The previous utopia Paul had experienced was made possible through the slave work of genetically transformed beings, the Underpeople, living out of sight, with few practical exceptions, underneath the planet surface, with no rights, no payment, only duties. However, the Underpeople, though lacking freedom, could count on the fraternity and support of all other unprivileged living in the same conditions: they formed a coherent society that fought for the only right they did not have.

This short story still has other layers of meaning running under the main events. Paul and Virginia are set on a quest for the Abba-Dingo, an obsolete computer renowned for making predictions. [13] It was popular knowledge that the computer always made truthful prophecies if people travelled the Alpha Ralpha Boulevard, so accessing the computer by the northern side. This kind of common knowledge reminds the reader he/she is in a fictional world that, as in some actual regions of Earth, has

some of its knowledge based on superstition. Even when humans lived under the stupor caused by perfection, this knowledge was accessible to some of them. It was the case of Virginia. Before being French, she had travelled with an aunt to consult the Abba-Dingo. Expecting to have a prediction, they got none because they did not travelled the Alpha Ralpha Boulevard.

What is then their quest? Virginia wishes to know if the love she feels for Paul is true or just another memory implanted in her brain. [14] In other words, Virginia wishes to know the truth, to access the "tree of knowledge". A third character, Maximilien Macht, a tall and sunburnt German with red hair, plays the role of the serpent, the tempter.

During their perilous travel through an abandoned route that climbed up into the clouds to the centre of power, Earthport, Macht takes pleasure in smashing some eggs with his feet, killing unborn birds. Paul, disgusted with this gratuitous action, discovers he can hate, and even kill if necessary. This upsets him deeply:

> *I liked him not at all. The words of forgotten crimes came into my mind: assassination, murder, abduction, insanity, rape, robbery... We had known none of these things and yet I felt them all. (Smith, 1993a: 389)*

The explosion of emotions, unexpected since silenced for centuries, proved that humanity did not evolve under the utopian rules; they had been just like zombies, deprived of feelings, emotions, desires. Left to themselves, all these silenced feelings would surface again, and humankind would travel the same old route of violence and war.

The tempter, the serpent that gives access to knowledge, will be Paul's guide into the dark recesses of the human mind:

> *[Fear] is delicious, [Macht] thought. It makes me sick and thrilly and alive. It is like strong medicine, almost as good as stroon. I went there before. High up, I had much fear. It was wonderful and bad and good, all at the same time. I lived a thousand years in a single hour. I wanted more of it, but I thought it would be even more exciting with other people […] This is what the Lords of the Instrumentality never let us have. Fear. Reality. <u>We were born in a stupor and we died in a dream. Even the underpeople, the animals, had more life than we did. The machines did not have fear. That's what we were. Machines who thought they were men.</u> And now we are free. (Smith, 1993a: 389)* [15]

Smith's short story remains faithful to Saint-Pierre's novel, even in its final moments. Paul and Virginia get their predictions: Virginia's is written in her own flesh

and blood, Paul's in a scrap of tissue that once covered an old corpse. Both predictions are painfully true.

Virginie drowned on the shores of her island, before her lover's eyes, because bashfulness — a feeling she had learnt while living in the French society — made it impossible for her to do the right thing: to undressed herself and accept the naked mariner's hand to help her swim ashore.

Virginia's blame is by far more profound, because it reveals a flaw of character. She chooses to die rather than let an Underperson touch her. It was pure repugnance, profound disgust, a complete inability to accept the other, even in a life-threatening situation. [16] As predicted, Virginia died twenty-one minutes after Paul received his own prediction on the scrap of cloth.

Paul's previous compassion for the unborn birds dictates his fate, whatever it may have been, for the narrative is left open.

> *The someone else was C'mell, whom we had first met in the corridor.*
>
> *I came to get you both, she thought at me, not that the birds cared about her.*
>
> *What have the birds got to do with it?*
>
> *You saved them. You saved their young, when the red-topped man was killing them all. All of us have been worried about what you true people would do to us when you were free. We found out. Some of you are bad and kill other kinds of life. Others of you are good and protect life.*
>
> *Thought I, is that all there is to good and bad? (Smith, 1993a: 398)* [17]

The paradoxical truth of Smith's technological utopia resides in C'mell's, the cat-woman, underlined words. While human beings were under the control of highly developed technology that left them all in a state of numbness, depending on drugs to avoid depression and suicide, the slaves, the Underpeople, did not have their freedom, but they had security. The change in humans' lives would definitely change the known *status quo*, probably for worse, because humans left loose, without guidance, without a social order or strategy would probably return to their predatory behaviour that almost led them to total annihilation several times in the past.

Conclusion

Comparing two utopias written almost four and a half centuries apart probably should reveal more differences than similarities in what regards their ideas, the message they convey to a critical reader or, using Eco's definition, to an "ideal reader" (Eco, 1997: 21-23). In fact, though they both create two completely different fictional worlds, a *quasi*-medieval one and an ultra-technologically sophisticated other, they both focus on the origin of all utopias: a wish we all share, whose roots are lost in the mists of time and myth, the wish for a better, more harmonious way to live in society. The balance between the individual needs and desires, and the communities' hangs on very uncertain premises.

In the sixteenth century, Thomas More and his fellow humanists shared the dream of a more human society, achieved mainly through the education of princes and the ruling classes, and engaging themselves in active roles of civic life. However, time proved them wrong. Princes and Kings seemed much more attracted to rule according to Machiavelli's *The Prince* (Maquiavel, 2008; Machiavelli, 2008)

Being a critical and intelligent citizen, with strong ties to the community, knowing the ways of the lords and those of the people, Thomas More created an open narrative, a dialogue to be resumed some other day, because Utopia was not yet the right answer:

> *When Raphael had finished his story, many things came to my mind which seemed very absurdly established in the customs and laws of the people described (…). I knew, however, that he was wearied with his tale, and I was not quite certain that he could brook any opposition to his views, particularly when I recalled his censure of others on account of their fear that they might not appear to be wise enough, unless they found some fault to criticize in other men's discoveries. I therefore praised their way of life and his speech and, taking him by the hand, led him in to supper. I first said, nevertheless, that there would be another chance to think about these matters more deeply and to talk over with him more fully. If only this were some day possible! (More, 1965: 245)*

In my opinion, More shared a faint hope that some kind of a better society would be possible one day if, and only if, the transformation came from within each person. Utopia achieved its state of "perfection" at the cost of individual freedom, denying any change that could threaten the established *status quo*, severing human creativity. Utopians can copy, but they cannot create. They are stuck in place and in time forever. That is unnatural, even in a utopia that promotes a healthy, natural way

of living for all. Rationality without emotion, order without disorder, are not successful forms of living, for they are contrary to nature.

Cordwainer Smith, whose professional career was, for a long time, the study of psychological procedures to control masses, compares a natural utopia (*Paul et Virginie*), written in the year of the French Revolution, to a highly technological utopia. From this comparison, he leads the reader to draw the conclusion that the supposed utopia was, in fact, a dystopia that would lead human beings to annihilation. The cost of a peaceful society cannot be achieved by denying human emotions and feelings. Moreover, ignorance is not the right answer.

Paul and Virginia are two persons left unprepared to face and understand the meaning of living in society, the meaning of life itself. They are puppets at the hands of a superior power, lab rats that will die or survive according to decisions they are not ready to make because they lack all the feedback that culture provides. They are not the romantic lovers that grew up surrounded by responsible adults amidst a luxuriant natural milieu. Without social ties, without the background of culture, humans are condemned to extinction.

The apparent choice to be made here, taking More's and Smith's narratives into account, seems to be either lingering or dying. However, that is not what both writers had in mind. Literary utopias are narratives that heave an implicit warning, a political aim, and a pedagogical purpose. Human society is always on the verge of self-destruction (warning). Politics are to be conducted by taking into account the whole human being, with all his/her inherent complexities (political aim). Society should never cut its ties with culture and creativity, for its future depends on the way people are educated and integrated into a whole, sharing more than laws and regulations (pedagogical purpose).

Perfection is not part of human DNA, evolution is.

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Notes

1 To refer just one of the most recent critics, I suggest the reading of Fredric Jameson's book (JAMESON, 2005).

2 Aires do Nascimento, in his introduction to the Portuguese translation of More's Utopia, publication actively promoted by Professor J. V de Pina Martins, points outs that: "o [primeiro] tradutor inglês (…) transformou a obra num relato de viagem, ganhando em pitoresco, mas apagando a tensão entre o real e o imaginário; se o contexto político assim o exigia, nela, o prolongamento da frase retira a condensação e o valor do significado original, mascara a expressão do autor em função da mensagem filtrada" (MORE, 2009: 152-153) ["the [first] English translator (…) transformed the work on a travel narrative, gaining in picturesque, but erasing the tension between the real and the imaginary; if the political context thus demanded, the lengthening of the sentence withdraws the thickness and the value of the original meaning, masks the author's intention due to a filtered message"].

3 On this matter see, Kumar (Kumar, 1991), Sargent (Sargent, 2010) and Vita Fortunati (Fortunati e Trousson, 2000: 634-643; 2008: 19-30).

4 The humanists considered women had a very important role in the social and political structures of any civilized society for they were the first, and therefore, the most important educators.

5 More wrote the first part of Utopia while he was in Antwerp, performing the duties of ambassador for the city of London.

6 The opinion that The Praise of Folly and Utopia are the outcome of a common plan delineated by Erasmus and More during Erasmus long sojourn at More's house (1509-1511) is advocated, among others, by André Prévost (Prévost, 1978: 65-67) and Pina Martins (Pina Martins, 2006: 82).

7 In spite of Budé's characterization of Utopia as a place between heaven and earth, one must remember that, just a few lines before, Budé baptized the island as Udepotia, a never land. Thus, he takes part, in my opinion, in the same game of words and double senses that runs throughout the entire narrative and gives it its peculiar characteristic of seriousness and jeu d'esprit.

8 On Utopia being and open narrative see "Utopia I e Utopia III; a continuação de um diálogo humanista" (Monteiro, 2013).

9 Sargent expresses a similar vision: "… if I were a poor peasant in 1516 I would find [Utopia] extremely appealing" (Sargent, 2004: 4).

10 For a more detailed analysis of Cordwainer Smith's narratives see "People e Underpeople ou as involuções e evoluções da humanidade" (Monteiro, 2012).

11 For a chronology of Smith's "history of humanity" see Lewis (Lewis, 2000: 14).

12 In Paul et Virginie, the plot is set in the Mauritius Islands, then a French Colony. Smith's setting is Martinique, a French Department. Both islands, though in different oceans, share similar tropical climates and natural atmospheric disturbances such as hurricanes and tropical tempests. In both, nature is luxuriant.

13 Anthony Lewis suggests that the name Abba-Dingo may mean "father of lies" (Lewis, 2000: 17).

14 In Paul and Virginie, Paul expresses the doubt about the faithfulness of their love. He is the one left behind while Virginie is sent to France, to be properly educated as a young woman of high society should be.

15 Not underlined in the text.

16 At this point, I think it is important the take into consideration the cultural moment during which the short story was written: 1961. Civil rights were beginning to become a hot political issue in the United States, mainly in the southern states, and soon it became a judicial problem too, with consecutive rulings from courts up to the Supreme Court. Cordwainer Smith having been a military and a University professor was quite aware of the problem and I think he did not let it pass unnoticed both in this short story, but especially in the novel, Norstrilia. Though being published only posthumously, important parts of it ("The Planet Buyer" and "The Underpeople") were published in 1964 and 1968. For further information on the changes of science fiction and utopia in the 60's see Fitting's "Utopia, dystopia and science fiction" (Fitting, 2010).

17 Not underlined in the text.