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utopian philosophy as literature and practice

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**Etherotopia, an Ideal State and a State of Mind:
Utopian Philosophy as Literature and Practice**

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PhD

2014

I, Christos Callow, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm this has been indicated in my thesis.

Abstract

This thesis examines the concept of *Etherotopia* (which literally translates to ‘ethereal place’), by which I define the combination of utopian philosophy with certain ideas of individual perfection such as nirvana. The argument is made that the separation of utopian visions into social utopias and individual ones (states and states of mind) is a false dilemma, since a complete utopian theory should include both.

In relation to my own utopian writing and as a transition from the critical to the creative part of this thesis, I examine the question of genre in utopian literature and, following from the view that literary genres are subjective and conventional, I argue that utopian literature doesn’t need to be labelled as a literary genre but rather that it is utopian philosophy in literary form, and therefore philosophical writing.

Having argued for the need of a contemporary Etherotopian theory and having discussed the relationship between utopian writing and genre, I proceed to introducing my portfolio of creative writing, a short story collection with the title *Etherotopias*, which is a series of diverse utopian/dystopian fictions that in some cases expand on the concept of *Etherotopia* either philosophically or aesthetically, while in other cases provide literary responses to conflicting utopian theories popular in contemporary society and its consumer culture. The collection is therefore a series of arguments and criticisms in the form of stories that range from political and satirical to religious and existential and address social issues as well as utopian and dystopian states of mind.

Acknowledgements

I would like first of all to thank my parents, Christos and Eftychia, because first of all I was born, which I understand is an essential first step towards studying for a PhD. I am also most grateful to have graduated from the greatest university: the kind of Greek family that one thinks – or should think – of with admiration when one uses the term Greek family.

I would like to thank Dr. Caroline Edwards, who has been my supervisor since I began this project at the University of Lincoln and later at Birkbeck, and has always been there not only as a supervisor, but most importantly as a friend. If this project has achieved what it set out to achieve, it is her success as much as it is mine.

Also, special thanks to a great thinker and friend, my former tutor Prof. Johan Siebers, who has generously shared his wisdom on all matters utopian and helped me form my own utopian theory.

I am honoured to have been a Birkbeck student and would thus like to thank my supervisor Toby Litt who has offered invaluable advice on my writing during my studies at Birkbeck. Finally, I'm grateful to Prof. Carol Watts and Anthony Shepherd for their support and to Birkbeck's School of Arts for being the fantastic place that it is, a small intellectual utopia in a big dystopian city.

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Introduction

This thesis, the outcome of a creative writing – and thus a practice-based – research, consists of a short story collection and a series of essays that explore the philosophical ideas and aesthetics of the creative work. I have titled the collection of stories *Etherotopias*, plural of Etherotopia, a term I coined in the first year of my research, combining the words ‘ethereal’ and ‘topos’ (‘place’). This concept is the central idea of the critical work and also provides a thematic bond for the stories in the collection; it is finally the title of one of the stories. Some of the main questions Etherotopia deals with are the conceivability of utopia, its aesthetics, the application of utopia in everyday life and therefore the utopian theorist’s responsibility to his or her theory, as well as the possibility (or impossibility) of a ‘local’ utopia (be it a city, country or planet) within a broader dystopian reality. Etherotopia concerns what I see as an underdeveloped branch of contemporary utopian philosophy; the combination of theories of social perfection and theories of personal perfection; ideal states and ideal states of mind; utopia(s) and nirvana(s).

Both utopia and nirvana are, I understand, fairly common terms. However I provide some relevant definitions in the first essay. Here, for the purposes of this introduction, I want to say I am particularly fond of the following approach by Prof. Miriam Eliav-Feldon: ‘A utopia is an invitation to perceive the distance between things as they are and things as they should be’ and that utopia, since ‘it is an appeal to perfect the social environment, it expresses explicit and implicit criticism of the things as they are.’¹ If these are the two main aspects of utopia (criticising ‘things as they are’ while imagining ‘how things could be’), the reader will find that both the creative and the critical writing in this thesis deal with both approaches and therefore examine both Etherotopia and its opposites.

In that sense, each of the stories included here functions within the collection as an argument either supporting the Etherotopian perspective or criticising popular utopian ideas that contrast it. By this I mean that my thesis is not a conventional critique of beliefs and worldviews already considered unpopular in contemporary society; this would be, in my view, insufficient motivation to write philosophical fiction. I prefer, in

¹ Miriam Eliav-Feldon, *Realistic Utopias: The Ideal Imaginary Societies of the Renaissance, 1516 – 1630* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982), 1.

both my creative and critical writing, to address philosophical issues in unconventional, and potentially controversial, ways.

I do not claim that the stories, as a collection of fictionalised arguments, form a complete ideology or manifesto. Several of these present utopianism as a work-in-progress and as an inconceivable alternative and are therefore focused not as much on the politics and practicalities of a utopia, but on the process of imagining utopia, its philosophy and aesthetics. In regards to the literary aspect of these stories, there is a balance of humorous and ‘serious’ stories, different narrative techniques and a mix of genres interconnected to one another, but mainly science fiction and fantasy. Finally, the stories are all in some sense utopian or dystopian fiction, though I am conscious that, in the essays preceding the stories, my definition of utopian literature is the broadest possible one. To clarify this; like a science fiction story is not necessarily about science, many of the utopian stories in the collection are not about utopias, but rather about utopian perspectives of the world; in other words, these are exploring states of mind. Some are even about nirvana or about a Christ or Buddha figure.

As to the logic of the stories, in the majority of them – if not in all – the aim is to demonstrate a radical critical thinking where, whatever the result, the action – and this is another element that connects the stories – is always a form of rejection. Often it is the rejection of the idea of ‘here and now’ presented as an escape to a better planet (elsewhere), a journey to a better time (elsewhen), or an allegorical denial of experience. At other times, it is the collapse of a pseudo-utopian model and a symbol or a personality that represents it.

Development of the project

Throughout my studies, I have been interested in how creative writing works as practice-based research and have often speculated about the implications of such a concept. One of the questions that have puzzled me for instance is why creative writing is considered practice-based research, as opposed to critical writing; since, objectively, both involve the same ‘practice’; writing. When I decided to study for a creative writing PhD, I felt it was appropriate that the creative part would be also be ‘critical’, a work of art and a work of criticism at the same time. As Andrew Crumey writes in his essay ‘Creative Writing as an Academic Discipline’:

Perhaps our corpus is not artistic literature as such, but literature seen as a form of problem solving. We can certainly find examples of writers who have viewed their own work in this way: Poe’s *Philosophy Of Composition* is an extreme

example; the reflector novels of Henry James are more moderate in their problem-solving claims. Of a PhD novel we might ask: what problems does it pose, and how does it address them?²

While still thinking about working on a PhD, it seemed to me that a philosophical kind of fiction like utopian fiction would be an ideal subject, especially considering I had already developed an interest in this field, as most of my writing prior to starting my PhD I would consider utopian literature. Originally the creative writing project which I suggested in my PhD proposal was a novel about a modern spiritual journey, inspired by such philosophical novels as Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* and Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* but set in a dystopian near-future society; it would explore the idea of being a utopian citizen in a dystopian world.

Within the first weeks of my research however, I suggested to my supervisors that, due to the variety of ideas and perspectives I wanted to examine in the project, it would be more productive if, instead of a novel, I worked on a story collection. The first story I wrote for this collection was *A Boy, Alone*. I presented the story along with a critical piece I wrote at the 2012 Annual Postgraduate Conference of the University of Lincoln. (Both the story and the critical piece were later published.)

I went on to write more stories, thematically and aesthetically connected to the first one. I decided then that the stories that would be included in my portfolio would be mainly science fiction and fantasy as well as cross-genre stories with elements of both. As to the narrative technique, I decided that there would be a combination of various narratives, so as to experiment with a series of ideas and concepts from more than one perspective. Finally, the entire creative part of the PhD would consist of an anthology of around twenty of these stories.

Before the summer of 2012, I had come up with a name for the type of utopia I was exploring. My problem with Thomas More's term 'Utopia', which literally means 'no place', is that it has been used both as a positive term (as More intended it to be) and as a negative term (e.g. utopia as unrealistic expectation). In their book *What is Philosophy?* and while discussing revolution and utopia, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari note that 'The word utopia (...) designates *that conjunction of philosophy, or of the concept, with the present milieu* – political philosophy (however, in view of the

² Andrew Crumey, "Creative Writing as an Academic Discipline", accessed June 18, 2014, www.crumey.toucansurf.com.

mutilated meaning public opinion has given to it, perhaps *utopia* is not the best word).³ Misconceptions of the term are problematic also because, as I understand it, the utopian condition is a utopia for all and thus an objective matter that a subjectivist perspective either distorts (thus interpreting a dystopian vision as a desirable utopia) or simply fails to comprehend and even grasp it in the first place.

Since the idea behind Etherotopia is to explore in creative and critical writing the ‘inner utopia’ or utopia of the mind (which could be interpreted as nirvana or the Christian ‘Kingdom Within’, to name two examples), I find that ‘Etherotopia’ as a term depicts exactly that spiritual utopia which is not exclusively a social state (as utopias are in the traditional sense) but also a ‘state of mind’. Literally, the term may be translated as Ethereal Land. I find this suitable also because a number of stories in the collection are dreamlike stories, including *Etherotopia* and *The Painter’s Dream*.

The stories are listed in a roughly chronological order, according to time of completion. This is in order to demonstrate the development of the thesis, as well as of the writing itself. As some of these have been previously published, I include here a list of publications, listed according to publication date⁴:

‘Bears’ was published in the ezine *The Mad Scientist Journal* in August 2012, edited by Jeremy Zimmerman and Dawn Vogel. It was reprinted in the fiction anthology *The Mad Scientist Journal: Summer 2012* in April 2013.

‘The War to Dante’ was published by StoneThread Publishing in the fiction anthology *Body-Smith 401 and Twenty Other Stories: An Anthology of Speculative Fiction* in September 2012, edited by Harvey Stanbrough.

‘The Doers’ was published by Dog Horn Publishing in the fiction magazine *Polluto, Issue 10: Wave Slave Orgy* in February 2013, edited by Victoria Hooper.

‘Karyatis Unbound’ was published in the ezine *Sorcerous Signals* and in the fiction anthology *Mystic Signals* in February 2013, edited by Carol Hightshoe.

‘The Painter’s Dream’ was published online in the ezine *The WiFiles* in April 2013, edited by Jay Faulkner.

‘A Boy, Alone’ was published by Jaxas Publishing Company in the fiction magazine *Quantum Realities* in April 2013, edited by Shawn Grimsley.

³ Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994), 100.

⁴ Note: I have not included city of publication, as in some cases the magazines in which my stories appeared are ezines (online magazines) while in others they were published as ebooks. These have been published under the name Christos Callow Jr.

‘Etherotopia’ was published by Hic Dragones in the fiction anthology *Impossible Spaces* in July 2013, edited by Hannah Kate.

‘Parts of me that aren’t mine’ was published by Kalamity Press in the fiction anthology in *This Mutant Life* in September 2013, edited by Ben Langdon.

Finally, the main essay of my thesis, ‘Etherotopia, or a country in the mind: bridging the gap between utopias and nirvanas’ has been accepted for publication by the academic publisher Ashgate and is forthcoming later this year (2014) in an edited volume, titled *Utopia and the Individual*.⁵

The Field

I have previously referred to a certain branch of contemporary utopian studies that examines theories relevant to my own, such as the connection between utopia and nirvana. I want to discuss this in more detail here, defending the timing and originality but also the relevance of my research.

First of all, the field of utopian studies to which this research thematically belongs, is a very diverse one as is clearly indicated in the ‘About’ section of The Society for Utopian Studies’ website:

The Society for Utopian Studies is an international, interdisciplinary association devoted to the study of utopianism in all its forms, with a particular emphasis on literary and experimental utopias. Scholars representing a wide variety of disciplines are active in the association, and approach utopian studies from such diverse backgrounds as American Studies, Architecture, the Arts, Classics, Cultural Studies, Economics, Engineering, Environmental Studies, Gender Studies, History, Languages and Literatures, Philosophy, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology and Urban Planning.⁶

This, in other words, is a very vast field and the particular area of research in which my work is part of seems to be at an early stage of development and only few relevant works have been produced so far. I am confident however that this is going to change in the near future and I will mention certain examples to back this statement.

An early academic study on utopian literature is Joyce Oramel Hertzler’s *The History of Utopian Thought*, first published in 1928. This book is a key influence on my thinking and it helped me with the first steps of my PhD. I have included many

⁵ Clint Jones and Cameron Ellis, eds. *Utopia and the Individual*. London: Ashgate, 2014 [Forthcoming].

⁶ The Society for Utopian Studies, ‘About’, accessed July 14, 2014, <http://utopian-studies.org/>.

quotations from this in my main essay on Etherotopia, the reason being that I find the author's perspective to be similar to mine in that he almost makes no distinction between the utopias of political texts and those of religious texts and even refers to the idea of utopia being a 'state of mind'⁷; in a sense, I am using this idea, which is the conclusion of his book, as the starting point of my thesis.

There are references to the connection between utopia and the Buddhist nirvana in academic texts such as *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* by Prof. Steven Collins. Collins, for instance, examines a utopian aspect of the Buddhist faith and, while the first of the two parts of his book is mainly focused on the concept of nirvana, the second part, titled 'Paradise in Heaven and on Earth' focuses on utopia and begins with an introduction titled 'Utopia and the Ideal Society'. He even refers to the relation of utopia and nirvana in the Buddhist tradition, in which: 'nirvana is assimilated to other Buddhist utopias (...) through the image of it as a city.'⁸

There are other texts that refer to utopia as a state of mind, though not always positively. For instance, in *The Faber Book of Utopias*, John Carey recognises the existence of personal, spiritual and other such utopias of the mind while making a clear distinction between social and personal utopias, even though he is critical of the latter⁹; I return to his approach in more detail in my first essay.

In 'A Short History of Utopian Studies' (which appeared in the journal of the Utopian Studies Society that I mentioned before), Peter Fitting dismisses Hertzler's approach in his *History of Utopian Thought*. He writes that: 'Despite the emphasis on "social thought," Hertzler mixes prophets, social dreamers, and utopian authors and planners rather indiscriminately.'¹⁰ My approach however, as stated above, is similar to Hertzler's and also Lewis Mumford's who, in his 1922 book *The Story of Utopias* writes that 'idealism and science continue to function in separate compartments; and yet "the happiness of man on earth" depends upon their combination.'¹¹ I believe in this combination and thus I have, in my work, emphasised the social aspect of Christianity

⁷ Joyce Oramel Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1965), 314.

⁸ Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 291.

⁹ John Carey, ed. *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), xix-xx.

¹⁰ Peter Fitting, "A Short History of Utopian Studies," *Science Fiction Studies* 107, Volume 36, Part 1 (2009), accessed June 18, 2014, <http://depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/107/fitting107.htm>.

¹¹ Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1928), 268-269.

and Buddhism, though in any case my Etherotopia is not exclusively a social issue but a personal one as well.

A recently published book that explores this approach favourably is *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought* (2011), edited by Patrícia Vieira and Michael Marder. Vieira and Marder express a concern for the dominance of dystopian literature – I quote: ‘Is there still any space, whether conceptual or practical, for the thinking of utopia – which from the outset announces a certain negation of place, *topos* – in a world marked by a chronic dystopian outlook?’¹² – and argue for an existential utopia which they introduce thus:

Positively put, a revived utopian thought enjoins us to search for meaning in the immanence of collective life and to fashion a common space devoid of an overarching unity, a malleable and plastic space, where shared existence is interpreted each time anew.¹³

Another book of those recently published that is relevant to my work is *Utopia and Consciousness* by William S. Haney II, published in 2011. This study explores the relationship between utopia and the concept of consciousness in Sanskrit texts. For instance, in the preface, Haney writes the following (it should be noted here that the ‘two traditions’ he refers to are, what he calls, ‘contemporary Western theory’ and ‘Sanskrit poetics’¹⁴):

The approach centers on the opposing theories of language and consciousness of the two traditions, for language changes with the level of one's consciousness. The three ordinary states of consciousness are waking, sleeping and dreaming, while the fourth state is pure, transcendental consciousness, which, once it becomes stabilized, leads to the fifth state of cosmic consciousness, the basic state of consciousness required to achieve utopia.¹⁵

Admittedly, I haven't quoted Haney's book elsewhere, since he examines different texts, traditions and philosophies than I do. Nevertheless, the book was published the year I submitted my PhD proposal and so, in a sense, the year I started this research; this shows that I am not the only person making connections between utopian social states and utopian states of mind.

¹² Patrícia Vieira and Michael Marder, eds. *Existential Utopia: New Perspectives on Utopian Thought* (New York: Continuum, 2012), IX.

¹³ Vieira and Marder, *Existential Utopia*, XI.

¹⁴ William S Haney II, *Utopia and Consciousness*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 7.

¹⁵ Haney, *Utopia and Consciousness*, 8.

However, the work that, in my view, makes the strongest case for the defence of my thesis must certainly be the forthcoming essay collection titled *Utopia and the Individual*, the one in which my own essay on Etherotopia is forthcoming and, though now that I am writing this, the book is in the final stage of development, I refer to it as evidence that there is work on this subject being produced right now.

I would like to think that the small number of books and articles on the subject, including recent ones, prove the rarity and originality of my contribution. At the same time, were there no other academic works in this field, making connections between one's state of mind and utopia, one might question the logic of this thesis or the author's sanity and were there too many or in any sense 'enough', one might undermine the value, relevance or – as I see it – demand for this type of research. And while the author's sanity is – arguably – the author's own business, I do hope I have, in this introduction, made a case for the logic that led to this particular research.

Chapter One

Etherotopia or a Country in the Mind: Bridging the Gap Between Utopias and Nirvanas

Utopia Here and Now

Joyce Hertzler concludes his *History of Utopian Thought* with the phrase ‘Utopia is not a social state it is a state of mind.’¹⁶ Other utopian scholars would argue that the truth is exactly the opposite, that utopia is a purely social matter. There seems to be a false dilemma here where one is expected to choose between two, seemingly conflicting, schools of utopian thinking: social utopias and private ones. In John Carey’s words, ‘Whereas most utopias reform the world, some reform the self’.¹⁷ He says of the latter that these ‘solitary utopians are Robinson Crusoes of the mind, inventing islands for themselves to inhabit’ and that they are very unlike ‘normal, public-spirited utopians.’¹⁸

Note here the distinction between the ‘normal, public-spirited’ utopianism and the solitary one; the kind that takes place within the individual’s mind and, for doing so, is denied any social value. In his work, Hertzler notices this problem when comparing utopianism to religion. He writes: ‘Among the various Utopians (...), two ideals reigned – ideals seemingly negations of each other. (...) The first ideal is the future of the human race in this world; the other is the future of the individual in another world hereafter.’¹⁹ Hertzler however believes those are essentially the same in everything but the end: ‘the specific end alone is different, and that is of minor significance.’²⁰

I understand that the concept of an inner, personal utopianism is commonly presented as a false alternative to the ‘proper’ social utopianism; when it is not, it is preached in the form of a religion. But these two perspectives are not necessarily the only options. In my view, there is no reason to exclude the possibility of a hybrid; a third school of utopianism that would reform both the world and the self. Speaking of a utopianism that functions on both levels, personal and social, Hertzler mentions Jesus’ idea of the Kingdom of God where ‘to separate the inner lives of individuals from the

¹⁶Hertzler. *History*, 314.

¹⁷ Carey, *Faber*, xix.

¹⁸ Carey, *Faber*, xx.

¹⁹ Hertzler. *History*, 262.

²⁰ Hertzler. *History*, 262.

social order was really impossible, for they react upon one another always and inevitably.²¹ Should we accept this argument – and I think it would be illogical not to, unless we believe that society doesn't consist of individuals – we would come to realise that there never was a dilemma in the first place.

That being said, it should be clarified that by a utopianism that demands both social and personal reconstruction to be fulfilled, one does not necessarily refer to a religion, but rather to a utopianism that functions as religion. This would be a more advanced theory than social utopianism. Perhaps this is closer to what Levitas defines as utopia when she says that 'Utopia entails not just the fictional depiction of a better society, but the assertion of a radical change of values.'²² This 'radical change of values', this *transformation*, if you like, is an essential element of a mature utopian vision.

Another problem with the strictly social utopianisms is that the individual, especially the theorist, is unable to put the theory into practice in his or her everyday life. As a result, the social utopian scholar's work typically ends at entertaining the idea and justifies Nietzsche's Zarathustra who calls scholars people who 'want to be mere spectators in everything' and 'like those who stand in the street and stare at the people passing by, so they too wait and stare at thoughts that others have thought.'²³ On the contrary, the religious utopian scholar's work (if a true religious individual) merely begins with the theory and continues with their participation in the actual world. That is because this school of thought is founded on the principle that the individual's relationship with him or her self is in fact a social issue, as it defines their role in society. I will return to this later.

In *Something's Missing*, a discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, Bloch argues that:

At the very beginning Thomas More designated utopia as a place, an island in the distant South Seas. This designation underwent changes later so that it left space and entered time. Indeed, the utopians, especially those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transposed the wishland more into the future.²⁴

²¹ Hertzler, *History*, 71.

²² Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (London: Philip Allan, 1990), 124.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A book for everyone and no one*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 147.

²⁴ Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 3.

Here Bloch refers to utopia as a place and utopia as a time but one could respond that a much older idea is that of utopia as a person – more accurately, a state of mind – which may also be described as nirvana. It is this utopianism that I explore in this essay: a utopia that does not require an alternate space or time, and may thus be created – or at least start its development – right here and now.

From a purely social perspective, the quest for nirvana might seem irrelevant to utopia. That is, if in our mind, consciousness does not occupy social space. There is good reason however why nirvana has been depicted in Buddhism as a city; Hallisey refers to a ‘conventional metaphor that “defines” existential conditions as “places”’²⁵, much like the Kingdom of God is described, symbolically of course, as a kingdom.²⁶

In what way then, it may be asked, would either nirvana or the Christian Kingdom apply to society? Again such a question would imply a total disconnection between the personal and the social. In the religious utopianist’s view, the personal issue is social and vice versa. In *Buddha, Marx and God*, Trevor Ling explains why this is the case (at least for the case of Buddhism, though this applies to Christian utopianism as well):

The only thing that Buddhism can never be is a *private* affair, since in the Buddhist view there are no private individuals. The aim of Buddhism is inherently *social* in its concern; it is to bring all men to nirvana; this objective concerns society as a whole.²⁷

Nirvana First

In my view, utopia is the nirvana of society and nirvana is the utopia of the person; in the sense that the two concepts can be read as synonymous, since we have established that nirvana is as social a goal as utopia. Since nirvana is more suitable a concept when referring to a utopian state of mind, I will be using this parallel throughout the remainder of this essay. It would be useful here to give a definition of nirvana, in order to avoid misinterpretation. The following quote is from *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* by Damien Keown:

²⁵ Charles Hallisey, ‘Nibbānasutta: An Allegedly Non-Canonical Sutta on Nibbāna as a Great City,’ *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, Vol. XVIII (1993), 113.

²⁶ See Luke 17:21 (Authorised King James Version): ‘Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.’

²⁷ Trevor Ling, *Buddha, Marx and God: Some Aspects of Religion in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1979), 83.

'Nirvana' literally means 'quenching' or 'blowing out', in the way that the flame of a candle is blown out. But what is it that is 'blown out'? Is it one's soul, one's ego, one's identity? It cannot be the soul that is blown out, since Buddhism denies that any such thing exists. Nor is it the ego or one's sense of identity that disappears, although nirvana certainly involves a radically transformed state of consciousness which is free of the obsession with 'me and mine'.²⁸

That would be the ideal state of mind for a utopian theorist, as it is difficult to even imagine utopia without having been liberated first – or, if you prefer, un-blinded – from personal obsessions, desires, addictions, traumas and so on. Otherwise, the result will be the continuous spread of more and more separatist utopias that favour one race over the other, one culture over the other, one gender over the other, one nation over some or all others.

At this point, I would like to draw a parallel between the wish to achieve utopia – social or personal or, ideally, both – and the wish for another type of perfection, immortality. Stephen R. L. Clark's response to the wish of immortality, in *How to Live Forever: Science Fiction and Philosophy*, adds another level of complexity to utopian theorising. Clark says:

The wish to be immortal, if it is to be rational, must be a wish to merit, or be capable of, such immortality. It would be a disastrous idea for the wicked, including the 'ordinarily wicked' (which is most of us). So if we wish ourselves immortal we must in reason wish ourselves 'deserving' of immortality. Conversely, if we wish ourselves thus 'deserving' we must wish ourselves immortal: it would make little sense not to want what we have wanted to deserve.²⁹

To translate this to utopian terms, it follows that a) before we demand utopia, we must first deserve it; in other words if we find ourselves in a utopian society without being utopian ourselves, we would be but parasites – quite possibly we would also be unable to appreciate that utopia; b) in order for our minds to become of the same quality as their utopian product, we must aim to achieve that 'radically transformed state of consciousness', nirvana.

In his analysis of nirvana, Clark states that 'the term is popularly used, in newspapers, simply to mean the fulfilment of desire. In Buddhist origin it means the

²⁸ Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 51.

²⁹ Stephen R. L. Clark, *How to Live Forever: Science Fiction and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1995), 20.

extinction of desire.³⁰ The same should apply to utopianism: it is the extinction of desire, not its fulfilment that is utopian. Otherwise, the utopian citizen would be as dependent on utopia for their frequent dose of satisfactions as a dystopian³¹ would. I would therefore argue that utopia itself cannot be a direct fulfilment of desire or need: it ought to be a new condition that comes almost automatically as a natural result of individual and, subsequently, cultural evolution. I will come back to this near the end of the essay.

I have so far presented the quest for nirvana and the quest for utopia as parallel paths in the same direction. Once the parallels have been drawn, it seems almost impossible to think of them as two conflicting objectives. At the same time, there is the problem raised by Bertolt Brecht in his play *The Good Person of Szechwan*: ‘the impossibility of being good in a corrupt world’³² – or, in utopian terms, to be a utopian citizen in a dystopian city – and so to achieve nirvana one would have to wait for the social utopia.³³ On the other hand, if a social utopia can only be brought by those who have a proper utopian vision and thus the necessary clarity of mind to host that vision, then maybe it is the other way round after all. It seems hard to argue with Brecht, but the two religions I am referring to here would claim not only that being good in an evil world is possible, but to be good in an already good world would hardly be an achievement. It is a complicated situation and one can never be entirely sure about which is the right place to start, utopia or nirvana. The only answer, it seems to me, is that, unlike the social utopia, the personal utopia may be achieved right here and now. The person that seeks a social utopia may end up waiting forever but the one who is after the personal utopia can start practicing right now. Maybe that person, like another Buddha, would have the mental capacity required to conceive the path to the social utopia while those still ‘blinded’ by ‘the obsession with “me and mine”’³⁴ may not. I

³⁰ Clark, *Live Forever*, 23.

³¹ Here I refer to a Huxleyan, rather than an Orwellian, dystopia that is sustained by keeping its citizens satisfied. It seems to me that those who ask for a utopia that would merely keep them entertained might as well welcome a dystopia that would do the same.

³² Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 118.

³³ Brecht’s message, I understand, is that to be good one must first struggle for a society which will allow its members to be good. The paradox is that to bring ‘good’ social change, those who revolt against the corrupt society must be un-corrupted already or the utopian struggle might lead to yet another dystopia.

³⁴ Keown, *Buddhism*, 51.

would argue that in our quest for a universal utopia, our own nirvana must be our first priority.

My argument is that ‘Nirvana First’ is the starting point of the religious utopianist. Just as Buddha started preaching nirvana *after* achieving nirvana, it follows that the utopian’s first task is to become a utopia themselves before preaching it. This logic is common sense in Zen Buddhism. In his classic work, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Herrigel warns that ‘Zen can only be understood by one who is himself a mystic and is therefore not tempted to gain by underhand methods what the mystical experience withholds from him.’³⁵

The same applies to utopianism. As we have not experienced utopia, we are not in the position to provide arguments from experience. Arguments must therefore come from *logic* and – following a Zen Buddhist understanding of truth – in order to have access to logic, the self must go; more accurately, the selfish ambitions, desires, preoccupations and everything else that adds to prejudice. The Zen Koan, *A Cup of Tea*, may be of use here. According to it, the Japanese master Nan-in ‘received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.’ (In our case, a utopian scholar who would inquire about utopia.) Nan-in serves him tea, pours his cup and keeps pouring even after the cup is filled. The professor complains and Nan-in replies that, like this cup, ‘you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?’³⁶ In the same way, the utopian mind must be ready to give up its own vision of utopia should a better one appear (even if that utopia wouldn’t include him or her). This means that our utopian vision must develop along with ourselves. The closer we are to nirvana or our own utopia of the mind, the closer we are to understanding what utopia would be like.

Another point that I find of interest here is one of Nietzsche’s arguments against theism, but this applies to other absolutes and ideals as well. He writes in *Zarathustra*:

God is a supposition: but I want your supposing to be bounded by conceivability. [As a thought-experiment, replace the word ‘God’ with utopia.] Could you *conceive* a god? But may the will to truth mean this to you: that everything shall be transformed into the humanly-conceivable, the humanly-evident, the humanly-palpable! You should follow your own senses to the end!³⁷

³⁵ Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), 20-21.

³⁶ Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, eds. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings* (Boston: Tuttle, 1998), 19.

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 110.

One of the main problems with the above approach is that instead of asking his people to expand their mind to include ideas they cannot currently conceive or comprehend, Zarathustra asks them to limit their minds to the humanly-conceivable, the humanly-evident, etcetera; so if there is something they cannot grasp, they are advised not to try to understand, but to give up the effort and ‘follow [their] own senses to the end’. The same problem affects utopianism and everything that seems to go beyond the familiar experience; this is the fear of the unknown labelled as reason or common sense.

Logically speaking, Nietzsche’s argument can easily be proven false: for instance, Earth was round even before people conceived its roundness and natural laws like gravity do not rely on our ability to conceive them. Furthermore, this school of thought excludes the possibility of nirvana which demands that the mind changes radically and develops the ability to conceive truths previously impossible to grasp.

The reason why this argument is nevertheless useful, even though anti-utopian at its core, is that it is based on an objective truth; supposing is indeed bounded by conceivability³⁸. For Nietzsche, this means no more supposing, but perhaps it should mean that conceivability requires practice. This is why I argue that nirvana or inner utopia is the necessary first step towards a social or outer utopia.

It is impossible to build utopia if we have not already conceived it and to conceive it we must first reach that state of mind that is capable of such conceiving. As Kateb writes: ‘we need bold utopian thought that is general and radical, that builds on novel capacities and takes the measure of novel problems, but goes beyond them in its exploration of the human condition and the requirements for at least approximating utopia.’³⁹ The key concept here is that this utopian thought goes beyond solving our own current problems and deals with the human condition itself. This is why we need nirvana or enlightenment or, if you prefer, the ‘kingdom within.’ The problem with social utopianism is its expiry date. Supposedly, after it had solved poverty, hunger, inequality and so on, it would simply expire. True utopianism, it seems to me, cannot

³⁸ Due to the lack of a single English word to describe the mental capacity of the conceiver or ‘one’s ability to conceive’, I’ll be using the word ‘conceivability’ to describe this, partly inspired by the term in the above mentioned Nietzsche’s quote: ‘humanly-conceivable,’ which is used to indicate that which the human mind can conceive. If this is an acceptable use of the adjective – the noun would be ‘human conceivability’ – I believe I can also use ‘conceivability’ to describe both this and its original meaning. In my thesis, therefore, the conceivability of utopia or the post-nirvana state of mind is – if I may put it thus – a two-way street, which is also in accordance with the Etherotopian way of imagining utopia.

³⁹ George Kateb, ed. *Utopia: The Potential and Prospect of the Human Condition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 23-24.

have an expiry date. It should struggle not merely to solve temporary problems, but to continue to greater depths and deal with existential issues. This is why I believe that nirvana may not only bring utopia, but also sustain it; in other words, nirvana is meaningful *after* Utopia as well.

After Utopia

The question ‘after utopia, what?’ can be used as an argument against utopianism in two ways: firstly, to claim that utopia, even if achieved, cannot be maintained and secondly – as Eugene Ionesco sees it – as certainty that the social utopia, once achieved, will create more chaos than there ever was before. Ionesco’s argument is very strong (here he refers to his play *The Bald Prima Donna*):

The ‘society’ I have tried to depict in *The Bald Prima Donna* is a society which is perfect, I mean where all social problems have been resolved. Unfortunately this has no effect upon life as it is lived. The play deals with a world where economic worries are a thing of the past, a universe without mystery, in which everything runs smoothly, for one section of humanity at least. (...) I believe that it is precisely when we see the last of economic problems and class warfare (...) that we shall also see that this solves nothing, indeed that our problems are only beginning. We can no longer avoid asking ourselves what we are doing here on earth, and how, having no deep sense of our destiny, we can endure the crushing weight of the material world.⁴⁰

This is an interesting response to utopianism in general but it has mainly to do with social utopianism’s expiry date. It is also to do with conceivability and whether we are able now, before utopia, to imagine our post-utopian condition. It is paradoxical, but this would be like a pre-nirvana Buddha trying to answer questions that only the post-nirvana Buddha is supposed to understand. To put it in simpler terms, it would be like a researcher deciding the outcome of their research before it even began.

However, I claim that Ionesco is not wrong. Indeed, when all the secondary social problems are resolved, humanity will have to deal with the primary, permanent ones. This is not necessarily a negative outcome, because inevitably we have to address the issues of our existence. In that, utopia can function like a collective nirvana; just like nirvana is supposed to clear our mind of our everyday troubles so that we can understand our lives in depth, so should utopia resolve the social problems in order for

⁴⁰ Eugene Ionesco, “The World of Ionesco,” *The Tulane Drama Review* 3.1 (1958): 46.

people to be able to focus on the age old questions. This is the stage when social utopianism proves insufficient. For Ionesco this would be the most difficult phase of mankind, but he gives no answer here on where this path might ultimately lead. Another writer, much grimmer in his vision, offers an answer to this post- realisation problem. In his famous story, *The Call of Cthulhu*, H. P. Lovecraft declares:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.⁴¹

I would like here to refer to the following statement by Paul Tillich: ‘we discovered that all utopias are negations of negation – the denial of what is negative in human existence.’⁴² It follows that if we accept Lovecraft’s view of the cosmos, utopianism would only work as deception, since in this case human existence would be a negative condition.

In my view this demonstrates why utopianism is bound by conceivability. I want to discuss this here in more depth. I will use as an example the last chapter of the *History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* by Julian Barnes, as analysed by John Carey in *The Faber Book of Utopias*. Here the character – and first-person narrator – finds himself dead, waking up in Paradise. This version of Paradise is a literal interpretation where an angelic woman who introduces herself as ‘room service’⁴³ brings the character everything he desires, starting with the breakfast of his life.⁴⁴ Carey describes it as ‘a heaven where every wish is instantly gratified’, where the protagonist ‘cruises on an electric buggy round heaven’s commodity-crammed supermarket, buying up vast cargoes of luxury, with no spending limit. He meets all the famous people he wants. He has sex every night with beautiful women. When he plays golf, he can hole in one every

⁴¹ Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales of H.P. Lovecraft*, ed. Stephen Jones (London: Gollancz, 2008), 201.

⁴² Paul Tillich, *Political expectation* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), 168.

⁴³ Quoted in Carey, *Faber*, 483.

⁴⁴ Carey, *Faber*, 483.

time.⁴⁵ When asking for God, he learns that God exists if he wants him to exist and doesn't if he doesn't want him to.⁴⁶ Predictably enough, in this version of Heaven the dead eventually get bored and 'miss things going wrong. Some of them ask for pain', others for bad weather and so on. They even have 'the option to die off if they want to.'⁴⁷ The narrator asks:

'And what percentage of people take up the option to die off?'

She looked at me levelly, her glance telling me to be calm. 'Oh, a hundred per cent, of course. Over many thousands of years, calculated by old time, of course.

But yes, everyone takes the option, sooner or later.'⁴⁸

Needless to say, this school of thought is anti-utopianism at its core. I find this to be flawed on many levels. First of all, it is a literal interpretation of Heaven as physical space. Secondly, it is an over-simplistic interpretation where Heaven is merely that place where all wishes come true. Thirdly, a soul that plays golf, has sex every night and enjoys the breakfast they serve in Heaven, while somehow maintaining the same senses and desires he/she/it had in life, is an example of poor conceivability.

Poor conceivability creates problems in social utopianism too. Would we not be bored in utopia, asks the anti-utopian, unable to accept that in utopia we would be different people with different needs with different perceptions of time, space, life and so on. We don't know what nirvana or utopia is like because we haven't been there yet. It is not shameful to admit that our conceivability is limited by our experience, our five physical senses, etcetera; but it is unreasonable to follow Zarathustra in denouncing everything we're unable to conceive. Even worse, as in the above example, is to have the arrogance to bring utopia down to our level when we should be attempting the opposite.

It should be easy to understand that Paradise has to be interpreted as a place due to our imperfect conceivability and yet that *it is not*. It is often not helpful to interpret religions literally (in which case 'thy kingdom come'⁴⁹ would come by means of transport and 'love thy neighbour'⁵⁰ would refer to the people of the same neighbourhood.) Of course Paradise cannot be a 'place' in the sense that a kitchen or a

⁴⁵ Carey, *Faber*, 484.

⁴⁶ Carey, *Faber*, 485.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Carey, *Faber*, 486.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Carey, *Faber*, 487.

⁴⁹ Luke 11:2 (Authorised King James Version.)

⁵⁰ Matthew 19:19 (Authorised King James Version.)

cinema is a place. Paradise is supposedly a place for souls – souls that are without bodies, and therefore spirits that don't occupy physical space, that are infinite. It would make more sense if Paradise, though necessarily conceived as a place, is something entirely different; more like a condition of the spirit. It follows that bodiless spirits would not feel hunger, for instance, but would have different needs which we are not in the position to imagine. Of course this is mere speculation, but to present Heaven as a big white cloudy room where an angelic genie fulfils the sensual needs of spirits without sensual needs is at least an unsuccessful metaphor.

This again affects utopianism. The anti-utopian will argue that after utopia we would be terribly bored, since there would no longer be any problems to solve and thus, nothing to do. However, like the allegory of Paradise, we are not in the position to conceive after utopia as we haven't yet had it. A different situation means different needs and life after utopia must surely be a very unfamiliar situation.

I would like here to return to the discussion of that religious utopianism which for both etymological and aesthetical reasons I define as *Etherotopia*.

Defining Etherotopia

Etherotopia, or Aetherotopia, etymologically means *Αιθέριος Τόπος* (Ethereal Place). Allegorically speaking, the metaphysical interpretation of this concept would be that it is a place defined not as a form and by its limits, like a physical space would be, but as an existential condition. Following that logic, the Christian Kingdom would be an Etherotopia or, if you like, a 'country in the mind.' But the focus of this essay is more about the paradise on Earth which would be, as I previously described, the kind of utopianism that is not limited to the social aspect but deals with the personal as well as the universal; this is what is meant by Etherotopia.

I should note that by a religious utopianism (and, to be clear, this concept is not the same as a religious utopia⁵¹), I am simply referring to a system of utopian thought that would *function* as a religion. How, one may ask, could this actually come to life. It'd be tempting to assume that a system whose first priority is the development of the individual mind towards nirvana or other such seemingly theoretical conditions, could be nothing more than a theory. Yet I would argue that more than any social utopianism,

⁵¹ A religious utopia would necessarily be a religious society; for instance, a theocracy. A religious utopianism need not have religious content; for instance, ideology may take the place of religion.

the Etherotopian approach would be the most practical. Consider Hertzler's comment on More's *Utopia*:

More's happy land is based, not upon desire, but upon the disdain of desire. He would have complete detachment from all our pre-occupation over mine and thine, for then much of the occasion for theft, envy and ambition would be banished and all could devote themselves to that which is best.⁵²

This 'detachment' is identical with what Keown describes as being 'free of the obsession with "me and mine."' ⁵³ This would then be a philosophy of life that deals with the source of social injustice itself, rather than its symptoms. It would be impossible to maintain a utopia of non-utopian thinkers either way and it follows that only utopian thinkers could create utopia in the first place. As to how such a philosophy would secure utopia, it is easily explained by Hertzler. He adds in his analysis of *Utopia* that 'because of this education and healthful life, ignorance, the great cause of crime and misery, is banished.'⁵⁴ This makes most laws unnecessary, thus 'the laws in Utopia are few, because it is against all right and justice that men have imposed on them laws.'⁵⁵

But apart from *preserving* utopia (and I would like to think that utopia can only be a work-in-progress; Hertzler is being realistic when he mentions that 'Humanity's perfection will never be attained; it is only possible to work toward it'⁵⁶ and thus preserving is not the right word; the right word would be 'improving'), this school of thought could efficiently *construct* it. Here it is useful to repeat that Etherotopianism functions as a religion and to explain in more detail the reason. Ling claims that 'religion always implies *action* of some kind'⁵⁷ and more importantly, adds that: 'what is done has *significance*. A meaning has been perceived, in the world and in human existence, and the way a man relates his own life or the life of his people to this meaning is religion.'⁵⁸

The Zen Master Taisen Deshimaru provides another insightful point. He states: '*True religion means harmonizing with what is outside, with society, with everything*

⁵² Hertzler. *History*, 135.

⁵³ Keown, *Buddhism*, 51.

⁵⁴ Hertzler. *History*, 142.

⁵⁵ Hertzler. *History*, 142.

⁵⁶ Hertzler. *History*, 307.

⁵⁷ Ling, *Buddha, Marx and God*, 208.

⁵⁸ Ling, *Buddha, Marx and God*, 209.

around us. That is the right place for the *bodhisattva*, the monk.⁵⁹ I would like to develop this further. A typical argument against religious systems is that they are mere escapisms.⁶⁰ But the Buddhist concept of *bodhisattva*, ‘the person who remains in “the world’ by choice, to help other people rather than to devote himself or herself to a personal salvation’⁶¹, demonstrates that traditional religion wants its followers to contribute to society’s utopian development. This is essential in Christianity as well. Jesus emphasised ‘the sense of *individual responsibility*. (...) He would have none of that flimsy fatalism which regards character as the creature of circumstance, but appealed to the will of men.’⁶²

Speaking of individual responsibility, one of the main themes of this essay is the utopian theorist’s responsibility to the practice of their theory. Religion has its *bodhisattvas* and so should utopianism. An excellent approach to how this utopian *apostle* would go from studying and lecturing to practicing utopianism is described in Book Nine of Plato’s *Republic*. Here Socrates responds to the argument that his ideal society could be found nowhere on Earth with the following statement:

‘But in heaven (...) perhaps, a pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees. It doesn’t make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere. For he would mind the things of this city alone, and of no other.’⁶³

The argument here – and clearly in disagreement with Brecht – is that regardless of whether utopia exists, the utopian must live in this world here and now according to that utopia’s philosophy. This way, at the very least, Etherotopia gains one citizen.

Here I would like to return to Hertzler’s interpretation of the ‘Kingdom of God’. This is how Hertzler introduces Jesus’ utopianism:

Jesus was both sociological and revolutionary in his point of view. He was interested in folks and their relationships and not in theology or ritual or

⁵⁹ Taisen Deshimaru, *Questions to a Zen Master: Practical and Spiritual Answers from the Great Japanese Master* (London: Rider, 1985), 25.

⁶⁰ This applies mostly to western society. There’s an interesting observation by Deshimaru: ‘Westerners like to be on one side or the other; either they are all for religion or they detest it - always the same old story of oppositions. What we must do is harmonize religion with communism, American assets with the Arab spirit. (...) there needs to be a theory in between.’ Deshimaru, *Questions*, 7-8.

⁶¹ Deshimaru, *Questions*, viii.

⁶² Hertzler. *History*, 82.

⁶³ Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato: Translated with Notes and an Interpretative Essay by Allan Bloom*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), IX, 592b.

ecclesiastical orders. (...) He intimated that there was to be a church, but he gave almost no instructions respecting its constitution or its laws. He fought all that belittles and degrades human beings, all that breaks up society into opposing classes and clashing creeds, and attempted to cultivate all that makes for the realization of self and the knowledge of the divinely ordained social order, with its pure, noble and beneficent life.⁶⁴

Hertzler later focuses on the socio-political aspect of Jesus' teachings, namely that he 'gave full recognition to the law of development in human life' and that he 'had caught the vision of a gradually established regenerated society, looking not only to personal perfection, but also to the establishment of a Society, pure, blessed and world-wide.'⁶⁵ It is this synthesis of personal and social perfection that is the essence of the Etherotopian theory presented here.

More importantly, the main reason Etherotopia functions as a religion rather than as a socio-political system is the path it takes. A socio-political system reconstructs society from the outside; it begins working inwards, from the system itself towards the individual, thus forcing a utopian model in a dystopian, Procrustean, manner. It is also possible that social utopianism misses – or postpones *ad infinitum* – the perfection of its individuals. This utopianism is doomed to fail as the individual cannot tolerate it, being unable to understand it due to lack of relevant utopian education that would need to occur *before* the enforcement of the utopian system, which is impossible.

Instead, Etherotopia would change society from the inside outward, from the particular to the universal. Consider the Christian approach as explained by Hertzler: 'for Jesus the Kingdom was to come not by outward force, or social organization or apocalyptic dream, but by the progressive sanctification of individual human beings.'⁶⁶ This school of thought aims to create the utopians prior to building the utopian city; rather it starts building the city by creating the utopians. As previously stated, this is the first priority of Etherotopianism; nirvana first, utopia later.

I understand this approach is in contrast with the traditional understanding of utopia as social theory. This means that we start by imagining the utopian citizen, then construct the utopian city around that model. It also means that we can begin doing this now. Our first utopian experiment would then be our own selves. Utopianism is too serious a subject to be merely theorised. Consider the example of Marxist studies:

⁶⁴ Hertzler. *History*, 68.

⁶⁵ Hertzler. *History*, 71.

⁶⁶ Hertzler. *History*, 71.

arguably nothing postpones, weakens or even prevents revolution more efficiently than teaching it. There needs to be a way to go beyond theorising utopia, beyond the limits of academic conceivability. Utopianism is, inevitably, in the hands of utopian theorists who are, more than any other citizen, responsible individually and as a group for society's potential transition to utopia. Action is required and what Etherotopianism demands is that it starts exclusively as individual responsibility. If utopianism as a vision of mankind, as wisdom even, may function as another type of nirvana, then its aim would be to bring all people to utopian conceivability (to paraphrase Ling's quote 'the aim [...] is to bring all men to nirvana.'⁶⁷)

To speak of changing the world without changing ourselves is at least hypocritical, let alone impractical. This can only work as a religious procedure, because a religion is a school of thought that can be practiced at both personal and social level. The way this actually works is best described by Hertzler's example of the Kingdom of God:

The Kingdom of God is thus seen to be an evolving – a gradual process of social and spiritual progress. It begins in the hearts and lives of men and does not end until the spirit of God rules in every institution and relation of life. It is both a subjective state of the soul and an objective social order. It is a growth, a development, the unfolding of a principle of life, in its subjective as well as its objective phases.⁶⁸

This then is the bridge between utopia(s) and nirvana(s); a utopianism that is both that 'subjective state of the soul' (or you may replace the word *soul* with *mind*) and 'an objective social order.' And thus it is clear that utopia and nirvana complete each other and are part of the same vision for an ideal society that consists of ideal people. And since this utopianism is both a private and a public quest, it follows that Etherotopianism, as a procedure, begins the moment we start thinking about it.

⁶⁷ Ling, *Buddha, Marx and God*, 83.

⁶⁸ Hertzler. *History*, 71-72.

Chapter Two

Zenre Fiction, or Towards a Zen Literary Theory

Hamlet's Dog

In response to the question ‘what are you reading, my lord?’, Hamlet simply replies ‘words, words, words!’⁶⁹ But certainly the answer Polonius was looking for was a more conventional one, like: I’m reading a poem, a humorous short story or, even, a science fiction novel. Yet Hamlet’s response is far more honest than that and besides, covers all of the above and more.

Taken out of context, this brief dialogue could well function as a Zen koan – or, in our case, a key verse from a Buddhist literary theory manifesto. From this perspective, the dialogue resembles the famous Mu Koan from the Gateless Gate: ‘A monk asked Joshu, a Chinese Zen master: “Has a dog Buddha-nature or not?” Joshu answered “Mu.”’⁷⁰

The translators inform the reader that ‘Mu is the negative symbol in Chinese, meaning “No thing” or “Nay.”’⁷¹ Luckily, the koan is followed by a commentary and a poem, which enlighten the reader as to its meaning. The poem goes:

*Has a dog Buddha-nature?
This is the most serious question of all.
If you say yes or no,
You lose your own Buddha-nature.*⁷²

The Zen philosophy displays a remarkable polemic stance against either/or dilemmas and conventional thought. So does Hamlet. Besides, if Hamlet gave a definite answer, he would need a definite definition too. Certainly the ‘*what* are you reading?’ question refers to genre. Let’s assume, for the sake of the argument, that Hamlet was reading a genre of fiction actually labelled as *genre* fiction.

SF would be a good example as it is a genre over whose identity there is much disagreement among scholars and critics. In *Science Fiction*, Adam Roberts argues that ‘the term “science fiction” resists easy definition’ and that while many would agree it is

⁶⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1992), 74.

⁷⁰ Reps and Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, 115.

⁷¹ Reps and Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, 115.

⁷² Reps and Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, 116.

a ‘fantastic literature’, the debate interrogates ‘in what ways it is different from other imaginative and fantastic literatures.’⁷³ Roberts adds that:

All of the many definitions offered by critics have been contradicted or modified by other critics, and it is always possible to point to texts consensually called SF that fall outside the usual definitions. It is, perhaps, for this reason that some critics try to content themselves with definitions of the mode that are mere tautologies, as if ‘we’ all know what it is and elaboration is superfluous.⁷⁴

The following cynical response seems unavoidable. Arthur C. Clarke ‘insisted that [as quoted in Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy*]: “sf is what the jury says it is.”’⁷⁵ Indeed, when a universally acceptable definition is unavailable, subjectivity prevails; in other words when no-one is right, then everyone is. Why then would Hamlet reply with anything else than ‘words, words, words’? In the case of science fiction (and this would apply to other genres as well) it would be the only way *not* to contradict the critics.

It should be made clear that Hamlet’s *zen-sual* response is not interpreted here as escapist but quite the contrary. His answer is like the Buddhist monk’s reply to the soul/no soul dilemma, so it actually makes *zen-se*. Hamlet could have said ‘mu’ regardless of the genre he was reading (essay, poem, or a slipstream / detective / urban fantasy story) and he would be right.

Consider what would happen if suddenly literary studies adopted this simple (some may say simplistic) view. I would like to return here to Ionesco’s problematic utopia which was also mentioned in the first essay. Briefly put, Ionesco argues that once the socio-political problems have been resolved, humanity is in the even more unfortunate position of dealing with the existential ones.⁷⁶ Following this logic, I would ask the reader to imagine a scenario in which academics and critics reach a universal agreement on every single genre definition, not only of science fiction, but of horror, magic realism, even the so-called ‘literary’ fiction. To add to that fantasy, suppose that everything currently debatable in literary criticism is resolved. What would become of the critic then? If we agree with Ionesco’s utopian horror, the critic would then have to face the more essential problems of literature. To expand further on this parallel, if the social problems can serve as distractions from the existential ones, it may be argued that such debates as the definition of this or that genre are merely distractions from the

⁷³ Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.

⁷⁴ Roberts, *Science Fiction*, 2.

⁷⁵ Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 63.

⁷⁶ Ionesco, ‘The World of Ionesco’, 46.

problems that the writer is addressing in his or her work as well as the reading experience itself.

Nevertheless, this level of global scholarly peace described above could never be reached through further complication of already complicated issues. It seems to me that conventional approach is a journey without an end. Umberto Eco writes that ‘interpretation is indefinite. The attempt to look for a final, unattainable meaning leads to the acceptance of a never-ending drift or sliding of meaning.’⁷⁷

In any case, the rejection of genre-labelling is evident in the works of authors who write without the limits of any particular genre in mind. A writer who could be described as advocating what I describe as *Zenre* literature, Ray Bradbury, develops an affective – rather than critical – approach to literature in *Zen in the Art of Writing*:

There is only one type of story in the world. Your story. (...) Give it a label if you wish, call it science fiction or fantasy or the mystery or the western. But, at heart, all good stories are the one kind of story, the story written by an individual man from his individual truth.⁷⁸

This is surely not a proper ‘critical’ approach but it is an honest one and it is a writer’s perspective, above all. At this point, and to speak of the elephant in the room, let us consider what the genre of this elephant might be in the following tale.

The Genre of the Elephant

Another classic Buddhist fable we can use in support of *Zenre* is ‘The Blind Men and the Elephant’, described here by Damien Keown:

The Buddha once told the story of the blind men and the elephant [...]. A former king of the town Savatthi, he related, ordered all his blind subjects to be assembled and divided into groups. Each group was then taken to an elephant and introduced to a different part of the animal - the head, trunk, legs, tail, and so forth. Afterward, the king asked each group to describe the nature of the beast. Those who had made contact with the head described an elephant as a water pot; those familiar with the ears likened the animal to a winnowing-basket; those who had touched a leg said an elephant was like a post; and those who had felt a tusk insisted an elephant was shaped like a peg. The groups then

⁷⁷ Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 32.

⁷⁸ Ray Bradbury, *Zen in the Art of Writing* (Santa Barbara: Joshua Odell Editions, 1996), 149.

fell to arguing amongst themselves each insisting its definition was correct and the others were wrong.⁷⁹

The lesson of this fable is quite simple. Subjective experience prevents, rather than results in, objective knowledge. To follow up with the science fiction/Zen Buddhism parallel: if scholars ever agree on a certain definition of science fiction, this resolution might even be worse than the problem it solves. Then towards which goal should we discuss definitions of literary genres, if the logical outcome must be a definable but deceptive partial truth, as in the Elephant fable?

Or perhaps there wasn't a purpose in the first place. Unlike Hamlet, a literary theorist does not read the words themselves but experiences through a critical lens (which could be the filters of structuralism, postmodern theory and so on) a distorted image of the text. If we draw a parallel here between the 'subjective' literary theories and the blind men in the elephant story, we will conclude that perhaps by analysing parts of the creature that is literature, we are missing the elephant.

The alternative is simple. If the 'elephant' is literature and its body parts are its genres, then to be able to see literature as a whole, one must see beyond genres. If our goal is to understand literature, the categorisation of its parts can be an unnecessary obstacle, especially if those parts were not meant to be separated in the first place. While writing *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley wasn't consciously writing science fiction, weird fiction, gothic fiction or however else a critic might choose to label her work.

The tradition of defining literature according to genre has even been unpopular at times. In *Genres of Discourse*, Tzvetan Todorov writes: 'To persist in paying attention to genres may seem to be a vain if not anachronistic pastime today' and that 'It is even considered a sign of authentic modernity in a writer if he ceases to respect the separation of genres.'⁸⁰ Besides, thanks to the increasingly genre-bending fiction being produced, genre-labelling becomes increasingly difficult. In *Evaporating Genres*, Gary K. Wolfe suggests that:

The writers who contribute to the evaporation of genre, who destabilize it by undermining our expectations and appropriating materials at will, with fiction shaped by individual vision rather than traditions or formulas, are the same writers who continually revitalize genre: A healthy genre, a healthy literature, is

⁷⁹ Keown, *Buddhism*, 1.

⁸⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres of Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 13.

one at risk, one whose boundaries grow uncertain and whose foundations get wobbly.⁸¹

Regarding genre definition, Wolfe argues that ‘at the same time that genre materials begin flowing freely into one another, we begin to see evidence of an even more peculiar development: the non-genre genre story’.⁸² This argument works better within a Zen framework because though it sounds like a contradiction, it actually demonstrates that the genre/non-genre dilemma is false.

I would argue that the term ‘genre’ is problematic in itself. For example, if we agree that genre fiction *is* itself a genre, then we are presented with the following absurdist conclusion: prose fiction is a (literary) genre one of whose genres is genre fiction. Indeed, Wolfe notices the confusion. He writes:

In fact, the term ‘genre’ itself has accrued almost too many meanings to be useful: In one sense, it simply refers to market categories; in another, it refers to a set of literary and narrative conventions; in yet another, it refers to a collection of texts with perceived commonalities of affect and world view.⁸³

We see that the term ‘genre’ is impossible to define and so is its relation to science fiction. Damien Walter, writing for the Guardian, argued: ‘the worst thing that ever happened to science fiction was getting confused with genre fiction.’⁸⁴

So far we have the following three versions of how science fiction is related to genre: a) it’s not, b) science fiction is one of the genres of literature (where genre means simply a category), c) if we accept that there is a genre fiction/literary fiction debate, science fiction takes genre fiction’s side, as one of the non-literary genres.

In my view, there is no real (or meaningful) trilemma here and any of the above three approaches is misleading. In that sense, a Zen literary critic, following the original Buddhist logic, would only say to all that: ‘Mu.’

The Finger/Moon Problem

All this could be useful towards reconsidering not only definitions of this or the other genre, but the critic’s approach to literature as well as his/her responsibility to it.

⁸¹ Gary K Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres: Essays on Fantastic Literature* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 51.

⁸² Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres*, 15.

⁸³ Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres*, 53.

⁸⁴ Damien Walter, “Adam Roberts: Last of the SF Writers,” *The Guardian*, 15 February 2013, accessed February 26, 2013, www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2013/feb/15/adam-roberts-last-sci-fi-writer .

Let's consider a Zen master's way of teaching, as depicted in the classic text *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Here the master denies giving a definition on a certain concept and adds:

‘Once you have understood that, you will have no further need of me. And if I tried to give you a clue at the cost of your own experience, I should be the worst of teachers and should deserve to be sacked!’⁸⁵

This is a more universal view of the expert's role (teacher, critic, or other): that in the end, the student (or in our case the reader) must be encouraged to draw their own conclusions. Otherwise, a rating system that decides, for instance, how many stars or points this film or book is worth is only meaningful if we deny the reader their right to actually criticise a film or book on their own. A Zen literary theorist would take a more reader-friendly direction. In his foreword to *Zen in the Art of Archery*, the respected Zen master Dr. D. T. Suzuki warns:

If one really wishes to be master of an art, technical knowledge of it is not enough. One has to transcend technique so that the art becomes an ‘artless art’ growing out of the Unconscious.⁸⁶

From this point of view, an interpretation that focuses on the technique, structure or aesthetics of the text underestimates its purpose and ends up merely a distraction. In the end, it all comes down to the finger/moon problem. As the Buddha told Ananda:

It is like when someone points his finger at the moon to show it to someone else. Guided by the finger, that person should see the moon. If he looks at the finger instead and mistakes it for the moon, he loses not only the moon but the finger also. Why? He mistakes the pointing finger for the bright moon.⁸⁷

To conclude, a theory is but a finger pointing: the theory cannot be the end, only the means. If it's merely pointing at another finger, the theorist and the reader are wasting our time. But if Zen is indeed the ‘return to the pure, original mind’⁸⁸, a Zenre theory would suggest emptying our mind before beginning to examine a text. In the search for a better understanding of literature, unlearning seems to me the greatest method.

⁸⁵ Herrigel, *Archery*, 73.

⁸⁶ Herrigel, *Archery*, 5.

⁸⁷ Buddhist Text Translation Society, trans. *The Shurangama Sutra with Commentary*, Vol.1, 2nd ed. (Burlingame, CA: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2002), 61.

⁸⁸ Deshimaru, *Questions to a Zen Master*, 144.

Writing Utopia Beyond Genre

Following from the previous section, I am going to connect here the critical perspective of that section with my understanding of utopian literature, before I proceed to my own utopian fiction, the story collection *Etherotopias*. I want to argue here that especially utopian literature transcends genre. That there is a tradition of utopian literature – or, more accurately, of utopian thought in literature – there is no doubt. But is it a ‘genre’ in the sense that horror and detective fiction are literary genres and, more importantly, does utopian fiction benefit from being defined and, subsequently, read and criticised as a literary genre; in what ways can such a labelling be meaningful and what may the purpose be of such a classification? In *The Boundaries of Genre*, literary critic Gary Saul Morson writes that ‘*genre does not belong to texts alone, but to the interaction between texts and a classifier*’⁸⁹ and adds:

To put this another way, there are two sources of variation in generic classification: there are differences among texts and there are also differences in the purposes of classifiers. Indeed, the same person may divide a group of texts differently from day to day or hour to hour depending on the questions of interest and the reasons for doing the dividing. At the beginning of each semester, I reshelve the books in my office according to what course I am teaching. Sometimes *Notes from Underground* is placed with the ‘novels,’ other times with the ‘anti-utopias,’ and still other times with the ‘self-referential monologues,’ such as *The Praise of Folly* and ‘The Diary of a Madman.’⁹⁰

Morson’s example is of particular interest here; the same literary work – *Notes from Underground* in his example – is placed under three different categories, in relation to its form (novel), in relation to its theme (anti-utopia) and in relation to its style and function (monologue). But, apart from practical, the question is whether any of the above categorisations are truly meaningful in understanding the essence of the text.

H. P. Lovecraft begins his *Supernatural Horror in Literature* with the phrase ‘The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown’⁹¹. Perhaps a romantic point of view, but one could add

⁸⁹ Italics in the original text. Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1981), X.

⁹⁰ Morson, *Boundaries*, x.

⁹¹ Howard Philips Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Ben Abramson, 1945), 12.

that hope, being fear's opposite, is as old as fear and that would make utopia, the literature of hope, as old as literature itself.

In any case, though I have no choice but to refer to this *wordy expression of utopian desire* as a utopian literature or fiction, my argument is that any attempt to place it among the literary genres or in a particular literary or philosophical tradition is fruitless, considering that many of the classic utopian texts don't even belong to the same form, let alone the same imagery. Utopian texts, regardless of genre, are not always considered literature but they are all in some sense philosophical works. When 'writing utopia', one may argue that it is not always useful to even distinguish between philosophical and literary texts; the utopian ideas explored in the texts can be judged entirely on their own philosophical value, regardless of whether they are expressed through a poem, a novel, a non-fiction book or an academic essay.

There are many ways to categorise the various fictions; according to sensation (horror, erotic, humour), according to target audience (e.g. children's, young adult), according to aesthetics (science fiction, surrealism), according to theme (detective novel, historical fiction, revenge-tale), and of course according to form (poem, novel, stage play). All of the above terms are practical, whether their practicality has to do with the shelving process, the marketing process or the 'use' of a literary work (plays are staged, poems recited, screenplays filmed, and so on). The statement I would like to make in this section is that we shouldn't use the term 'utopian fiction' in the way people use the term 'science fiction' or 'horror'. Rather than defining it by its form, style or theme, I would argue that utopian literature is best defined by its intention. The form, style and theme are but means through which a story is told; even the story itself, from the plot devices to the characters and the setting, is a means, not an end. The question I am therefore exploring here is whether we can stop defining utopian literature (and perhaps literature in general) according to its means but rather we start defining it according to its ends.

We could in that sense propose alternative categorisations of fictional texts, for instance according to worldview (optimistic, subjectivist, suicidal, and so on) – by which I mean that these are more meaningful distinctions than according to theme and setting – but I would rather argue that the main two categories of fictional and non-fictional writing would be the literatures of change (e.g. science fiction, radical political fiction and of course utopia) and those that suggest there is nothing to be done (e.g. pessimistic fiction and the various 'hymns' to the meaninglessness of life that are so popular in modern art). However, since both utopian and dystopian texts belong to the

utopian tradition, and both utopias and dystopias are known to criticise the societies of their times whether they are hopeful of the future or not, I believe a more meaningful distinction of all literature would be between utopian literature and that which is writing for writing's sake; i.e. art for art's sake, the kind of literature that doesn't engage in any meaningful criticism of society and is not concerned with the development of individuals whether as part of, or regardless of, social progress.

I understand that this argument – if at all original or useful – might be a big argument for this short chapter, but I cannot imagine what else needs to be said in defence of it, other than that genre theories (and perhaps most critical theories) focus on the means of the literature and not the ends, while I'm suggesting that what truly matters is the ends, and as a result, the real differences between Plato's *Republic*, Aristophanes' *The Birds*, Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium' and Bacon's *New Atlantis* are not their forms, styles, literary devices or genres, but what these thinkers (thinkers rather than writers; since writing itself is also a means, not an end) suggest as utopia. It is utopian thought itself that is meaningful, beyond stylistic choices and plot twists, beyond genres and beyond the – in my view – false divide between utopian literature and utopian philosophy.

I recommend that the reader of utopian fiction develops an immunity to genre-labelling; a work of utopian literature that is utopian in purpose, and not merely in subject matter, is in fact a work of utopian philosophy expressed through literature and as such must be judged on its own merit and not as part of this or that literary tradition, of this or that decade. If the reader hopes to understand the purpose and essence of any text, he or she must be encouraged to turn a blind eye to what opinions are currently trending in any field of studies regarding that text or its genre. Apart from 'the oldest emotions', one may argue that hope and fear are also eternally present in the mind, whether acknowledged by the conscious self at any given moment or not, and thus are the driving forces behind every human action or thought; furthermore, the various non-places the human mind has always been concerned with (dreamlands, consciousnesses, abysses, paradises and so on) are at the heart of this literature-philosophy that, in my understanding, transcends genres, formats, and times. To conclude, when writing utopia, one is not writing science fiction, fantasy or romance, fiction or non-fiction, philosophy or literature. When writing utopia, one is writing about change, about transformation of societies and personalities, and about hope. In that sense, I would argue that when not writing about utopia, one is writing nothing meaningful at all.

Chapter Three

Introduction to *Etherotopias*, a short story collection

During this research, I have explored a series of utopian concepts through creative writing in an attempt to reach, and subsequently expand on, my own conclusions regarding utopia. I frequently found myself disagreeing with, or more often receiving with scepticism, the contemporary utopianisms I came across in my studies and this has resulted in more satirical stories than I had originally intended to write.⁹² I soon realised that, in order to benefit most from the process and in order to produce an honest and original research, I should react creatively and critically to the ideological and aesthetical stimuli of the works I was reading; I also read books on religious utopianism which was a key influence on the themes I worked with.⁹³

The story collection I wrote as the main part of my thesis begins and ends with a Christ figure. In ‘A Boy, Alone’ it is a Christ figure in its earliest phase; the allegory of the divine child, a symbol of innocence. The figure evolves during the writing of the collection and in the final story ‘Phantom Jesus’, the title character is the mature Christ, the rebel who drives the merchants out of the temple; only in this near-future version, he blows up a mall. There are other such characters in the collection, while there are also others that are closer to being a Buddha figure. There are in fact several kinds of categories I could have divided the collection into, for instance in religious stories and political stories (but there are some that would belong to both categories.) Alternatively, the most efficient distinction I came up with was to divide them into ‘utopias of the mind’ and ‘social utopias’, a distinction I have discussed in my essay on *Etherotopia*. But in this essay I present the distinction as false and the same applies to how I handle these two utopianisms in my creative writing. So in the end, I decided that it would be most useful for this work and for the reader, if I placed the stories in chronological order. This is partly because some of these stories were written in response to others – for instance, ‘Karyatis Unbound’ returns to the theme of ‘The War of Appearances’, while the utopian island of ‘The World We Want’ is another interpretation of the utopia that Margaret wishes for in ‘Margaret’s World’. But, more importantly, the reason for the chronological order is that in no other order would the development of my creative

⁹² I demonstrated my disagreement with certain interpretations of utopia in the introduction of the thesis and I expand on some further in the introductions to the various groups of stories.

⁹³ Representative examples of the scholarship I refer to here are naturally found in the bibliography section of the thesis.

and critical engagement with utopian thought, as well as the development of my own writing style over the course of the last years, be evident to the reader and to myself. I have therefore put the stories in chronological order and divided them in five different groups.

To my satisfaction, the final group of stories seems a proper conclusion to the collection: when working on these, I had more concrete ideas in mind than when I had started. The project itself has undergone significant changes, particularly in the first year – though I understand this is often the case with PhDs – for instance, as I mentioned before, though my original proposal was that I work on a single novel, I discovered that, for the purpose of this particular project, a collection of short stories was more efficient. I want to return to this here, since I'm introducing the collection.

There are two reasons why I preferred to work on a story collection than a novel; firstly, because I wanted to experiment both philosophically and literarily with different ideas and styles, in order to examine a utopia-in-progress from different perspectives and, at the same time, improve my own writing. A story collection would therefore give me, as I believe it did, more freedom to work on my ideas than a novel would. By freedom, I am also referring to freedom from genre which I examined in the second chapter. In the preface to his 2013 story collection, *Adam Robots*, Adam Roberts writes: 'Short stories and science fiction marry well. In part, I think, this is because there's no generally accepted definition of either.' He refers, for instance, to the longer short stories which:

(...) go on and on - straying, *in fact*, into that debatable ground where critics bicker like sparrows over the proper distinctions between "long short novels", "novelettes", "novellas", "novelcules", "novelinas" and "short novels". This creative resistance to the pigeonhole is one of the things that attract me to the short story mode.⁹⁴

Here Roberts refers to another advantage of this form: 'One thing the short story form allows a writer to do is to try lots of different things out, without committing him/herself to the long haul of a whole novel' and expresses an interest in the idea of 'writing at least one thing in all the myriad sub-genres and sub-sub-genres of SF.'⁹⁵ This accurately describes the logic that also led me to work on a collection, although my focus is not on the sub-genres of SF but on different perceptions of utopia.

⁹⁴ Adam Roberts, *Adam Robots: Short Stories* (London: Gollancz, 2013), I.

⁹⁵ Roberts, *Adam Robots*, I.

The second reason I chose to work on short stories is that I was able to submit some of them the moment they were finished, and as a result I have corresponded with several magazine editors, have received professional feedback and have had many of these stories published. This has been a significant help in the development of my creative writing.

I want to refer here to some of the main literary influences of this collection: firstly, the writer I had in mind when I decided to work on a collection for my PhD was Ray Bradbury for his story collections, such as *The Martian Chronicles* and *The Golden Apples of the Sun*. Other influences include Kurt Vonnegut, especially his short story ‘Harrison Bergeron,’ and Adam Roberts for his utopian/dystopian novels, like *Salt* and *New Model Army*, but particularly his recent short story collection *Adam Robots*. Of the other literary texts I have read, I was influenced by Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, Roger Zelany’s *Lord of Light* and Olaf Stapledon’s *Star Maker*.

Finally, regarding my own approach to creative writing, I have already established my scepticism for genre definitions and therefore the stories are not stylistically loyal to either fantasy or science fiction, a distinction which I consider false in any case, nor in any sense to the contemporary utopian/dystopian literature. I also do acknowledge the subjectivity of the various creative writing rules that writers and critics occasionally come up with. For instance, I believe it is clear from my stories that I am neither in favour nor against but simply indifferent to the ‘show, not tell’ rule. In an interesting article titled ‘The Ten Worst Pieces of Writing Advice You Will Ever Hear (and Probably Already Have)’, Susan DeFreitas refers to the ‘show, not tell’ advice and humorously notes that ‘If writing advice were classic rock, this would be “Stairway to Heaven.”’ She explains that instead of spending half the story showing the main character’s childhood, for instance, the writer can just ‘cut to the chase, provide a few key details, and move on.’ She adds that ‘it can really save time, this telling thing’⁹⁶ and I understand that this is particular true for short fiction. As I said however, I am indifferent to such writing advice and there are instances in this collection where a story ‘shows’ instead of ‘telling’ and where it ‘tells’ instead of ‘showing.’ In the ‘Bears’, for example, the narrator gives some information away from the start so he can skip to the main subject, while in ‘Cannibal Popular’, there is mostly ‘showing’ as the narrative focuses on a series of summarised events. In any case, I have written each story having

⁹⁶ Susan DeFreitas, “The Ten Worst Pieces of Writing Advice You Will Ever Hear (and Probably Already Have).” *LitReactor*, April 11, 2014, accessed June 18, 2014. <http://litreactor.com/columns/the-ten-worst-pieces-of-writing-advice-you-will-ever-hear-and-probably-already-have> .

in mind what works for the particular story and in that sense there is no creative writing rule that some stories follow which others don't break.

In terms of writing style, and to mention examples from the stories I mentioned before, I am in favour of the kind of poetic prose that is characteristic of the more literary of the science fiction writers. An extract from Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* for instance:

Time did not pass. There was no time. He was time: he only. He was the river, the arrow, the stone. But he did not move. The thrown rock hung still at midpoint. There was no day or night. Sometimes the doctor switched the light off, or on. There was a clock set in the wall by the bed; its pointer moved from one to another of the twenty figures of the dial, meaningless.⁹⁷

This poetic narrative about time reminds me of Bradbury's writing, as in this example from 'The Golden Apples of the Sun' (after which his collection was named):

'What time is it?' asked someone.

Everyone had to smile.

For now there was only the sun and the sun and the sun. It was every horizon, it was every direction. It burned the minutes, the seconds, the hourglasses, the clocks; it burned all time and eternity away. It burned the eyelids and the serum of the dark world behind the lids, the retina, the hidden brain; and it burned sleep and the sweet memories of sleep and cool nightfall.⁹⁸

The above extracts demonstrate a poetic prose that I consider moving and powerful and which I have occasionally attempted myself. This writing style is not the role-model for all the stories in this collection, though, thematically speaking, some of them (like 'Etherotopia' and 'Margaret's World') include elements of surreal and fantasy writing; the poetic prose I referred to however is an example of a style that I admire and the stories I mentioned here have had a significant impact on both the themes and aesthetics of my story collection.

⁹⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 1974 (London: Millennium, 1999), 12.

⁹⁸ Bradbury, Ray, *The Golden Apples of the Sun* (London: Granada, 1977), 186-187.

Commentary on the first group of stories, ‘States of Mind’

The first stories⁹⁹ in this collection were written before I coined ‘Etherotopia’ and while I was still trying to figure out what direction my research would take and what character the collection would have. The concept of Etherotopia is therefore a conclusion from the early months of my research, rather than a goal set from the very beginning. I had not coined the term at the time of my first conference paper, titled ‘The Human in the Middle of Nowhere: “A Boy, Alone” and the Utopia of One,’ which was delivered at a postgraduate conference in 30 March 2012. The talk was later revised and published – along with the story ‘A Boy, Alone’ – in the form of a short article titled ‘A Utopia of Perception?’ in which I discuss the term ‘wise child’ as a potential utopian perspective from which to re-examine the world; the idea being that the world as it is would appear as a utopia to a person who ‘unlearns’ what he or she has learned since childhood and therefore regains the ‘pure’ perspective of a child. I won’t expand on this here as, though relevant, it is not a central argument of this thesis, but Carey refers to this idea, here explored by the poet and mystic Thomas Traherne in *Centuries of Meditations*. Carey describes Traherne’s argument thus:

(...) he maintained that we can all regain the child’s luminous vision, and re-enter paradise, if only we learn to value the ‘great, common and simple’ things – the sun, the sky, the air – instead of hankering after honours and riches. So for Traherne utopia is here and now, but before it reveals itself as utopia it has to be seen with a child’s love and wonder.¹⁰⁰

This can be interpreted as an apolitical, even passive, reaction to those problems of a social, political or economic nature, however this can be the case only if we were to accept the idea that a person’s understanding of the world is irrelevant to that person’s participation in the world. Note that Traherne dismisses the idea of ‘hankering after honours and riches’ which means that in a society of likeminded people, a system like capitalism or fascism would be irrelevant as such a society would automatically reject those principles that are the foundation of such systems.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ The collection was much longer originally but several stories have not been included for the purpose of maintaining the desired balance between the creative and the critical writing parts of the thesis.

¹⁰⁰ Carey, *Faber*, 76.

¹⁰¹ For instance the desire for riches in capitalism – which I believe is self-explanatory – and the idea of a superior race or country in Nazism and nationalism respectively.

The argument here of course is not that a change of perspectives, which is a mental process, necessarily leads to social change or that it is, in any sense, 'enough', but that such a procedure is required in order for the individual to be able to conceive of utopia and decide which social changes might lead to that utopia.

'A Boy, Alone' is inspired by this idea explored in Traherne's work, an idea that is not specifically defined by Traherne or, in this case, Carey who writes about it, but I would call it the perspective of a utopian mind. Only, following the 'return to nature' logic, this can be interpreted as a return to the natural state of mind. Henry David Thoreau describes this well in *Walden*, where he says 'I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born.'¹⁰²

There is also an existential side to 'A Boy, Alone', as the main character – a boy that exists alone on a planet without any other human or even animal creatures – is an allegory for humanity's relationship with the cosmos and, in that sense, though its end is pessimistic – nothing that the child can do affects the world, and therefore there is nothing that child can 'achieve' – the story follows a Buddhist logic, so that this realisation frees him from ambition and leads to a state of permanent happiness. I should add that the child of the particular story is already in a utopian world where there is no conflict other than in the relationship between human and nature (as the story is existential); if the story concerned the relationship between human and society (the theme of latter stories), its message would have been different.

The following three stories (including 'Etherotopia') are also founded on Buddhist logic to a certain extent. In 'Bears', a number of absurdist experiments lead to the bears' evolution to – what the scientists in the story describe as – Buddha Bears, a new species that is immortal, finds no meaning in 'motion' and is therefore in permanent meditation; its only activity being that the bears automatically clone themselves every now and then to fill the world with their wise kind, until, through multiplying themselves endlessly, they become billions and trillions and eventually cities collapse under their bodies, then entire counties and in the end the entire planet. This apocalypse leads to the renaming of Earth to Bearth. The narrator-character is one of the few survivors who have successfully climbed the bears during the pauses between their clonings, and lives in the 'Fur Desert' where the only thing that keeps him alive is the milk of the female Buddha-bears.

¹⁰² Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: Walden (150th Anniversary Edition)*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 98

Although I am not in the position to remember exactly which books I read at what time – and therefore what influences I had in mind when conceiving of each of these stories – I can certainly say that ‘Bears’ reflects a Lovecraftian logic and is structured like an Ancient Greek tragedy, in three ‘acts’ or, as I would call them in this case, phases. The first act (which consists of part 1A and 1B) is a dystopian phase as it describes the creation of the new bear species and the apocalypse this leads to; the second is utopian as it describes the utopian perspective of the survivors and the last is again dystopian; thus completing a cyclical mental development that takes place in the narrator’s mind as he remembers the events that led him to the present situation. At first, it is the fear of the apocalypse, then the privilege of surviving it and the positive first impressions of the post-apocalyptic world until he realises that this world is meaningless and in it there is no future for him or indeed for humanity.

In fact, this story reminds me of one of the reasons why I decided that my ideas would be explored more efficiently in a creative writing research. In this case, one of the story’s underlying messages is a critique of an anarchist, globalist utopia; however, some of the people who have read this, were surprised to find out this message when, after reading the story, I revealed it to them. The reason is that a story works differently than an essay and may, at the same time, address an issue directly and another indirectly, to the extent that the reader is aware of the more digestible message but – at least at a conscious level – misses the point that is made indirectly.

In ‘Bears’, when the planet becomes ‘Great Bear Country,’ the survivors experience the situation as a relevant flatness, since there are no more mountains, rivers or plains; everything has disappeared under the bodies of the bears, including borders and the idea of borders; and, as a result, the concept of a country or nation have been extinguished as well. Soon, the survivors of the apocalypse start wandering around naked and, as there is no concept of a ‘country’ or any sort of ‘border’ to separate them, they feel compassion for each other. The narrator declares, remembering this phase, that ‘The catastrophe was, we all agreed, the best thing to ever have happened to us.’

This leads to the problem described by Ionesco (that I had previously referred to in my first essay) in which, once people solve all their social problems, they have no option but to face their existential ones. In Stapledon’s 1937 novel *Star Maker*, where entire worlds go through a series of phases, once past the utopian phase, there is the awakened world phase, which he describes in the glossary that accompanies his novel thus: ‘**Awakened World.** A world that has attained communal consciousness. To do this, it has to pass far beyond the present human stage, and through the utopian

stage.¹⁰³ The bears in my story have achieved this awakening but the humans have not; thus, in a sense, Stapledon's utopia has been achieved but the utopian citizens are the bears. The human survivors, not having achieved a utopian state of mind, face Ionesco's absurd horror. This happens when they realise the milk of the immortal bears has made them sterile. This also strengthens their growing disgust of the bear milk which leads to their consideration of cannibalism. Eventually, the narrator and his female companion at the time part ways as they start fearing each other. The narrator continues alone and it is assumed that other people might have felt and done the same. In the end, desperate, alone and after weeks of finding no other survivors, the narrator simply states that he would kill to eat and that if he doesn't eat something soon, he would die.

'Bears' therefore expands on the idea explored in the first story, but here the loneliness of the main character leads to despair rather than enlightenment, and the human's acceptance of nature (in this case, of the post-apocalyptic Bearth) is depicted here as temporary and potentially pretentious. In both cases, the human submits to the world, unable to change it but in this case it is the concept of a past that leads to the human's despair, a past in which things used to be different. Had the narrator of 'Bears' been born in Bearth and never met another person, the ending might have been similar to 'A Boy, Alone'. He might have never grown sick of the bear milk and never had noticed his solitude, provided he had never been made aware of it.

It is therefore purely a matter of perspective, though I would prefer not to say that this character is right and that character wrong, as neither was given an option and I believe they couldn't have reached a different conclusion than they have unless they had had to deal with a different situation. 'Bears' however is a more complex exploration of the idea of a utopian state of mind than 'A Boy, Alone' in that the changes that take place in the world lead to radical changes in the main character's worldview. The plot structure in 'Bears' can be therefore summarised in the following way: from the main character's perspective; Earth becomes Heaven becomes Hell.

This is not to say that the story is an anti-utopian story, in the sense that it is a critique of utopianism in general and only secondarily can it be interpreted as a critique of a globalist utopia which solves nothing, since people's existential issues still make their co-existence problematic. Buddhism is referred to in the story as well, the Buddha-bears of course functioning like parodies of a passive interpretation of a Buddha-figure

¹⁰³ 'Awakened World' is bold in the original text. The quote is from: Olaf Stapledon, *Star Maker* (London: Millenium, 1999), 266-267

that simply spends eternity meditating. The narrator refers to the bears' 'state of mind' and says that he 'refused to see the Bear's decision to live the Eternal Psychological Immobility as a utopia or a nirvana.'

Following from this statement, I want to emphasise on the fact 'Bears' was partly written in response to the first story, 'A Boy, Alone', and that what is depicted as a utopian perspective in the first story is rejected in the second. I must add that in my writing in general, I frequently explore both positive and negative interpretations of the Buddha to the extent that in some of my stories or plays the Buddha figure is glorified and in others criticised or even parodied. This would appear to be an inconsistency if such a contradiction was evident in my critical work, and thus is another reason why I chose the medium of creative writing and specifically short stories to explore the ideas of this project, as I find that the process of writing different stories from various and occasionally conflicting perspectives, helps to develop a more objective critical point of view from which to examine the ideas explored in these stories. Arguably, this technique follows the logic of a Platonic dialogue and I would say that, in that sense, the stories in this collection can be read as different – though often similar – voices that participate in such a dialogue.

That 'Bears' was written after 'A Boy, Alone' does not mean that the latter point of view is closer to my own – or the opposite – but that I wanted to address the issue from this point of view as well. The conversation among the stories occasionally returns to the question of utopian perspectives and there is a group of stories that are more dedicated to this than the others; but there is a difference between the utopian perspective of the cosmos (which is explored in this group) and that of society (which is explored in the later stories). 'The Painter's Dream' makes that connection between this group of stories and the rest of the collection, as well as experimenting with the idea of a dialogue of conflicting utopian thoughts when, in the same story, more than one voice is heard, all of them versions of the main narrator-character and yet each representing a different worldview. However the sense of conflict between different minds, rather than between human and nature, is most powerful in 'Etherotopia', in which sounds and souls (here I shall be referring to these as Sounds and Souls, as they are referred to in the story) are characters in an alternate reality.

Originally, the idea that gave birth to this story was that, following the logic of humans debating about whether they have a soul, the Souls and the other inhabitants of the fictional *Etherotopia*, debate about whether they have a body (in the case of Sounds, the debate is whether they are produced by an object or, generally speaking, if their life

has a cause, or whether they were self-created.) The idea of a body or a source, known as the ‘Body Hypothesis,’ is treated as heresy by certain Sounds, like General Kiai. Other Sounds, like the ‘spiritophile’ Aeros, one of the Wind’s children (i.e. a sound created by the wind rather than by an object) support the idea. In the end, during the battle between Kiai and Aeros, Kiai argues that ‘There’s no such thing as a harp and someone playing the harp! That’s mythology, it can’t be proven, it can’t be conceived, it doesn’t happen!’

In addition, Aeros is influenced by a Sound named Psychophoni (the word would literally translate to ‘soul-voice’ in Greek); she convinces Aeros that bodies exist, claiming that as a Sound he should trust her judgment more than his own, since he has only one sense – sound – while she has plenty (in the story, the Sounds are not aware of the existence of the other senses, e.g. the Smells, while the Souls are in contact with all ethereal beings.)

As a story, ‘Etherotopia’ does not directly address any social matters. It is utopian primarily in the literal interpretation of the word, since the word ‘utopia’ means ‘no-place’ and the story’s setting is a non-place, an immaterial, ethereal setting where only sound seems to exist (at least from the Sounds’ point of view), there is no concept of space and even time is depicted as music; the background music. On the one hand, if Etherotopia as a concept has any social implications, they do not seem to be presented here; on the other, this story was written precisely as part of this thesis, and addresses the major themes of this research.

First of all, the characters’ relationship with the world, with each other and with themselves is defined purely by their conceivability of, or lack of, their material expansion or, in the case of Sounds, their source. Their relationship with each other is presented as a hierarchy of perceptions. Kiai is the most powerful Sound since he, though he denies it, knows the objective reality from experience, being a human voice that is aware of its body. Psychophoni is not weaker, but as a Soul, can only influence those Sounds that tune in to the frequency of the Souls; however the Sounds, under Kiai’s command, refuse to listen. Therefore, she is unable to save Aeros from Kiai. Kiai wins simply because he is the loudest and the other Sounds are on his side.

In this fantasy, the states of mind of the characters are their states of existence; Aeros’ thoughts define the sound he makes, his words are music and his music words at the same time, and that is also the communication between the Sounds in general. This conflict of different perceptions and conceivabilities is more evident, and of a clear philosophical nature in the next story, ‘The Painter’s Dream.’ Before I proceed with

this, I want to add one comment on the concept of ‘Etherotopia’ in relation to the story of the same name.

I have described the concept ‘Etherotopia’ in the first chapter. I remind the reader that the essay in question is intended to be an introduction to Etherotopia, rather than a manifesto while the collection is a series of thought experiments related to this concept. Some of these stories explore utopian (dystopian in other cases) states of mind, others criticise utopian ideas that would not be compatible with Etherotopia (for instance, consumerism in ‘Phantom Jesus.’) The story ‘Etherotopia’ itself is not about an Etherotopian society and therefore it is not a social state, but it is about a fictional Etherotopian cosmos and therefore it concerns the Etherotopian imagination, the mood and the worldview of this theory; it is an existential story and this is my understanding of Etherotopia; at the same time, it is an ideology and a worldview.

I have given the title ‘States of Mind’ to the first group of stories that start with ‘A Boy, Alone’, a story about utopian perception, and conclude with ‘The Painter’s Dream’, which is also about perception and about conceivability. ‘The Painter’s Dream’ addresses the concept of Nirvana differently than ‘A Boy, Alone’; here, the painter who wants to conceive of a true utopian world in order to make a painting of it, ends up creating a ‘Utopia Zen’, a painting of no colours, which is another comment on the inconceivability of true utopia. One of the main arguments that appears in several of the stories is that utopia is inconceivable to the non-utopian, first of all because utopia is a work-in-progress, it is in a sense *research* and therefore the conclusion cannot be known from the start of the research, and secondly because the priority of Etherotopia is the utopian state of mind.

In the story, during his attempts to create the painting, voices emerge from the painter’s head, each taking his form. His ‘clones’ disagree with him, each expressing a different opinion, one of them argues this: ‘the problem when you explain wisdom is that you have to be wise yourself otherwise with what authority do you claim to understand, let alone explain?’

This story criticises the process of conceiving utopia and also the process of preaching it. I wonder, through the story’s character and his clones, where does the ambition of utopian imagination end and the arrogance begin, and why is this utopian theorist more credible than the other, especially since in any discussion of utopia, the thinkers involved would typically discuss a utopia that includes themselves or that is even centred around versions of themselves. The man called A, the painter, argues “No-one ever attempts to consider that the True Utopia may not be the fulfilment of their

personal ambitions and unsatisfied needs, but that it may not even include them!” and “But how can you see Utopia, unless you become a Utopia yourself?”

I am aware that this idea sounds metaphysical or idealistic, but it is simply the case of the thinker practicing the theory on him or her self before they can suggest that the theory could and should be applied to society. The question that arises then is how the utopian theorist can experiment with their utopian theory on him or her self. The answer is that the theory, if it follows the logic of Etherotopia as described in the first essay of this thesis, suggests a way of living as well as a social system. The theorist attempts to conceive not primarily the system of Etherotopia, but the morals, aesthetics, perspective, worldview and everyday life of the utopian citizen that would inhabit Etherotopia. Therefore the personal utopia must be imagined first, which is why the painter in ‘The Painter’s Dream’ refuses to paint a specific utopia but paints a painting of no colours, which he calls ‘Utopia Zen’. What is suggested here is not the denial to imagine utopia, it is the denial of attempting to imagine utopia with an insufficiently utopian mind; in Zen Buddhism, it is suggested that one should empty one’s mind prior to seeking the truth. In ‘The Painter’s Dream’ it is suggested that the utopian scholar does the same.

Portfolio, Part I
‘States of Mind’

A Boy, Alone

“One day, observing a child drinking out of his hands, he cast away the cup from his wallet with the words, ‘A child has beaten me in plainness of living.’”

Diogenes Laertius on Diogenes of Sinope

1

He lived alone in the desert of the blue sand. He was fifteen years old and his eyes were the colour of the desert. He had small lips that rarely smiled. He had known no war, no pain or sorrow. He could see the stars twenty-four hours a day. He didn't know the difference between day and night. Of all the plants in the oasis, he preferred the olive trees. There were also peaches, blueberries, apricots and a variety of herbs, all in the colours of the rainbow. But there were no rainbows, because there was no rain, because there were no clouds. The only thing to drink was water, plenty of water, the small lake was an endless source of clean cold water and the boy loved it. He loved drinking it and splashing around in it. He also liked to close his eyes and sit by the water, his small legs in the water, in the silence. He could spend hours staying that way. Once he stayed there for a whole day.

He was alone all his life and so didn't know he was alone. He would see his reflection in the water and he would laugh, and dive in the water, and find no-one, and be disappointed, and get out of the water, and look back, and see the reflection was still there, and give his forehead a little slap, as if to say “how foolish of me”, and then he'd laugh again.

He was always a boy and would die a boy. He didn't have a name, because there was no-one to name him, and couldn't speak any language because there was no-one to teach him, and because there was no language. He was the only creature not only in the area but on the planet also. He didn't know the shape of his planet but he thought it probably resembled a star. He had never been anywhere else than where he was. Never gone more than seven miles away from the oasis. Never gone anywhere.

He had tried to travel in the past, when he was seven, and when he was nine, and ten, and twelve, and had tried once more a few months ago, but none of these attempts got him anywhere. Apart from the oasis, there was nothing. He often climbed the olive

tree and looked around, but as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but the endless blue sand.

2

He had turned fifteen that day, but he didn't know. He never knew when it was his birthday, had no means of counting time, nor was he aware that such a thing as "time" was in operation. There was no passing of days where he was, as there was no way of telling when a day began or when it ended. Besides, even if there were days, he wouldn't regard any of them as his birth-day, as he had never experienced a death or a birth, and was unaware of such activities.

He thought of himself and of everything as eternal. The only other life he had witnessed was the life of the plants and of the water and of the sand and he had never seen the plants or the water or the sand die. He had never seen any of them bleed or cry or hurt themselves or each other.

He could also see that, apart from him, nothing moved much. The plants, for example, had never tried to travel like he had. He thought them wiser than him, in many aspects. He thought that perhaps he should be like them, *with* them, rooted in the sand, *by* them. He owed them his company he felt, because they had been feeding him, supporting him, for as long as he could remember. He loved them and decided he wouldn't attempt to leave the oasis again.

Later he slept, and dreamt a dream he forgot, and got up at the time the sun was at its brightest. He often did. He had a couple of apricots for lunch and drank some water with his hands and went a few meters away, in the desert, to play.

He liked playing with the sand, digging holes to put his feet in and cover them and pretend he was a tree. But this time he thought of something new. This time he would create something out of the sand. So he put his fingers in the sand and grabbed a fistful of it. He let the sand fall next to the hole and added some more.

A tiny hill had been formed, not much bigger than a peach. The boy liked this, as there were no other parts of the desert shaped like it, like fruits of sand the size of his palm. Normally, he'd spread the sand back in its place, to make the baby hill disappear in the flatness of the desert. But he had found it funnier to let it be.

He crawled next to it. He looked at it. He spat at it and laughed. He took more sand and made the hill twice as big. That was it – the first time in his life he felt pride. He loved his creation with a love unlike any other he had felt. It was much different than the love he had for the plants and the desert and the water and the stars, because he

had not created all these things. And the love he felt for the tiny hill was a polluted love, polluted with pride. But he couldn't know.

Adding more and more sand – greed follows pride – he spent the next few weeks trying to make a mountain. Not that he knew what a mountain was, but he could imagine a size. Then, one day, as he was climbing the hill, he looked back at the oasis, at all the different colours and shapes, and was inspired. He wanted to make his creation as complex as the oasis, if not more. He first made a cave in it, then a tree – of sand, of course – and then he made a statue of his reflection, right in the middle of the cave. There were two societies now on the planet – the man-made, his, and the natural, the oasis. There was no life, though, in the man-made, and the statue wasn't a real person, and would never become one. Nor could any plant, or any form of life, grow in the cave.

After two months of working on this project, the boy quit. He destroyed the idol of the tree and the idol of himself and the cave and returned to his natural home.

3

He was finally happy.

In the past, he had attempted to travel, to explore, but now he could see there was nowhere to go to, and nothing to explore. In the past, he had attempted to create, but there was nothing to create that hadn't been created for him already. He had tried to build himself a new home, but anything he could build would eventually collapse. He had tried to leave his home out of an unworldly nostalgia for a new home, an imaginative destination he knew nothing about, other than it was supposed to be as far away from his real home as possible. He could now see – there was no such thing.

All he had was all there was. Himself and the oasis. He knew of the emotion of happiness and that of curiosity. But there were no means of satisfying his curiosity. The knowledge of anything was impossible.

That day, as he returned to the oasis free of all curiosity and leaving behind him the man-made castles of sand gradually collapsing in the wind, he ran to his beloved trees, his apricots and olives, and the sand of life in which their bodies were rooted, and as he ran, he stepped on the oasis' water.

He kept running on it, for the first time in his life, unable to tell whether that was something simple or special, common or uncommon, as he had nothing to compare his life to, as nothing in his little paradise could be compared to anything else, and so

walking on water was no less beautiful or remarkable to him than swimming in it, or drinking it, or splashing around in it.

He was happy and that meant there was no curiosity to lead him to new dead ends of exploring and fruitless activity. He was innocent, and his innocence was his happiness and his activity. And after grabbing a peach, he ate it not for the pleasure of tasting it, or out of need or hunger, but merely to show his gratitude to the tree from where he had taken it. With half the peach in his mouth, he laughed. He closed his eyes and laughed.

He fell on his knees while laughing. He spit half the peach while laughing and turned his head to the lake, and looked in the water. There was a moment of silence. He could not see his reflection on the water. The reflection wasn't there anymore.

He was free.

Bears

1A.

Ever heard of auto-cloning?

You must have. Everyone knows what that is, or at least suspect that something like it was behind all this. I used to know a scientist who worked on the project. He died, though, in the process. He died quite a horrible death. He was devoured by a bear.

That is, before bears were tamed. The poor man was part of a larger group of scientists determined to find the solution to all of life's problems. Or at least, try. They called themselves The Herbert Easters after the famous re-animator – also because they were all either named Herbert or born during the Easter, or at least some of them were and the others were not. Maybe no-one was and some of them had lied about it. No-one knows.

The original plan was to create a chemical formula that would instantly tame wild animals. The purpose was to remove violence from the animal kingdom at first, and then from humanity. The first few experiments were total failures. Animals would die in the process. Some of the scientists too, including the one I mentioned. Bears that grew too powerful and too aggressive had been accidentally created, and then, at the cost of quite a few lives and quite a lot of money, they were tracked down, killed and replaced.

These were incredibly hard to kill. Their skin was harder than that of a normal bear, and they had increased resistance to pain. They were faster, stronger, and fiercer than they used to be before the experiments. The Herberts studied their corpses with most interest. They weren't anywhere nearer their original goal, but they now had new ideas to add to the project. They had almost discovered how to make the bears' skin impenetrable. They imagined they could do the same with humans. They were now more excited than ever before. They thought they could discover a way to make both humans and animals immortal. That, at the expense of fertility, of course. In their utopia there would be no death, but no birth either, and the number of existences would always be the ideal. But first, before changing the entire society, they had to succeed in changing the bears.

Through cloning, they managed to keep some of the bear's behavioural characteristics out of the clone, and through splicing, they combined bears and pandas, and the result was a mutated bear-like creature, calmer than the ordinary, resembling pandas more than bears, in everything but the shape and the size. They were black and

white in colour, like pandas, and fluffy, and comfortable to sit on. Literally, the scientists would sit on them, tickle them, play with their food, annoy them in any way possible, and the new bears would accept it. They were almost without personality, as their natural aggression had been chemically removed.

There was no way though they'd survive in their natural environment. They were tamed pets, dependant on their human masters, yet they were expressionless, indifferent, neutral. The cost of the experiment was the bear's motivation of life. This new bear did nothing but occupy space. It wouldn't eat much, as it felt no hunger unless when it had to be fed, once every day and only a little. It would drink water not for pleasure but in order not to die of dehydration. It was a meaningless mass of meat, sad to look at. Alas, was that the future of the animal that once was the glorious bear?

The Herberts continued their experiments on the hybrid bear. Their current objective was to make it self-sufficient, so that it could live without any water or food. I don't know how they did it. I know it took them little more than a year. I know in the end they made it. The outcome was an *Ursus Aeternus* – an immortal bear.

It was a miracle or so it seemed. The greatest achievement of mankind. The Buddha Bear, as the scientists named it, that was indifferent to the universe as the universe was indifferent to it, that had nothing to do but doing the Nothing, that had no reason to live but life. It needn't feed, it needn't drink, it needn't worry. There was no violence in it, because there was no desire. The bear's mind was empty as the Buddha's. The bear itself was in constant meditation. As her skin was impenetrable, and her strong muscular body was immune to pain, there was nothing really that could upset her eternal silence.

During the tests, the scientists stabbed one of the bears. No reaction. No blood. The knife just bent. They shot the bear. Nothing. No bullet could get past it. It didn't even disturb it. The bear didn't even move. Then, at last, they put dynamite in the bear's mouth. That, the bear noticed. The explosion however had no result other than to make her open her eyes for a moment, look around indifferently and close them again, to continue her meditation. Her teeth weren't harmed. Her tongue was so hard it could lift a panzer tank. This was, you may say, one god of a bear.

It was everything they had aimed for: peaceful, self-sufficient, undying. The men of the future would be like this bear, the scientists thought. The men of the future would know no death, no suffering, no hunger or thirst. Now all that the scientists had to do was one last experiment: to make a society of these bears, in order to see what kind of socialising they were capable of and if indeed their utopian vision could work.

To achieve this, they had to make more bears like it. They would all be clones of this bear, the Buddha Bear, who was their triumph, their magnum opus.

It seemed too good to be true, as everything kept going according to plan. What's more, what the scientists hadn't realised at the time was the mutated bear's ability to reproduce at will. And while they were struggling with their outdated cloning machines, the cage where the bear was held, had now two bears, the one a copy of the other – a clone of the other, to be precise.

It was as though the gods of science has heard their deepest prayers.

This advanced new species, the scientists came to realise, had the ability to clone themselves. One of the scientists called it auto-cloning, as it would happen automatically and at a steady ratio.

1B.

The result was that there now were two bears.

Needless to say, the two bears soon auto-cloned themselves, becoming four bears which auto-cloned themselves and became eight bears which auto-cloned themselves and became sixteen bears. By the end of the day, there was no room in the laboratory for any more bears, yet the bears kept cloning themselves in a steady tempo, ignoring everything that surrounded them. As they were indestructible, the walls of the laboratory fell under the pressure of their bodies and the rest of the laboratory as well was soon ruins underneath them, as they kept multiplying from sixty four to a hundred twenty four and from five hundred twelve to a thousand twenty four. And they kept multiplying. They were thousands by the end of the week, hundreds of thousands halfway into the month and would soon be over a million.

What used to be a laboratory was no more. It wasn't even visible as some thousands of heavy immortal bear bodies were resting upon it, motionless, forming hills of bears at first, then whole mountains of them. The bears were now visible from space – they would eventually, the scientists feared, be visible from the nearby cities even – for god's sake, the cities would eventually collapse under them the way they kept multiplying.

What there no way to stop them? Was there nothing to be done to save mankind from a flood of Bear Buddhas? The scientists could discover a cure, or at least a way to put an end to the auto-cloning, but all their notes and equipment were buried deep under the Bear Mountain and as the mass of bears kept spreading, it was getting harder and harder to get anywhere near the place. Of course, the bears themselves were not

dangerous. They wouldn't attack anymore than they would do anything else. They wouldn't move. They did nothing but breathe and whether they were also thinking or not, you couldn't tell.

One of the bravest – and with the guiltiest of consciousness – scientists attempted to reach the laboratory. He climbed over one of the harmless bears during the silent hours between two auto-clonings, and kept climbing until eventually he reached the peak of the Buddha Bear Mountain. We never heard of him again, nor do we know what he did afterwards, if he attempted to push between the bear bodies and dive inside the mountain, or if he decided never to come back and continue his life up there, with the bears.

Since the others had by now realised they were unable to prevent the growth of the Bear society, they took photos and a video of the horrible auto-cloning, and rushed to the nearest city to warn its inhabitants of the coming danger. By the time they arrived, the Bear Mountain had grown as big as to be visible from the city folk, who were already packing their stuff, hoping to escape from the apocalypse.

The news spread quicker than the bears. Soon, the army decided to intervene. But the bears were immune to bullets, as they were to rockets, bombs and the kamizaki pilots who flew down on them in their aircrafts.

The deathless meditating auto-multiplying self-sufficient ever-tolerant Buddha Bears were indeed, as the newest movement of doom-prophets predicted, the society of the future, and the coming race, the one whose coming was the end of mankind.

Within days, the city was ruins. Within weeks, it was overrun by bears. Within a month, no part of it was any longer visible under the tons of bear body. The nearest cities and villages and towns were already half-emptied by then, and the rest of the inhabitants were either preparing to leave or had decided to die under the psychical flood of bears – with the exception of the sceptics, those who were determined that what was going on made no sense and, thus, was *not* going on, regardless of what the psychical senses of their fellow humans were perceiving as a “fact”.

Soon, the day came that the country was literally overrun by bears. There was no space for anything else as the, by now uncountable, masses of bears were occupying the whole place. What used to be grass, streets, buildings, cars, trees, other animals, humans, sand, rivers, and everything else that used to “form” the country, was now buried under tons of tons of tons of bears.

The survivors of this first destroyed country were those who could move faster than the expanding mass of bears. Needless to say, no pedestrians survived, with the

exception of those who climbed over the bears and went missing. Their fate was, at the time, unknown to the rest of mankind.

They probably died during the atomic bombings though, if they had survived suffocation under the mountains of bears. These bombings were the last and most desperate attempt to stop the bears. It failed of course. It didn't even upset their formation, as the Buddha Bears – now certainly more in numbers than all human creatures and the rest of the animals combined – were not willing to be moved by any explosion and for whatever reason.

Whole countries were being evacuated, when the first of the great earthquakes occurred. The burden of the bears was too much for the ground to hold and soon there came the greatest earthquake that ever shook the Earth – actually, it was the first global earthquake, one that shook the entire Earth.

The planet didn't expect such a thing to happen, not any more than anyone else, and was not prepared to deal with such a catastrophe – yet eventually it adapted, as the bears in their harmonious and steady auto-cloning, were carefully picking the spaces their clones would inhabit, and the weight was equally shared in all ends of the Great Bear Country – it was now definitely a country, and would soon be a continent too, if nothing stopped it.

Just imagine that every time an auto-cloning happened, the size of the Bear Country doubled, since each and every one of the bears created a new clone of itself. Of course, there were quite a few hours between each cloning, but that was no relief now that the time the people of the neighbouring countries had to run away – by car or train – or even to fly away, was not enough to escape each new wave of clones.

Inevitably, more and more people accepted their fate and refused to move. Like the bears, they stayed in their place and waited. Eventually, they too would become part of the Great Bear Country. A living part or a dead part, nobody knew at the time.

The people at the other end of the world seemed the luckiest and, yet, were the most unlucky. Their hours of waiting seemed fewer and fewer as time passed, and the Bear Country was already as big as Australia as would be twice as big after the next wave. The people at the other end of the world had less than a week – a week, at most. What's more, they, unlike the rest of humanity, had nowhere to go to, as they were as far as humanly possible already. They were facing quite a serious existential crisis while they were running around like rats, trying to survive the inevitable. There was no hope of course of escaping into Space – all big buildings, including Space Stations, had already collapsed during the great earthquake.

A few days later, the nightmare was there. The people at the other end of the world were surrounded. They stopped running, the earthquake had stopped, Earth had almost been conquered by the Buddha Bear Society and in the next few hours, the last free country of mankind would be history.

Of the people at the other end of the world, many killed themselves and their own, others simply closed their eyes and waited, others were driven mad and didn't know where they were, what they were doing, and why they could no longer see the sun. And, as always, there were those brave enough to attempt to climb the bears and possibly live a little longer – not that they knew what for, they just knew, thanks to a strong instinct for survival deeply rooted in man and every other species, that they had, somehow, to stay alive.

I was one of them.

2.

Earth was now hidden from the Sun and the other way round, as Earth was the new underground, and the bodies of the Bears were the planet now.

Oceans, mountains, everything was underneath. And since they were known for their harmonious expansion, there was not a single bear's body placed higher than the rest, and so Earth - or Bearth, as I called it – was now, in its roundness, completely flat. By this, I mean not that the shape of the planet had changed but that there was no such thing as a mountain or a hill, a valley or a cave, or anything anywhere in between, but the Bear Country was perfectly flat, slightly curving only to fit the round planet, as a great giant palm of fur holding the planet tight, determined never ever to let go.

Thankfully, the expansion of the bears had stopped or so it seemed. Even if they were still spreading, it wasn't noticeable anymore. We weren't – by "we" I refer to us, the survivors – anywhere nearer the moon, at least not for the time being, and the air was still breathable, though not as pleasant.

It seemed nature had adapted to the present situation and that, as we were now living on the backs of the bears, our own organism had started to adapt as well. I knew little about science and thus can only say that if anything changed in us, the radiation must have played some part. I'm guessing that if there was radiation, it came either from some secret power plant destroyed by the bear expansion, or from the trillions – or were they more? – of the breaths of the bears that were forming a new atmosphere within our own. Whether these mutant clones were radiated, I don't know for sure. I

know that for the time being, it seemed that we, the remaining humans, had survived the apocalypse, and that for the next few days at least we would probably remain alive.

There was nothing to do at first, but sit comfortably on the bear underneath us – and who-knows-how-many bears underneath it – and wait while thinking or perhaps think while waiting, depending on which of the conditions of being includes the other. One thing was certain: as long as the moon wasn't moving towards us, we weren't moving towards it, and that meant peace.

At first, we mourned for our beloved ones. Then for the rest of mankind. And for home, for our countries, and memories, and for the little things and the great things and all things, really. But most importantly we mourned for our future, buried under the bears as well, along with our past.

Crossing fields of endless bear fur, thinking we might die while wandering across the Fur Desert – some already had, I imagine – we tried to communicate with each other, if we were lucky enough to find at least one other.

None of the people I met in my journeys spoke any of the languages I spoke – but all were friendly and eager to learn my language as I was to learn theirs. It goes without saying that food was hard to find, though I did occasionally come across this or that animal, and with the help of my new friends, captured it and ate it raw. There were quite a few animals that had survived the apocalypse of the bears, mostly birds – though these couldn't fly much higher and were easy prey, as long as you had something to throw at them – I had my shoes – provided of course, you'd get them.

We lived like this for a while. I regret to say that piss was the substitute for water, though we later found we could drink milk from the breast of female bears which was much tastier and the bears never ran out of it. This mutated milk was very tasty and healthy, and we realised we needed nothing else for our survival.

Now that we had the means to stay alive and since the moon was still at the same distance, we felt somewhat relieved. It wasn't that bad, if that had indeed been the apocalypse and it was over. Plus, as I believe I mentioned before, sitting on these bears was very comfortable. And so was lying on them, and sleeping on them. And as for pissing or pooing, we had no trouble with that as it all went down the innumerable gaps between the bears – and, without wanting to sound disgusting, we'd wipe our bottoms on bear fur until they were clean. The bears didn't mind. They were Buddhas.

We felt no shame for each other, and soon threw away our clothes, and like Adams and Eves, we wandered around naked, without even noticing each other's genitals, not any more than we were noticing the bears underneath – and at this point,

we'd spend hours of our lives forgetting we were sitting on bears, as they had become our new natural environment and our minds had already adapted to the new reality, whether we were conscious of this adaptation or not.

I felt nothing but love for my fellow survivors and I'm sure they felt the same. Our former homes, buried under the great bear country, were almost forgotten and we felt at home anywhere we were. Nor were we aware on top of which country we were, as there was no way of telling what was under the bears.

We soon began making love on bears. My first time on a bear was the greatest experience of my life. It's much better than making love on a bed, because the bear is fluffier, and most importantly, alive. The animal's presence made the sex much more passionate.

I instantly fell in love with the woman I made love with. I couldn't get her name at first, as neither could understand the other's language at the time, and when I did learn it, it didn't matter. I will be referring to her as "Her", "She" and "the Woman". I loved her. I still do.

This world was truly a Utopia. The presence of the enlightened bears that consisted the new Earth, or Bearth, under our feet, were creating a holy atmosphere. Wherever you were, it was holy ground, as it probably was a Buddha bear's back.

What's more, we soon saw each of us was self-sufficient, just like the bears. Thus, we each picked our partner and left the others since, though we loved them, we had no need for their company and they had no need for ours. I was in the company of Her, the one with whom we had been making love on the bears and Hers was all the company I needed. I believe She felt the same. We all did.

What need was there for a community of more than two anyway, and what use? There was nothing going on that we ourselves didn't do and there wasn't much we could do but love and be loved and live in harmony.

Me and Her and the bears, this was the ideal society, a paradise on Earth – sorry, a paradise on Bearth – the one the prophets preached or something like it, and all of us were so lucky to be the Noahs of this Apocalyptic Bear Flood, and wished the bears would never go away, as this new society was much better than any we used to have before. Indeed, to everyone's surprise, the post-apocalyptic world seemed actually much better than the pre-apocalyptic one. The catastrophe was, we all agreed, the best thing to ever have happened to us.

Living on top of the Buddha Bears had somehow given us the impression that we were like those bears ourselves. We believed we were immortal, and happy, and

healthy, and that possibly we could even clone ourselves out of thin air. Of course, we had no such ability.

One day I questioned the meaning of my perfect life. I'm sure She did, as well, but can never be certain whether we began doubting at the same time. I know I was the first to openly express my fears, and that She was prepared for them. By that time we had been wondering, among other things, why She wasn't getting pregnant after our many attempts, and then we realised. Not only were we undying and psychically strong and of perfect health – we were also sterile.

3.

We realised we weren't feeling as we used to, about each other or even about ourselves. What's more, we were suddenly disgusted by the bears. We now hated stepping on them. We could no longer sleep on them. We'd stay awake for three or four days and then collapse and faint and wake up and try to stay awake again, weaker this time, but would manage to stay without sleep for at least a day, then faint again, then again wake up, even weaker than the last time, and so on, and so on, and we had the most horrible nightmares, all of them taking place in the same place our lives were, and so we were no longer in the position to tell when we were in a dream or awake, as everything seemed perfectly normal at first both in real life and in the dreams and soon after something crazy would happen – in life? In the dream? Who knows? – not that it could get much crazier than what had already happened, the Great Flood of Bears I mean, and so everything was pretty possible, I guess, or at least we felt that way. We were ready to believe in anything.

Within months, we started to seriously consider the possibility that the world was always like this. Our minds were fucking with us or were the bears' minds telepathically fucking with ours or were they simply trying to communicate? I don't know, She believed the world was always Fluffy and Bear-skinned, and She still defended this opinion last time I saw Her.

We started looking for other people. We never found any.

In the end, She and I separated. Not because we were not attracted to each other anymore, but because we had become dangerous to each other. We both realised we craved for meat. We both feared the other, we both decided it would be better if, in case either of us grew mad and decided to attack the other, if the other was far away. Thus, we abandoned and were abandoned.

I was on my own now, wandering on that Nightmarish Desert of Bears' Backs and Buttocks. Too often I attempted to bite the impenetrable bear skin, too often I hurt my teeth and ambitions in the process. I had grown sick of bear milk, although I knew it was the next best thing to the Divine Nectar of the Gods, but you have to be a god to appreciate the treasures of the gods, or a Buddha Bear, at least, to fully taste the essence of the Buddha Bear's Milk. But this liquid Utopia was unknown to me, and so was the utopian state of mind that the Buddha Bears seemed to be enjoying – at this point, I'd find it both intolerable and unacceptable and refused to see the Bear's decision to live the Eternal Psychological Immobility as a utopia or a nirvana – but what did I know, I who had not been there but as an observer, I who was but the survivor of the apocalypse, not its creator or its prophet even or at least a man, bear or other creature that could be proud of somehow participating. No, I just couldn't know.

The next person I met in my wanderings, was dead. A body rotten on top of a bear's back, its head conveniently placed on top of the bear's butt, though the bear wouldn't fart or by any other means show disrespect to the dead person – plus, I could not know the gender of the person, as it must have been lying there for days and was nearly dust by the time I got there – nor was I ever such an expert of human anatomy as to be able to tell a man from a woman by simply looking at their bones. Frankly, I wasn't willing to get anywhere near the body. I just looked the other way and kept moving. Slightly faster than before.

That was the last person I encountered and it must be weeks ago. I haven't seen any edible animals either. Yesterday, I looked up and saw the moon was closer. I'm either getting mad or Bearth is growing bigger and bigger every day, counter to my initial beliefs, and we're going to crash into the moon eventually.

If such a thing is possible. I know little of the laws of psychics other than the law of gravity which I believe means that, simply, you throw something up, it's gonna fall down. Naturally though, I would think that if we were – “we” as a planet, me and the bears and whoever else had survived – if we were indeed getting closer to the moon, that would mean I couldn't be alive. However I am, so that means...

I really would like to get some meat. Last time I tried to drink Bear milk I realised I couldn't. I mean there was no milk. It's like the only source of life I had left had gone dry. I tried another bear. And another. I keep trying. Nothing. I really would like to get some meat. If I meet another human being – one with flesh on him or her – I won't be able to resist. I fear the wild bear inside me will awake and attack.

I'm very hungry. If I don't eat something soon, I will die.

Etherotopia

“You don't *have* a soul, Doctor. You *are* a soul.
You *have* a body, temporarily.”

Walter M. Miller Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz*

1. War

It didn't sound like night and that meant something was terribly wrong.

At first, there was this humming sound that seemed off-key but was subtle and discontinuous and very few noticed. Most were absorbed in the calm background music that was their evening, chanting in chorus, along with the occasional hooting of an owl. But with the hum came even stranger voices, louder and threatening – among them, a chaotic laughter scared the sensitive Sounds, followed by a monotonous beat.

The beat was so intense they had no choice but to shout, which was allowed under extreme circumstances only. The younger generations had never experienced such a thing before and were running amok, crashing into each other and generating noise. In this place, noise was about the worst thing that could happen.

Thankfully the Order arrived before it was too late. They were the government of Sounds, an elite group of maestros and composers that decided what music played in the background. They were led by General Kiai – whom even the demons feared, as he could produce noise at will – and Aeros, a child of air and second-in-command.

“Tune in to nighttime, people!” shouted Aeros. A group of accidental falsetto-makers flew past him and against the wind. “Have they really no will of their own?”

“Worry about yourself!” said Kiai. “These ones are dead already.”

The general was the echo of a recently deceased man, though of course he couldn't know. None of the Sounds acknowledged the existence of material people, or matter in general. The great heresy, known as the Body Hypothesis, was only popular among their neighbours, the Souls. For the Sounds, the existence of a non-ethereal body was a superstition.

“Where is this noise coming from?” shouted the general to Aeros. “Any idea what caused it?”

“Not yet, sir. We're trying to synchronise the crowd...”

“Forget the symptoms and focus on the problem!” said Kiai. “I was expecting you to tell me we're under attack!”

“Is that even possible?” said Aeros. “How do we deal with this?”

He listened carefully. The general was right – the demons had already begun their assault. Noise had served as a distraction and they had moved into the crowd unnoticed. A great number of Sounds were already gone by the time the Order realised what happened. The demons used noise to drive the Sounds insane, causing them to flee from their musical utopia into the deserts of silence where they would simply cease to exist.

But now the enemy had been spotted and the Order of Sounds were fighting back, using screaming voices to shatter the demons until, finally, the disturbing beat stopped. In some distant part of the world beyond, the demons, in their real form, exploded into fountains of blood. If someone had witnessed the scene, he'd assume the whooshing of the air had caused the massacre.

2. Heresy

“The Souls are behind this.”

“That is impossible.”

“You think the demons work alone?” insisted Kiai.

He was right in that the demons had little power in Etherotopia, where Sounds, Airs and Souls lived in harmony – though since the rise of the Order, there was hardly any communication with the other races. This was due to the fact that Kiai opposed the Etherotopian religions, especially the Body Hypothesis.

The Hypothesis' main doctrine was that no Sound just came randomly into existence but that somewhere, in another frequency, there were non-ethereal bodies that produced them. These “bodies” supposedly had forms of their own – stable forms that were not subject to the mood the wind was in or the ever-changing music of time – they had also the ability to sense not only the Sounds but other beings as well, which existed in worlds parallel to the ethereal lands.

Kiai considered these superstitions harmful and compared them to Noise. This led to a steady rise of the anti-soul sentiment and the suggestion that the souls would go as far as to ally with the demons didn't sound as absurd as it normally would, as it was proposed by Kiai himself whose music was flawless.

“Are you saying that the Souls have declared war on us?” said Aeros who was in doubt. Only members of the Order were powerful enough to have their own will, since they, unlike the minor Sounds, weren't automatically convinced by each and every tune their leader played.

“This is what I suspect, yes” said Kiai. “And I command you to confirm my suspicions.”

Aeros played a different tune in response to Kiai’s commandment, a melody that sounded as an acceptance and a denial at the same time.

“Did you order me to find out who’s behind this?”

“I ordered you to question the Souls.”

“Am I then to consult the Souls?”

“Your mission is to find out what role they have in this.”

“I understand. You assume that the Souls might know something about this, but since it is only an assumption, you send me on a quest to find the truth.”

They sounded like two hands on a piano playing each a different melody that, when combined, formed the complete song. That was rhetoric. The theme each played was a revision of the other’s, a series of retellings and adaptations that were also answers.

Aeros was secretly a spiritophile, as were all the wind’s children, and without rejecting Kiai’s accusation of the souls, he led Kiai into sending him to them, not in order to find proof of their involvement but to seek guidance.

Having permission to interact with the souls, he tuned in to their frequency, a parallel world where a much different music was playing, the kind that could be heard and smelled and touched – though as a Sound, he could only listen.

He was no stranger among the Souls and had visited them in the past, when he was young and in love and hadn’t yet joined the Order. He knew he was “there” – though he had no actual sense of location – when he heard the divine music, the eternal psalm of higher life that came from each and every Soul and spread to the whole of Etherotopia forming Time. The Souls were the only known beings operating both within Time and outside of it, thus Kiai’s suspicion that they must had been involved in the sabotage of night and the noise it had caused.

Aeros knew he was expected. Sensing only one presence other than his own, he grew worried for his existence. Would that other presence refuse to interact with him, he, as a Sound, would perish.

“Welcome Aeros, son of the Wind,” said the female spirit.

“I have missed you, Psychophoni,” replied the male Sound. He was pleased to interact with his soul mate again, yet sensed the lack of trust in the air. He did not like the fact that her society hadn’t joined them.

“Where are the others?” he asked.

“They wish to keep their distance. Safety measures.”

“You are not in danger from me,” he said, “or any other Sound.”

“Perhaps. But we learn you have been visited by demons.”

“We find your knowledge suspicious since you have not learned it from us.”

“We find your suspicions biased, since you have openly renounced our faith.”

“But we find your faith unreasonable, since it does not derive from sensual experience...”

“Yet it would be reasonable to trust our judgement, Sound, since you only have one sense and we have plenty!”

“We have never experienced any other sense than ours, so we deny their existence.”

“We find this selfish.”

“And we find this logical.”

They spoke with sounds – the Souls knew all the ethereal languages and could speak in all senses – their dialogue was in a way similar to body language, meaning they were showing, as well as telling, what they were thinking.

“Why are you so aggressive, my love?” asked Aeros, exhausted.

“I’m only responding to your aggression,” she replied. “If I didn’t tune in to your passion, how would I be able to communicate with you?”

Aeros felt shame. He realised he had been carrying the violent tune of his leader, and that, like a messenger Sound, he bore more of Kiai’s music than his own. He apologised. She accepted the apology.

“You influence me, Sound, in more ways than you can possibly imagine. Your psychedelic rhetoric could destroy me, even though you have the best intentions.”

“Do not call me Sound, Psychophoni. When I am interacting with you, I feel no difference between Souls and Sounds.”

They were now playing the same tune. It meant they were about to make love.

“Aeros,” sang Psychophoni. “What you’re doing to me is what we spirits mean when we say the music touches the soul.”

She shouldn’t have said that, but the sound of Aeros had gone too far inside her and had dug up this hidden thought. Their communication was interrupted, then resumed in a different tone. They had split.

“What is this touching you talk about?” said Aeros. He feared her influence as much as she feared his. He was worried, because she had mentioned that other sense, that “touch” which had no place in the non-material world of Etherotopia.

“Please do not be upset, Aeros! I only meant to describe what I feel.”

“I will stop interacting with you now,” he said. He meant that he was leaving. He was terribly upset she had made a reference to the Body Hypothesis. Had he been heard discussing it, he’d be most likely expelled from his society and die.

“I want to help you, Aeros!” said Psychophoni. “Please stay tuned!”

He did. Psychophoni’s music was too powerful to resist. The other spirits were now joining her, forming a chorus of channelling minds, all expressing themselves through one voice. A less experienced Sound would have perceived this as a single voice shouting, but Aeros knew he was being surrounded. The voices of the Souls were closing in on him, making it impossible to escape to another frequency.

He was trapped.

“You want to learn why the music of Time was disrupted?” said Psychophoni.

“We know that,” replied Aeros. “The sabotage was a distraction so that the demons could ambush us.”

“On the contrary, we think that the attack was the distraction. The upsetting of Time was a ritual.”

“A ritual?”

Aeros was not sure what note to play next. The concept of a ritual was as unpleasant to him as anything related to religion. The impression he got of the term was that of voluntary dissonance, an undisciplined sound that couldn’t be used for musical purposes and thus was useless to society.

“But what if...” said Psychophoni, who had listened to his thought, “what if we Souls have bodies?”

“This is not what I’m here to discuss!” said Aeros.

“And what if you Sounds come from bodies? And what is a body really? Its existence cannot be proven, only assumed, and yet...”

“That is enough!”

“Are you sure we communicate through sound? What if sound is matter also? What if you interact with the material world all the time, though you never realise?”

“There is no such thing as your imaginary material world!”

“The ritual was a summoning,” she said, abruptly replying to a previous question.

“You’re singing out-of-tune, it’s hard to follow!” he complained.

“It was the summoning that brought the demons.”

“Who summoned them?”

“The one who is dead and does not know it,” said a voice almost identical to Psychophoni’s that was heard at the same time and yet was not of the same person. Aeros realised they were carrying out two conversations at once. This time, imagine a piece for piano for four hands, neither pair playing the same song, yet both melodies sounding perfect together, as if written to be performed simultaneously.

“The Sound’s real name cannot be pronounced because it is noise.”

“Who is he?”

“If there are bodies, they wonder if we exist and we wonder if they exist.”

“Don’t confuse me!”

“You can’t imagine,” continued the parallel Soul, “how many worlds will be destroyed if Etherotopia falls!”

“In another world,” the first voice continued “this Sound you seek is a ghost. Here he exists as an echo.”

“An echo?” Aeros knew who she was referring to. “But the general defended us when the demons attacked!”

“He did not. You did. You, and the rest of the Order.”

“But why?”

“Because he’s been degraded to noise himself. It might not be his fault. Maybe one of his other bodies killed itself. The one that smells. Or the one that touches. His denial of the Physical Body confirms he has lost it.”

“But what can I do to stop him?”

“Hurry.”

3. Exile

The return to the default frequency lasted but moments and soon Aeros found himself tuned in to a darkness much more upset than that of an ordinary night. But he had to resist the noise and inform his fellow Sounds of the situation, warn them of the general’s intentions and his fall from a brilliant psalm to a clamorous noise demon – or was this not his mission – wasn’t he not supposed to return as a messenger who had spied on the Souls and report on their heretical activities, especially their involvement in the sabotage of Time, which they themselves had described as a ritual – or were the Souls his true allies whom he had consulted regarding his own existence – and hadn’t they preached the Body to him? And, above all, wasn’t he convinced?

He was very confused and encountering the general made him even less capable of recollecting his thoughts. The chaotic music that surrounded him, only added to the noise inside.

“You’re late,” said Kiai. “We’re about to wage war on the Souls.”

Everyone had tuned in to the polemic mood. Human, animal Sounds, even natural and mechanical ones had joined the vocal war dance, though there was no visual awareness of their physical origins. In the background, the music of storm and thunder defined the tempo. The main theme of war, performed by Kiai himself, was repetitive and intense and gradually evolved into noise. Also the beat had returned.

Aeros refused to join them, thus every note he played sounded wrong.

“But the Souls are on our side!” he protested.

“Oh, my!” said Kiai. “Have they brainwashed you? Only don’t tell me you have converted to Body Hypothesising!”

“My only wish is to preach unpopular truths,” said Aeros, adding a tragic note to an already passionate tune.

“Iaaaiii!”

The general’s barbarous scream disrupted all music and nearly knocked his opponent soundless.

“You touched me!” said Aeros triumphantly, to the surprise of both Kiai and his fellow Sounds.

“Touch?” echoed the general. “I know not of this touch!”

The Sounds couldn’t know he was lying, since the physical extension of the general’s existence was inconceivable to them. Formerly the sound of a living man, Kiai was aware of the variety of physical senses, including touch. In fact, the only proof of the Body Hypothesis in all of Etherotopia was himself, the original denier, who had witnessed the material world through physical eyes.

“There is no such thing as a touch, you heretic!” he roared.

“I speak on behalf of the Souls” insisted Aeros. “And the Souls believe that Noise was created by... for...”

He changed his tune.

“And the Souls believe in the existence of bodies. Non-ethereal bodies.”

“They are clearly delusional,” said Kiai loudly, using his powerful voice to oppress Aeros and limit his influence. “Everything is pure energy. Could anything exist in any other form?”

“I suspect that... No, I believe...”

“Believe? How illogical! Believe in what? A body is supposed to be a form of energy made of something other than energy which is inconceivable to both us and the Souls, and yet we all are supposedly interacting with it without realising! It’s the most absurd of all theories! Why aren’t you satisfied with the conceivable reality? Is it escapism that motivates you?”

“I don’t know,” said Aeros, weaker than before but just as stubborn. “Isn’t your attachment to the provable reality, escapism from all the alternative possibilities, many of which would be hard to accept, requiring you to improve yourself which, in turn, requires effort?”

“No-one has created us!” exploded Kiai who, as a human voice, felt betrayed by his former physical host. “You don’t exist for a reason, Aeros! There’s no such thing as a harp and someone playing the harp! That’s mythology, it can’t be proven, it can’t be conceived, it doesn’t happen!”

“Curse you!” sang Aeros, irritating his superior even more. The other Sounds, though they avoided expressing themselves directly, were automatically taking sides, the majority naturally supporting the authority.

“Do you want to upset harmony? To create Noise? Is that what you want?”

Aeros was singing at the same time as him, in a different tune, and the combination of them both expressing their music sounded awful.

“That is enough!” shouted Kiai.

“Arrr!” shouted Aeros, hitting the general with both wind and sound.

“Aeros! I sentence you to Silence!” replied Kiai and the entire society joined him and screamed so loud that Aeros was sent flying, as if a most powerful wind had blown, a wind that carried him away to the never-ending wasteland of silence.

The isolated Sound couldn’t hear his enemy anymore. He couldn’t hear any sound at all. There was no musical theme to tune in, no tempo, no time. He had lost communication with Etherotopia and that meant he was dead. Then he realised he was experiencing solitude. He had never felt solitude before. He observed the silence that included him. The permanent lack of noise. He accepted that silence and rejected the illusion of sound. He tuned in to oblivion and disappeared.

The next day there was noise in Etherotopia. Everyone knew what that meant. One of the Souls – in response to the news of her beloved’s death – denied her immortality and vanished in thin air.

The Painter's Dream

“What's most worthless about dreams
is that everybody has them.”

Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

1

He was a painter who didn't use colours.

In fact, he had never painted anything. Other people didn't consider him a painter. Those who knew him personally even had the impression he hated painting and they were right.

To him the process itself, or the result, meant nothing. He saw no difference between an idea being born and that idea being formed. He cared only for the idea itself and all his life he had such an idea, a concept of a painting which, would he one day be able to conceive, his work as a painter would be over.

Sitting in a chair in the middle of an empty room, in perfect solitude, he felt it was finally time. He realised he had been postponing this moment for his whole life, as he was always too busy “living” and had no time for such metaphysical activities as truth-seeking and Zen painting. That's what he called it, Zen painting, because, frankly, it didn't involve painting. Everything was meant to happen inside the head and that was supposed to be enough.

He was old and lonely and had forgotten most of the things he had lived and the rest didn't matter. He used to have a pretty ordinary job, one that didn't require any imagination and thus was unimportant. He had often tried to erase his unpleasant and unnecessary memories and he had often been successful.

He could remember planning his magnum opus, the work of his life, the painting of no colours, ever since he was a child. What had happened between then and now? Not much and nothing inside him had changed.

The passing of time was supposed to bring him closer to his goal. It didn't. Life itself was expected to contribute. It didn't. The experiences of a lifetime, the hundreds and thousands of books that filled his personal library and his head, the things he had heard, seen and felt – and even those he had imagined – nothing helped, none of these got him anywhere nearer the achievement of his life.

He had fallen in love many times, he had fallen in hatred even more, and every time he had travelled around the world, he had always found himself back to where he

had started, his mind almost suffocated with the overfilled Thought-Albums of the images he had witnessed which turned out to be a burden rather than a pleasure-storage, as they were originally meant to be.

How could he ever see the One Picture, if between him and the empty painting, the armies of past experiences and blurred memories were marching triumphantly in the name of King Headache the Eternal? And how could he ever even conceive the Thoughtless Thought he was after, if the gardens of his mind were occupied by such parasites as the Fear of Death and the Remorse for Having Lived?

He had to empty his mind. He had to gather his memories and hopes in one large pile of garbage and set them all on fire and watch the smoke vanish. Then he would be free. Then he would be ready.

Like a madman, the madman he was, he started dancing around the big white room, his hands the moving fires of deathless death, fighting against life-consuming life, and all the illusions it brings to the eye, to the ear, to the flesh. For too long had his heart been treated as a slave, obeying such masters as temptations and habits and addictions of the senses, and for too long had she been used as a mule, carrying on her back the burden of contradictory feelings, and suffering underneath.

She was a woman made of fire, his heart, and she was tired and weakened and on her way to faint. And yet she was a loyal heart and had refused to stop beating before her beloved's dream was fulfilled. She patiently waited for the moment when her beloved would finish his work and be finally ready to die, so that she could also rest in peace. And she was prepared to wait forever.

2

There was almost nothing there. All there was, was a big white wall in a big white room, opposite him. Himself, in the centre of the room, the room which was a box in a box called a building. Yet he had to think outside the box, see the big picture.

Though a painter, he had no obligation to paint what he would see, or in any other way expose it to an audience, by expressing it or describing it. Express or describe what? He had no right to paint, write down or talk about, a picture he had never seen in his head, a thought he hadn't been able to conceive, a dream he hadn't dreamt, a truth he hadn't known.

He had a name for his painting-to-be. Utopia. Having a word for something he couldn't think of was allowed. He wouldn't go any further than naming the thing though. Had he allowed his mind to build a personal utopia in his imagination, his

vision would have been blocked by the garbage of personal ambition and prejudice, and the fight would be lost.

In his quest to imagine the Image, he saw there was the way of dreaming and the way of meditating, but he wasn't yet certain which was preferable in order to communicate with the inner mind.

He attempted the latter at first, and in a simple meditating stance, without still leaving the comfort of his chair, he closed his eyes in front of the empty painting on the empty wall, and let the silence guide him to a desirable higher consciousness.

It didn't work. The old man fell asleep instead, and his mind was now active in the Dreamworld where a room, much similar to the one his body was in, was awaiting for him and a new painting was exposed, naked of colours, on the wall in front of him.

His obsession was once again haunting him in his dreams as it used to in the old days. He felt he wasn't alone in the room and the presence of Another, an unknown and indefinable Other, was making him increasingly nervous as he hadn't yet realised he was in a dream, and was slowly walking towards the picture-less frame, which seemed wider and wider, expanding as if to include the whole cosmos.

Instead of the blank paper, he found a void, much like a gate that led to another world. The presence of the Other was by then too powerful to ignore and, though he couldn't turn his head to look, he felt the need to enter the gate to the other world and escape.

To escape, through the gate of the dream, through the painting... He never got there. The feeling that whatever was behind him, was after him, was the last he recalled when he woke up.

The gate. Utopia was a gate. That was the impression he got from the dream.

3

He was not alone.

In his head, he had two contradictory desires, as if the dreamer and the painter were two separate people occupying the same body – the dreamer was A, the original, whose wish was to know the truth, to enter the gate. B, the other, he merely wanted to paint the truth and was determined to complete the painting with an image his limited imagination would produce, regardless of whether the conceivable utopia would be a true or a false one.

He had to immediately disconnect himself from that part, allowing it to live separately since he could not kill it. A new chair was brought for B, who sat right between A and the painting.

That was rude, thought A. He tried not to be distracted at first, but was soon annoyed by B who was already planning what colours to use for the painting he had in mind, definitely a bad one.

“You cannot just start painting!” shouted A. “You don’t even know what you’re going to paint!”

“I have an idea of how Utopia would be like,” said B.

“Your personal interpretation prevents you from seeing the actual thing. Even worse, your delusion becomes a distraction for the rest of us!”

B had turned, and the two of them were now standing face-to-face, each the enemy of the other, their faces almost identical, their eyes completely different.

“I am allowed to dream of a better world, you know,” said B. “You can’t take that away from me!”

“It’s impossible. Even if your dream feels good at first, you’ll soon find it full of contradictions – it could even be a nightmare for other people. The question is – can you imagine a world that is perfect for everyone?”

“I don’t think I can. My imagination is limited, as is my reason.”

“Then shut up your reason,” said A, “your dreaming too. Until you have crossed the gate, how dare you talk of what lies beyond? Has either of us been there?”

“No.”

“Then we are not in the position to know.”

B stood up. He moved his chair to A’s right and sat by him. They both looked at the empty painting from a similar distance. They continued their conversation, trying to reach an agreement, seriously considering the possibility of a future collaboration. They gave up the thought. It’d never work.

C arrived the moment the new debate began. He was in fact born from the debate. As soon as he entered the room, he stood with his back to the painting, refusing to even think about it, let alone doing something. He believed that the truth was inconceivable not only in our present state of consciousness, but in all states. He was a pessimist and his sole philosophy could be summed up thus: “If I cannot conceive of perfection, no-one can. There’s no utopia, because if there was such a thing, I would have known it.”

The rest of them – their numbers growing fast as more and more of these painters arrived – almost ignored C's existence, as he had no communication with them and refused to join them in their activities.

D was C's alter ego, a positive pessimist who shared exactly the same mind as C's and had exactly the same opinions – the difference was, he thought they led to happiness. Of the two, he was the sociable one. He would write and publish the one manifesto after the other, an active dystopian thinker who preached that the man who sees the emptiness of life is a happy man, and that the future of humanity is the monkey, the ape, and the dog. The law of the jungle was the one he respected and as for the painting, he thought he was the only one in the room suitable for the job.

"I am the most enlightened of you all!" he shouted. "I shall be the one to paint Utopia!"

The others seemed sceptical about this statement.

"You remind me," said B, "of the monkeys who claim they can explain Buddha and Jesus and Life, who talk of such thing as the road to happiness and the other monkeys listen."

D didn't like that comment. B continued.

"The problem when you explain wisdom is that you have to be wise yourself otherwise with what authority do you claim to understand, let alone explain? Writing on Buddha is claiming you're a Buddha yourself, which is arrogance, unless of course you have denounced the world, like a Buddha! Have you?"

"That *is* the problem," said E, who was strangely taller than the rest. A started to get worried. They were now different in size as well, he observed. He worried that if too many interfered, he would never finish his quest. E continued.

"I think the real question is who the Utopianist is. What makes a person able to conceive Utopia? Unless already achieved, Utopia is a work-in-process, a plan, but whose plan is more credible?"

"Are you examining the idea or the person behind it?" asked F. F was new.

"I'm not sure. But doesn't the dream come from the dreamer?"

That was debatable. The metaphysicians would probably claim the opposite, that the dream happens to the dreamer, yet the more reasonable ones were certain that the dream is connected to the dreamer's personality and that it's born out of his own unconscious.

E's argument made sense. The new law was instantly accepted by the majority: "Thou shall judge a Utopia by the Utopian who thought of it!" Even the metaphysicians had to agree that the tree was responsible for the fruit, and not the other way round.

The symposium went on and the room was now growing wider, eager to welcome new arrivals. A was not sure anymore if he was awake or in a dream, alive or dead, or perhaps was there another state of "being" he ignored? Ah, too many distractions, he thought, and tried to clear his mind.

Alas, Silence was in itself a Utopia!

4

D hadn't spoken for a while. He was writing something, maybe making notes of the things he had heard or drawing early drafts of what would be tomorrow's masterpiece.

Of all the painters in the room – and they were by now quite a few, all of them similar in face and different in thought – not one had touched the painting yet, or even went anywhere near the frame.

A had been trying to meditate yet it was impossible. The noise was unbearable and there was little to do but wait, inactive, as he was all his life, growing older and weaker every moment, unable to do anything but wait and wait and wait. He had no idea how many separate discussions were taking place in the room now, and if any of them was truly useful or if there were all noise and nothing but.

He turned his head once, out of curiosity, only to see C, the passive pessimist, holding his face with his hands, crying, probably thinking how the news of a future suicide would affect his relatives and friends. A's attention was again distracted as he heard D, who had abandoned his drafts and was now standing on a chair, preaching the Super-Man to a group of newcomers, quoting directly from popular thinkers.

As some observer rightly pointed out, their Utopias were all problematic because they were based on the society they themselves would like to inhabit and not on the society they ought to. But they just liked and disliked what was, at their time, popular to like and approvable to dislike and even though they all had a different menu of opinions, these opinions were all picked from a greater Opinion-Menu which was terribly limited to include only those opinions currently acceptable by the modern up-to-date version of the Middle-Ages.

Even the most controversial thoughts they'd be encouraged to think, were suspiciously promoted by an important part of society, and there was little value in re-

producing and presenting them as if they had any originality. Very few people, however, could see this.

D, who had gathered a group of teenage versions of A, was teaching them the godlessness of the universe, the random meaningless universe in which, he taught, they would only be happy if they saw its randomness and its meaninglessness.

He recited Nietzsche to support his argument: “If there were gods, how could I tolerate not to be a god! Therefore, there are no gods.”

“Do you believe this?” said F. “Is this how we really choose our beliefs?”

“If I can’t dream, there are no dreams!” shouted C who had been listening to D’s speech, forcing a war cry that had the sense of triumph.

That was helpful, thought A. He stood up and everybody stopped talking and looked at him. The oldest man in the room, the most mature of the Thoughts, though not necessarily the truest, he was the first and the last, and the source of them all.

“That’s how it is, then,” he said and coughed, as if he was sick. He was. The old man was but a step away from his death, and this made his time more precious than theirs. “We don’t choose our beliefs based on what makes sense to us. Instead, we choose what makes sense to us based on what we *want* to believe.”

That made sense, thought everyone.

“People dream of a society that’s good for them, or the group of people in which they belong. Thus, we have scientific utopias, religious utopias, feminist utopias, hippie utopias, etcetera! No-one ever attempts to consider that the True Utopia may not be the fulfilment of their personal ambitions and unsatisfied needs, but that it may not even include them! You know the problem with the pseudo-utopians, whose dreaming is thought-masturbation? That though they want a new world, they want to keep the old self. But how can you see Utopia, unless you become a Utopia yourself?”

After the pause that followed, and after having confirmed that A had indeed made his point, people resumed their earlier conversations, adding new, more or less, commonplace concepts, such as “the painter must become the painting”, art for art’s sake, utopianism for utopianism’s sake, and so on.

In his refreshed despair, A collapsed under the recurring noise, and put his hands on his chest, as if trying to hold his breath from running away or, worse, from running amok in there.

He shouted “Silence!” but there was none. He shouted a second time and a third and then he closed his eyes, and wished it was a dream, and opened them again, and looked around, and saw that either it wasn’t, or if it was, it wouldn’t go away.

5

Eventually, it got late and more and more of his fellow Zen painters gave up hope and left. There was some silence again during which an exotic beauty, a woman in red bearing a face of her own and not a version of his face, entered the room.

“Hello, my heart” said everyone.

His Heart sat on A’s lap and kissed him on his cheek and his cheek turned red. She then got up and walked slowly to the big white wall. He realised she was weak, half-formed. A broken heart, he thought. Not too broken, but still...

She threw herself on the wall and her body melted on the picture. The wall was now red as the woman disappeared inside it. Was Utopia red? That was also debateable.

Some understood that a Red Utopia meant a bloody one, one that required bloodshed to be created or to be maintained, others that it meant a Communist Utopia, a society founded under the sun of equality, and others that the colour red was the colour of love, and that all Utopia needed was love.

But all these were debatable, some of the plans too simplistic to be taken seriously, others too complicated to be used for anything other than academic self-satisfaction and thought-recycling.

The last thing the painter could remember from the dream was a picture being formed all by itself on the wall. The Great Ego Utopia, a third-dimensional asshole emerging from the frame, and this was the gate to the selfish utopia, where common desires and pop culture ruled.

He refused to enter the gate to the modern Dark Age which promoted itself as the fulfilment of mankind’s future, but was nothing but mankind’s primitive past made digital reality.

He woke up in the big white room of eternal silence, where his thoughts were loud enough to take their own formation and come to life. But he had succeeded in his dreams and meditations to silence them all and was now literally on his own, in front of the finished painting which he named “Utopia Zen.”

It was his magnum opus, a painting of no colours, a big blank paper, on an empty wall, in an empty room. It was his dream come true and the gate of his dreams was now wide open in the wall, and he would enter and depart.

The time came when people worried and started looking for him. They found his clothes in the white room. His body was not found.

Chapter Four

Commentary on the second group of stories, 'Utopia and Aesthetics'

In the second group of stories, as in the third, and in order to develop a better understanding of Etherotopia, I am mostly concerned with what Etherotopia *is not*. The logic of this methodology is described by Theodor Adorno who argues that:

Falsum – the false thing – index sui. That means that the true thing determines itself via the false thing, or via that which makes itself falsely known. And insofar as we do not know what the correct thing would be, we know exactly, to be sure, what the false thing is. This is actually the only form in which utopia is given to us at all.¹⁰⁴

In the following group of stories, this perspective is explored through the relationship between utopianism and aesthetics. With the exception of the utopian 'Martian Arts' – in which the Martian society of Spartathena is an allegory of an Etherotopian culture – the others are pessimistic dystopias in which the problematic aesthetics create or sustain the dystopia. Miriam Eliav-Feldon describes the relationship between utopia and aesthetics thus:

Utopias are written by intellectuals who are sensitive to the misery of this world. A utopia is an expression of malaise, though rarely that arising from personal suffering, but rather from aesthetic discontent in view of squalor, corruption, disorder, and disharmony.¹⁰⁵

In that sense, the stories here are connected through the main character's rejection of their own society and culture. In these four stories, this is presented as an escape; John Fallacy in 'Cannibal Popular' escapes from the society of his fellow cannibals (which he had originally helped create); in 'The War of Appearances', Romeo abandons both the society of the orcs and that of the elves and becomes a monk; in 'Martian Arts', the spy of the moon-people gives up his mission and stays in Mars with the Spartathenians; finally, in the absurdist dystopian 'The Way to Dante', the writer Timothy Komph dismisses the culture of his times, as well as his own work, and dives into the piles of garbage made of books from the forgotten past in search of works by Dostoyevsky, Plato and Dante.

¹⁰⁴ Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ Miriam Eliav-Feldon, *Realistic Utopias*, 2.

Each of these stories offers its own contribution to my analysis of Etherotopia, both creatively – as a work of creative writing – and philosophically. First of all, the idea of how the majorities adopt a new opinion is explored in ‘Cannibal Popular’ where cannibalism starts as an unacceptable vice and ends up a totally acceptance and even everyday phenomenon, ultimately causing the end of humanity. The story is told backwards, which – apart from a literary device – demonstrates the idea that what the majorities understand as cultural progress might well be the opposite in reality. Finally, the story starts with a quote from Hitler regarding his ‘big lie’ which history has proven to be a successful propaganda technique; the idea is simply that the majorities are more easily convinced by a big lie than a small one, because they cannot as easily accept that someone would lie about major issues. The quote is used in the story in order to encourage doubt in ideas that are popular in the time of the reader; in the story, cannibalism has become a popular lifestyle while the parallel is drawn between cannibalism and Nazism, also thanks to the use of the quote.

‘The War of Appearances’ takes these concepts further. In this story, the war between orcs and elves is a bloodless war of aesthetics, where in a seemingly peaceful society, the elves are eventually transformed into orcs, because they come to adopt their neighbours’ tastes and values. Furthermore, these aesthetics are basically anti-Etherotopian; the egotistic, materialist orcs who find pleasure in deceiving and being deceived, in hurting and being hurt are in a constant anti-utopian state of mind, and in that sense they are anti-Etherotopian.

The above story, for instance, through the negation of the values of the orcish society, reveals certain qualities of Etherotopia; the difference between a utopia of non-utopians and a utopia of utopians is that the first are unable to tell whether their utopia is satisfying them or deceiving them, while in a utopia that consists of people who have achieved a utopian state of mind or utopian perception, the utopian vision is not limited to the direct satisfaction of the senses and necessarily has a non-materialist aspect. The idea that non-utopian minds see deception as a means to happiness is part of the dystopian orcish aesthetics. In the story, an orc magician is selling emotions to children: ‘A kid would order *a portion of fear* for instance, while a teenager would buy some *adult pleasure*. The magician touched their forehead with a sceptre and they were filled with the sensation ordered.’ The same idea is the focus of the story ‘The New Emotion’ but presented in a science-fictional way rather than through fantasy.

‘Martian Arts’, though part of the same discussion, is different from most previous stories in that it has a good ending and explores comparisons between three

utopian fantasies: a group of actors from Earth who have achieved transcendence through theatrical performance, a group of Martian martial artists who have achieved an even higher transcendence through their training and a group of other Martians who have combined martial arts and theatre to become truly spiritual beings, to achieve in other words a utopian state of mind. The last group of Martians forms the society of Spartathena whose name is a combination of the words Sparta and Athens, and implies that these alien beings combine the qualities of both the archetype of the Spartan warrior and that of the Athenian actor. In that sense, the better utopia in the story suggests an emphasis of both body and spirit, and therefore explores a non-materialist worldview and aesthetics without dismissing physical development.

‘Martian Arts’ reveals another aspect of Etherotopia, the idea that the utopian mindset of an Etherotopian would include an emphasis on the arts and on a healthy body. The representative of the Spartathenians is Apollodion, the story’s Übermensch or superhuman. Combining the best aspects of the human and Martian cultures, he is a science fictional version of the utopian personality that perhaps the Ancient Greek Diogenes would have wanted. In *Utopias of the Classical World*, John Ferguson writes of Diogenes:

(...) Diogenes’ contribution to educational theory lay in saying that the sole, or almost the sole purpose of education was the training of the character, not to serve the community physically (like the Spartans), nor intellectually (like Plato’s Guardians), but so that the individual might stand on his own feet before God and man. His aim was the self-sufficiency of the individual. This was a task which sound education could accomplish. (...) This education consisted of two parts, mental leading to self-knowledge, and physical leading to self-control. Either half of the training was incomplete without the other.¹⁰⁶

This is exactly the point of ‘Martian Arts’. In accordance to what Diogenes would have wanted, the education of the Spartathenians focuses on physical and intellectual training (as well as the involvement of every single citizen in the arts) to ensure that each citizen of utopia has the best physical and mental condition he or she could possibly have. This inevitably leads to the best possible society, as it consists of individuals who have achieved the best possible body and mind.

The story features a dystopia as well however, though only in the background. The society of the moon-people to whom the narrator belongs is the only society in the

¹⁰⁶ Ferguson, John, *Utopias of the Classical World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 93.

story in which wealth matters. The narrator informs the reader that there are no theatres there and also that, when he visited Samuria, he was originally ‘disappointed by the total lack of luxury’ being a moon-citizen, though he later changes his mind.

There is an underlying anti-capitalism in these stories, though the criticism is mainly on the aesthetics of that system, be it the consumer culture, the entertainment industry or the materialist worldview that, in my view, sustains it; I return to this idea and explore it in more depth in the last story, ‘Phantom Jesus’.

The last story of this group is ‘The Way to Dante’, where the main character, Timothy Komph, revolts against the dystopia he’s part of by rejecting modern books that are so massively produced they fill the streets (it is an absurdist story), and by diving into the piles of old books, burning the latest ones, he reaches the books of Dostoyevsky, Plato and, indeed, Dante.

One of the reasons for this retreat to the classics – which costs him his life as he’s buried and eventually suffocates under vast numbers of books – is that in this futuristic scenario, writers have their books composed by computer programmes and, since people don’t even have the monopoly on producing intellectual work, Timothy feels useless which is what leads him to his suicide mission. The aesthetical conflict here is not between the old and the new, the classical and the modern, but between a culture which values creative work for its essence and one where creative work is produced massively for profit, let alone that is mainly produced by computers. The question is not whether this is a plausible futuristic scenario but that what motivates the creation of intellectual and artistic work is related to the worldview that each social system requires for a system to be maintained. It follows that art and education in a system that is founded on altruist values must be of a different quality than in a system in which individual profit is in conflict with the well-being of society or of other individuals; the reason being that an individual’s priorities and motivations are directly related to that individual’s beliefs and aesthetics; this is another reason why one of the central arguments behind Etherotopia is the need for a theory that is built around the idea of a utopian individual and the state of mind of that individual.

Portfolio, Part II
‘Utopia and Aesthetics’

Cannibal Popular

“The broad masses (...) more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie (...). It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.”

Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*

2050

The last man on Earth ate the remains of the second last ritually and with respect. He cried. They used to be friends.

2047

Former cannibal rights activist, Sir John Fallacy, was worried that society had become too open-minded for its own good. In the midst of the civil war, he fled along with his likeminded companions. On the way home, he held his best friend’s hand and promised him he had converted to vegetarianism.

2045

“My fellow citizens, we have finally made our dreams come true! We have rid the world of everyone who is not like us! Never again shall we face the prejudice and hatred of those who don’t understand us! My fellow cannibals, all people are now cannibals! No-one will judge you anymore!”

The only person who didn’t cheer in support of the president was Fallacy. Instead he left the place quietly before the president finished his speech. Behind him, the faces in the crowd looked rather merry, as if hypnotised by the president’s voice.

“Yet not only our wildest dreams have come true,” continued the president, “but our nightmares also. Because now that there are no more non-cannibals to eat, we have no choice but to start feeding on each other...”

2042

Official-Story doubter, vegetarian, and terrorist Guy Normal was sentenced to Death by Consumption – that is, being thrown to the angry mob and eaten alive – as a

penalty for the assassination attempt of President Blood. During Normal's execution, the president announced that the only way to put an end to anti-cannibal racism was to eliminate all remaining non-cannibals.

2040

"I'm afraid the only solution to overpopulation is the open practice of homicidal cannibalism," wrote John in his notebook. "Nowadays, cannibalism is practiced in public view and society accepts it as everyday reality. The ancient tradition of burial has been replaced by a ritualistic consumption of the dead. A good number of hate groups remain active though: anti-non-cannibal hate groups that claim to have been created in response to anti-cannibal hate groups, though these have mostly been extinct and are discredited by the media either way. I am sceptical of how the government deals with this issue, though I do not lose hope."

Fallacy's diary was found among his other documents and he was instantly taken to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with Anthropophagophobia or "unjustified prejudice against cannibal people and their practices." The doctors let him go when they realised who he was, but they confiscated the manuscript.

2037

The first cannibal president was elected. Harvey Blood declared, in a rather moving speech: "Cannibalism should be acceptable by all, as it had been in ancient cultures, as it will undoubtedly be in the societies of the future. There's no reason for us cannibals to hide anymore. We are here, we've always been, and whatever our enemies do to stop us, we will continue to be!"

The world celebrated with him. Since Blood became president, cannibalism was officially no longer a crime or a taboo. That day was named the International Day Against Anthropophagophobia.

2031

Fallacy was finally released from prison. By then, the long series of films, novels and documentaries depicting important historical and religious figures as cannibals had convinced public opinion to be tolerant to the idea of cannibalism. Fallacy was welcomed as the representative of a long-oppressed and misunderstood minority. Even his haters saw him as a victim rather than as a threat, as someone who was ill, confused or "lost".

“Praised be Jesus who taught us to eat man flesh!” he shouted once outside the prison. This statement was met with little controversy. Everything was going as if according to a plan.

2029

Crypto-cannibal and history professor of the University of Hoaxford, Kostas Poulos published his book “Cannibalism in Ancient Greece”. Later in the same year, and inspired by such pro-cannibal propaganda, the pseudo-historical novel “Achilles the Man-Eater” was released, in which Achilles was portrayed as feasting on the corpse of his friend Patroclus. Answering to accusations such as “you monsters are changing history!” the writer denied being a cannibal instead of answering to the second part of the sentence.

2026

In prison, Fallacy wrote the first cannibal utopia. The only kind of cannibalism allowed in his fictional society was to be necro-cannibalism, as in “eating only the already dead.” Homicidal cannibalism, which meant to kill in order to eat, would be punishable by death. Fallacy argued it’d be a peaceful society where cannibals and non-cannibals could live together in harmony. Plus, no need for graveyards. “There is no doubt,” he wrote, “that the society of the future will accept cannibalism, as it is already familiarising people with the idea through films and video games in which such acts are being featured.”

His novel was published while he was still in prison and became a best-seller.

2022

Sir John Fallacy, a best-selling writer of children’s fiction, revealed on public TV that he was a cannibal. His statement was received with scepticism, until he bit the ear off his interviewer and swallowed it. “We are a minority,” he protested to the shocked audience before anyone realised what had actually happened. “We have the right to practice our ways, and you have the obligation to accept us! We will reject those who don’t accept us! We will fight discrimination with every means we have!”

The War of Appearances

Romeo and Juliet couldn't be together anymore. She wasn't prepared to accept what he was becoming. None of the elves was.

He left her without saying goodbye as if he didn't want to, or couldn't. She was lying on the red sofa next to the window, her beauty crushed under the sight of the city. At this time of the night, the streets were empty, with the exception of some forest animals here and there, and the occasional night owl on the lookout for prey. Romeo shut the golden gate behind him and walked the street that led to roads less hospitable near the city centre.

Unsure of where he was heading, he avoided the places that felt familiar, taking all the wrong turns, as if wanting to get lost.

Past the centre now, and by the moonlit road, his eyes met a misshapen orc junkie lying half-asleep half-dead on the pavement, hunted by demons of addiction, his colourless body trembling in the cold. On his cheek he had a deep scar from some gang war he had fought in his youth.

Romeo had never seen this area before. He had been with elves all his life, since his orc mother abandoned him by the golden gate. The baby's resemblance to his elven father had left her without choice, since that child of two species could be easily mistaken for an elf. And indeed, handsome Romeo seemed to have no place among orcs and only recently, in his early twenties, he had begun to behave like one.

In the end, the world of his father denied him. His wife left him and Romeo was too vulnerable to take any more pain. The shock he felt from seeing the poor orc in such condition hit him like a deadly blow. The violence of this image!

The orc's pale face drew him closer; he felt the need to help this creature, to carry him on his shoulders as if the orc's burden was his own. Instead, when he brought his gentle eyes closer to the orc's, his hands held the orcish face and his knee crushed it, and he repeated this action until the creature dropped dead next to his feet, shattered under the pressure of Romeo's unwanted memories.

As soon as he realised what he had done, he felt a hatred for himself, an entirely new feeling that added to his already painful existence. Hoping no-one would notice or care, he left the body on the street where he had found it – its empty eyes hidden well from public view as, in his fury, he had forced the face into the mud – and started running under the hope-crushing moonlight, as fast as he could, having killed something inside him that had long begged him to be spared.

#

In the morning, he was uglier.

His body was a stranger to him, his elven face betrayed by its orcish eyes. He realised why he had lost his right to be among elves. He was confused but having murdered a stranger out of rage was sufficient proof he was turning into a monster.

As the rising sun burned his back, stretching the shadows of the city above him, he heard the steps of crowds in the distance, a sign that the city was awaking.

He saw an old man crossing the bridge, coming from the woods beyond the city. A bunch of orc children ran behind him, playing war with their wooden swords and water pistols. On the nearby shore, a naked orcish woman fell on the sand, jumping from the pavement.

Two male ones followed, the only uglier than the other but both strong and armed. The one held a whip, the other – a policeman – had iron shoulder armour and a police torture-knife. They seemed as if they were about to violate the woman, but it turned out to be rape-play, a practice common among the orcs.

“It fills you with ugly emotions, doesn’t it? Orcish ones. Don’t stare!”

The voice soothed him. For a moment he thought he’d keep watching, even join the game. The more time he spent there, the more powerful the orc within him grew. This rape-game would seem horrible if filtered through the beliefs and moral system of an elf, but an orc would argue it’s all about pleasure and pain. For some reason, it didn’t feel as wrong as it should.

“Didn’t you hear what I said? It’s not safe to look!”

A hand grabbed his shoulder and Romeo turned. It was the old man, holding a beggar’s bowl, his face covered under a hood, his fingernails eternal, like bone fingers on his flesh fingers, his skin the darkest green that nature could provide.

“What do you want, old man?”

“You shouldn’t be here, elf! Leave at once!”

“But I belong here, I’m not an elf... Not entirely...”

The sound of gunfire scattered his thoughts. He hadn’t heard such a sound in years. His attention was captured by a fat winged red-feathered creature that dropped dead in the river. Orc hunters went after it.

“I know who you are, fool,” said the beggar. “Don’t you see you’re in danger? You must escape while you can!”

“Escape from what?”

“Everything,” replied the beggar.

His eyes were still fixed on the hunters, now fighting over the dead bird. One of its heads had been struck by an arrow, so the orc with the gun was arguing with the bowmen about what had killed it. He could also see that orc with the whip flogging his companions who were enjoying it. This time Romeo didn't stare. He didn't want to see what'd happen when the police-orc would draw his knife.

Romeo looked at the old man instead who, as it turned out, was blind. He wanted to comment on that, curious as the beggar seemed to have no trouble moving around the busy streets. But before he said a thing, he heard a noise so loud that both he and the old man covered their ears. It evolved into a symphony of brutality. It was orcish music from across the street.

"For God's sake, protect yourself!" shouted the beggar. "We are surrounded, all surrounded!"

He dropped his bowl and ran to the bridge. He was clearly not a resident of the city. Trying to catch him, Romeo almost fell on a human pet that an orc hunchback was taking for a walk. The elven government had permitted orcs to keep such pets, among the other monstrosities it allowed, since it followed a "live and let live" policy to keep the orcs from rebelling.

Most of these things Romeo had never seen as the elves avoided the orcs' side of the city, like the orcs avoided theirs. But both communities knew what the other's culture was, and had been tolerating each other to avoid warfare.

Romeo followed the old man across the river and beyond the forest, until he lost him near the ruins of the ancient temple. Romeo noticed a hut to the north of there and guessed it was the old man's house.

The door was open. It shut behind him when he entered; the only light in the windowless hut came from a magic fire dancing on a rock. Upon seeing this independent flame, Romeo thought the old man a wizard, one who had long ago detached himself from the orcish community.

"I come and go as a beggar in disguise, but do you think I live as one?" said the orc. "My name is Oedipus, some call me Oedipus the Wise, but most choose to ignore me, if only because I come and go as a beggar."

"But are you...?"

"Really blind?" said Oedipus, having read his thoughts. "My eyes, not me. I once realised they kept me from seeing the truly beautiful things, and took them off with needles. But that's none of your concern. There is a war going on and you must flee before it gets to you."

“A war? What do you mean, old man?”

“Ah, you’re confused. Who wouldn’t be? I know you killed an orc yesterday but you mustn’t let this trouble your mind.”

Romeo didn’t reply. He looked at Oedipus plucking the feathers off a two-headed bird. In his amazement he noticed there was an arrow coming out of one of its eyes.

“Don’t be distracted by this. There’s a war going on and the people you love will perish in it. Practically, the orcs have already won and are waiting for the elves to realise.”

“What are you saying? Are the orcs preparing for war?”

“*Preparing?* Haven’t you seen it happen? When you murdered that orc you barely knew? When you enjoyed watching the orc sadists violate each other? And you saw the children with toy weapons, taking pleasure in performing murder. What about the elves who so un-elvishly denounced one of their own, something that hadn’t happened in their entire history? You still don’t see the war?”

“But no-one’s fighting!” said Romeo.

“Think! When I punch you, who I do I hit?”

“Me.”

“But I hit your shoulder.”

“But *I* feel the pain.”

“So when I make a disgusting sound or show you a cruel picture that upsets your stomach, who do I hit? Through the stomach? Who feels hurt?”

Romeo was upset. So many things going on in his head and the fire dance was seducing his attention, as was the horrible sight of the dead bird he could swear was the same the hunters were fighting over.

“Why did you kill the orc? Your fellow orc! Think! You felt pity, right? But you also felt bad inside, the image made you feel bad, its appearance attacked you, like a noisy sound punches the ear, like a bad smell...”

“It was headache. The pain in my head was intolerable, I wanted it to stop!”

“You say you don’t see fighting? But a sight that upsets your stomach is fighting, noise is fighting! It’s a war of appearances, impressions. They don’t aim for your senses but for you who senses. Like a knife or an arrow aims for *you*, though it seems to go for the body. Close your eyes. Can you see it now, the invisible war?”

All Romeo saw was that isolation was driving the monk insane.

“You mentioned my loved ones are doomed. How exactly are the orcs’ rape-games and pop music and fart jokes threatening the safety of the elves?”

“But don’t you see? Your dear Juliet, an early victim of the war. Yesterday night, after you left, she was murdered.”

“How?” asked Romeo, unconvinced.

“She drank poison,” replied the monk.

“But you just said she was murdered!”

“She was, you killed her. But it wasn’t your fault, you were in defence. It’s... complicated.”

Romeo had no doubt the monk was mad. He made sure his blade was still in its scabbard, and got up impatiently, his one hand on the sword’s hilt, the other searching on the wall for a door. To his surprise, the monk didn’t stop him. Only after Romeo found the door and opened it, he heard the monk’s voice asking in an unexpectedly friendly tone:

“Aren’t you staying for dinner?”

#

He slept on the shore in some distance from a corpse. He recognised it as one of the two sadists who must have died from either too much pain or too much pleasure. His face was missing and from those scars Romeo concluded that cannibalism was part of the orc’s sexual life. It seemed a rather peaceful corpse, yet the sight of it was violent enough to make him vomit.

He decided the mad monk was right about one thing: that he should escape from this nightmare. He started walking back to the elven community. The orcs ignored him because, though he knew they found his golden hair and soft-skin ugly, it was safer for them not to provoke the elves. They followed a “live and let live” policy too. Besides, they didn’t care.

When Romeo reached the centre of the city, where the paths of elves and orcs crossed and members of both worlds engaged in brief dialogue, even joked when the atmosphere was friendly, he saw something he had only heard of before.

An orc magician entertained the young orcs, selling them – weird as it may sound – emotions. A kid would order *a portion of fear* for instance, while a teenager would buy some *adult pleasure*. The magician touched their forehead with a sceptre and they were filled with the sensation ordered.

Romeo found this merchandising of emotion revolting, but he remembered the movies the elves would see at the cinema and thought it was the same thing. That he

would pay to be amazed or scared or moved to tears, like one of these children or the orc junkie he had seen the other day, dying out of overdose of emotion-products, made him furious.

In all his fury, he was pleasantly surprised when he saw familiar faces on the street, elves who didn't seem as happy to see him. Had he looked in a mirror that morning, he'd know his face was by now almost completely orcish, even though he was still recognisable as Romeo the elf.

When he finally reached the golden gate, he demanded to see Juliet. He drew his sword when the guards refused, then punched one of them and broke into Juliet's house, only to find her in the arms of another elf. As soon as the new lover saw the old one with the sword, he fled without a second thought.

Juliet, on the other hand, was a frozen statue, her eyes empty as the clear sky.

"It hurts to even look at your face," said Romeo.

"Likewise," she whispered.

Romeo recalled what the monk had said about Juliet being dead. He felt like taking revenge for the emotions she had inspired him, but paused to think why he felt this. Hadn't the sight of her in the arms of another hurt him much more than a punch or a kick in the stomach? Wasn't this *violence*?

He brought his blade to her face. She cried and held her face as if hiding it would stop him.

"Don't worry, your image only hurts temporally," he said. "Your hatred hurts forever."

"Likewise," she said.

At this point, having understood the nature of the war, he left Juliet and ran, past the golden gate and across the elven part of the city and the orcish, beyond the bridge and past the ruins. He found the hut empty, no sign that anyone lived there. It was *his* home now, he decided.

Indeed it was. Romeo spent the rest of his life there as a monk. During the years that followed, he observed the war that led to the genocide of the elves. It began as cultural warfare, then psychological. When the orcishisation of the city was complete, there was no sign that elves ever existed. One by one every generation was absorbed by orcish culture, preferring the orchish ways over the elven traditions. Romeo never returned to the city, afraid that if he would, he'd most certainly fall victim to some unhealthy sight or sound or other such painful sensation during the war of appearances.

Martian Arts

It was my first time on a spaceship which, I understand, is unusual for a person of my age. But travelling was never part of my training and I'd never been to any planet other than my own before, unlike most of my people. I didn't particularly like the look of Earth from my window and was glad it wasn't our final destination. We didn't have permission to land anyway. We were supposed to escort a touring company of earth-actors to a location which was not revealed to me at the time. As if I didn't know that the greatest theatres of our universe were on Mars!

Only when the actors boarded the ship were my suspicions confirmed, as the captain gave me new instructions regarding my mission. I saved the data I was given and went to the spaceship's living room to mingle with the humans of Earth who, as I had been taught to think, were inferior to my people in everything but the appearance.

I had enough information about each and every one of them already. There were seven actors, four men and three women, one of whom was also the director and I had no idea who the writer was, but the script had already been approved by my superiors as "politically harmless" and so it didn't matter. I was supposed to welcome them as soon as they were on board. We would depart for Mars right after, but first I had to make sure they were safe and ready to go.

"And who are you?" I was asked the moment I entered the room. Everyone's eyes were fixed on me, as if I was an alien to them and not a fellow human. I feared a predictable conversation. I had heard that when people of Earth met my people, they'd argue "we are the original" and my people would reply "we are the advanced" and usually the entire dialogue would be about what was more important, being original or being advanced... Truth of course is neither was advanced or original, the earthlings were simply living on the planet of their ancestors and we were only technologically advanced or "entirely dependent on technology" as earth-people would say. Yet these were actors, they were supposed to think non-conventionally and I expected them to be entertaining at least.

"I am one of the advanced," I told them without any originality, hoping they would provide some.

"Are you an actor too?" joked the same man who had spoken before. He couldn't be serious. He knew there were no theatres on the moon but wanted to know more about me. On my behalf, I wasn't going to reveal my identity.

“No, I’m just the guard” I said. That wasn’t entirely false, keeping them safe was indeed part of my mission. The truth of course was that I was a spy. “Tell me then, how’s Earth these days?” I asked to keep the conversation going and, well, maybe out of curiosity too.

“Same as it was before we were born, same as it will be after we die,” replied one of the women in a serious, dramatic tone. It was a typical earthling’s response, always reminding each other the fact that under the current circumstances, no revolution was possible, and so, no progress either. This kind of talk inspired mixed feelings to us moon-people. On the one hand, we felt anger that the earth-people would never accept being slaves to us; on the other, we felt satisfaction in that they had limited their protesting to purely wordy, if often artistic, expression. Not that they had much choice.

“I have never been to Earth myself” I confessed. “I’ve seen pictures, heard stories. I’ve heard it’s Hell. From up there,” I pointed at the direction of the moon, “that’s certainly how it looks.”

I didn’t expect much reaction, let alone a fight. Earthlings were known to be tolerable with my kind, though if anyone was to blame for Earth’s degradation to a living hell, it was my kind and my kind only. As everyone knows, when all the rich-people moved to the moon – as only billionaires could afford the journey – the poor did nothing to stop them, but instead encouraged this extravagance, taking some pride themselves in mankind’s “conquest of the moon”, not realising yet this was a mankind that didn’t include them.

Back to the spaceship, the actors had turned to the living room’s round window, watching the increasingly small globe in the distance. I thought they had stopped paying attention to me and were absorbed in unfamiliar emotions of nostalgia and homesickness. Then the oldest of them turned to me with tears in his eyes and said passionately – as if my words had hurt him – “I know it’s Hell. But it could be different. I promise you it could be different.”

#

I had found the actors too peculiar a species for my taste and avoided interfering with them for most of the journey, particularly after listening to them copulating in the living room while I was in my room next door, planning my short stay on Mars. I would like to think there were only two of them in the living room during the sex incident, but I could claim with some certainty that I had heard more than two different voices screaming, at which point I simply stopped listening.

We were less than five hours away from our destination when I returned to the now quiet living room only to find it empty with the exception of one half-naked woman lying on the floor by my door. It was the director. She wasn't old, but she looked experienced. Not much older than me, probably something like thirty but then again you never know, earth-people always look younger than they are.

I had accidentally stepped on her golden hair – the colour of rusty gold, to be precise – and in my absent-mindedness, hadn't yet realised I was supposed to move and let her hair free from my iron boot. She didn't seem to notice either.

“Are we there yet?” she said childishly, a sign of wisdom.

“Nearly,” I replied. “Were you having sex with the others?”

“Nearly,” she replied. “We were rehearsing for tomorrow's performance.”

I must have misunderstood them, I thought. That would explain it. They were obviously not having group sex in the living room of a spaceship knowing there was a moon-person next door, and another one on the floor above, the captain. I noticed the unfortunate location of my boot and, blushing with shame, I helped the woman get up on her feet and led her to one of the sofas. I sat next to her.

“You were rehearsing pretty... vividly,” I observed. “Are you looking forward to the festival? I take it it's a pretty big event.”

“Are you kidding?” she replied with a laugh. “It's the first Intergalactic Theatre Festival, and we were lucky enough to be invited to perform. It's probably the biggest thing that will ever happen in our lives.”

I faked a smile and tried to extract more information. The only thing I needed to know before we landed was what they were hoping to get out of it, a question to which she replied without hesitation.

“Transcendence”, she said.

I was puzzled. What sort of transcendence I meant to ask but didn't. It sounded to me as if she had meant “pleasure” or some equally base earthly sensation. At this point I asked myself what was it that theatre people were trying to achieve on stage, but this sort of activity was always alien to me and I could think of no answer. Yet as much as I liked to discuss theatre with this earth-woman, I could not help but stare at her exposed flesh and feel emotions unpopular in my society of the moon.

She noticed my effort to repress my lust but did not respect it. Instead, she touched my lips and with serpent-like movements rode my body, forcing me to make love to her on that sofa. I don't know how long it took me to get back to my senses after that unfortunate incident, but when I did, I was alone.

#

It was morning on Mars when we landed on the desert above the underground city of Samuria, the planet's capital. We were invited to spend the day there, and received a warm welcome as guests of honour. I enjoyed the welcoming but must admit as a moon-citizen I was disappointed by the total lack of luxury. The Samurians were highly-disciplined people who felt contempt at everything unnecessary, thus they would not even tolerate such concepts as hobby or jewellery, and I'm thinking they would protest at the view of a TV or any other "mass entertainment technology" that's used on Earth to keep the enslaved population happy. Strangely enough, the Samurians behaved like a military people, which contradicted their peaceful nature. I'm quite sure they hadn't waged a single war in their entire history, though I'm just as certain they'd be worthy opponents to anyone who would dare attack their planet.

Light was a luxury too in their underground city but they were willing to provide some for us, because they knew we couldn't do without it. I spent most of my day in the hotel – if I could call this cave-like guesthouse a hotel – where I was invited to be the audience to the final rehearsal of my neighbours from Earth. That being said, I didn't get the chance to see much of Samuria, nor was such sightseeing part of my mission. Anyhow, I remember being strongly discouraged by my superiors to expose myself to any of the Martian cultures, so I limited my activities to the hotel-cave and found a comfortable bed to have some rest on before the rehearsal started.

At first I didn't understand much of what was going on. The actors looked like they were forcing themselves to a genderless model of behaviour which didn't quite work, and the men looked ridiculous next to the women, the first dressed in feminine costumes, the second barely dressed at all. And when they started barking and squawking like animals, attempting a pan-orgasmic chorus, I began wondering what impression the theatre of Earth would make to the culturally superior Martians.

Then I realised – with some horror, I must admit – that the sex scenes they were rehearsing were too realistically performed to count as theatre or acting. These people were actually having group sex as part of their show – or, should I say, group sex *was* their show. Normally, I would find this rather uninspired, but such was the variety of sexual activities that took place before my eyes, that I had to take my upset stomach and mind elsewhere and quickly too.

I walked fast on the dark street, moving carefully in the shadows, hoping some Martian would notice I was there and grant me some light. But I was interrupted by a soft voice which warned me I shouldn't wander alone in the dark, and then saw before

me – as a new light force had come from nowhere to light my way – a Martian child in training clothes, exercising its advanced acrobatics in a dangerous rocky pathway that led to greater depths of the planet.

I was stunned by the child’s ability to produce light at will, as well as his knowledge of my language – or was it able to read my mind? I never learned – and saluted this younger but higher existence with admiration. The child talked to me of a number of Martian ideas, most of which I could describe as practical yet metaphysical and others I could not comprehend at all. The child explained for example how every citizen of Samuria was an expert in the fighting arts, such as “the Empty Hand” and the “Empty (would we call it open?) Mind”, yet I could not understand either concept. I would like to have learned more and the child was eager to teach me, but the time had passed and one of the actresses – the one who had seduced me in the spaceship – called my name and I was guided back to the cave, where a group of Martians were waiting to take us to our final destination.

In brief, what I had learned about the Samurians was that these people used martial arts’ philosophy in everything they did and by martial I mean martial not martian, though etymologically I take it that both terms derive from the same source.

#

Back to the surface I learned that our new escorts were experienced Samurian fighter-dancers who would come with us all the way to the festival to take part in it themselves. “We’re going to dance War,” one of them explained. “The body expresses itself and attains perfection through our fighting methods which are indistinguishable from dancing. Trust me, when you see it, you won’t know how to call it.”

A desert ship – common Martian transport – took us after a many-hour ride to the surface-city of Spartathena, the most mysterious – some would rather say “sacred” – place in the known universe, which opened its doors to non-Martians for the first time in light of the festival. When I say “its doors”, I’m speaking metaphorically. There was no such thing as a door in any Martian city, and in Spartathena there were hardly any buildings either. But I will avoid describing the city, and will focus on narrating what actually took place there.

At this point, I should add that my mission as a spy of the moon government was to uncover the great secret of the Spartathenians who had succeeded in controlling matter to superhuman extent and – what’s more important – without the use of technology. They were known, in fact, to have reached the most advanced stage of civilisation in the universe without having anything that could be called a “science.”

How I was to retrieve such information I was not instructed, and any method would be approved, including the kidnapping of a sample – a Spartathenian taking part in the festival, for instance, would be ideal – but of course there had to be more reasonable ways.

In the beginning, the Spartathenians seemed very similar to the Samurians, though they were very different “inside.” What made all the difference was in their performance. Their leader – a more accurate title would be the Highest among them – was a tall blonde man called Apollodion, who looked much like a man of Earth, despite his elegant manners. He was organising the festival and was going to participate himself, after his guests.

We had arrived just in time for the opening ceremony which was too humble, I thought, for such a big event. Or it could be the case that our arrival was part of the opening ceremony, if not the whole of it. Either way, I caught myself looking for the seductress from Earth, who was treated with much more respect than I, had joined the rest of her group already and was led to the stage in a hurry. I noticed everything was perfectly organised, yet I saw no sign of technology – not to my surprise – and last but not least, I thought I saw two Martians watching me, as if waiting for me to make my move. I could swear they could read my mind all at once, as if it was a computer file.

Up to this point, my time in Spartathena felt as if I was doing time in prison. The locals obviously didn't trust me, partly because I wasn't an artist, but mainly because I was from the Moon. They had this crazy idea that since I was living on the moon, I must be working for the Government – which was true, of course, but they weren't supposed to know.

I did my best to play it innocent and pretended I was but a supporter of the earth-actors, though the Martians of Spartathena didn't let me go anywhere near the dressing rooms – or wherever it was they were getting ready. Instead, I was encouraged to join the audience, most of the members of which were standing barefoot on the red desert.

The beginning of the festival was all music, nothing visual, and as a human I found it hard to enjoy. The steady tempo of a drum beat was, I would swear, the only thing that could be heard in the entire planet. I wanted to scream. I wanted to move. I wanted someone to do something – it was unbearable! Then, suddenly, I found the monotony of it relaxing. I felt I was insane, switching from the one mood to the next so abruptly. Then I thought of my mission. Nothing extraordinary had happened yet, so I had to wait. A spy must always wait.

When the beating of the drum-like instrument finally stopped, the actors from Earth came to an opening at the centre of the crowd which was supposed to be their stage. A bit insecure at first, they began performing. The members of the audience were watching with great interest, as if they were taking part in a ritual. But when the daring earth-actors performed their more extreme scenes that were meant to shock – or perhaps to entertain the oversexed population of Earth – most of the audience simply laughed. And when she – the director, who was also the leading actress, it seemed – began performing the most shocking acts, some of her fellow actors refused to continue. She felt embarrassed, and like another Eve, covered her genitals and breasts with her hands and left the stage crying, followed by the rest of the group.

As if this was part of the programme, the festival continued to the next part immediately. The actors from Earth were replaced by the martial artists from Samuria who were going to perform their advanced acrobatics and dance-fighting movements to impress the difficult audience. But the Spartathenians could hardly be impressed by body movements and the Samurians, in an act of desperation, prayed their secret prayers and created with their minds a powerful globe of light which they sent flying into the air. Then they joined it and jumped as high as no earth or moon person could ever hope to jump – even with the aid of science – and performed the most insane acrobatics in the air. That part was cheered by some members of the audience but when the Samurians landed and looked at the peaceful face of unmoved Apollodion, they felt empty inside and melancholic and left the stage quietly.

And then it happened.

Apollodion himself stepped forward and entered the stage on his own. This was the moment I was waiting for. This was the moment everyone was waiting for. The actors from Earth, the Martian martial artists, they were all members of the audience now, all had forgotten what role they had in the festival – and they had no other role than to prove their own systems had failed, that their arts had degenerated to mere entertainment and a base one too! And what was I, the spy, to do? What more could I do than wait and see?

I expected everyone would clap for Apollodion's entrance and some of the earth-people did, but stopped when they realised they were only producing noise – earth-culture wasn't advanced enough to rid itself of such primitive concepts as the clapping of hands or autograph-signing. Instead, the audience welcomed him with a silence that was more alive than all the noise in the world.

What followed is nearly impossible to describe. In a god-like manner, Apollodion's mind expanded beyond itself – no, that's not quite accurate but in our poor language I can think of no better words to use – it was transcendence, yes, but that is too general. You see, the earth-people tried to achieve transcendence through the arts, the submission of the dancer's body to music, the actor's miraculous exercise of “becoming” another person, and thus theatre's metaphysical role, almost religious, almost magic; that the actors could reach such states of mind that monks and wizards were after, and still that was not enough!

And the martial arts, the Samurians' ability to control the natural forces, just one step higher than the earth-warriors' complete acceptance of death, the ninjas and the shaolin monks training so hard to attain a superhuman relationship of mind and body – the total control of the body! And yet, no, that was not enough!

Now I looked into Apollodion's eyes and my goal was accomplished.

Now I looked straight into Apollodion's eyes and I heard his voice in my head, giving me the exact information I was looking for. I saw his lips moving, and I heard him speak, though I doubt that anyone else could listen.

“The secret you are looking for...” he said and there was no other sound in the universe, no other existence. “I once realised that if a person could combine theatre with martial arts, that person would be complete.”

That, I whispered to myself, *that* is your secret?

Apollodion then lifted his hands and everyone saw his performance of god. His body took the shape of a cross; his head lowered humbly, his eyes... his eyes... his eyes... I have no words! His eyes were everything and please include all words. His eyes were the unlimited, and what I witnessed was the man's soul, a soul released as an explosion of light and sound, a firework of emotions and... I have no idea how else to define it, I will attempt to write more about this in a future report, after I get used to the life here and the way people think and their language. I hope I will eventually understand and be able to explain.

My mission sort of failed, as you have probably guessed. That, or it was never completed. I refused to go back, but from what I learned, the Samurians returned wiser to their underground city and talked to their people of arts that play with emotions and how those arts could help someone go beyond I, Me, and Mine. And I hope the earthlings realised the futility of an undisciplined theatre and that they added some martial art philosophy to their performance, yet I have no idea what became of them –

with the exception of the woman who stayed behind, after me childishly begging her to spend some time among the Spartathenians. And with me, of course.

As for the secret I had meant to learn, I have obtained it and hold it dear in my heart. If the moon-people shall claim it, let them come and take it by force. But all the science and technology of a self-cripple people who rely on matter like addicts rely on those very sensations that enslave their thought, will never grant the moon-people the power or the understanding they are after.

The Way to Dante

“You don’t have to burn books to destroy a culture.
Just get people to stop reading them.”

Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

1.

“The most dangerous place in the world is the Library. People get in there and never come out the same.”

“Who do you mean, my love?” he asked.

She didn’t reply. Her eyes were fixed on the ugly building of stone, with its thousand broken windows, its twisted corridors and underground vaults, where the old books were stored as if they were bones and skulls of the dead, and the Library was their graveyard. Now those chambers were out of reach, overfilled with scattered pages and garbage.

The street wasn’t much prettier a sight, and to see the sun you had to climb on some roof, and you’d still be hungry for more. They used to be able to see the sun from their balcony, but that was five years ago and much had changed in five years. The city, their relationship, the Library.

“What do you mean they don’t come out the same?” he insisted.

“You know what I mean,” she said uneasily. “No-one comes out of there unharmed... Normal people get in there and get out mad, with existential issues, with doubts about whether they are who they think they are, thinking they are fish trapped in a human body, or Buddhas on the way to nirvana-land, or whatever... They often end up suicidal or junkies or fascists. You know the influence books have.”

He knew. He too had gone into the Library unprotected once. He had been opening books randomly, thinking this was the way to do it. It had almost killed him back then. He had got depressed after making a series of wrong decisions on which books to read and in which order. And there was no-one around to advise him, to warn him.

Had it not been for her entrance to his life, he would have exited from it long ago. But now he was grateful to her and, though suspicious of her professional life, he trusted her emotions were pure.

“Look!” he said abruptly, triumphantly almost, as if he had found some unexpected treasure. She turned to the wall of garbage to her left – the wall of old TV

sets and radios, past non-fiction best-sellers and colourful swimming suits that were no longer in fashion. Her husband was looking at her from below, as he was lying on the ground next to a pile of DVDs and dog shit. “Look, look what I found!” he insisted with a smile that wouldn’t lose its wideness.

He was holding a 50s book with an almost blank cover, with a long title that didn’t ring a bell to her but under it was a name she held dear: “Timothy Komph.” Her husband, her friend, her writer.

She took the book in her hands to have a second look. “I don’t remember having published this,” she said. “When was it? 2053? I must have published a thousand books since then. Do you remember what it was about?”

Timothy’s smile was still there but not as warm. “You,” he said.

She suddenly felt a cold breeze swimming through her hair, a breeze that felt as strong as a push. She got frightened and dropped the book on the ground and looked around to see if there was anyone there besides them. Her strong fingers on the sawed-off shotgun holstered on her belt. It was getting dark. She gave him his hand and asked him to get back on his feet.

“It’s late,” she said.

“Can I take the book with me?” he said.

“No.”

Before they started moving again, he grabbed the book and pushed it deep in the garbage wall, burying it under the endless pile of junk. On the way home, he cleaned the dog shit from his fingers, wiping them clean on an old “You Could Be The Next Big Name Writer” poster.

2.

Three hours later, she was asleep next to him and he was staring at the ceiling, thinking he had to go to the bathroom. He sneezed a lot recently because of the dust that was everywhere, but wouldn’t complain to anyone about it – especially not to his wife, who insisted he caught a cold last week when they went for a picnic and slept by the lake. There was of course no water in the lake, only book covers, bottles, shoes and furniture. Still, it didn’t smell too much, which was nice.

At least it was nicer than the view from the bathroom window, he thought, if that could be called a view. He could easily reach into the pile outside and grab a two-year old comic book or some adventure story that had been adapted to a movie the year

before. But he wouldn't do so. "Why would anyone read anything that's more than six months old?" That's how he'd been trained to think.

He had been really fortunate that day to spot a book of his own in one of the endless piles around the city. It was nearly impossible to find a book – or any other product – of more than two or three years of age. Normally, to reach one of his books, he would have to crawl into the garbage like a mouse – which, normally, he wouldn't.

He had stopped writing more or less about the same time as everyone else: the last day of the year 2055. That was the day people stopped writing. It wasn't the day the I WRITE 4U came out, the programme which required minimum information such as a few character names and a synopsis to create a novel, script or comic book almost entirely on its own, with little guidance. Timothy Komph was only a child back then in 2032 when I WRITE 4U was released – nor was it twelve years later when the first GHOSTWRITER was created, a computer whose creativity and imagination was nearly as advanced as a human's. The program didn't even ask for ideas. You would simply tell it what you wanted to read and it would write the story for you. It would even adapt it to a short story or a poem, if you preferred, or a theatre play, a song, a trilogy of novels – anything.

Yet writers continued writing, because they were still encouraged. They were much fewer though, as the dreams of glory and world-domination had started fading away since the first piles of books joined the other garbage and the libraries were now overflowed and inhospitable. The earlier solution to the problem of space-occupying books, the internet, had been abolished as early as 2034, when the government decided it couldn't be controlled, and had to shut it down for security purposes.

No, it was in 2055, when the Nokbuel Prize went to a novel that was written by a computer, that Timothy Komph gave up writing. Everyone else did. And those who didn't want to, were practically forced to. There was absolutely no reason why a person would write their own book anymore. Furthermore, there were so many books out there that only by chance would any two people in the world come across the same one – unless it was strongly promoted by the media which only the computer-made books were. There was – as Komph himself had written in his final work – so much information that nothing that could be known mattered and that nothing that mattered could be known.

It didn't stop there. Another example of the government propaganda was the series of posters that had been covering the city for the last fifty years, posters like "You Could Be The Next Big Name Writer!" Because of these, everyone wanted to be a

writer, a singer, a dancer, to live the dream, the never-dying zombie of a dream known as the glory, the career, the money – the American Dream. Everyone wanted to be the best, and so the city drowned in the products of its people's arrogance.

And that was it. It was meant to happen. It was inevitable. Timothy Komph knew it from day one. The reason he wrote books was to prevent it. He was one of the few who wanted to prevent it. They failed.

Now he looked at the garbage-land outside the bathroom window, then at his wife's beautiful face – his publisher's beautiful face – and was unimpressed. He had a headache, which helped. He was furious. It showed. He thought of his wife as no more inspired than a machine-written book. He pulled the sheets, uncovering her, waking her up.

“What is it?” she said abruptly, as if she hadn't just been sleeping.

“How can you not remember my books?” he said.

She looked at him puzzled.

“Honey, it's almost four years since the last book you wrote. It was 2054, remember? I can recall only basic information, the book's writer – you – its publication date, sometimes the title even but not what it was about.”

“It was about you. They were all about you!”

He felt betrayed. He felt his wife's memory had been cheating on him.

“I'm sorry, love,” she said. “You know we're programmed to delete all the unnecessary information. If it's more than six months old, no-one cares what it was. We have to live for the moment, Tim. You know that.”

The moment... Part of him was hypnotised enough to agree... And part of him still resisted, after all these years, part of him still resisted...

“They used to ban these books...” His own sneezing interrupted his thought. He ran to the bathroom to get some tissues for his nose. “Damned dust!”

“It's the cold,” she corrected him.

He ignored her.

“They used to ban these books, I said, the books that were too controversial, or politically incorrect, or whatever. But then they – you – came up with a more effective method: more books. The more, the better. It wouldn't mind what subject they had – as long as it wasn't one of THE books, it was more than welcome. Myself, I couldn't believe it at first, but when I realised what was going on – that it was a filthy plan – that you, my publisher, my wife, were involved – I was terrified!”

She smiled mechanically.

“Banning or burning a book just didn’t work anymore,” she said as if narrating a memorised text. “Making a billion meaningless books available, in order to drown the book, to make it disappear in a sea of books – that was the new fascism.”

His headache was stronger, a wicked child in his head banging everything with a hammer. The noise of his own thoughts, the echo! He closed his eyes and pretended the woman had disappeared, yet he couldn’t erase her from his mind. Back in the bathroom, with pills for headache in his hands, he remembered – with mixed feelings – when he signed his first book contract with her. They hadn’t even kissed yet. They hadn’t even thought they would.

“I don’t want to be just another writer whose life purpose is to be The Next Big Name Writer!” he had said.

“I know, Tim, you want to be a writer who writes good stories.”

“No! I don’t want that either!”

“You don’t want to write good stories?”

“I’m not saying that, I’m saying it was never about writing a good story, it was always about changing the world!”

He remembered she had smiled behind her desk, her legs crossed comfortably, her perfectly white teeth gently biting the lower lip. Smiled as if she had heard the most wonderful thing. Smiled as if she had agreed.

But she never wanted to change the world. What she wanted was to be with him. He knew she wasn’t to blame. Unlike him, she hadn’t chosen who she was. She had to work for the people who had created her, and eventually switch to publishing computer-made books only. She didn’t have a choice.

He discovered she was a robot months after they first made love. He remembered how awkward he had felt, then how quickly he had accepted it. Suddenly, he remembered everything.

3.

His mind paused.

Then he realised. He had been brainwashed. But seeing a copy of his old book had activated a series of improbable thoughts, and all led to unfamiliar conclusions. He realised the nature of these machine-made books, with their perfect structures and their plot devices, their predictable twists and common messages. These books had to be burned. They blocked his way to the classics, the modern classics and the ancients! They blocked his way to culture, to truth, to himself. In times where the production of

books was conservative, their burning seemed the only progressive thing. He got his mini-flamethrower which was needed to clean the books and clothes that fell to their garden, and also his axe which he used for path-opening through the junk, and before his wife realised what he was doing, he jumped from the bathroom window to the hills of garbage-culture, and from there to the road.

It was late and he was alone in the street – with the exception of a thin bearded man in the corner who was disposing of a hat he had bought three months ago when it was still in fashion, and of some kitchenware too. There was also a mutated mouse feasting on a cat, a rather unpleasant sight to watch that was taking place outside the main library door to which Timothy Komph was heading. The moment he got there, he gave a good kick and the door opened wide, revealing a labyrinth of books.

“I want to burn my way to Dostoyevsky! To Dante! To the depths of my soul!” he screamed and dove inside the ocean of unlimited pages. At first he thought he could hear his wife, screaming from the bathroom window predicable words of advice such as “come back”, “be careful” and “don’t do it.” But he wouldn’t change his mind. It took him some time and lots of slashing and burning but he eventually came across some of the titles he was looking for. Behind him, in the dark, the books of a machine-made future collapsed blocking his exit. He continued unbothered.

Eventually, he got there. With flames all around him to light his way, he reached the deepest tunnels under the library, the caves where the classics of another world had been exiled. His dream had finally come true, his life had finally meaning. With a copy of the Divine Comedy, of Odyssey and Plato’s Republic in his hands, he gladly suffocated under the burden of a dead culture, celebrating his burial in the company of people he loved.

Chapter Five

Commentary on the third group of stories, 'The Anti-Utopian Stories'

The stories in this group could be classified as dystopian but I've chosen the title 'anti-utopian' instead. This is because their central theme is ambiguous in that certain aspects might be viewed as utopian while others dystopian or – as is most evident in 'Margaret's World' – a vision of humanity that appears wholly utopian may be, in the story, reversed and presented as dystopian (therefore the story criticises a particular utopia, and this makes it anti-utopian). Arguably, 'The Doers' seems to be the exception since it can be read as a straightforward totalitarian dystopia; however, the story criticises an integral aspect of contemporary culture that, as I understand it, is commonly regarded as a virtue of the modern individual; briefly put, this is the model of the 'busy person', referred to as 'Homo Chronoborus' in the story. I will return to 'The Doers' shortly.

'Black List Magazine' is a hybrid, in the sense that is partly utopian, partly dystopian. On the one hand the idea that everyone who breaks the unwritten moral laws of the unnamed island in the story, even by saying a small lie, should be put in the black list of the island's public magazine is a totalitarian thought experiment. On the other hand, the result is that everyone in the island knows who is trustworthy and those who have deceived others are eventually exposed and, should they not change their ways, sent into exile. The character-narrator ends up murdering his daughter, after a publication labels him potentially dangerous; therefore, he is convinced that he *is* dangerous, and commits the crime, fulfilling his subconscious desire to confirm the magazine's message and – through it – the logic of the utopian society itself. Simply put, if he attempted to prove he's not dangerous then the magazine would be wrong, and in his mind the entire structure of the particular utopia would collapse. This is in accordance with the following argument. Though he is talking about faith, Emanuel Swedenborg makes a good point here; he says that 'those who first take their thoughts from others and make that thought their belief, and then view it with their own understanding, cannot easily recede from it, and are therefore in most cases satisfied with confirming it.'¹⁰⁷ In 'Black List Magazine,' this leads to fanaticism and murder. The story is therefore one of those stories in this collection that explore the idea that

¹⁰⁷ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell*, 1758, trans. John C. Ager (Pennsylvania, Swedenborg Foundation, 2009), 57

utopian societies are in constant threat of being distorted and even collapse due to their misinterpretation by the anti-utopian minds of those that inhabit them.

My belief that the individual must achieve a utopian state of mind (whether this is labelled nirvana, enlightenment, transcendence or otherwise) before a society can be truly utopian is a recurrent theme in the collection. The method used to preserve utopia in 'Black List Magazine' fails not so much because of the nature of black-listing itself but because the main character does not have, and fails to comprehend, the philosophy on which his society is founded; this is evident when an outsider – who wants to marry the main character's daughter – is accepted in the utopian island and is given permission to join this utopia but the main character finds this unacceptable; he argues that the outsider 'hasn't been educated here and has not lived with us long enough to appreciate our culture' and asks the magazine for advice on how to prevent the marriage. The response angers him, as the magazine editors suggest he is the real outsider and that he should change his views. This personal change however never happens in the story and this is due to the nature of the particular utopian system; it is a social utopia that uses the Black List Magazine in order to preserve itself. If it was a society of utopian individuals, there would be no need for black lists or any other method of preservation since, a utopia that consists of utopians is not threatened from within, precisely because what makes such a society utopian is the utopian state of mind of its members; that is the Etherotopian priority.

If the problem in 'Black List Magazine' is the social utopian model, in 'Margaret's World' it is the subjectivity of truth and of the self. In this story, the concept of the indefinable self that results from the subjectivist views so popular in today's society (the increasing subjectification of gender, culture and the concept of truth) is being the subject of absurdist satire. In 'Margaret's World', no-one judges their fellow human by their appearance, because there are no appearances to judge someone by. The people of this future utopia are not only without a gender or an age, not only without ideology, but without a face as well. Not only is any comparison discouraged, it is impossible. The world itself has also transformed and there is no longer day or night, but an omnipresent greyness. My main argument here, expressed through the main narrator/character, is that 'ideologies separate us but without ideologies there is nothing to separate.'

This leads me to another conclusion of Etherotopia which is a criticism of what is referred in the story as 'the forever convenient indefinable' which is founded on that worldview which suggests that reality is subjective. I must add that, because of the

nature of this thesis and because every story in a story collection is necessarily different and addresses a variety of issues, I cannot sufficiently expand on a theme that is only examined in a small number of stories and the debate about reality being subjective or objective is not the main focus of this work. I will refer however to a particular work that has influenced my understanding of this matter, and that is Max Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*, in which he refers to Socrates and, in Horkheimer's view, the two problematic perspectives he fought against:

Socrates died because he subjected the most sacred and most familiar ideas of his community and his country to the critique of the daimonion, or dialectical thought, as Plato called it. In doing so, he fought against both ideologic conservatism and relativism masked as progressiveness but actually subordinated to personal and professional interests. In other words, he fought against the subjective, formalistic reason advocated by the other Sophists.¹⁰⁸

I find the above terms, 'ideologic conservatism' and 'relativism masked as progressiveness' most useful for the utopian vision that Etherotopia opposes and especially the second term in the case of 'Margaret's World.'

The next story in this group is 'The Doers', which ends with the following phrase: 'The time of the Doers has ended. The time of the Thinkers has come.' It is a dystopia set in a future Britain, where the government controls people by encouraging them to be constantly active, to constantly 'do things' and never leaving them the time or the energy required to think. It reflects, in that sense, G. K. Chesterton's warning about capitalism, that 'the employers will give time to eat, time to sleep; they are in terror of a time to think.'¹⁰⁹ In the story, sabotaging the little time people have left to think is achieved by 'The Doers', a small team of government agents who, among other things, create the news, so that people are constantly distracted. The idea is that, apart from keeping its citizens satisfied, a successful dystopia also keeps them busy and promotes the idea of busyness as a virtue.

What this means for Etherotopia is that, precisely because of Etherotopia's emphasis on the development of individual personality and the clarity of the individual's mind as being the keys to both creating and sustaining utopia, the utopian citizen follows neither the role model of the 'busy' character – the 'doer', who has to choose, for instance, between having a career and having a family and is also expected

¹⁰⁸ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London: Continuum, 2004), 7-8.

¹⁰⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *Utopia of Usurers and Other Essays* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1917), 31.

to ‘make sacrifices’ in order to succeed in society – and, the other extreme, the archetype of the monk who invests his or her entire lifetime in the relationship between the individual and the world as well as his or her spiritual and/or mental progress towards the personal utopia.

Finally, ‘Parts of me that aren’t mine’ satirises the total trust in technology and examines the idea that a cyborg or post-human future may be a negative, rather than a positive, utopian vision. In the story, the main character, Jasper Fava, is a cyborg who manages to defeat the tyrant whose body is more technologically advanced than his own. Fava, by removing his own mechanical parts, ends up a blind swordsman who defeats his cyborg master with only one hand, thus representing the concept of the insufficient human resisting the age of the more advanced, but less human, machine.

All the citizens of this fictional dystopia are forced to upgrade themselves to ‘normal’ (becoming cyborgs) and here there is a link between ‘Margaret’s World’ and ‘Parts of me that aren’t mine’, the influence of one of the key texts that have inspired me to write the kind of fiction I write: Kurt Vonnegut’s short story ‘Harrison Bergeron’, included in his collection *Welcome to the Monkey House*, which also shares a similar theme with his novel *The Sirens of Titan*. To quote from Susan Farrell’s *Critical Companion to Kurt Vonnegut*:

In both cases, those who are above average in any way are made to wear physical handicaps on their bodies so as not to have an unfair advantage over those citizens less gifted than themselves. (...) Both works depict the American ideal that ‘all men are created equal’ gone amok. As in many of Vonnegut’s works, ‘Harrison Bergeron’ creates a Utopia that misfires, leading to more social problems than are cured.¹¹⁰

As I understand it, Vonnegut here criticises a popular distortion of the ideal of equality (which may or may not be considered communist), which is the interpretation of equality as sameness. Vonnegut suggests that a dystopian state would supposedly promote equality – which is a utopian principle – for ultimately dystopian purposes. Besides, as Farrell adds, ‘the equality that has been achieved in 2081 in “Harrison Bergeron” is a perfectly uniform mediocrity.’¹¹¹ This is an important point, namely that dystopia pretends to operate in the name of utopian principles (which is precisely why I name the stories in this group anti-utopian.) To make the connection between this work

¹¹⁰ Susan Farrell, *Critical Companion to Kurt Vonnegut: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Facts On File, 2008), 183.

¹¹¹ Farrell, *Critical Companion to Kurt Vonnegut*, 183.

and my own clearer, 'Parts of me that aren't mine' is influenced by 'Harrison Bergeron' thematically; the society claims to be a utopia because people's mechanical parts make them superior to their original non-upgraded bodies (though they are all in the same situation, as they're expected to be upgraded to cyborgs) while 'Margaret's World' is influenced ideologically and thus in a more meaningful way; as in 'Harrison Bergeron', the problem that dystopia pretends to solve is discrimination and the, even more problematic, solution is the destruction of individuality. While in Vonnegut's story, this is done through eliminating those aspects that make individuals healthier, stronger or more beautiful than others, in my story the dystopia goes further and eliminates every single difference, including faces, genders and names. Thus the differences that make the individuals *individual* are not hidden or oppressed as in 'Harrison Bergeron', but they are permanently removed in favour of an absolute relativism that is supposedly, in Margaret's view, progressive.

Furthermore, 'Parts of me that aren't mine' addresses the question of whether technology expands the powers of the human or limits them. An early simple example in the story is a reference to 'the calculator as an extension of [the] mind' which however has been invented to 'solve the problem instead of' the mind. Also, in the story the teacher asks the student: 'why would you *want* to do it yourself? [...]When there's a machine that can do it for you?' The problem here, in relation to utopia, is more political than it is practical and returns to the idea of 'The Way to Dante' where even intellectual work is done by machines. The problem is political because if the machine solves the individual's problems instead of the individual, this means a less responsible individual and also a more 'replaceable' one.

Subsequently, the above problem also has an existential side because the life of the individual in Etherotopia should, apart from pleasant (as it is supposedly in any utopian vision), be meaningful. This is also what makes the utopias in the four stories of this group problematic, they all reduce the individual to: a name in a list, a nobody, a 'busy' nobody and an upgradeable nobody, respectively. Finally, their preservation prevents cultural change; but the aim of Etherotopia is personal and social evolution, simultaneously and the one as a result of the other, and this requires cultural progress.

Portfolio, Part III
‘The Anti-Utopian Stories’

Black List Magazine

I wrote to the magazine last week and this morning I went to buy the issue in which my letter would appear. Black List publishes letters of our island’s inhabitants and the editors’ responses. I skipped the reports of theft, violence and addiction, and went straight to the family section where mine would be. Some stories grabbed my attention. Here is one:

“Dear editors,

I write to inform you that a certain person, named (...) has been cheating on me, his wife, named (...), with his secretary, named (...), a crime about which I only recently found out and, of course, my first thought was to write to you. I understand such actions are unacceptable in our utopia, however I’m willing to forgive him, if the state can persuade him to repent. I wait for your advice.

Yours faithfully,

(...)”

#

That was an uncommon case, I thought, yet I had heard of a similar incident many years ago when I was a child. I had for a moment forgotten my own problems – such was my surprise – and was curious to read the magazine’s reply:

“Dear (...),

These things have a greater impact on society than you realise. Behind every madman, criminal or corrupted politician, there is some personal trauma, usually from childhood or a failed relationship. One proof of the damage done is the confusion it has caused you. We appreciate your desire to forgive, but instead advise you to forget. Your husband’s name has been put in the Black List and he will be expelled from the island shortly. His secretary too. Within the next week, a psychologist will visit you, paid by the state, to help you deal with whatever trauma caused and move forward.

Yours sincerely,

Black List.”

#

The magazine never published the names either of the accusers or the accused on the weekly issue. The editors kept this information for themselves until, in the end of

each month, they added the names of those found guilty to the monthly Black List. The names of those who had already been driven away from our society were removed so as not to occupy space, though they were archived online and in the libraries. One could find the whole list on the government's website, for example.

Before I got to my letter, I found another that described a case equally unusual and unacceptable.

“Dear friends,

my name is (...) and I am fourteen. Lately, I've had doubts about the way my father is parenting me and my fears were confirmed this Christmas when he confessed that his Santa Claus story was a lie. I felt so much hatred when I found out I had been deceived all these years. Have you heard of this Santa? It's a myth from a non-utopian country my Grandpa was from. He was involved in brainwashing me, as well. You can't imagine how much I cried! Why would a father lie to his own kid? At school I was the only child who believed this fairy tale and all these years my father kept repeating he was right and all the children wrong. He also asked me not to tell my teacher, afraid she would report him. She has been reading your magazine to us, as teachers must do, ever since we were ten but I've never read of such a thing as what happened to me in the other people's letters. Is my father evil? I know lying is a crime but I have been taught that our parents love us, so I'm not sure what to make of this. I know I don't want to be hurt that much again. I am poisoned with doubt and mistrust. I hope I did the right thing by reporting him. I do love my father but he's a liar.

Have a nice week,

(...).”

#

That was incredible, I thought, lying to someone for years. They tell us some cultures raise their people with lies so that they develop an unstable relationship with reality and become more vulnerable to propaganda – but not here! Here that would be illegal, considering its cultural impact. Here that would be preposterous.

I found the magazine's reply particularly helpful:

“Dear (...),

Your father has been brainwashing you into a consumer culture that is alien to our world and unacceptable. His name has been added to the Black List and will be made public in the next issue. Depending on his actions, it may or may not be removed from the List in the future. Until then, he is officially a bad influence. As for you, we don't know whether you are in the position to recover from such a trauma but we will

stand by you. Your teacher has been informed as well as your fellow students, so you will receive as much support as you can get. It is important that we live in a society where everyone can be trusted, therefore we have to spot the untrustworthy ones and make their names public so they cannot harm other people with their lies, fake promises or verbal violence. We think your father is not suitable to be a parent – the culture of such lies as Santa Claus does not belong in a utopia. However, your father cannot be expelled as you are too young to be deprived of a father figure. His punishment will be limited to having his name on the Black List until he realises the error of his ways. Thank you for writing to us, child, and good luck,

Black List.”

#

Truth is our utopia would have long collapsed were it not for the Black List Magazine. There were no corrupted politicians in the island – these were spotted as soon as they lied to a wife or a son or a friend, so they wouldn't get the chance to grow into professional liars. Our politicians were people who had never lied to, or cheated, or otherwise harmed, a fellow citizen. Getting blacklisted was the penalty for all crimes – from the smallest lie to a murder, though we hadn't had a murder for five generations – and if the crime was too serious, the criminal would be exiled to another society where his actions would be considered more or less tolerable, even acceptable in some cases.

I confess I delayed reading my letter on purpose, knowing the gravity of the subject, knowing that my future – and the future of my family – depended on the magazine's response.

Finally, I found it. Seeing it there made my heart beat faster, made me fear. I wondered if I had made my point clear, if my writing was proper, if perhaps I could have said this or the other phrase differently. I was too worried for the impression it would make but told myself it didn't matter. What mattered was what *they* would say.

“Dear Black List,

I write to report my daughter.

Despite the love and education I've given her, she did the most outrageous thing by getting engaged to an outsider. The outsider, named (...), who wished to join our utopia, has had his application approved by the state and is currently staying in the island as one of us. I appreciate, of course, the state's generosity and know there've been successful marriages of second and third generation outsiders who were raised here according to our customs and morals. But he hasn't been educated here and has not lived with us long enough to appreciate our culture. I tried to convince (...), my

daughter, to change her mind. I understand some outsiders have developed advanced brainwashing techniques, which would explain my daughter's stubbornness and the addictive nature of her love. Imagine that I was forced to take action and lock her in her room while awaiting your instructions – there was nothing else I could do to prevent this madness. I confess I even hit her at some point, while trying to get her in there. Please advise me on what to do to prevent this marriage, as I'm sure you know the impact these things have on society.

I am looking forward to your response,

Yours always,

(...)"

#

I closed my eyes. Counted to ten. The magazine's reply was in front of me, finally, after a long week of bad sleep and agony, of listening to my daughter curse me from behind the locked door, of trying to comfort myself that she will never end up with an outsider, that she will have a healthy, utopian life. This was the longest week of my life. Now, I was finally alone in the living room, with the Black List in my hands, with the answer to all my questions in my hands.

I opened my eyes.

"Dear (...),

We regret to inform you that you have been added to the Black List under the category Potentially Dangerous. The reason was, of course, the crime you yourself confessed in your letter to our publication. Not only have you committed violence against your own daughter and locked her in her room, but you excuse those actions, as if you don't understand their significance. You are obviously mentally disturbed and since your daughter is an adult, we have no second thoughts about expelling you from the island. In fact, by the time you are reading this, consider yourself under arrest already. You will be given twelve hours to realise what that means and accept it before you are officially exiled. There's no need to add that you are to release your daughter immediately. The outsider to whom she is engaged is a healthy-minded new member of our society and has been accepted by the community. Your disrespect to your fellow citizen is based on prejudice, not reason. Tomorrow, when the ship will have arrived at (destination of the ship was not revealed), you will find yourself an outsider too in a city that will be suspicious of you as well. Our publication is meant to support our society of trust, thus a good citizen of this island should trust anyone not included in the Black List. Please understand we don't hold this against you and that we hope you find

happiness in your new home. But you are not a utopian, and are not mature enough to be one of us. Thank you for your understanding. Pack your things and good luck with your future,

Black List.”

#

It is dark now but I can see the island from the cabin window. I am tired but cannot go to sleep. I wasn't given twelve hours after all, I was arrested within a few minutes from the moment I dropped the magazine on the floor and ran to the kitchen to grab a knife. I hadn't even thought what I was going to do with it, but hearing my daughter had just woken up, I went to her room and unlocked the door.

She screamed so loudly I had to do something. The magazine was right. I am dangerous.

Margaret's World

1.

They removed my face.

It was a painless procedure. I have no idea how they did it. They removed all of it at once, not just the skin, but the eyes too, the blood and the rest of it. Everything that was my face was erased. Whether it was science or magic they used for the operation, I couldn't tell.

These people were without faces themselves. They captured me as soon as I stepped my foot on this cursed place. They started operating on me immediately. They put me in a rotating corner-less room and tied me up on a peculiar steam engine that seemed to be the heart of the room and what caused its harmonious rotation. The persistent sound of chains, the smoke, the heat... It all oppressed my soul and in my agony I shouted "Margaret! "Margaret!", the only name I could remember.

They weren't moved.

They began by shaving my beautiful long hair. I expected they would, because all four of them were bald and they were re-creating me in their image. And then they shaved the rest of me, too. To most of the things I told them, I received no reply but when I asked what was wrong with my hair, one of them – it was impossible to say which – said something about the relationship of hair and stereotypes, then another murmured the word "prejudice." At the time, I had no idea what they were implying.

I could understand the function of most of the machines they used to shave me, but still they looked awkward and produced what seemed to me unnecessary amounts of noise and smoke. By the time they had moved to the more challenging phases of the operation, I couldn't see my own nose in the smoke. I couldn't feel it either and didn't notice when it was removed along with the rest of my face, but was later curious to know with what impossible senses I could still see, smell, speak and hear, even interact with my surroundings, with pretty much the same clarity as before.

I found their explanation hard to accept, namely that they had removed, as they argued, "not the face itself, but the mere conceivability of it."

As for the final phase of the operation – the one that would complete the surgical removal of my identity – I would rather not give details, as I didn't understand how they removed that part of me either.

Everything was over in less than an hour, and when I was finally released, I was one of them. Faceless, genderless, and without identity, as the psychologically disturbed utopians of the 20th century would have wanted everyone to be.

2.

Margaret sent me here. “I have seen the future and it’s wonderful,” she used to say. “There’s no more prejudice, no more racism, sexism or hatred.”

I would usually turn away in disbelief. Her utopian vision was too common and one-sided to attract my attention. Margaret herself wasn’t. She was a witch or so she claimed. I remember she would boast about being able to escape from the guards whenever she wanted to. She just didn’t want to.

One day during lunch she whispered in my ear: “I can show you the future too.” I told her I wasn’t interested. I was never good company for people who were looking forward to a future promised by Hollywood movies, international companies and banks. What did advertisements such as “In the future, we’ll grow cities like plants” said to people like me who grew up in times of crisis, who saw their neighbours starve in the street, who heard that their friends committed suicide, who themselves constantly moved from one country to another in search for work? I didn’t care if the rest of humanity wanted to go to the moon. I wanted all that money to be given to the poor instead. A former member of the starving population, I could not be fooled or impressed by the promises of an arrogant science.

“The future is better than you think, I guarantee it is,” insisted Margaret.

“Leave me alone, Margaret,” I would reply.

We were all certifiably insane but Margaret was truly insane also. Most of the others, we were there for political reasons. I was an anti-war activist, another was a Christian Orthodox, and there were two brothers who had written a book against the queen. We didn’t know why Margaret was there. Claiming you’re a witch wouldn’t normally get you in a mental asylum those days. We suspected they were experimenting on her, which explained her screams at night. But she wouldn’t tell us anything afterwards and I think none of us ever asked.

I was closer to Margaret than everyone else and still had no clue what they were doing to her. Whenever I asked anything about her own life, she would instantly change the subject so we never got to the “nighttime screaming” part.

“Let’s not talk about the present. Why don’t we discuss the future instead?” she would say. Every single time. Escapism, obviously. I wasn’t a psychologist but I knew what escapism was.

“What’s so miraculous about the future?” asked the younger of the two brothers once. “Are people going to be immortal or something?”

“Yes!” celebrated Margaret. “And open-minded, too! There won’t be any prejudice, because everyone’s going to be everything! Everyone will be from all countries, everyone will be pansexual, everyone will be everything there is!”

“Even people who don’t want to?” I asked.

“That’s the thing. They will want to be. They will be taught to want to be!”

“You mean they will be forced,” said the Orthodox guy. “Brainwashed.”

“When you say they will be everything, you really mean *anything*, right? In other words, *nothing*,” I said to Margaret.

“You will see,” she replied. “One day I will show you and you will see.”

She was right. I saw. Contrary to my initial beliefs, she was truly a witch. And the day came that she did send me to her long-expected future. And finally, now that I have been there myself, I can say this:

I have seen the future and it is faceless.

3.

I woke up in the future in a desert garden full of colourless trees and the greyest grass I ever saw. Being a sceptic as well as an experienced dreamer, I performed all the tricks I knew that would verify if this was real or not, from testing my body movement to writing in my notebook – thankfully, it had been teleported with me – and to examining my reflection in a mirror. There was one in the building behind me.

I was kidnapped as soon as I stepped out of its front door and had my eyes closed with a handkerchief and my hands tied with a rope. Next thing I knew I was in that most horrible of rooms. I have already described what followed.

I was thrown out after the identity-removal operation, a faceless man in the middle of nowhere. I turned out to look at the building I’d been in. I crawled to the door and put my ear on the wood, but there was no sound coming from inside. I opened it slowly. I went in. Just an ordinary-looking abandoned house, not at all futuristic or otherwise peculiar. I opened all doors, no-one led to the rotating room.

The only mirror in this house was located in the same place as that other mirror in the other house. That led me to conclude that all houses in Margaret’s utopian future

were the same. Having spent much of my youth in the most fascist country in the world, I had come to believe that a street of identical houses was the trademark of a fascist culture. I wouldn't be surprised if my faceless kidnappers were working for the government.

4.

I wandered around the ruins of the city for hours. It wasn't day. It wasn't night. It was a permanent version of the grey zone in between. I wondered if I was on Earth but there was no way to tell. These trees didn't look like they needed sunlight but then again they were Earth trees. The sky was unchanging. A thought crossed my mind, a little too extreme, that the sky had been forced to look like that never-ending wall of pale mist to hide the wonders or horrors of the mystical universe from the sight of mankind.

Was it a series of chemicals what had altered the sky or some accidental nuclear apocalypse? Or it could be the curse of a sect of future magicians who used the forbidden knowledge of their pre-digital world ancestors to merge the light of day and the darkness of its absence into the immortal greyish light of neutrality.

It was never too light and never too dark in this place and I had no idea how to count time, but that was the least of my problems. After what seemed like hours of walking between identical ruins, and while I finally decided to rest and postpone my exploring, I saw a figure walking my way, slowly but steadily, the most neutral walk I'd seen.

I recognised it as one of the people who had taken off my face. I ran towards the figure, and stood bravely in front of it. The faceless man or woman – you couldn't really tell – ignored me and kept walking until he/she got past me.

I was frustrated.

“Hey, you, come back here!” I said.

He/she started to run.

“Wait!” I said. “I want to talk to you! I want to know! What is this place?”

The man/woman kept running away. Thankfully, he/she was tired and I was gaining ground.

“What have you done to me?” I shouted and jumped to reach him/her, grabbing his/her leg. We both fell on the ground.

“Relax, person!” he/she said trembling. “I've never met you before!”

He/she was lying, I thought.

“Why the hell do you call me person? I’m a man!” I said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, I don’t know you,” he/she insisted.

That was awkward. He/she sounded like the faceless people I met before, and was dressed just like them – I then realised I was dressed like them myself, what were these clothes? All black and white, all so neutral – but then again his/her presence didn’t feel as threatening as that of my faceless kidnappers. What if he/she was a victim too?

He/she didn’t react at first when he/she saw me, but ignored me, which obviously meant there were more of us people without a face. If that was the case, I thought, how could he/she know if he/she had never met me?

I asked the question. He/she replied.

“Because I’ve never met anyone,” he/she said. “I’ve never wanted to talk to anyone, I want nothing to do with any with you! Now let me go!” I did. I left him/her go and then he/she ran away until his/her figure was out of my sight.

Hey, that person might have fooled me, I thought then, but it was too late to go after him/her. That person could have been one of those four as much as it could have been anyone else.

I was mad at myself. Mostly, I was confused. I started walking again.

5.

I examined the possibility that Margaret hadn’t sent me to the actual future but to her version of it. It was also quite possible that I ended up in my own interpretation of her version of the future, which would make things even more complicated. But no, that was not the issue. The issue was whether I was in the actual “inevitable” future or in an alternative “possible” reality.

My preferred answer? I was in Margaret’s world.

Either way, it didn’t matter. What mattered was that I was part of it now, I was living there and I had to choose between submitting to it and fighting against it.

6.

Eventually, I met more people. Beyond the ruined part of the city, there were streets filled with the faceless ones. They all seemed so busy and worried and full of life and I wondered what was going on.

“What’s happening?” I asked the one closest to me. I got no reply. “Where are you going?” I asked another person.

“Where are *you* going?” said the person.

“I’m lost,” I replied honestly. “I’m trying to find out where I am.”

“So am I.” said the person, just as honestly, and left.

This was getting nowhere. I had to try another way.

“Who the hell are you people?” I shouted to everyone and no-one in particular.

“Where are you coming from? Where are you going?”

A distant voice, exactly in the same tone, as if an echo, replied by repeating the same words. “Who are you people? Where are you going?” And another person, this one nearer to me, stopped running around for a moment and joined in. “Where do you come from? Where are you going?” Soon, everyone joined in the chorus. Everyone had always wanted to ask the same question and this was their chance.

But no-one could give an answer, and it was getting too noisy, too disturbing. Some of them were obviously struggling to cry, others were trying to add this or the other emotion to their voice but could not, due to the lack of face. All the voices were pathetically neutral, genderless, passionless. Only the volume could change and only for practical reasons.

I couldn’t stand them anymore. I ran away.

7.

I remember Margaret signing her favourite song: “Imagine there’s no country, imagine there’s no religion, no race, no gender, nothing. Nothing to die for, nothing to live for, nothing, nothing, nothing. Imagine there was nothing...”

This was people’s utopia at the time. How convenient! Every group of people dreamed the elimination of everything they didn’t approve of. How else to explain the totalitarian utopias and the pseudo-progressive separatist utopias, all these products of fascist thought?

“Anarchy!” said Margaret once. “Science and magic will make humankind immortal and the immortals will live in perfect anarchy. Everyone will be self-sufficient, so it will work. It cannot fail. I have seen it and it is the future.”

She had “seen” it but never been there herself. She claimed it wasn’t part of her quest or however she had called it. She sent *me* there instead. One night, she was in my room. I had no idea how she got in but she put her hand on my mouth to prevent me from uttering a word.

“Listen,” she said. “You are ready. You have to go. Now.”

I didn’t know what she was talking about, I only wanted to sleep. But since she was there, I thought, I could steal a kiss. She didn’t let me. She put her other hand on

my forehead and whispered something. The movement of her brilliant lips was like the dance of red-skinned angels and I wanted to disappear in this dance.

Next thing I know, lighting struck me or so it felt. A blinding light occupied all space and I was carried away in its journey throughout everything I had ever seen, heard, imagined or experienced. A soft voice, Margaret's perfect voice, echoed in my mind as the bolt of light was turning to a colourful sparkling rainbow.

"I have faith in you, my love."

The voice then said other things I cannot remember but I think she asked me to communicate with her if I ever found the way. I was too busy trying to conceive of my own existence at the moment so I cannot be certain what it was I truly heard and what I had wanted to hear.

The next moment I was awake in the future.

8.

Having run away from the crowd, I entered a random house. I really needed some rest. This one didn't seem abandoned but all its doors were unlocked so I presumed it was.

It wasn't.

I almost stepped on a faceless person who was lying on the floor between the main entrance and the stairs.

"Are you the owner of this house?" I asked.

"What do you mean owner?" replied the other.

"Why are you here?"

"Why not?"

"What is your profession?"

"I don't answer to identity-related questions, they generate prejudice."

"Do you have any food?"

"How would you eat it?"

"Won't I get hungry?"

"You don't have organs."

I automatically put my hands on my stomach – I mean on the part of my body under which my stomach was supposed to be. It wasn't there. Having no stomach felt no less weird than not having a face and I hadn't realised how much of myself the faceless surgeon-wizards had removed, but I somehow couldn't be as deeply shocked as I would have been if I had such things as nerves and blood pressure.

“How am I alive?” I asked the person on the floor.

“Who knows?” the person replied, clearly a nihilist.

“What is your name?”

“Why would I have a name? What would I do with a name?”

“Well, *my* name...” I was going to introduce myself but the person interrupted me.

“Don’t say it! Please! No more identity-related conversation!”

“Why not? You have identity issues? Why? Who are you? Where are you from? What do you believe in? How do you define yourself? Say something!”

There was a dead silence so dead it would smell like a corpse if it was any deader.

“I don’t have an answer to any of these questions. Please leave me alone,” said the person finally.

He/she wanted to be left alone. He/she was a stranger, was born a stranger and would die a stranger, like all the people who wanted to be left alone. But I could understand him/her. I felt pity for him/her. I even wrote a poem for him/her.

Here’s my poem.

9.

I met a stranger.

I couldn’t be racist to him or her, because he/she was from nowhere.

I couldn’t mock him/her for his/her accent, because we sounded just the same.

I couldn’t be sexist to him/her because he/she had no sex, he/she was actually an “it.” I

couldn’t be anti-whatever it was, because it had no ideology or religion.

Finally, I couldn’t hate it for being different than me because it wasn’t.

For all the reasons above, I couldn’t love it either. So I killed it.

It didn’t resist. It had nothing to live or die for. It was useless. I’m not sorry.

I would gladly kill it again.

10.

Oh, Margaret, how wrong you were!

Such a wonderfully complex mind, such power and personality! But you were blinded by your own emotions and couldn’t see that your dream of a better world was the ultimate nightmare! Oh, Margaret!

I remember she would insist that our ideologies, our sexes and our religions separated us. I don’t blame her. Modern culture was brainwashing everyone into

thinking that religion was the source of all wars, that political identities separated friends and families, and so on. The government could best control people who didn't believe in anything.

I was always sarcastic with this part of Margaret. "Margie, my sweetheart," I would say to get her attention. "Ideologies separate us but without ideologies there is nothing to separate."

It's true we disagreed on basic things. At first we couldn't even stand each other. Then we fell in love. It was predictable but sweet nonetheless, though we were strongly discouraged to express this love and were being constantly watched, so there was nothing we could actually do in the asylum. Oh, Margaret!

11.

In the city of the faceless, I discovered I enjoyed killing people. Faceless people only, people who had no expression of fear, happiness or whatever emotion on their face, since they hadn't one. I killed quite a few.

I spent a lot of time making my own weapons out of raw material such as wood and junk I found on the streets and in the deserted houses. But my favourite one was the simplest. A bow I made out of wood, along with a few arrows, some of which were a hundred percent wood, others had a head of stone. It wasn't the most accurate bow but you would probably hit a moving target if you aimed at the belly or the torso.

Once I was on killing spree. Struggling to give myself a thrill, I had made a primitive axe – more like a homemade hammer – and got to the middle of the crowd. As usual, everyone was busy getting nowhere and back, in circles, eternally. I had never dared to attack anyone in front of others before, afraid of their reaction but for the thrill of it I was willing to take the risk. And I did.

I stopped a random faceless person and asked the time. It didn't get the joke, so I assaulted all the conceivable parts of its body with my stone axe. No blood, of course, but after a good many strikes, it died. Satisfied, I looked around to see everybody else's reaction. Nothing. They all continued their walk, minding their own business, as if nothing had happened. I attacked another, killed it, nothing. I screamed. A person turned to me, thought I wanted to start a conversation. I destroyed its body completely, with the hatred of a monster. I thought for a moment I would stop killing because it didn't seem entertaining anymore, but then I thought that if I kept killing, I would eventually end up destroying the people who had deprived me of my face.

So what? I asked myself. So what if I did find them and kill them? Would I even know it was them? For all I knew, I might have already done so and not notice. And what about the ease with which I could kill anyone – with which anyone could kill anyone else – at any given time? Including myself? Was I any less vulnerable than the faceless people I murdered? What if another faceless person in despair felt the same thrill as me and started killing too? What if I was next?

I began hiding from invisible enemies I had created in my mind. I could swear I was being watched. Constantly. My every move, my every thought even. I would stay inside windowless rooms, preferably basements and guard the door forever. I rarely walked among the rest of the faceless. Once, one of them walked too close to me and I thought it was going to kill me.

“What are you looking at?” I said defensively.

“I wasn’t looking at you,” it said.

The truth is there was no way I could know what it was looking at, so it might well have lied to me. You never knew when we faceless people were watching.

“Where are you going to?” I asked. I wanted to achieve an interrogating tone but the outcome sounded more like a question of apathetic interest.

“Anywhere.”

“Aren’t you scared?” I said. “Don’t you know there’s a person killing persons?”

“Yes, I noticed.”

“And are you not afraid for your life?”

“What life?” it said.

It might have said that ironically, or miserably, or angrily, or mysteriously, or otherwise. There was no way I could tell.

12.

Margaret, Margaret.

She was a natural redhead. I hadn’t seen such colours in the impersonal city. I understand that the kinds of red, green and yellow would be considered offensive here which is why this cursed world felt like an ancient black ‘n’ white TV programme.

What is the colour of a faceless face, one could ask. Blur. Blur would be my answer. No colour, just the blur memory of a face. The indefinable. The forever convenient indefinable.

“I’m a woman,” said Margaret once. “At the same time I’m not. Sometimes I feel like a man. What is a woman? What is a man? Aren’t we all the same?”

The forever convenient indefinable.

13.

Recently – I would say yesterday but what is a yesterday here?

Recently, I saw a person hanging itself. People ignored it. I watched it. How its legs were swimming in the air, its body shaking like a fish out of water. Then the movement stopped. It was a sad sight to watch. Personally, I wanted to cry but I had lost that identity-related ability. I was going to turn around and leave it hanging there, in peace, but it talked to me.

“Hey, you, will you get me down?” it said.

“You’re alive!” I said.

“I know, it’s horrible, but I guess we can’t die. Someone tried to kill me the other day and I was like having an empty dream and then woke up, as if something had resurrected me. No scars left, nothing. We can’t die, I tell you. I tried it on my own. Nothing. Can you please get me down?”

It had tied that rope around its neck so tightly it couldn’t release it no matter how much it tried. Pathetic creature, I thought.

“I’m the one who killed you – or who tried to kill you.”

“Damn you then! You’re crazy!”

“Yes!” I said, feeling so pleased with myself all of a sudden. I repeated my thoughts to it, satisfied it had inspired those thoughts. “I *am* crazy. I am *something*. I am definable, describable, recognisable. I exist.”

“You’re a hater, then. You want to be distinguished from the rest. You would like to have a face, if you could! Go away, I want nothing to do with you!”

“Your choice. Bye.”

“Where are you going? Get me down!”

“You’re the one who told the hater to go away when he offered you his help. I have to go. I’m proving a point here.”

I wasn’t really going to leave poor it hanging up there, but I went to the place where I had hidden my bow and arrows which I thought I would use to get the person down. Not to my surprise, it was still there when I got back. No-one else would help it. Naturally, it didn’t recognise me at first and waved.

“What do you wave for? I’m your murderer!”

“My saviour! Will you help me get down?”

“No-one else will? In that case...”

I raised my bow and aimed at the rope.

“What happens if you miss?” shouted the hanged person.

That distracted me and I did miss. The first arrow got it in the arm.

“Do you want it back?” said the person.

“I got one more,” I said. I missed again. “Yeah, I want it back.”

“What do you think happens if you aim at my face?”

“You want me to try?”

The person threw me back my arrow and with it, I aimed at that part of the person’s body where the face would normally be. The shot was successful.

“What happened?” said the person.

“Did you feel it?” I said.

“Where’d it go?”

“It sort of... disappeared inside your face.”

“What face?”

“You know what I mean. The void on top of your neck.”

“It disappeared? Where do you think it went?”

“I don’t know. How about we get you down first before speculating?”

“You’re not good with that thing, though. Why not throw a knife at me? I’ll grab it from my skin and use it to cut the rope.”

“Fantastic.”

That’s what we did. I found a sharp kitchen-knife in the abandoned house behind the person and threw it at its body. It bled air and fume. They all did. The kind of fume those obscure identity-removing machines produced.

While it was still hanging around itself, the person reminded me of the rotating room where I had lost my identity.

14.

Me and it talked in the garden where it had hung.

Me and it talked about many things. It explained that unlike most of the faceless people there, it wasn’t born without a face but it had got its face removed later in life when it already had developed some personality. I didn’t ask it about its past nor did I tell it that I was *from* the past.

Finally, me and it talked about the endless possibilities of where the things we threw inside the faceless faces went. Eventually, I tried to put my face inside its face but

something prevented the two faces to come too close, like an energy field. I threw a rock down its face though, and put my foot in for fun.

“You think someone might be on the other side?” I said.

“Does anyone tickle your foot?” it said.

I wanted to laugh. I told it. It didn't know what laughter was.

“Laughter is discrimination,” I explained, “because not all people laugh at the same thing. It's an emotion born out of prejudice. People wouldn't laugh in utopia.”

Margaret would hate me for saying this, I thought. But one of my greatest pleasures when I was with her was to show her how self-contradictory was her logic. Ah, Margaret!

“Know what we'll do?” I said. While thinking of Margaret, I had an idea. “I'm taking notes of my experiences here, I've got this notebook. I'll throw it in your face so it gets to the other side. I have no idea who or what is on the other side, but it's definitely worth a try, don't you think?”

So that's what we did. If someone is reading this, it means we're successful.

15.

Margaret, if you're reading this, I want to go back!

The Doers

1.

“Today’s my first killing spree, right? Oooh, so excited! Will there be lots of blood? Will there be, you know, ACTION?”

The man in the white suit kept chewing his croissant and didn’t reply before it had disappeared inside his beard. The other, a young thin man in black costume and huge yellow sunglasses, had put his hand in his pocket and was holding something proudly. His teeth chattering. His eyes behind the ridiculous glasses so wide opened they would pop at any time, bounce on the glass, and fall back in their holes.

“Get in there,” said the man in white, interrupting his thoughts.

Trembling, and trembling more for trying not to show it, with his hand still in the pocket, the man with the yellow glasses entered the crowded cinema. The movie was about to start, so he was on time.

“My first kill... oh, first killing spree...” he murmured joyfully as he walked among the unsuspecting crowd. His bearded partner had stayed behind in the vehicle, waiting for him to finish the job.

In the room, people were still trying to find a seat. A guy’s frog had followed him inside and they were chasing each other all around the place. An obese family had brought their dinner with them while a nudist was walking up and down fully dressed to protest against the stereotypical representation of the lead female character in last week’s movie.

Many of the people in the audience were dressed in superhero costumes, some of which were related to the movie, but most of them not. The man with the yellow glasses finally found a place to sit next to a sixteen year old boy who was wearing a shirt with the letters “fuck the world” on it.

Finally, the man took his hand out of the pocket, bringing it near the kid’s face. He was holding a remote control. He pressed a button, then put the remote back in the pocket quickly. Then, as if he had felt the sudden need to invade the toilet or to answer a call of significant importance, he left his seat and ran out of the room as fast as he could.

He almost fell in the dirty river outside, but managed to hold his balance and jump in his partner’s vehicle, which took off immediately. Once inside the winged transparent sphere of the Raincopter, his trembling, and all the music of agony inside his head, slowly but steadily faded out.

“If they ask, you’ll say you ran away to escape from the murderer,” said the bearded man when the cinema building was a good deal behind.

“My first killing spree, Papa...” murmured the man with the glasses, while trying to imagine what must be happening back there. He had been informed the boy was part of a gang and went everywhere armed, as many people did anyway, and hoped he had created a good amount of chaos. “My first killing spree...”

The bearded man didn’t reply. When minutes later, the man with the glasses abruptly released an orgasmic laugh, he told him to shut up.

“But Papa...”

In his mind, he heard the screams and recalled all these faces... In his imagination, he painted them all in blood...

2.

The man with the yellow glasses and the black suit was John Du, 24, and the latest personal assistant to secret agent Papa Nick, also known as “The Doer” or “the man who does things.” Papa was the best at this, the only one of his kind.

As an agent, he was only active in times of great crisis when his services were needed the most, as only he had that special talent required to do things. Not to do them *well*, necessarily – just to do them.

“You know, Johnny, to be a Doer, following orders is never enough. You need to improvise also. Watch this.”

He stopped the vehicle and opened its only door-window to talk to an old man who was crossing the river on his toad.

“Excuse me, sir, but will you promise me you won’t take it personally?”

“Take what personally?”

“That,” said Papa Nick and took his ray gun out and pointed it at the poor old man. The gun went pew-pew and the old man went “ow” or he would have gone “ow” but he had already turned to liquid and liquids don’t usually go “ow.”

“What the hell was that?” said John when they were off the ground again.

“Wait, I’m not done yet,” said Papa and activated the computer screen which was itself part of the vehicle. He needn’t press a button as most of the inner side of the Raincopter consisted of a series of touch screens.

“Old man gone missing,” he reported to the computer. “Possibly dead. Last seen driving a Frogse in central river of Flooded Lon.”

The screen now showed a Frogse, also known as “the horse of the lake,” a particular kind of mutated frog that could easily be trained to become a means of transport and was preferred by the poor population who couldn’t afford a boat or an air balloon. After the great flood, when Lon was conveniently renamed to Flooded Lon – though it still remained the kingdom’s capital – these Frogse could be found all over the place. Even so, the old man’s Frogse would find a new owner in no time.

“I still don’t get it. I mean, I get why we organised the killing sprees. I get why we organised all those accidents, murders, rapes... But to actually do it, to actually shoot the man yourself, with your own weapon...”

No sound came out of the big black beard. Johnny continued.

“Of course, you might say, killing someone with a gun feels the same as making someone else kill someone with a gun. Still...” Johnny looked in Papa’s indifferent eyes. Johnny removed his large yellow glasses to look clearer in Papa’s eyes. “Still, it is murder done by someone else, in this case the gun, in the other case the remote control. I mean, you yourself don’t feel like the murderer... Do you?”

Papa changed the subject.

“What’s the next thing on the list?”

Johnny examined the various lists that appeared on the screen. He knew his wife was in there somewhere but would rather deal with this later. He kept reading.

“Well, there hasn’t been a rape on Cannibal Street for almost three months... I guess their hunger is more powerful than their lust. And there hasn’t been a terrorist attack on the palace since... ever. That’s because terrorists are programmed never to attack the palace. What about a threat, though? Tell them that terrorists have planned a bomb in...? I don’t know, somewhere, anywhere, just mention terrorists!”

Papa sighed.

“Don’t underestimate yourself, boy. We don’t do threats. We do the action.”

He said “we,” John thought. He meant we’re both Doers now, John thought. This is my reward for “doing” that killing spree, John thought. Now I’m a Doer too.

They were now crossing Absurd Street where the Palace was. The river passing in front of the Palace was always flooded with blood, real blood, from all those countries Her Majesty, the Mother Archetype, had invaded in her long career as a warlord. She was on holiday though and had stopped invading countries recently in order to organise the Games. Normally, being such a starter of wars, she would have been banned from joining this multi-national celebration of Peace, but the Games had been devaluated to mere spectacle to keep the slaves entertained.

“It’s almost three o’ clock. Can I...?” said John to Papa.

Papa stopped the vehicle.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Please, Papa! I need to!”

With a grin on his face and the disappointment that his newest assistant wasn’t any cleverer than the last, Papa opened the door-window of the Raincopter and a hand extended forming the Queen Ant Salute and a soft voice was heard singing in front of the palace, joining millions of others chanting simultaneously all over the kingdom.

“God save our noble Mom,
 ‘cause some people are noble and some are not,
 that’s the Queen Ant Song!
 Long to reign over us,
 we actually want someone to reign over us!
 How could anyone sing anything like this,
 unless an ant?”

John Du with a big smile on his face, feeling useful and intelligent, proud that he was part of the kingdom, but mostly proud that he was proud, sat back next to Papa, relieved he had done his duty as a citizen of the empire and was ready now to continue his day of doing things.

“What’s the matter?” he complained to Papa. “Every day at three o’ clock, we must all salute the Great Mother. Because it is three o’ clock only if the Great Mother wants it to be. We learned that at school. Have you not? Don’t tell me you don’t enjoy singing the national anthem, at least for the sexual pleasure of it, the pleasure of feeling important as part of the empire, as a servant to Her Majesty, the Mother Archetype... Or don’t you love your Mother?”

“Are you done?” said Papa frustrated, lifting his hand for a moment as if to slap him but he just scratched his own bald head in the end. “Let’s get back to work then. We have a thousand things to do before the opening ceremony tonight.”

While flying across the river-streets of Flooded Lon, they saw an unhealthy amount of people on their way to the Stadium. Thousands were on Frogses but most of them were swimming all the way in the radiated water and the blood of a thousand nations. Looking down at the masses of untitled people, the Rich People With Titles were heading to the same direction in their air balloons.

“Ok, now that you are officially an agent in her Mother’s service, I can reveal to you that you have been lied to about pretty much everything since you were a child. You have been told for example that in order to exist, you must constantly do things. You must work hard to exhaust your body and then you must have fun in order to keep your body exhausted. You must never have energy left to think. You must never have the time to think. You are a Homo Chronoborus, a Time-Wasting Man. Think of this. What do you do when nothing’s happening? When you’re not kept busy?”

“I don’t know,” said John. “I guess I just... think about things. The body rests and the mind thinks.”

“See? That’s why people must be busy. But now there’s a crisis and it’s hard to keep them distracted. That’s why the Great Mother is hosting the Games, like her uncle Adolf before her. And our job as Doers is to make sure people forget about the crisis during the Games. It’s a very delicate situation, which is why we have been summoned. Now, we’ll need at least a couple of murders this week, one could be a hate crime against a minority person, say, in public view, the other... I don’t know, that would take some planning. Don’t forget about improvising.”

“What about the ceremony itself?”

“No, we cannot attend that. It’s an excellent opportunity to do things while the rest of the world will be watching the opening ceremony. I’m thinking of the good old accident technique... What about a nice explosion?”

“But I want to go... I want to see the Mother Archetype...”

“Grow up. You’re a propaganda agent now, you can’t be fooled by the very propaganda you are responsible for. Or can you? No, really, you have to grow up, Johnny Du.”

4.

The whole world was watching the ceremony while John Du was working. He had spotted the interesting case of a family of slaves, bound with flags of the empire instead of leashes, barking the thousand names of the Mother Archetype from their floating home on Colony Street.

These slaves were only one of many families the Empire had received as payment for the loans their poor country had taken from the Great Mother, after the Mother herself had ruined that country through cultural warfare. John Du wanted to have fun with them so he used his remote control on a gang of armed Frogse-riders

who, under John's control, would torture, rape and cannibalise all seven members of the particular group.

"Now that's what I call improvising," said Papa when he heard of John's latest achievement. "I'm thinking of promoting you to my permanent assistant, after all."

"What happened to the last one?"

"I killed him."

They had coffee in one of the air-cafes above the city. It was late at night and they could observe the herd in the city below, cheering for the one crowd-pleasing spectacle after the other. Thousands of years after the days of gladiators and public floggings and nothing had really changed.

"What are we doing tomorrow?" asked John.

"Tomorrow we kill your wife," said Papa, very simply. "You will choose the way, of course."

John paused and looked outside indifferently. It was raining as usual. Their Raincopter was recharging. In the background, the naked children of the dying culture of childhood were floating around on wide-opened umbrellas, chained to the air balloons of their parents. Occasionally, some would be sacrificed to the Mother Archetype, since all children belonged to her anyway.

"Drowning," said John finally. "If she must die, let her die from lack of breath. I don't want her face ruined, I don't want death to change her appearance. If it must be, let her drown."

"You know it's part of the process. Unless of course you don't want to be promoted."

"I want to live," said John. "I know it's either this or my death. If it must be, let it be her death. I'm in. We'll do it your way."

"You're smarter than I originally thought," said Papa. "I'm happy for you."

5.

John's apartment was in the underwater part of Flooded Lon. Most of the remaining middle-class lived there, afraid of the wild city above them. Not as much of the gangsters and organised crime, as of the random people.

There were posters all over the city, and waterproof ones too on the submarine buses and the sunken ruins. "Random people will kill you. People without a past or anything. Be forever wary of the random people."

The posters were designed by the same organisations for which Papa Nick was working his whole life. He knew of the technique. He must have explained it to John a thousand times.

“People don’t just turn to murderers. People can’t take big decisions anyway. They don’t have free will. They have microchips. We have the remote controls. We find one of the random people. We press a button. And here’s our serial killer. Or our terrorist. Thanks to us, there is news on TV every single day. Thanks to us, the Doers, things happen. The things we want to happen all the time. We make them happen.”

It was early in the morning when the Raincopter’s sphere dove underwater and the Doers were outside John’s place in no time. Behind the glass window-walls, John saw his young wife, Angela, almost an adult, reading a pre-apocalyptic romance in her bath robe, her unending dark hair wet, nearly covering her face.

“What is she doing?” said Papa.

“She’s not doing anything, just reading.”

“I know, it’s crazy. But your kind is getting extinct, you know. Normally, people are either poor servants or rich masters. Neither can read. You underwater people are getting rarer every day.”

“Yeah, I know,” murmured John. “It’s crazy.”

John used a common remote control to open the main gate and then, when the Raincopter entered through, the gate closed behind it. They waited until there was no water left in the corridor, then John moved to the door that led to his apartment.

“Are you ready to do this?” said Papa.

John knocked on the door. Angela took some time to open it, but was very polite when she did and kissed John passionately as if she hadn’t seen him in ages.

“Hello, Mr. Nick,” she said to Papa.

“Oh, you’ve been expecting me? That’s very sweet,” said Papa. “But let’s be brief, shall we, because John and I don’t have much time. We got – how should I put it – things to do.”

“Please take a seat,” said the woman as if she hadn’t heard him. “I’ll be back with you boys in a minute.”

Papa sat on the sofa the woman was sitting on before and John sat on an armchair opposite of him. He was trembling. Not like when he had entered that cinema. Now he was trembling with fear.

“Why is it taking you so long?” said Papa to him while the woman was away in the bathroom. “If you want to say goodbye first, just do it. We don’t have time to waste.”

It's just a push of a button and she will do whatever you want her to do when you push that button."

"You're right," said John. "I'm sorry."

In the TV on the wall behind them were images from yesterday's opening ceremony. The Mother Archetype was trying to look cool. Her slaves were proud that she looked cool. The People With Titles were pleased that the slaves were pleased because that meant they wouldn't start a revolution anytime soon.

"There's no point in saying goodbyes," said John finally, after taking a heavy breath he would never have released if he could. "Get in here, Angela."

She did. She stood in front of him. Obviously didn't like his tone but he was too nervous lately and his partner was there – more like a boss – which obviously made him even more nervous and abrupt.

"Sweetie," said John. "I wish I didn't have to do this to you but... you know the society we live in is cruel. Sacrifices have to be made and I really have to do something I would rather not do in order to get this promotion... But I don't have a choice, because..."

"Get over with it," said Papa.

"I won't say goodbye," said John and pressed the button on his special Doer version remote control that instantly turned Angela to a puppet with only one thought in its mind. Suicide by drowning. Then, as if a sleepwalker, Angela walked to the front door, then the door behind her closed before she would get to her watery grave.

Papa was pleased. His advanced Master Doer's version remote with a computer screen on it revealed that the command of suicide had indeed been given and that meant John was eligible for the job of permanent agent and would be promoted immediately. There was only one criterion: to be ruthless. A killing spree was nothing compared to looking in the eyes of the woman he loved, the woman he once chose to live his life with, and decide her execution.

It is amazing what people can do for a king or a queen. There was no doubt that for the Mother Archetype, John was prepared to do anything. He was more than a slave-citizen. He was a person who would sing the racist anthem without shame, who would wish the Great Mother "long to reign over him" with pride, as if being ruled aroused him sexually, mentally or otherwise.

"I am proud of you, son," said Papa Nick, putting his hand on John's arm.

They had to go now and do more things, the things that Doers do, the things that kept people busy so people couldn't think, the things that kept people distracted from

the real problems in times of crisis and separated them into smaller groups that could do little on their own and had little in common with the rest.

Papa opened the door to the world outside. He had the unpleasant surprise of not seeing his transport, his favourite Raincopter, where he had parked it, right outside John's apartment door. Instead, he saw her, the woman who had been ordered to be dead – and his device had confirmed she had been ordered – and was not. She was doing nothing but standing. And smiling.

Papa pointed his own remote at her. He pressed the button. Nothing happened. He wished she strangled herself that very instant. She didn't. He then wished she ate herself. He kept pressing the button. No response. No ACTION.

"I had her microchip removed," said John coldly. "Don't ask me how, we both lost a lot of blood. Oh, I had mine removed as well, obviously. There is a group of revolutionary surgeons, all living underwater so you people can't spot them. Well, let's not waste any more time. There's no point in saying goodbyes, right?"

Papa was sweating all over himself. Angela was keeping a safe distance. She was now aiming at Papa with his ray gun – Papa's own ray gun which she had taken from the vehicle – the vehicle itself was nowhere to be found.

"Our friends have taken care of it," said Angela to Papa. "If it's your vehicle you're thinking of, I mean. They want to study its technology. We're tired of moving around on Frogse, you know? There're not a lot of places a Frogse can go, such as the Floating Lon in the sky."

"But...", said Papa finally, to John. "But you were loyal to the Great Mother. You couldn't be a thinking man, you were singing the bloody irrational anthem! And you killed people, you destroyed the lives of people!"

"I have never really used that remote," said John. "Well, not until now. As for all those horrible things, the killing sprees, the order I gave to that gang – which was my gang, by the way – all that was just theatre. I wanted to get you down here, in the underwater part of the city where the thinking people live, in my own place where I can destroy you without any witnesses or cameras. And without any difficulty, too. By the way, pointing that remote control at me, it's getting really annoying. Why don't you put it down?"

"Why don't you put yours down?" said Papa.

"Because mine works. Yours doesn't."

Papa wanted to shout but the voice coming out of his beard was suddenly too weak. He had never felt so insecure.

“It does work,” he protested. “It is the Master Doer version, the most advanced technology on the planet, designed by her Majesty’s top scientist-servants and loyal secret agents.”

“Sorry, Papa,” said John. “It might work on the Mother’s slaves but it doesn’t work on thinking people. My apologies but you know, Papa, following orders is never enough. One needs to improvise also. Watch me.”

That was the moment that John Du pressed the button. Papa was about to reply to John but his mouth was magically shut and his mind was suddenly elsewhere. He tried to think but was too busy getting himself killed by hitting his head on the glass wall. The impenetrable glass wall.

Angela would rather not stay and look but got in the house. John stayed and waited until his ex-partner was dead, then kindly took the Master Version remote control from his pocket. The most powerful weapon in the universe was now in a revolutionary’s hands. The last Doer on the planet was dead. The time of the Doers was over.

The time of the Thinkers had come.

Parts of me that aren't mine

Part 1

Jasper Fava couldn't walk, so science made him legs. His left eye couldn't see, so he got himself a new eye from the Machine, one that was so perfect he decided to have his good eye replaced also.

He was only five when they upgraded him. At first he resisted but didn't have a choice. Being deformed was against the law and he had to be repaired before he could go to school. Until then, he was considered a cripple child and not only for being born without legs or with a poor eyesight. What truly made him a cripple in the eyes of the other children was the lack of mechanical parts in his body. Thankfully, this was corrected.

At age five, Jasper was taken to the Tower of London where the Machine was. There the mistakes nature made were corrected. There entered the dysfunctional human bodies, all too human, all born cripple and half-formed, and they were fixed. In the dungeons of the Tower, the dreams of a post-human future were fulfilled and the memories of an inglorious past erased.

It cost nothing to get upgraded to "normal." The Machine offered its services to the entire society for free, and the gates of the Tower were always open to every citizen who wanted to replace a hand or an eye or any other part of decaying flesh with a superior mechanical version.

Part 2

One day, while returning from school, Jasper saw in an alley two teenage cyborgs fighting over a piece of high-tech equipment. The one had a long blade coming out of his hand, part of his defence mechanism – the other was literally empty-handed. To Jasper's surprise, the unarmed cyborg won. This outcome was illogical. His personal computer's calculations showed that an armed cyborg would always be superior to an unarmed one.

"Probably he had an advanced fighting system," Jasper thought. Otherwise, he couldn't make sense of it at the time.

Part 3

By the age of eight, Jasper was an excellent student. He couldn't count to five but could use the calculator that counted up to five for him. Besides, this was a perfect

world and all students were perfectly programmed. None of them could count to five and none of them needed to, because they had all been given calculators.

“Think of the calculator as an extension of your mind,” said the teacher in the first and only math lesson. “Why has it been invented? To solve the problem instead of you. It makes your life easier. Science makes your life easier.”

The teacher often made references to the theory of the extended self, which alone justified the invention and use of calculators. According to the theory, this part of the cyborg mind existed to do the job that that part of the human mind would otherwise have to do on its own.

Jasper disliked the idea.

“Wouldn’t it be more honest to say it limits our mind instead of expanding it?” he said. “I mean, I’d rather be able to count on my own.”

“But why would you *want* to do it yourself?” said the teacher. “When there’s a machine that can do it for you? Especially when that machine is part of you, part of the extended you. Come on, Jasper, try to see the bigger picture!”

Jasper did try. One day, he wanted to estimate what twenty nine times ten was. The calculator did the math instead of him. At the same time, in another area of the island, an obese man decided to lose weight. So, he programmed his personal robot to exercise instead of him.

It didn’t work.

Part 4

Jasper grew up in the floating city-state of London. The Tower was in the centre of the city. His father lived there. He was everyone’s father, Mr. Goro. Apart from that, he was also the Machine’s inventor. Not the first cyborg to have walked the Earth but the only one known to have survived the flood.

As a country, London was disconnected from the rest of the world, but rumour had it there was no rest of the world left. In the island, Mr. Goro was worshipped both as a god and as head of state. Its people were told that outside of the island not much, if anything, existed.

During his childhood, Jasper was taken to the Tower one more time. At age twelve, he had his left hand replaced by a mechanical one, so he could work. Of course, he needn’t work to make money, as this was a moneyless society, but he wanted to, so as to no longer have to face the prejudice of his fellow students.

Part 5

One day he returned to the Tower to ask for a better job.

“I want to do more,” explained the man to the Machine.

“You are doing enough,” replied the Machine. “You are useful. You work at the factory full-time.”

“I am not *aware* of it. While my left hand and legs work at the factory, I am fast-asleep or watching a film in the inner screen of my cyborg eyes, or chatting with a friend at the other side of the city, whispering to one of the antennas coming out of my skin. I’m never aware that I work.”

“That’s utopian. You should be thankful, science has advanced to the extent that your body can work without bothering you. You can even have cyber sex while working in the factory, and a real orgasm too, and it will not slightly affect your work. What is wrong with that? Why are you complaining?”

“I just want to feel useful, like, solve a problem but on my own.”

“The computer chip in your brain solves all your problems. The robot-parts in your body do the work. What would you rather do? Can you compete with a computer in dealing with data? Can your fleshy parts compete with your mechanical ones in effectiveness?”

“I feel I’m being replaced.” Jasper left the great chamber.

The Machine saved the data from their conversation for later use.

Part 6

He was upgraded to an adult when he first met his father. Mr. Goro, in his silver suit, with his one brilliant eye, because a second would be unnecessary, and his electronic voice, his bloodless body of perfectly maintained flesh, and the katana he always carried with him – the only reminder that there used to be a culture other than theirs – and, finally, the iron smile on his face, the forged smile of a paralysed tranquillity that was once achieved in times of crisis and had remained unaffected by the passing of ages.

He was all white and grey colours, Mr. Goro, apart from his skin which was, admittedly, too human too fake. Skin was to his body what a wig would be to a bald man’s head.

Goro had always wanted to meet Jasper in person, having heard enough to put him on his list of Noteworthy Individuals some time ago. What Jasper didn’t know was that the real title of the list was different.

Defective Cyborgs was the real title. And next to Jasper's name, the computer had added a more specific note: "Potentially Dangerous. Thinks Too Much. Recycle."

Part 7

"Do you know how to use a sword?" asked Mr. Goro.

Behind the ocean of identical metal buildings, the sun of a lost world was diving into temporal oblivion. The sunset was magnificent at this time of the day, an image no man-made device could produce.

"I haven't been programmed to, father," said Jasper.

Mr. Goro laughed honestly.

"It takes more than a programme. You need to use both parts, both machine and body to be a swordsman. Take this blade, hold it with your right hand, the human one. How does it feel between your fingers? Its weight, its touch? Accept it with all your senses."

"Am I supposed to fight someone?" asked Jasper, while thrusting the sword in the radiated air.

"Martial arts aren't really about fighting," replied Goro. "They are about knowing yourself. Do you know yourself, Jasper Fava?"

Jasper's mind was elsewhere. He would like his cyborg-mind to take his part in the conversation, to have the auto-pilot in his head speak instead. He enjoyed the movement of the sword and would rather fight the wind with it.

Goro hit Jasper's sword with his own, so violently that he disarmed him. The young cyborg looked lost for a moment then instinctively lifted his hands in front of his face as if he was under attack.

"What did that feel?" said Goro softly and Jasper lowered his fists. "When you suddenly lost possession of the blade? Didn't it feel like part of you was taken away?"

Jasper gave it some thought.

"Yes," he said.

"The sword becomes an extension of your hand. In the old world, there used to be a race of people called the Samurai. I don't know where they lived – I don't know much pre-flood history, I was too young when the world flooded. But I read a book about these people, they had made martial arts a way of life. When a Samurai held his sword – like this katana – he treated that object as part of him. Do you understand?"

Jasper thought he recognised the reference.

"Our school teacher said the devices we use become extensions of our mind."

“But you believe, I’m told, that what they really do is *replace* your mind.”

Jasper nodded.

“Well, this is different,” said Goro. “I suggest you practice with it. Better yet, unite with it. Trust me, this is a part you need.”

Mr. Goro had let him live that day. The young cyborg, puzzled, looked at the gift of his master, and wondered what use it could have other than killing.

“I still don’t get how this can be a part of me!”

“Why, is your *real* hand any more *you* than this? Isn’t it also an extension of you? You have a lot to learn, Jasper. Treat your devices as body parts. Being a cyborg is not enough – you have to think like one also!”

As the ageless man’s voice faded away in the darkness that flooded the night, Jasper Fava waved the sword playfully, like a child fooling around. The sword felt much lighter. And what sounds it made!

Part 8

The next day, Jasper went back to the Machine, to obtain a swordsmanship program and upload it to his cyber-brain. Now the sword felt at home in his hand. In the days that followed, Jasper would randomly provoke armed cyborgs in the streets to duel with them for the fun of it, if not for practice. Why he was suddenly so obsessed with sword fighting, he couldn’t tell. Perhaps it was tempting as a thing of the past, a past he could never know. Or merely the fact that Goro himself had introduced him to it for some reason, some reason that had to be of importance...

Part 9

Months passed and his enthusiasm faded away like a shadow. He no longer engaged in duels, whether in real life or virtual. Instead, he practiced on his own in desolated places where he could be alone. There he found that wielding the sword felt different when his machine-eyes were deactivated, and in the silence of these hours of the night when nobody was out there but himself and the moon. He could swear that the sword danced better in the silence than in the noise, in the darkness than in the light, in his human than in his cyborg hand.

His relationship with the sword changed him, as did the strange things he saw in everyday life. Once, on his way home, he noticed on a prison-like wall the words “Technology Limits Us” written in cyborg blood.

He saved the information in both brains.

Part 10

He quit his job the following day. Work was voluntary either way, and human workers were the most replaceable, unnecessary part of the scientific society. What wasn't as widely known, they were recyclable also.

Recyclable and disposable.

Part 11

There was no graveyard for cyborgs. The human flesh was burnt in the ovens of the Machine, and their robot-parts were recycled. The frequency of these secret executions depended on the size of the current population.

This kept the population down. Priority was given to those cyborgs who had expressed an unhealthy attachment to their human side. Jasper Fava was number one on the list for years, yet Mr. Goro had chosen to let him be, observing his progress as if he was a guinea pig and London was the laboratory where such guinea pigs would wander aimlessly around. Perhaps the reason he kept Jasper alive was that he saw in him the only real human he had seen in the last three hundred years of his life.

Part 12

There was no graveyard but Jasper once saw what was going on in the Tower. He had spent the night meditating, sitting on one of the many roofs of the impersonal city, when he heard the screams of metal being crushed, and smelled the smoke of burning flesh in the air. He had forgotten he was near the Tower. His eyes switched to night-vision mode and he walked carefully as an iron cat in the dark, trying not to make any noise.

A gang of advanced cyborgs were leading a smaller group of inferior ones to the Tower. Why in this time of the night, Jasper could not tell, as all upgrades were done during the day. His fellow cyborgs should be in their cells now, their computers turned off and their human brains resting. Until then, he had the impression he was the only man or machine active at this time of the night.

He watched the cyborgs on their way to the Tower. He followed them, tried to blend in the larger group and was successful. The sword he was carrying was proof enough that he was cyborg enough to have been granted a sword.

The groups split into smaller ones, as they descended twisted stairs unfamiliar to him, leading to the darkest parts of the Tower. There he witnessed the melting of breathing metal. There he saw the disposal of meat and recycling of people.

The cyborgs that did this were completely indifferent, absent-minded, as only their robot-part participated in the process. Their human mind was fast asleep, unaware, possibly dreaming.

Having seen enough, Jasper turned to leave. He needed time to recover from the shock, he needed to think. He never got the chance to. On his way out, he saw he was being followed by a tall heavily armoured cyclops he knew as Mr. Goro.

Part 13

Jasper couldn't run forever. Any moment now, the sun would rise, and with it, the whole society would wake up. What if they were ordered to attack him? At some point he had to turn and face Goro. But first he needed to *think*.

His imagination was malfunctioning. He hadn't fought a real duel before, a duel to the death, and both his human logic and his computer's agreed that a positive outcome was improbable.

He escaped the Tower and got past the factory building and the "Technology Limits Us" graffiti. Finally, he got past the building where his cell was, the place he had been taught to call "home." All this time, he was careful not to drop the sword, as that would have been the end of him. All this time, he was careful not to slow down, not to stop for any reason, not to reach any dead-ends.

But that was inevitable. When he reached the end of London, the end of the city and the country, the beach where his metal feet stepped on the red sand and the black pebbles, he stopped and raised the sword above his head, like some ancient warrior statue that had woken up after a thousand years.

He *thought*. He realised his leader and parent was an enemy he had to destroy. The place he called home was a prison. The Machine that had given him everything he had, had in fact *taken* everything he had.

He knew what he was fighting against but not what he was fighting for. It didn't matter. When Goro's blade came whistling from the shadows, he was prepared to fight back.

Part 14

Goro was much more experienced. He had been practicing swordsmanship for centuries and his robot-body was technologically superior either way. His movements were faster, his mind more advanced. If Jasper managed an early successful blow, it was due to Goro's arrogance. He couldn't count on it. Goro replied immediately, striking Jasper's left hand so hard he almost broke both hand and sword.

Jasper's morale had received the most damage and when Goro's blade nearly chopped off his nose, Jasper fell back on the sand and accepted his defeat.

"You give up?" said Goro. "You're pathetic. See, that's your human side, it's weakening you. It's what technology is meant to replace. Now die for it, die in the name of science!"

Jasper was filled with anger, an emotion removed from the superior cyborgs. It didn't help him fight Goro, but it motivated him to keep trying. Jasper's next attack took his opponent by surprise and disarmed him. Goro's smile remained unaffected, the indifferent smile of a metal Buddha.

Goro had other means to fight, being the master. He transmitted a command to Jasper's inner-computer that deactivated most of his robot-parts, such as his left hand.

"That's impossible," said Jasper while his hand was all of a sudden too heavy to move and his eyesight nearly as poor as a human's. "What is wrong with me?"

Goro retrieved his sword from the sand.

"I have deactivated your cyborg mind and every part of you that is machine. So tell me, *human*, how fast can you act now? How efficiently can you *think* on your own? If the device that thinks instead of you goes off, what do you do? If the machine goes off, it becomes a burden – or was it always burden? You have asked yourself that, haven't you? But I'm afraid it's too late."

It was not. Without a second thought, Jasper disconnected his metal hand and let it drop soulless on the ground. No blood was spilled as all the early wounds had long been closed and the metal was connected to the cyborg mind not the heart. Now Jasper, lighter than before, rushed towards Goro and the fight went on.

"What did you do?" said Goro. "You are now a cripple again!"

"I was born a cripple, you bastard, and I'm proud of it!"

Jasper was now fighting better than before, because, as he had realised in his meditations, the less the things that troubled the mind, the better the mind worked.

He decisively put the sword close to his own face. With its edge, he removed the left eye first, the right one after. The blind swordsman. And how relieved he felt, how

free! He had removed all the robot-parts of his body but his metal feet which he still needed to fight – but which he would gladly do without.

“It’s better to be cripple than cyborg!” shouted the blind swordsman, his blade dancing in the air. Having denounced all senses but that of sound and touch, having freed himself from so many distractions, he achieved the impossible blow and struck the shocked Goro straight in his glass eye, the only truly vulnerable spot, and through it, his brain, the only human part he had left. That did it. The all-mighty cyclops dropped dead. The smile on his face, unchanged. The age of the Machine was over.

Part 15

Jasper Fava, laughing bitterly, disconnected his body from its metal legs and crawled victoriously across the beach. His fellow cyborgs, many of which had just awakened, were silently watching him crawl, some from their cell windows, others from the pavement.

The former cyborg, now full time human, the *man* named Jasper Fava crawled stubbornly ahead, towards the ocean. Slowly but steadily with only one hand and half an arm to help him move, he dove inside the water and struggled to swim for the first time in his life, guided by his remaining four human senses, invalid yes but a hundred percent human, swimming fearsomely against the waves, with no other thought in his mind than never to stop until he reached one of two destinations.

Either a new land to call his home or a watery grave to call his home.

Chapter Six

Commentary on the fourth group of stories, ‘Utopian/Dystopian Perspectives’

In ‘Utopian/Dystopian Perspectives’, I return to the exploration of utopian and dystopian states of mind and the conflict between them. More specifically, in the story ‘Curiosity is my middle name’ I satirise the – in my view, escapist – culture that looks to the stars as humanity’s future rather than towards creating a better society on Earth. The latter is in accordance with a point that science fiction writer J. G. Ballard makes in his article ‘Which Way to Inner Space?’ He writes: ‘I think science fiction should turn its back on space, on interstellar travel, extraterrestrial life forms, galactic wars and the overlap of these ideas that spreads across the margins of nine-tenths of magazine s-f.’¹¹² Instead Ballard suggests that ‘The only true alien planet is Earth.’¹¹³

This point of view is important in *Etherotopia* because of its focus on the ‘inner’, rather than the outer, space. In ‘Curiosity is my middle name’, the message implied is that a better society can only be created on Earth, in other words ‘here’, not ‘elsewhere’. One might, in the same spirit, add ‘now’, not ‘later’. The story also concludes with the phrase ‘Wasn’t it better elsewhere after all?’, as the ones who left Earth for Mars realise the Martians have left their own planet for Earth. I consider these escapist perspectives dystopian because they prevent any possible transition to utopia or, generally speaking, they prevent radical change; the reason being that these perspectives postpone change ad infinitum by only being able to conceive it taking place elsewhere and elsewhen.

‘Karyatis Unbound’ thematically returns to the cultural conflict that was depicted in ‘The War of Appearances’ through the, archetypal in fantasy literature, conflict between elves and orcs. Unlike ‘The War of Appearances’ though, ‘Karyatis Unbound’ has a positive ending. Here an Elf visits the Orcish island’s museum and sees the statue of Karyatis which the Orcs had stolen from the Elves in the past. When touched by the Elf, the statue awakens and asks the Elf to take her back to the Elven land. On the way Karyatis takes back everything that the Elven culture has given to the Orcs, including technology, democracy and language; these concepts become inconceivable to the Orcs, particularly when she absorbs their alphabet, leaving them speechless. The only thing that remains unchanged by the time Karyatis leaves the island is the Orcish queen, monarchy being ‘a concept primitive enough on its own.’

¹¹²J. G. Ballard, “Which Way to Inner Space?” *New Worlds* 118, 1962, in J. G. Ballard, *A User’s Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (London: Flamingo, 1997), 197.

¹¹³ Ballard, *Inner Space*, 197.

The story concludes with the Elves un-discovering the Orcish island, therefore cancelling history, claiming their society is better without the influence of the Orcs.

Again, as with ‘The War of Appearances’, the Elves and Orcs don’t represent races or countries but worldviews and, subsequently, fictional archetypal cultures that derive from them; the Elves are more spiritual, peaceful and value the arts while the Orcs are arrogant and greedy, value brute strength and power. The Elves consider the statue of Karyatis their possession because, though it was created by the Elves and the Orcs stole it, the Orcs believe they have ‘earned’ it since they had the power to take it. The conflict is therefore between a humanist perspective and the ‘law of the jungle’ that the Orcs respect, that is the rule of the strongest. One can interpret the Orcs in these two stories as fascist; they are certainly imperialist. The emphasis is, as in previous stories, not on the socio-economical problems of the two worldviews but on the worldviews themselves. The dystopian perspective of the ‘fascist’ Orcs corrupts the Elven aesthetics in ‘The War of Appearances’; however, in ‘Karyatis Unbound’ the opposite happens, as the story starts with the Orcs owning an Elven treasure that represents their utopian values and it ends with the undoing of history, which results in both cultures forgetting each other and thus cancelling each culture’s influence on the other. It is important to add that both stories are essentially war-less, in the sense that the conflict between Orcs and Elves in the story is purely cultural. The conclusion from both of these is that Etherotopia dismisses the source of certain dystopian worldviews such as fascism by opposing not merely the symptom but its roots; the roots being the worldview that leads to such ideologies, in other words the dystopian perspective that is represented here by the Orcs.

‘The Very First Man’ attempts something different, being one of those mainly existential stories that are relevant to the discussion of Etherotopia as allegories for utopia rather than being directly utopian. First of all, it is a time travel story and I want to add here that the reason why I’m working with such concepts is that the literature I’ve been reading the past few years has mostly been science fiction (since utopian/dystopian fiction in our days almost always includes science fictional elements) and, as a science fiction writer and, ultimately, scholar (most of the papers I’ve presented at academic conferences were dealing with science fiction texts, while the two conferences I organised myself have been on science fiction), I’ve felt part of the science fiction community and have been following discussions on similar topics. This is one of the reasons that in my stories I’ve dealt with certain subjects (like post-human visions of the future) rather than others (e.g. politics.) Perhaps the only story that is of a

purely political nature in this collection is ‘The Brain in Chains’ which is in the final group of stories and I will discuss later.

To return to ‘The Very First Man’, the use of the time travel literary device in the story is not to serve a particular plot structure, but to present a certain perception of history and progress that is in accordance with the Etherotopian worldview. The story is thematically existential, because it is a story of self-discovery in which the main character travels back in time to find his earliest ancestor and, potentially, the source of life itself but ends up meeting his own self as a child; in the story, this is because an advanced people from Mars have instructed the construction of the Egyptian pyramids, while it is revealed that these people once inhabited a pre-apocalyptic Earth in which the main character lived.

‘The Very First Man’ is a criticism of the inevitability of progress: the idea that better days will inevitably come, either because the individual has faith in the system itself – e.g. the capitalist system – or in the self-destruction of that system. At the same time, it is also a criticism of the idea that human culture is constantly evolving. In the story, historical progress is impossible because time, in the story, is entirely cyclical. The reason why this criticism is helpful here is because I believe it is absolutely essential that, while the individual ought to be hopeful, he or she must not take the idea that better days will come for granted, otherwise the urgency of a cultural or political revolution (or any kind of revolution) is undermined.

As to its interpretation of time, I have been influenced by science fiction stories that discuss similar concepts of time. The best example is the following quote from Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, in which the scientist Shevek explains that ‘we think that time “passes,” flows past us; but what if it is we who move forward, from past to future, always discovering the new?’¹¹⁴ He goes on to say that experiencing time is like reading a book, in that the entire book is there and life is moving from one page to the next. This is relevant here also because it positions the subjective perspective (the reader) in an objective motionless reality (the book.) The main character in ‘The Very First Man’ experiences such an objective totality and so does the main character at the end of the next story, ‘The Owl’.

While most of the stories in the collection are thought-experiments meant to develop certain utopian ideas and criticise others, some stories focus more on the development of the collection’s creative writing side. In some cases, such as in ‘The

¹¹⁴ Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 184.

Owl', I attempt to return to certain ideas by focusing on the literary value of the story and the way in which it addresses its philosophical subject. 'The Owl', like previous stories, concludes with the idea that non-utopian minds cannot handle truths that transcend them, such as an objective perspective of reality that is not limited by time or space. The revelation of such a reality leads the main character to suicide; the character, while conceiving of past, present and future as one, at the same time 'will cut – is cutting – has cut his veins.' The distinction here between utopian and non-utopian states of mind suggests not that there are 'worthy' and unworthy minds, but that there are different phases in the individual's mental development and that, since the desirable objective utopian vision that would benefit both individual and society requires an equal utopian state of mind to be conceived, comprehended and realised, the individual must aim to reach that state of mind and not allow arrogance to become an obstacle to this inner transformation.

In 'The Owl', the inconceivable is the ultimate terror for the non-utopian mind while for the advanced state of mind of the Cyclops it is potentially the achievement of objective truth that leads to nirvana and permanent happiness. It is perhaps the most Lovecraftian of the stories in this collection and I want to draw a parallel here between 'The Owl' and two of Lovecraft's stories, 'Through the Gates of the Silver Key' and 'Ex Oblivione'. In 2012, I gave a paper at the Utopian Studies Society¹¹⁵ conference; my paper was titled 'The Key to the Gate of Dreams: Searching for Utopia in H. P. Lovecraft's Dreamland' and its purpose was to demonstrate glimpses of hope – even utopianism – in Lovecraft's fiction. Here is an extract from 'Through the Gates of the Silver Key' which I had quoted then as well:

No death, no doom, no anguish can arouse the surpassing despair which flows from a loss of identity. Merging with nothingness is peaceful oblivion; but to be aware of existence and yet to know that one is no longer a definite being distinguished from other beings - that one no longer has a self - that is the nameless summit of agony and dread.¹¹⁶

In Lovecraft's story, this describes the character's – Randolph Carter in this case – experience of absolute knowledge which, instead of leading to nirvana, results in the complete loss (destruction) of identity. Interestingly, in another story by Lovecraft, titled 'Ex Oblivione', the same revelation proves pleasant – hence my inspiration to

¹¹⁵ The Utopian Studies Society is based in Europe while the Society for Utopian Studies, which I mentioned before, is mostly active in the US.

¹¹⁶ Lovecraft, *Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales*, 406.

discuss Lovecraft's utopianism, also the relationship of his cosmology to Buddhism. Like nirvana, the Lovecraftian utopia is literally a no-place: nothingness. There is a glimpse of it in the story "The Statement of Randolph Carter" in which Randolph hopes that his late friend Harley Warren is "in peaceful oblivion, if there be anywhere so blessed a thing"¹¹⁷ (again the phrase 'peaceful oblivion') but it is far more evident in 'Ex Oblivione' in which the narrator experiences a similar revelation:

(...) I knew that all sights and glories were at an end; for in that new realm was neither land nor sea, but only the white void of unpeopled and illimitable space. So, happier than I had ever dared hope to be, I dissolved again into that native infinity of crystal oblivion from which the daemon Life had called me for one brief and desolate hour.¹¹⁸

This is in accordance with the interpretation of nirvana as an escape from the cycle of life. Written in the same style as the first Lovecraftian passage I quoted, it seems that the two Lovecraftian characters experience the same nothingness in totally different ways, as the absolute dystopia in the first case, as nirvana and utopian existence in the second. In that sense, the objective truth that the characters of my story 'The Owl' are after is the same for both but the way they experience it differs. This depicts my idea that even utopia itself is not enough, the appropriate lens (nirvana or the ideal state of mind) is required not only to create utopia but, more importantly, in order to experience it as such.

¹¹⁷ Lovecraft, *Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales*, 10.

¹¹⁸ Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *The Dream Cycle of H.P. Lovecraft: Dreams of Terror and Death* (New York: Del Rey, 1995), 72.

Portfolio, Part IV
‘Utopian/Dystopian Perspectives’

Curiosity is my middle name

1

Supreme commander of Earth, General Curiosity, formerly known as Captain Joe “Curiosity” Killkat, was held responsible for the majority of those mistakes that led to Earth’s destruction and, consequently, mankind’s self-humiliation. His famous Vanity Projects – the conquest of useless moons in his name, the failed colonisation attempts of other planets, space tours for billionaires, and other such demonstrations of power – also known as The Great Masturbations of Science – seemed no less insulting to the starving population than superficial show-offs to keep the Wankers International impressed.

Before he left the planet – in the classic abandon-ship-style – he addressed, for the last time, the poor yet obedient people of the One Nation, formerly known as NUBF, Nations United By Force.

“My fellow humans, as you have probably realised by now, we have followed the Popular Plan to the letter. There are currently no countries, no borders, and of course no memory of them as we have erased all of mankind’s history from both your books and your brains. Science has also proven there’s nothing to live or die for, with the exception of science itself – in fact, you’re more than welcome to die tonight as there’s no room in my spaceship for all seven million five hundred twenty seven of you, my dear nuclear war survivors.”

At this point he paused to scratch an itch in a hole in his yellow glowing hand.

“People of Earth, you may be doomed but take consolation in the fact that you were *born* doomed. I don’t know if that makes sense to you, but since there was no revolution when I suggested sending a sex doll to Mars to see if it lured any Martians out of their holes – a most expensive operation – I think anything I say makes sense to you, so no problem. Thankfully, us governments can always trust the majority of you. Please don’t see the destruction of Earth as the failure of science but as a magnificent opportunity for mankind to abandon this place and move to a better one. Think of the planet as a car on fire – it’s going to explode any minute now. It’s *that* fed up with us. Now we, as a government, have the means to either save it or blow it up ourselves and seek a new one. We can’t do both, so you must decide – will you interrupt the Progress

of Science by choosing Earth or will you choose Death and sacrifice yourselves to Science and Curiosity? The final decision is mine but you may as well vote in vain against it.”

Naturally, all earthlings agreed to let Earth be destroyed so that a new planet could be inhabited. It made much more sense.

2

The next day, Joe Curiosity boarded the Spaceship Arrogance 11. Predictably enough, he was accompanied by the infamous Nine Billionaires, the only people who could afford the journey. They left Earth in good time. The planet was set to be self-destruct hours later while they'd be halfway to Mars.

Arrogance 11 was the strongest and fastest means of transport ever known to man. Arrogance had previously been to the moon twice for the mere satisfaction of the billionaires. The number of lives that could be saved had the money been given to the poor instead, was exactly the number of miles Arrogance 11 flew per minute.

The dying of Earth in the universal background was the most spectacular picture Joe Curiosity had seen in his entire life. He shed a tear when it happened but that was only for the earthly pleasures he used to have there.

For a moment, he and his company of Billionaires were worried the earthlings wouldn't follow their final orders – that moment lasted for days – but when Earth finally exploded, they all shouted “Hurrah!” as if their favourite football team had scored a goal or their employees had told them they'd rather work for less, than lose their jobs. They were *that* entertained.

But when moments later, the planet of their destination also exploded, they were suddenly lost in unfamiliar emotions of insecurity and terror. Mars was suddenly no more.

One by one, they noticed all alternative destinations followed. One by one, all the habitable planets of the known universe exploded before their eyes. This wasn't supposed to happen, they all thought. This wasn't, by any interpretation, good.

Arrogance stopped moving and froze in the middle of nowhere. There was nowhere to go to. Shit.

3

Within the next few hours of supreme agony, Supreme Commander Joe Curiosity demanded to know the cause behind the series of planet explosions. His

curiosity was soon satisfied, as another spaceship, coming from the direction to which they were heading, approached them and there was communication.

The light green face of a Martian Billionaire appeared in their screens. It addressed the first person it saw before it, one of the Nine.

“Who is your leader, human?”

“Curiosity,” replied the man, pointing at the Supreme Commander.

“We were heading to Earth,” said the alien to the right person this time. “Where has Earth gone?”

“I personally arranged its destruction,” replied Curiosity. “I used the term sacrifice when I explained it to the poor. Earth had turned to a garbage land, either way. We were thinking of moving to Mars. Mars is like heaven, right?”

“No, Mars is hell,” replied the Martian, debunking popular Earth myths. “But we had come to believe that Earth is heaven.”

“Just imagine that we abandoned Earth to move to Mars.”

“But we abandoned Mars to move to Earth!”

Simultaneously almost, tens of other spaceships appeared in the distance coming from the remaining exploding planets. They all had the same problem and the same question.

Wasn't it better elsewhere after all?

Karyatis Unbound

My best friend was killed by a statue.

The sign clearly warned “do not touch” but I don’t think this was the reason the ancient statue of brilliant Karyatis opened its stone eyes and grabbed my friend and colleague by the throat, choking him to death.

Within seconds, the alarm went off. Everybody in the museum ran amok, screaming like babies at the sight of this bloodless murder. I, on the other hand, could barely move. I tried to shout too but was voiceless. When the statue turned to me, out of lack of other potential victims, I lost my balance and fell on the floor.

The statue gave me her hand. I could not understand. Perhaps she knew of my dual nationality and spared my life because I was born in the same place as her. She acted as nothing out of the ordinary had happened and asked me where we were.

“We’re in the national museum”, I replied, “in the capital city of the Orcish Kingdom. Do you not know of this place? It’s an island disconnected from the rest of the world, both geographically and culturally. It’s very unlike home.”

She said I needn’t explain more and asked me to lead her out of this place. I couldn’t refuse, though I had found her request impossible. I was still trembling and the sight of my orc friend’s body on the ground next to me wasn’t helping. I recalled our discussion, trying to figure out what had triggered the statue to come to life. I was arguing that the beautiful elven statue had been kidnapped by the orcs during the old war, and that it was about time she was brought back to us. My friend, on the other hand, was a supporter of the Orcish Empire, a fascist in other words, and said his people had earned this treasure justly, through war. I guess the statue disagreed so strongly she woke up to make her point.

“You must come with me immediately,” she said. “I want you to guide me back to the mainland. Is there are a sort of passage?”

“There is a bridge,” I said, “but it’s a long way from here. We’ll have to cross the entire city.”

“Then we better get moving. Go!”

We found the main door locked from outside. We heard police sirens. Any moment now we’d see armed police-orcs breaking in the building. Would they fire at us? I suggested we surrendered but Karyatis was already running to the back of the museum and I followed, confident she knew what she was doing. I then saw her put her

hands on the museum wall which collapsed the moment she touched it. That, I thought, was magic as powerful as the magic that had brought her to life.

She ran ahead to the street and was almost hit by a black double-decker bus.

“What is this ugliness?” she said.

“A vehicle,” I replied, looking the other way to see if we were followed.

The driver – a fat bearded hobgoblin two times the size of the average orc – shouted at us. Karyatis walked to the bus and grabbed him out the driver’s window. She ordered me to take his place and drive while she chopped him in half and threw another couple of orc passengers out. Only an old woman was left seated silently in the back of the vehicle. I don’t know if Karyatis noticed her but if she did, she didn’t seem to bother.

The statue stood close to me and my heart-beating went faster again, though I knew Karyatis was an enemy to everyone but myself.

“Get me to that Orc Bridge,” she commanded.

I drove the bus throughout the city I knew so well as I had spent the last four years studying there. Archaeology, to be precise. My eyes were on the road but my mind was distracted by Karyatis who was now lifting her hands in the air as if performing a spell. I discovered what she was doing when I looked behind, through the mirror. Because of her spells, the whole city behind us was disappearing.

“What the hell are you doing?” I shouted.

On my right and on my left, skyscrapers turned to sand and houses were swallowed by the earth underneath them. In their place, trees popped up and primitive huts, and I could swear at some point I saw a wild fox crossing the road.

“I’m taking back what our people have given to the orcs. Culture, technology, logic. Their buildings collapse because without us, they’d never be built.”

My heart was beating like a dancer in ecstasy. So many times I had almost hit another car before it disappeared in thin air. At some point, I felt a hand on my shoulders and found myself sweating.

“Sorry to interrupt,” said an unfamiliar voice, “but this is my stop.”

After Karyatis’ permission, I stopped the bus and the old woman got off. The house to which she was heading turned to a village hut, while her clothes transformed to what one may call “fur bikini.” A young man came out of the hut – her son probably – to welcome her. He was dressed like a Viking from a historical film.

I resumed driving. When we saw the city’s main park on our left, Karyatis suggested we crossed it to save time. She reassured me there’d be no problem. Indeed,

the park's main gate melted to water by the time the front of the bus hit it and we were now in the least ugly part of the city.

I thought I could still hear the police sirens in the distance but my attention was distracted again and I caught myself hypnotised by the magic of Karyatis. As we passed by them, the benches turned to tress, the pigeons to snakes, an obese family to a family of bears and a group of drunks to hairy monkeys.

“When I'll have left this island,” said Karyatis, “it will be as if civilisation never touched it.”

Before she finished her phrase, an explosion next to us made me lose control of the vehicle for a moment. Colourful birds flew away from their nests. I stopped driving when I saw a dozen tanks taking position before us. Police helicopters and foot soldiers followed. And from the trees behind us, cavemen with homemade spears and warriors with axes and bows. We were surrounded.

Calm as any immortal woman who controls the forces of nature, Karyatis stepped out of the vehicle; I did the same. Not that I had an option the way her cold stone hand was gripping mine.

The whoosh of a sudden fire consuming the entire bus made me turn, only to see an ox cart in its place, the ox indifferently facing the tanks ahead of it, as two different epochs examining – and possibly mocking – one another. In all my amazement, I noticed the ox smelled too badly to be a mere illusion. With that, and feeling Karyatis' protective touch on my hand, my suspicion was confirmed that this was much more than wizardry.

Until then, none of the tanks had fired or the soldiers moved. Karyatis waited patiently, as statues do, and before long the army was given orders on what to do next. Then the soldiers made way for an elite battalion of troops that were escorting the orcish monarch in her luxurious limo. That was a surprise. The deformed queen was cheered by the masses of orcs watching the scene, including the cavemen. Especially the cavemen.

Behind her and beyond the fast food restaurants, pubs and nightclubs, lied her palace, built on the corpses of the poor. On its left, the parliament as a contrasting picture, and a tower on its right, in which all sorts of revolutionaries, foreigners and free-thinking men had been tortured in the past. And beyond all these, the river that separated two worlds, and the bridge to the better one.

When the queen of this bloodthirsty people address the statue, the whole city turned silent, which was natural, given that the puppet master was speaking.

“And where do you think you’re going?” said the monarch to the statue.

“Home,” replied Karyatis.

The monarch laughed as nasty as any savage. She had seen magic before, though not as advanced, and pretended she was cool with it, indifferent even. Above all, she had her public image to protect.

“You aren’t leaving this island, statue. You are my people’s property.”

“Stolen property,” replied the statue.

The queen shrugged her shoulders.

“So? You think it matters? You think we mind that we’re a nation of thieves? We’re orcs, we’ve always been that way! Look at the faces of the primitives behind you, then look at the fascists that worship me. What changes in a few thousand years? The clothes, maybe, but not the faces. I’m telling you, statue, we will never let you, or any other of our loot, return to your countries. What do you propose we do? Empty our museums? Surrender our cities to those nations that built them when we couldn’t make anything more complicated than a hut? Do you not understand, Karyatis, that if we let you leave, we will be destroyed? No, we would rather destroy you! Orcs! Prepare for...”

The queen’s lips kept moving for a little longer until she realised she was making monkey sounds and couldn’t produce a single word anymore. A weak beam of light was leaving her, and the statue collected the light in her hands.

“This is my people’s alphabet,” said Karyatis. “My property, which I take back, since you have abused it. We were wrong, it seems, to intervene with your society and I will now correct this. Trust me when I say, when I’m done with you, it will be as our people never met. Now allow me to pass.”

As we moved towards the army – I was hiding behind the statue all the time – I heard the tanks roar and the guns fire and thought these magical moments, though magical, were the last of my life. But as the bullets touched us, they turned to flowers and the rockets to mere smoke. The tanks ahead were turning to newly-discovered campfires and the cars to horses and ponies, depending on size – with the occasional donkey. The masses remained the masses, only of green apes and chimpanzees, and the queen remained the queen, a concept primitive enough on its own. In the distance, the palace turned to a large hut, the tower also, and the parliament, along with the whole idea of democracy, disappeared both from the orcs’ lands and from their minds. In the end, I remember fearing I’d disappear myself as step by step I felt the bridge to

civilisation, which we were finally crossing, collapsing under our feet, until I turned and saw with my very eyes that it was no more.

As I looked at the Orcish Island we had left behind, the statue's hand of stone suddenly felt warmer and more human on my shoulder. I held it in both hands as if I had captured a pigeon. It was of flesh. I dared to look into her face. The beauty was identical, but nothing resembling a statue. She had taken her real form, I thought.

"Kyrie," said the tender lips and I was happy to hear someone calling me "sir" in my mother tongue again. I will translate what she said. "We are ready to begin, sir. The crew is assembled and waiting for your instructions as to where exactly to build the bridge. Everyone is looking forward to crossing that damned river."

I gave the whole idea some thought. Unless I was wrong and deceived, I was glad Karyatis had given me this huge responsibility. I smiled at the young attractive woman who shyly returned the smile.

"I've changed my mind, my dear," I said. "I've thought about it carefully and have decided it's best to leave this island unexplored."

The Very First Man

1

I don't know if I should be happy or depressed that I succeeded in my mission. Surely, finding the first man in history was no ordinary task and yet I made it and yet I made but a hole in the water. And I couldn't have done it without the already advanced technology of the people who lived before my time and who I now curse.

I had everything I needed for the journey. Implanted translator device. Laser gun. And of course my precious time machine, tied around my wrist like a watch, though currently out of use and I would not risk making another.

There was one way to do this, I thought. I'd descend my own genealogy tree as if it was a kind of ladder, one forefather at a time, beginning with granddad Alexander who had the same name as me and who I had never met in person.

Usually, I needn't spend more than an hour with any ancestor; an hour was enough to extract the necessary information and move on to the next – or, I should say, the previous one. I'd often appear as a complete stranger at a time when the forefather in question was a child and ask him to point me in the direction of his father. It took fifteen generations to discover that my last name wasn't Smith as my first American ancestor's stepdad but one less common and harder to pronounce: Khonsu. And where had this name come from? The American didn't know, but his mother did.

2

My research brought me to Ancient Egypt, where I traced the Khonsu family all the way to the construction site of the Great Pyramid of Giza. There I met my ancestor Ahmes who had taken part in the construction of the pyramid. I felt honoured at first, then indifferent. Had to remind myself I wasn't there for tourism. I could do anything I wanted with my time machine later; now my task was to confirm where I had come from. Besides, that supreme knowledge would define how I'd use the machine in the future.

If you answer my questions, I told Ahmes, I will take you to the future where I come from. The poor man smiled, not knowing I was lying. Truth is I couldn't affect the past because every time I used the machine, my recent activities were erased from history automatically. I could only act within the alternative reality in which I was experiencing it. And so, in my experience, time-travelling was nothing more than browsing through data.

Do you live on your own, I asked. We all live on our own, he replied. No, I mean, where is your family? We are all a family, he said. Yes, but where is your father?

He pointed at the sky.

I couldn't accept it at first, but my eyes insisted. There was a flying saucer floating above our heads. Then my initial amazement was replaced by fear. Is your father in that thing? Yes, said the young man naturally, as if the sight of UFOs was everyday reality.

I had no idea where this youngster was born so I couldn't simply go back in time and introduce myself to his alien dad. I needed to try a more direct approach, if I was to meet the next forefather in line.

I had my laser gun recharged. You never know.

3

The spaceship landed next to the pyramid, where a man in uniform welcomed it. Ahmes told me he was Hemon, chief architecture and current prince of Egypt. An alien woman, dressed in red, descended from the spaceship to meet with him. I wondered if the Pharaohs acted under the guidance of aliens, though these creatures seemed as human as the rest of us.

I waved to them and a guard shouted at me, thinking I might be mocking the prince. I took out my gun and fired a warning shot, turning a nearby camel to ashes, which made everyone scream. The woman ordered the guards to let me pass. Who are you, she asked. Where do you come from? What do you seek?

I only had one thing in mind and little patience. I pointed at my Egyptian ancestor, without lowering my gun. I need to find this man's father. You mean his creator, replied the alien, unimpressed by my laser pistol. I put it down when I realised it was identical to hers. I don't care how you call him, I said, I must see him.

Turned out I had to visit the spaceship. There she introduced me to the original Khonsu whom the Egyptians worshiped as a god, like ancient people did with aliens. I learned his name meant "traveller". To the locals he symbolised the moon crossing the sky at night. Probably because he was the spaceship's captain.

Khonsu was excited to meet a time-traveller and wanted to share with me their plans, such as the building of the pyramids and the repopulation of Earth, a many-thousand year old project that was nearly complete.

I interrupted him and his childish enthusiasm faded away. Have you created Ahmes, my most ancient Egyptian relative? Yes, Ahmes is one of the many I have

created in my image, though slightly adapted as everybody else. But is he the product of your sperm? Yes, he replied. Then you're my ancestor and I want to meet your father. But you can't. Why not, I said, where is he? In Mars.

In all my journeys I could easily go back and forth in time but I had to rely on the currently available transport to move around. I asked if he could take me to the red planet. He replied he gladly would but the ship couldn't depart until the pyramid was ready. That's fine, I said. Just let me know how many years it will take and we'll meet outside the building then.

4

My trip to Mars was going to take a few days but I resisted using the time machine of fear of ending up floating in space.

Thankfully, the Martians were hospitable people and Khonsu offered to show me around. Getting him to talk was easier than I thought. He spoke of a flood that had wiped out the first human societies of Earth. The sinking of Atlantis, along with the rest of great cities and other such flood-related stories. But what are your plans for the future, I asked, possessed by a curiosity I had repressed before, afraid it would slow me down. But maybe Khonsu could give me the answer I was after.

He took me to a small room, a laboratory within the ship where the prototypes were displayed. There were all the failed models of human experiments that his kind had set loose upon, what he called, the New Earth. I recognised some of these types as Homo Erectus, Australopithecus, Neanderthalensis... Many others I hadn't heard of, possibly long extinct by that time.

Do you know it then? I said, impressed by his revelations. The Great Truth?

What truth?

The answer to the eternal dilemma. Design or Accident? Creation or Evolution? Adam or Ape?

I don't know that, he said and gave it some thought. But could that be a false dilemma? Misinformation, even? Have you ever thought that perhaps neither dogma is correct?

You mean there could be a third answer?

My brain was in a state of emergency. I had never treated the Great Debate as a false dilemma. Now I was even more looking forward to finding the first man who ever lived, and didn't care whether he was from Earth, Mars or nowhere.

Can I ask you something?

What is it, he said.

Why do the humans you design have different colours, height and attitude, while all you Martians look and behave the same?

Khonsu asked me to keep down and shut the door.

Let me tell you a secret, he said. Mars is hell. We have no borders, no races, no religions. No-one really matters. Deep inside we hate each other and wallow in our misery. That's why we're trying to give the New Earth a variety, to make it colourful and rich. In every place we visited – Egypt, Tibet, Guatemala – we created different cultures, connected to each other and yet unique, independent and self-sufficient. You see, we have tried the one-world thing in Mars and it has failed. But someday we will move to New Earth, when it is complete. It is our Utopia, the land we have promised to ourselves.

That made me cough like choking on a piece of broken truth.

Well, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I think your society is doomed because in my time Mars is uninhabited. And there's no sign of your activities on Earth other than the Mayan temples and the pyramids.

You're lying, he barked almost shedding a tear. He knew I was telling the truth. He knew that meant the work of an entire Martiankind was in vain.

We didn't speak at all for the rest of the journey. When we finally reached Mars, I asked to be taken to his father. He lived in a simple building that resembled an earthly house. I didn't pay attention to any differences, since the concept was the same. What mattered was that I could finally use my time machine again.

Have you always lived here, I asked the father.

What's that got to do with anything?

It's important that you tell me! Yes or no?

Yes. But why?

Nothing.

Fifty years earlier, I met him again, a kid in the arms of his father. Two hundred years earlier and I was asking the same questions. Where did you live fifty years ago? What number? Who was your father? Until, at some point, a guy answered: fifty years ago? We weren't here fifty years ago, we were on Earth.

You people are unbelievable! How can I get to Earth?

Why would you? It's over.

I know, but is there any means of transport?

There used to be. But we've just recycled our last spaceship, I'm sorry. If you were here two weeks ago...

Blink. I was. I begged them not to destroy the ship and let me drive it back to Earth. I failed to convince them with reason but, thankfully, I was armed and they were not.

5

I found the same man in Earth's last space station ten years ago. I asked all the known questions and he gave me the details. Did you live there before the poles melted? Ever since you were a child? Give me a date. Twenty three years? He told me I was insane and left me there typing twenty three "y" minus in my time machine.

I found the place. I knocked. The same astronaut opened, only six years old at the time. Is your father at home? Yes, sir, he is. Tell him I'd like to see him. Dad! A man is here to see you! Impatient as always, I entered the hall that led to the living room. A pale figure stood before me. When he saw me, it took him a few seconds to realise who I was. Then he collapsed.

His son cried like mad but I said it was ok and that he should bring his father some water. I hadn't yet understood why he was shocked. Only when I took a closer look at his face, I realised that he was no other than myself, Alexander Khonsu, ten years from now.

I was seeing the future.

The Owl

I saw the one-eyed titan watching me from the mountaintop.

It was raining. Even if I could get to my motorcycle, it wouldn't be any use. I took the camera out hoping at least to save a picture. The machine flashed – my worst move so far. Next thing I know, the giant was coming down the mountaintop, leaping from rock to rock towards me.

My Greek was better than the average scholar's, so I understood what he was saying. He demanded I stayed where I was. My feet were trembling like branches in the wind. If I jump now, I thought, I'd avoid a more horrible death. Instead I froze in my place, dropping my digital camera with all the beautiful pictures of Olympus and the nearby villages and of the ancient theatre of Dion which took its name from the god Dias, also known as Zeus.

The cyclops stood in front of me. His eye blinked a few times, as he was no less surprised to see someone like me than I was to see someone like him. He kept shouting, not always producing words. I asked if he would spare my life. He ignored me and examined the motorcycle while murmuring in ancient Greek about something that had to do with gods and demons. Then he sat between me and the vehicle.

“Are you here for the Gods?” His teeth moved threateningly under his large eye, like he was chewing on the air.

I didn't answer. I thought a wrong answer might cost me a life and I only had one with me at the time.

“The Gods are not here anymore, there's nothing here. Sometimes people fly around in their chariots, which the gods left behind. Have you been to Egypt?”

I nodded. As any adventurous middle-aged archaeologist, I had travelled to all those lands where humanity had spent her golden ages.

“My cousins built the pyramids, but you didn't hear that from me. And the walls of Mycenae, have you seen them? They call them Cyclopean for a reason.”

He laughed funnily and went back to chewing the rainy wind, possibly a tick he had got from spending an eternity talking to himself. There were no buildings in the area so I suspected he lived in a cave.

“I'm not surprised, you know,” he said giving the vehicle a kick. “I've seen iron horses like yours before, and chariots without horses. Perhaps I shouldn't be telling you this. Why have you come here? A pilgrimage to the gods?”

I said it was something like that.

“People don’t normally come on their own up here. When there’s more than a few, I stay hidden. Once in a while there’s someone like you, a loner, and I come out to greet them. Or eat them, if I’m hungry.”

We stared at each other for a while, the rain kept falling all around, with the occasional thunder in the distance.

“Relax, I’m a vegetarian. Just because I’m bigger doesn’t mean I’m a monster. Hey, are you cold? My cave is up there, if you want to pay a visit.”

“I should be going,” I said but didn’t move.

“I won’t let you go before the rain stops,” said the giant grabbing my hand.

So many times I felt his grip would tear it off, as I had to run to keep up with his huge steps. Not far, there was indeed a cave, though I hadn’t seen it before and I remembered every single one on the map. Its entrance was blocked by a rock and once we went in, the cyclops put it back. I silently prayed for a quick death.

“I said I’m not going to kill you,” insisted the giant as if he had heard my thought. “I brought you here to show you something.”

The corridor seemed endless and if we weren’t inside the tallest mountain of Greece, I’d swear we were descending the steps of the underworld. The path was lit by a series of torches emerging from the walls, eternal flames as out-of-this-world as the beast himself. Finally we reached an enormous chamber that could well be the giant’s living room.

“Sit,” he said and let go of my hand. The furniture had weird shapes, their shadows dancing around like the flames. Opposite the entrance of the tunnel, was a giant mirror that didn’t work. By this I mean it didn’t reflect the images in front of it.

I sat on the ground in the middle of the room, suspicious of everything that seemed to have been created by ancient beings. I wondered how we could still hear thunder outside.

“I need your help,” said the cyclops. “Don’t look so stunned, I don’t mean you personally, any outsider brave enough would do. And you’re the only one so far who didn’t run away when he saw me.”

Again I nodded, silently agreeing so as not to anger him. I would rather not confess I belonged to the kind of people whom fear paralyses, rather than those to whom it gives wings.

His every pause lasted forever, because he breathed so slowly. Instead of his anatomy, however, my attention was captured by a large painting on the wall to my right, depicting an old bearded man wielding a hammer. The blacksmith of the gods.

“There’s a certain artefact I want you to retrieve for me,” said the cyclops. “You must have heard of the titan Prometheus...”

I said I knew mythology well, an expression I immediately regretted, though he wasn’t offended. He ignored my comment and went on.

“Most people seem to think Prometheus gave them nothing but the fire, which he stole from the god Hephaestus,” he said and pointed at the painting. “But calling Prometheus a thief of fire is an understatement. What he did that really upset the gods, was giving the mortals wisdom. Wisdom, which he stole from the goddess Athena. Are you familiar with the story?”

I was. I had read the ancient tragedy of Prometheus, one of the earliest works of theatre and philosophy. According to this version of the myth, Prometheus gave much more to humanity than fire. He gave us the arts and the sciences, and everything that made us different from the other animals.

“What you don’t know is what was left out,” continued the giant. “The gods never shared their divine wisdom with the humans, so all Prometheus could give them to fill that gap was doubt. But what about the meaning of life? What about the divine plans and the mechanisms of the cosmos?”

The thunder outside grew louder, the horrible weather kept hiding the top of the mountain from plain sight. I wondered if I would ever find my way out, should I manage to escape.

“Giants have no more information about these things. And when the gods fled this universe, they took that knowledge with them. Or nearly. The goddess Athena left her sacred owl behind, a divine creature that contains in its blood all the secrets of the cosmos.”

The cyclops got my attention. All of a sudden, nothing else mattered. My own life, my career, my dreams, my petty ambitions which a dumb pop culture had forced into my head – even personal safety was no longer a concern. “What do you mean?” I asked the giant. “That there is an answer to all the questions of life and that you know where to look?”

“Don’t be excited,” he said. “You aren’t supposed to know, your simple mind couldn’t handle the truth. What I’m suggesting is that you find that owl and bring it straight to me.”

“Tell me more.”

While he went on talking, I noticed the storm outside was singing with a much weaker voice. At some point, the giant touched the mirror. Within the glass, we could

now see a detailed map of the universe, and a list of ancient names for every single planet and star. That living ancient computer zoomed into itself until it brought to life a perfect three-dimensional depiction of Athens first, and then of the Acropolis, the most wonderful of ancient citadels. Its heart was the temple of Athena, called the Parthenon, a building of both architectural and religious significance.

“Visiting the temple should be much easier for you, mortal, than it is for me,” said the giant. “For all my strength, I couldn’t risk letting my existence be known to the world.”

“What would be my reward, if I brought you the creature?”

“I wouldn’t tell you everything. As I said, your mortal mind wouldn’t be able to handle the information. But I would tell you what you’d need to become wiser than any human in history. I’d let you know as much as to no longer fear death – neither, I hope, will I – and enough to preach life-saving truths and utopian manifestos.”

He paused and there was absolute silence. The rain had stopped and the fires around the room were now dancing to a peaceful tempo that calmed the confused contents of my heart.

“As for the owl, don’t be fooled by its appearance. You will find it in the temple posing as a statue. Touch it and pray to the goddess to reveal her wisdom. The owl will come to life and follow you back here. I will be waiting. Once you arrive, I will summon another storm and open the entrance to the cave.”

“Wait,” I said, as we were now walking down the tunnel towards the exit. “You forgot one thing. How does the owl work?”

“There’s no particular prayer. As long as you make your intentions clear, it will follow you...”

“No, I meant how does it reveal its knowledge?”

“I told you it’s in her blood. But you don’t need to know that, you must only bring the owl back here safe and I will do the rest.”

He moved the rock that blocked the entrance and I ran outside. The night had fallen and what a silent, holy night it was. I could see the lights of distant villages gently accompanying the night in her ritual waltz of shadows.

#

By the time I got to a hotel, it was tomorrow. My motorcycle wasn’t harmed but the camera was ruined, and the pictures of the giant cyclops were but memories inside my head. Memories I wouldn’t share with the rest of the world until I had solved whatever mystery was there.

Sleeping was neither an objective nor a possibility. But I really wanted to take a shower, and lie on a normal bed for a while, staring at the unmemorable ceiling of a human-sized room.

I set out to Athens first thing in the morning. The point of no return had been crossed and I had the impression that the end of the adventure would be the end of my life. Not that the adventure was in the journey itself. If I claimed that the journey was the destination, it'd mean I had no worthy destination. Sneaking into the Acropolis at night wasn't the exciting part of my journey either. My quest consisted of two simple phases: waiting and sneaking in.

Once inside I knew the area by heart, having studied the three-dimensional map in the giant's cave. Every step towards the owl statue seemed unnaturally easy. Indeed, it was there, the single most important artifact in history, displayed on public view, so vulnerable to the vulgar eyes of those unworthy to appreciate it.

Slowly and ritually I touched its forehead with my fingers. I murmured an improvised prayer to its goddess, something like "Holy Athena, goddess of wisdom, share with me your knowledge of the world," but it didn't work. More decisively, and under the pressure of guilty thoughts, I tried to remove the bust from its place but it was impossible without tools. "I beg you, Athena, bring the statue to life!" I cried.

Thankfully I had another sort of tool that might come in handy. I consulted my dictionary which reminded me all the names by which Athena was known. I called her Pallas and Parthena, Atrytone and Promachos, and every single marvellous poetic epithet she had been given, even Glaukopsis, as Homer had called her. Glaukopsis!

The burden of my heart was lifted and time nearly stopped when I realised that Glaukopsis meant "the one who has the eyes of an owl" – implying the brilliance and brightness of those eyes – and remembered as from a dream all I'd read about Glaucus, Athena's sacred owl and, in a moment of ecstasy, summoned the bird itself.

The statue blinked. I felt the thick feathers against my skin and caressed the mythical creature. A sacred light from its eyes blinded me for a second. They were the eyes of the universe staring at me indifferently.

I gently took it under my arms where it stayed obediently – or, if I may repeat the word, indifferently – perfectly aware of my intentions, as if it had stayed there for an eternity waiting for me to steal it.

I was surprised that I met no resistance getting in and out the place and even more surprised that I expected it, but somehow I knew the gods had played a part in this, as they had in causing the rain on Olympus.

Getting back was the hard part. Having the source of all knowledge in front of me on my motorcycle was a temptation unlike any I had experienced. I tried to talk to it many times but couldn't get a response. Does life have a purpose, I asked. Why was the universe created? What is the bigger plan?

Once in a while it hooted mysteriously, but I made no sense of its sounds. Is this a yes? Is that a no? Is that even a response? It didn't hoot often, and when it did, it wasn't reacting to my questions but to its own thoughts. I thought of giving up. For some reason I couldn't, as if a force beyond my understanding was moving me. I took my hands off the handlebars for a moment, then put them back. Not enough. I clapped my hands. Yes, I was still in control. Really confused though.

I hadn't realised we were nearly there when I saw the mountain ahead of us. No, I shouted. I parked in the middle of the road and dismounted. Beside the road, the ground was still wet from last night. I didn't care. I kneeled in the mud and prayed my free will would jump out of my head, as if it was an iron nail stuck in my brain. It turned out my imagination was wilder than normal when, in a clash of thoughts, I conceived of a disgusting image from the future, a memory of a crime I would commit unless my will submitted to my destiny and stopped producing unreasonable dilemmas.

The owl then landed on the grass next to my feet. It hooted passionlessly, a sound I could interpret any way I wanted, because of all the possibilities my ignorance generated.

Without a single rational thought left, I crawled to it. It came nearer instead of flying away. The knowledge is in the owl's blood, the cyclops had said. I could hear him screaming from the top of the mountain, unless it was my imagination. I could hear the mountain too, protesting for the blasphemy I was about to commit. I grabbed the owl by the head. I brought its neck close to my mouth, I bit some feathers off and spit, and repeated the same action until the flesh was bare.

I didn't have a knife so there was no quick way to do this. My owl friend didn't seem to mind. I pressed my teeth against its flesh and pulled and pulled, with so much hatred and ambition it brought tears to my eyes. The next moment, I was lying on the ground, holding the owl above me, its neck above my mouth, the blood flowing in, the nectar of the gods or of the demons, as I drank the divine gift of the gods until the last drop.

My eyes opened wide like skies, the first thing I did when I was finished was to scream at the top of my voice at the sight of the Olympian sky, which lay up there,

naked of stars, threatening to fall on me or at least that was the impression my guilt was poisoning me with.

I stood up, a rebel against life, breaker of promises, drinker of the owl's blood. I hadn't done any harm, I thought, as the two types of blood, mine and the owl's, were mixing up. Dizzy and lost, I went back to the motorcycle, ignoring the broken statue of the Athenian owl, staring at me from its deathbed, with empty grey eyes.

#

The engine wouldn't start and I blamed the battery. My only option was to walk to the next village. My mind was empty but I hadn't felt any difference. The taste of the owl's blood was sweet and bitter and nothing. My heart was heavy from an indefinable burden. Once or twice I lost my balance. My steps were those of a zombie. I blinked. Many times. More than the owl and the cyclops combined. Tears. Painful tears. Why these were there, I couldn't remember. Where I was going to or coming from, all was mixed up in an emotional soup. I shook my head, hoping it would come out the ears.

The road shook with me. To the left, then to the right. Nothing more than an illusion, not even an illusion, merely the dizzy eyes fooling around. Blink. The sun was coming out, you could see it sneaking up from behind the mountain of the gods. Blink. No, of course it wasn't, not in the middle of the night. Blink. Where did the lights go, the village was right in front of me, I was in the middle of the street, I knew I shouldn't be walking in the middle of the street... what street? Darkness. I thought I could see Earth in the distance. Omnipresence can make you throw up sometimes, till you get used to it. No, I was imagining this. There I was again, walking towards the village, closer to civilisation with every step, or to madness.

Now you see me, now you don't. The beeping noise came from a truck that carried traditional Olympian wine, though there was no way to know that, but what else could it be transporting in that area, a truck coming my way, the driver calling me names like "malaka" and "gamimene" which I recognised besides not knowing any modern Greek slang, or did I, but either way I ignored him, because I knew that he was going to change lanes and in the end drive right past me, while showing me his middle finger, which he didn't realise I couldn't have seen in such darkness but he showed it to me anyway.

I kept walking. There were more important problems in the world. Inside my head, the meaning of life was being translated in every single language, frequency and sensation but no two definitions were even loyal adaptations of each other. My senses were a mess. That baby's poo from the last house on the left of the main square of the

village stunk. The woman's breasts were beautifully crafted gifts of nature, but only on the outside, and the rest of the body too, I mean, who could be aroused by a bag of bones and meat, and her eyes were no less pretty from the inside of the skull, but the woman was dead either way, I simply saw her passing through me, not then, some thousand years ago, on her way to the fields. I picked her ghost among the many that surrounded me, in costumes from times to come and times that were already over, though one cannot really tell the difference when one is being objective.

Upset by the sight, I closed my eyes and all disappeared. By the time I opened them again, I was already on the way to the mountaintop, my legs exhausted though I couldn't feel them, let alone sympathise with them. Time was too relative for my mind to be bound by it. I opened my eyes again when I heard the rain, the real rain, the right-here-and-now rain, aimlessly falling on my head and on the ground. The entrance to the cave was open and no-one blocked it after I went in.

The flaming torches on the wall waved. Light made no difference, I didn't use my eyes to see, but a single objective sense within and beyond me, activated by the sacrifice of the owl. I walked to the main chamber of the cyclops' refuge. The future, already known, wasn't interesting enough to prevent me from entering the room. The past, displayed in full detail, wasn't memorable at all. The plans of the gods seemed perfect indeed. But in all my knowledge, I couldn't understand. I had the knowledge of the gods but, sadly, none of their wisdom. I was still a soul imprisoned in a body, tragically limited to a single, independent consciousness that was now aware of every other, yet still independent and detached.

The nameless cyclops – you don't need a name when you're alone – was in the middle of the room, weeping, his voice echoing beyond the cave, further disturbing the silence of the mountain already suffering from the storm. The monster's tears didn't dry when he saw me. They only added to the anger.

“Why didn't you listen to me?”

“For many reasons, all rooted in the weakness of human nature,” I said coldly.

“Why did you come here? After what you've done!” shouted the cyclops, so loudly he started to cough.

“I acknowledge my crime,” I said. “I cannot make any sense of what I know. It is like uploading a three-dimensional video game to a calculator. An autopilot in the brain of a donkey... I can think of at least a billion other examples simultaneously.”

“Is there anything you can tell me...” said the giant, “that can give meaning to my life, to why I have been living inside this cave for thousands of years waiting for someone to bring me the owl of wisdom? Can you see meaning?”

“I am aware that there is,” I said, passionlessly. “I have tried to translate it to the human-made languages but it is impossible. A more accurate translation would be through music, which is the universal language of all things, but it still won’t do.”

The cyclops cried again.

“The language of the gods...” he said and his mouth produced a series of sounds whose existence I acknowledged but I couldn’t translate them to make sense to my human brain. “You fool! I told you, you weren’t worthy of this!”

“I cannot apologise because guilt is a subjective emotion, but I am aware that you are right,” I said mechanically. “The right thing to do would be to kill me; slowly, if it will please you more. I will not experience the difference.”

The cyclops knew it wouldn’t offer him any satisfaction. My last impression of him was seeing him running up the corridor, and then jumping desperately from the top of the mountain, thus fulfilling his second secret wish, one he had been repressing for millennia, hoping his more holy one would be someday fulfilled.

His damned soul will remain in the area, haunting the mountain while trapped between dimensions, so powerfully attached to this one and yet ready for the next. As for me, I have no other desire. I have spent endless hours of meditation attempting to write down all that I have concluded was noteworthy in a readable manner. There is one thing to add. In order to explain the sight that the explorers of this cave will find before them, I must say that the human skeleton in this room belonged to the writer of this text, who shortly after finishing it, will cut – is cutting – has cut his veins...

Chapter Seven

Commentary on the fifth group of stories, 'Conclusions'

I have simply titled this final group of stories 'conclusions' because I find them to be the more mature of the stories I have written for this collection both for their philosophical ideas and as works of creative writing; furthermore, the thesis naturally includes a short 'proper' conclusion but, since this particular thesis is the outcome of a practice-based research, I thought there should be a conclusion for the collection as well as one for the critical work. These stories are therefore the 'creative writing' conclusion(s) of this portfolio, followed by a final work of criticism that is the conclusion of the thesis.

This is also the most political group of stories, with 'The New Emotion' and 'Phantom Jesus' being criticisms of the consumer culture, 'The Brain in Chains' an anti-capitalist/anti-fascist science fiction story while 'The World We Want' returns to the problematic relativism of identity of 'Margaret's World.'

Although at all stages of my PhD, I was critical of consumer culture and the collection does conclude with an anti-consumerist story, I became convinced that the source of consumerism and of capitalist values is not the capitalist system itself but – as I have stated before – the source from which such an understanding of the world as capitalism may emerge. Several of the stories in this collection address the issue of the utopian or non-utopian states of mind that may or may not afford to conceive of objective truths and utopias. One may argue that arrogance is related to the source of social discrimination, but in my view it is that arrogance in combination with a relativist perspective that reinforces the capitalist view of nature as property and even of the human body as property or as product whose value rises when it is fashionably modified or upgraded. In the 'perfect' relativist world of 'The World We Want' (the title is of course meant to be satirical), a person can well be considered a horse or a dog if they wish to be addressed as such. It is an absurd world where people can do and even (pretend to) be whatever they want and where psychoanalysts cannot find a job, because no-one sees their traumas and deceptions as problems, but rather they see them as 'differences,' traits that define them and make them unique.

To return to the first story of this group, I will briefly discuss here the plot of 'The New Emotion'. In this story, individual experiences are products which people can buy and download in their brains so they can live and re-live them as often as they like. These can range from a person's first kiss to a celebrity's orgasm and another person's

near-death experience. One day, scientists claim to have invented an entirely new experience, a new emotion that no human has ever felt before (again, here is the idea of the inconceivable.) When he finds out about this, the main character decides he'll do everything he can to obtain that new emotion, but early in the story it is so expensive that only a few people in the world can afford it. Eventually the price drops and the more people that buy it, the more common the emotion becomes and the cheaper the price. In the end, the emotion is available for free but the main character no longer desires it, as it has become the commonest thing. When it becomes illegal not to have obtained it, the character commits suicide leaving behind a note that writes 'anything but the new emotion'. Like with 'Cannibal Popular', this is how, in my view, ideas that dystopian governments promote start as original or eccentric and end up commodities and even necessities. Relativist perspectives are anti-utopian in that sense, because they leave individual personality defenceless to this cultural war I've described as 'The War of Appearances' in the story with that title.

In relation to Etherotopia, this story as a thought-experiment suggests that this 'new emotion' which is naturally indescribable and inconceivable to those who don't have access to it – leaving the possibility open that it is a placebo emotion – is desired by the people of this near-future world, regardless of the fact that they have no clue as to its nature. Briefly put, they first desire the 'new emotion' because of its rarity and because it is presented as the luxury of the privileged few who can afford it and then, when the price is lower and eventually when the product is provided for free, they still desire it because everyone else does, because it has become an essential part of their contemporaries' everyday life. This is an allegory for how the introduction of the 'new' can become the norm in the consumer culture. This can also apply to an idea. Either way, the argument here is that people don't know why they want this 'new emotion,' they want it because they are expected to and eventually the main character is forced to make it part of his life whether he wants to or not. The Etherotopian mind however ignores the popularity of an idea and examines the idea itself. The following dialogue from the story describes, I think, this attitude well:

'What is the trouble, officer?'

'As we have mentioned in the many thought-texts we have sent you, you are the only person on the planet who hasn't experienced the new emotion.'

'What is wrong with that?'

'There's obviously something wrong with you, sir, since you seem to revolt against the entire human race.'

‘The entire human race is deadly wrong.’

This attitude, it seems to me, is crucial for the development of a utopian vision. The utopian thinker must be in the position to examine an idea without any preoccupation, whether the idea is supported by a majority, a minority or none other than the thinker. This perspective is demonstrated by Bradbury in his story *The Meadow*, included in *The Golden Apples of the Sun*. Here is the relevant passage:

‘Mr. Douglas, (...) did you ever read that story about the man who traveled to the future and found everyone there insane? *Everyone*. But since they were all insane they didn’t *know* they were insane. They all acted alike and so they thought themselves normal. And since our hero was the only sane one among them, he was abnormal; therefore, *he* was the insane one. To *them*, at least. Yes, Mr. Douglas, insanity is relative. It depends on who has who locked in what cage.’¹¹⁹

It is thus inevitable for a proper utopia to appear as highly controversial in a world that follows the logic described in ‘The New Emotion.’ The story is an allegory for this relationship between a sane individual and an insane society, as well as for the dominance of consumer culture in the contemporary world. For instance, the pursuit of happiness – naturally related to utopian desire – becomes society’s obsession with the indefinable ‘new emotion’ product in the story. I am sceptical of the idea that utopia is merely the ‘happy land’ since, as I understand it, the concept of happiness in a non-utopian world is potentially radically different from the concept of happiness in a utopian world, especially one that consists of transformed states of mind. Of course the fact that I may be sceptical of the capitalist conventional version of happiness does not suggest a criticism of happiness in general, but rather the idea that there may be a far greater kind of happiness than the kind offered by the pleasure and entertainment industry of a consumer culture.

The following is the most purely political of the stories in the collection. ‘The Brain in Chains’ has a clear message, story structure and development. Christmas Red is a Marxist academic who decides to murder the dictator of a near future dystopia but ultimately finds that she is incapable of doing so, being by nature a theorist and not a practitioner. Though this is an obvious fascist dystopia, Marxist scholars are not only allowed but encouraged to teach Marxist theory at university, because the dictator feels that as long as they are teaching the revolution, it will never happen. This is why he

¹¹⁹ Bradbury, *Golden Apples*, 160

doesn't punish Christmas for the failed murder attempt in the end of the story but encourages her to continue her job.

Rather than a criticism of Marxism itself, the story criticises a passive left-wing culture depicted in the story which, while claiming to be revolutionary, in everyday life demonstrates the same attitude towards consumer culture as if it wasn't related to the Marxist worldview at all. This is a crucial issue for the application of the Etherotopian philosophy; a major problem with the everyday life of contemporary Christians, Buddhists and Marxists – to name three worldviews so well-established I don't need to re-introduce here – is that they follow ideas that are incompatible with many aspects of contemporary society which can either mean that one or more of these groups would eventually contribute to a cultural revolution or that these groups do not apply the values and aesthetics of their beliefs in their everyday life. One would expect – if I understand the basis of these three worldviews correctly – that these groups of people would not only oppose capitalism and its values theoretically but also practically and in their everyday lives; at least in the case of Christianity, this would be because of the anti-materialism of its worldview while in the case of Marxism – and even more obviously in the case of this story – it would be because of its anti-capitalist logic. I do think this happens due to an unintentional hypocrisy on the behalf of the believer or theorist and I want to make this statement clearer with an extract from the story in question. In the story, Christmas recalls giving a paper about the commercialisation of pleasure at a philosophy conference although being drunk the night before. Here is the relevant dialogue (Christmas speaks first):

“...I was in the first panel. It didn't go well. I must have drunk a little too much the night before.”

“What was your paper about?”

“Oh, you know... *Plato's Allegory of the Cave as a diachronic response to the Commercialisation of Pleasure in the Dehumanising Capitalist Society*. Phew! Least I've memorised the title. I will add this as an essay in my book in which I criticise the consumer culture and the delusion of relief it offers.”

Etherotopia's solution to this problematic conflict between the theory and practice of a utopian philosophy is its emphasis on the life and the mental transformation of the individual. What makes Christmas fail as an anti-capitalist is that her everyday life is identical to that of the average capitalist consumer. This is precisely why Etherotopia, though a philosophy for the person and the society, functions as a religion; it suggests that the individual starts living here and now according to the theory, while a purely

social theory might suggest that the individual will start living according to the ‘ideal society’ elsewhere and elsewhen, provided the desired society is first achieved; personal change is thus postponed ad infinitum. This is why the very first step in Etherotopia is the change of the individual and social change follows from that.

‘Phantom Jesus’ expands on the subject of ‘The Brain in Chains’ and offers a more radical approach. Phantom J is a member of a terrorist group that operates in a dystopian near future society. When he is to decide between three possible targets, the Central Bank, the Deception Centre and the War Centre (the third includes the factory where robot soldiers are produced as well as being the main government building) of the dystopia he faces, he selects to bomb the Deception Centre which is an immense amusement park, his argument (and mine) being that ‘satisfying people is what keeps dystopias going.’

Re-reading these stories from a critical perspective, it is clear to me why this was written after ‘The Brain in Chains’, even though there had been quite a few months between the writing of these two stories. Phantom J does what Christmas Red cannot, and that is because Phantom J is an anti-materialist. His target is the source of the problem rather than a symptom; it is not the dystopian government itself but what sustains it, and also what possibly gave birth to it. The need for immediate pleasure, which is satisfied in the story with the temple of consumerism that is the Deception Centre, is arguably also what makes a person desire to exploit others, so they can secure that others serve them and produce whatever satisfies them. ‘Phantom Jesus’ follows a Christian logic in that sense, as arrogance (or pride) and greed are to blame for the dystopia, not the dystopian system itself, which results from the dystopian state of mind in the first place; the mind that is, in turn, the result of that moral relativism that allows greed and arrogance to be interpreted as acceptable or even positive traits of the individual’s personality.

‘The World We Want’ is, as stated above, a satirical title. The utopia here is a caricature of a kind of utopian thinking that I suspect is popular in contemporary society: namely, the utopia where all desires are fulfilled, pleasures are guaranteed, and so on. While discussing their existential utopianism, Vieira and Marder write:

What is desirable – in other words, the Good and utopia itself – becomes a matter of dispute and political disagreement that, in the absence of an external arbiter (i.e. God or the teleological idea of progress), open the door to relativism

and to a recasting of utopia in the banal guise of an individualistic and oft-times hedonistic “private paradise.”¹²⁰

This ‘paradise’ is being criticised in the story, the utopia that people think they want. Besides – and following from the analysis of ‘The New Emotion’ – people can only be in the position to know what they want if they are aware what they are choosing from. In ‘The New Emotion’, there is really no option, as the desirable product is promoted as a ‘must.’ In ‘The World We Want,’ the situation is more complex. The utopia of this story is founded on the same logic as ‘Margaret’s World’; but while in ‘Margaret’s World,’ there was no concept of identity and the inhabitants of the absurdist dystopia were faceless and nameless bodies, the citizens of ‘The World We Want’ are given the right to redefine themselves and become anything they want to be, to the extent that some even change their species; Bonbon’s daughter decides to become a dog and everyone else in the island is expected to address her as a dog. No-one is allowed to disagree with any other’s own subjective truth since, as one of the characters explains, judgement is a crime in the island.

In the end the main character is sent to be executed for questioning the beliefs of others. The leader of the utopian island (and manager of the Pop Uto Hotel in which the inhabitants of this utopia live) condemns the psychologist with a speech that includes the following words:

Psychologists are unemployed in Pop Uto, why, why, why, because people here are confident in themselves, confident that whatever they have chosen to be is right, is right, is right, is right!

The story concludes with the psychologist’s observation that one of the nearby horses – that is actually a man who defines himself as a horse – is in a more tragic position than himself. The reason is not explained directly in the story but it is that the psychologist is conscious of his own tragedy while the rest who seem to be enjoying their utopia are delusional.

This observation helps make a useful connection between this story and Etherotopia. If utopia is merely the fulfilment of desire, then should a dystopia appear to fulfil the individual’s desires in order to sustain itself, in the individual’s subjective mind this dystopia would be experienced as a utopia. I want to return here to the idea of Etherotopia being the theory that aims to bridge the gap between utopia and nirvana. In the theory of nirvana, as I understand it, the subjective truth must be dismissed to make

¹²⁰ Patrícia Vieira and Michael Marder, *Existential Utopia*, X-XI.

room for the objective (this is the meaning of the Zen Koan *A Cup of Tea* that was examined in detail in the first chapter.) The idea that reality and self are subjective is one of the false freedoms the capitalist system generously offers, as they cost the system nothing and can be useful for the manipulation of the individual. In either case, the desirable state of mind in Etherotopia is the emotionally stable mind, the mind that cannot be easily ‘moved’ or impressed and therefore cannot be easily manipulated and that is of the highest possible clarity. The process of attaining nirvana must be part of the process of achieving utopia and vice versa. An enlightened society can only consist of enlightened members and – though this may appear to be metaphysical, depending on one’s understanding of ‘enlightenment’ – I believe that this is the most *practical* element of Etherotopia.

Portfolio, Part V

'Conclusions'

The New Emotion

Maria downloaded the kiss for 5000 dollars.

The soundtrack played in the background, her tongue pressed against her lips. Her eyes, whatever-colour-she-wanted-them-to-be, shut. Her breasts, whatever-size-she-wanted-them-to-be, caressed by invisible hands.

It lasted for thirty one seconds, like in the film. When the experience was over, all went back to normal. Her eyes met Adam, her lover, watching her silently from the other side of the room.

"You're not jealous, are you?"

He looked the other way.

"It's only a recorded experience," she said. "It's not real."

"I never said it was."

The music stopped when Maria wished it. Adam sat on the sofa next to her, touched her long unnatural hair, then her lips.

"I wish you stopped spending money on other people's experiences."

"It's the latest thing! How else do you suggest we pass the time?"

"I'm bored. I'll go for a walk."

"Again? You went outside last month!"

"I fear if I stay here any longer, I'll go mad!"

"Ha! So you *are* jealous!"

Adam shut the door. Maria re-loaded the kiss.

#

A week later they signed the divorce papers. She had just downloaded a series of expensive celebrity orgasms, including her favourite singer's. He hated it when she spent money like that. He needed that money to save the world, or so he claimed, and every single dollar counted.

He went through the catalogue again.

Save an African village: 7000 dollars.

Save three African villages (3 in the price of 2): 14000 dollars.

Save a third-world country: 5,000,000 dollars.

Save the world: 37,000,000,000 dollars.

Adam groaned. He was 37 billion short. He had nearly enough money to save a village though and that was something. It was much more expensive than buying the memory of a pop singer's kiss or a teenager's loss of virginity, but it was worth it.

Damn, he thought. If *he* was famous, he could make some money. Until then his recorded real-life experiences had no value to anyone but him. Especially since most people uploaded their experiences for free and anyone could download them as apps in the micro-chip next to their brain.

So in the end, Adam gave up. He donated his entire inheritance to a village and prayed that someone else, rich enough, would save the rest of the world.

#

Months passed and Adam was back in the ordinary life. He had found a new partner, much more suitable for him than the last one – search engines were updated constantly – and they enjoyed their time together. Sometimes, he and Eva uploaded a selection of their beautiful memories to be available to their friends online.

World-saving was a thing of the past. And there were so many distractions keeping one's mind away from the world. All those exciting apps, re-introduced to the market for more approachable prices. With a thousand dollars, you could now win a boxing tournament, sleep with a bunch of porn stars and give birth on the moon.

Eva encouraged him to experience birth as well.

"You have to feel the pain we women feel," she said. "I will transfer the app to your brain so you can load it when you're ready. Don't worry, I will be next to you all the time."

The experience was indeed liberating. The couple went through all of life's ups and downs in a week. There was no loss they hadn't felt, no agony they hadn't been through, no joy they hadn't shared.

"I feel wise," said Adam on the seventh day and collapsed on the floor. "I feel I've done everything there is to do, seen everything there is to see, heard everything, felt everything..."

"Well, nearly." Eva sighed. She grabbed her half-empty glass of wine and drank it in one go. "There's one experience we don't have access to."

"What is it?" he said. Instantly the sole purpose of his life became to gain access to this unknown sensation.

"Haven't you heard? It's the latest achievement in science, the greatest in the history of our species. Login to your brain and scan the full catalogue for the most expensive app."

Adam shut his eyes and meditated. The micro-chip inside his skull burned. His consciousness connected to the internet. His mind dived in the digital dimension, ignoring numerous friend requests, spam-thoughts and open doors to virtual realities. Tell me, tell me, world, which is the most expensive app of all?

A single page emerged from the depths:

The New Emotion.

Are you tired of feeling happiness, sadness, hatred, love?

What if there was an emotion different than the others?

Forget anger, excitement, depression, pleasure!

Those you have felt so many times in your life!

Forget pain, hope, fear, boredom!

Science can upgrade you to something higher than human!

Science can *add* an emotion to the human experience!

There are no words in any language capable of describing it, so we call it The New Emotion!

Upgrade yourself today! Feel the unfelt!

(Currently available only for billionaires.)

(The New Emotion costs exactly 1,000,000,000 dollars.)

(There are currently 27 people on the planet who can afford it.)

#

Adam couldn't sleep that night. There was an emotion he had never felt, an experience he could never have. It was killing him. At the same time, there were twenty seven others who *had* access to this new emotion and he was so jealous and so angry and so I-must-have-this-or-I-will-never-have-peace!

But maybe having peace was an emotion inferior to that new one, that brilliant, inconceivable, superhuman emotion. No, he had to find a billion dollars! He had to work, steal, murder, make any sacrifice needed to obtain it! The meaning of his life! No, he shouldn't sleep. He put on his clothes and ran outside, in the middle of the night, running around without a specific destination in mind, towards anywhere, as long as he was on the way to make a billion dollars.

As he ran across the street, his mind danced in his head like a pole dancer stripping from her skin. Police machinemen watched him run, midnight taxis flew above his head. Everyone on the planet knew where he – and everyone else – was at all times, thanks to the implanted chips – so no, he couldn't steal.

A voice in his head warned him he wasn't careful. Some family were moving houses and the floating house nearly hit him. While running past the old factories, he remembered his former employer and changed his direction.

The man was staying up late not far from there, as Adam learned online. He texted him his thought of seeing him and was accepted. A large metal door opened wide. He joined his friend's table.

"What's up Adam? Can I buy you a drink?"

"Water, thank you."

"What do you want it to taste like?"

"Chocolate. Oh, and strawberries."

The two men climbed the table and lay on it, under the colourful ceiling. Empty bottles floated towards the bar to be refilled before flying all the way back. The smell of apple juice and chocolate milk and candy and hot coffee, all for people who had either finished or were just beginning their day.

"What can I do for you?"

"I need work."

"Impossible. The old days are gone. Machines do all the work now."

The man laughed and drank his water which tasted like lemonade and swallowed his pill which tasted like lamb chops and salad and freshly-baked bread. His teeth moved up and down childishly.

"You know how it works," he said. "Better machines, less workers. A dream come true. Humans have officially nothing to do and all thanks to science."

"You're wrong!" Adam jumped from the table. "Science has finally given us something to hope for, something to fight for!"

"You don't mean that emotion, do you? Bollocks! It's only destined for a selective few!"

"I don't care, I want to download it! Where can I get a billion dollars?"

The old man sat on the table like a Buddha under an imaginary tree.

"For real?"

"For real."

The man whispered something in Adam's ear, something he'd rather not send by thought-text, of fear someone who shouldn't read it, did. Adam was inspired.

"Near-death experience?"

"You didn't hear it from me," said the other. "Near-death like actual near-death, mind you. Not a glimpse of the afterlife, there's plenty of that stuff online for free. I'm

talking about real danger, the shit that people don't experience anymore. If you are willing to risk your life for this new emotion, I'm sure you'd find enough customers who'd pay a fortune to download your memory."

Adam's eyes shined the diamond-shine.

"That's a great idea."

"Do it soon, though, before it becomes commonplace."

#

Adam didn't make love to his wife that night or the next. Eva had to re-load a previous sexual experience – with Adam, of course, otherwise he'd be jealous if he went through the data and found out. Whatever was in his mind, she couldn't know since it wasn't stored in digital form but in the real brain.

"I will jump from the balcony tonight," he said the first night. The next night he was in the hospital. From the hospital room, he made his new app available for sale at the price of 1,000,000 dollars. He only needed to sell a thousand of these. He labelled it: "For sale, unique near-death experience."

It wasn't that unique after all. His friend had little success trying to sell his cyborg cat's assisted suicide attempt by drowning and some hundred people had also put themselves or their loved ones in danger. But it seemed no-one wanted to spend money on second-rate experiences when a new emotion was on sale.

"Don't lose hope," said his wife on the third night, after he confessed his not-so-genius plan which wasn't his in the first place. "Haven't you heard? It only costs a million dollars now."

Indeed, all the twenty seven billionaires who could afford it, had already bought the emotion and in order to sell more, the app's price had dropped significantly.

"I want it, I want it!" cried Adam, sucking on his girlfriend's real-flesh breast, resuming old but not entirely forgotten positions, stored in both his brains, since his micro-chip was implanted shortly after birth.

"I want it, I want it too!" cried Eva, sucking on her boyfriend's tit, re-loading the same experience so that it made no difference.

#

Within a month, Adam had made half a million after selling a series of suicide attempts and extreme sports few people in the golden age of the machine attempted. Luckily, by that time, the price of the new emotion app had dropped to nearly that much money.

Then the impossible happened. Adam heard the app was now available for free. More and more people wanted to share it so badly they didn't care how much they had sacrificed to gain it. And for one moment Adam was so excited and then, the next moment, he didn't want it.

"It's become the most ordinary thing," he told Eva. "Everyone has it."

Eva left him. On her way out, she downloaded the new emotion and Adam never saw her again. Adam locked himself in his house and spent the next week in complete solitude and peace of mind.

#

One day there was a knock on the door. Open the door, it's the police, they said. They had warned him many times. He didn't know what he was being accused of or even *if* he was being accused at all.

The uniformed robot entered the hall.

"What is the trouble, officer?"

"As we have mentioned in the many thought-texts we have sent you, you are the only person on the planet who hasn't experienced the new emotion."

"What is wrong with that?"

"There's obviously something wrong with you, sir, since you seem to revolt against the entire human race."

"The entire human race is deadly wrong."

"That is highly improbable. You have twenty-four hours to download the new emotion, or you will be *forced* to install it. Understood?"

"And who will force me?"

"The government controls your brain more than you do. Have a good day, sir."

#

The next time Adam jumped from the balcony, he made sure he landed on his head. His suicide note consisted of a single phrase: "Anything but the new emotion."

The Brain in Chains

1

Christmas watched the library burn. What else could she do?

She opened the office window to shout but no-one listened. Her protest was drowned under police sirens and student laughter. In the distance, undergraduates were lining up like an army on their way to the club. Not a single head turned. Nothing to see here. Libraries had been burned before, replaced by more useful buildings or made landing areas for the flying cars of wealthy students.

What else could be done?

From the isolated microcosm that was her office, Christmas watched the past die and ate her fingernails. A bird in a cage it alone had chosen. A proper academic nest. No room for a desk or a shelf. The garbage bin was a hole in the wall next to the computer screen. The screen was a computer, a television, an e-book reader, a radio. Her job was twelve hours work per day, every day but Sunday, six hours sleep and six hours life. And a poster on the wall. An old man smiling. Mr. George Gap. The leader everybody loved because he was cool.

There was some fingernail-spitting. Straight in the bin. Always. After years of practice. The window shut when she turned her head to the screen. The screen turned on. There was light.

“How can I help you, Dr. Red?”

Christmas asked for the one book she always read after eating her fingernails which she always ate after learning something disturbing.

“The manifesto,” she said.

There was a knock. Interruption. A man with curly hair rushed in the office.

“Christmas, did you see that?”

Her reading was postponed. The screen now showed pictures of landscapes.

“The bastards!” continued the man. “Do you have any physical copies left?”

“I borrowed a book from the library last week” she said. “I guess they’ll want to burn it too, when they find out.”

“Do you think people will ever print books again?”

“Edward, how naïve of you! You think our children will miss what they never had? But that’s not our biggest problem. Do you know why they burned the library?”

“No. But I don’t think they’d tell us.” Both stared at the computer screen, as if it was staring back. “How was your day?”

“My day? I don’t know. I’m tired.”

“I mean the conference. I thought you were one of the speakers?”

“Yes, oh God, and I was in the first panel. It didn’t go well. I must have drunk a little too much the night before.”

“What was your paper about?”

“Oh, you know... *Plato’s Allegory of the Cave as a diachronic response to the Commercialisation of Pleasure in the Dehumanising Capitalist Society*. Phew! Least I’ve memorised the title. I will add this as an essay in my book in which I criticise the consumer culture and the delusion of relief it offers.”

“I find that fascinating. Shall we go to the club then?”

“I could use a drink.”

They left. The computer screen shut down. The elevator waited for them.

2

The city was dead outside. The students were either partying or copulating or defecating at that late hour. The rest of the working class were either copulating or defecating or resting. No-one knew the programme of the wealthy.

“What time is it?” said Christmas.

“Sleep time.”

“I don’t want to sleep.”

“Life time has passed. Everything is closed but the club. What do you want to do?”

“I want to die.”

“I thought you said you needed a drink.”

They stopped in front of the smoke that was consuming the library. With huge fire-breathing machines, the policemen erased the memory of the building. Christmas asked one of the officers. He said they were ordered to rid the place of this ugliness, that the great George Gap himself had ordered its demolition.

“Our beloved leader,” said the officer, “is visiting the university next month. I hear the university is awarding him for his contribution to modern culture. Isn’t that exciting? What an honour for our city, ma’am. And the country.”

3

The award would be given by the chancellor if, as a world leader, George Gap wasn’t himself the chancellor of every single university. In that case, the person who

had the honour to hand the award to the world leader was the head of the economics department and manager of the company that was the university, a sweet middle-aged man called Mickey Bloom.

His wife, Christmas, asked him to refuse.

“Don’t be foolish, Christmas. We might disagree with the system but there’s no use opposing it, since we’re working for it. Aren’t you happy that of all people, Mr. Gap has chosen *me* to hand him the award? For God’s sake, I’m going to touch him! In front of an audience too!”

He thought she’d share his excitement, but all he got was a blank frustrated face and emotional distance.

“But Mickey, how is that possible? Doesn’t he know you’re a communist?”

“What difference does that make?”

“It should make a difference! Don’t you find it a bit strange?”

“What’s strange?”

“That they know we’re communists! We teach Marxist theories and talk to our students about the horrors of capitalism, we tell them our leaders are tyrants, that the working class should revolt against them...”

“What’s your point, Christmas?”

“Why don’t they stop us? They won’t even fire us!”

“Maybe they don’t think we’re dangerous.”

“Well, we are! We are in charge of their children’s education! We’re more responsible for the future of this world than anyone! We’re the Platos and Hegels of our time, or at least we should be!”

Mickey wasn’t even looking at her. There was a large screen on the wall of the coffee shop that was at the same time a computer, a library and the coffee shop and it was displaying soundless advertisements of new clothes, cars and hallucinatory drugs.

Mickey, in all his Marxism, was thinking he needed that shiny green car that was designed like a frog and dove underwater. The driver in the ad was a tall blonde woman he had seen in a fashion magazine. Her revealing dress...

“Mickey, are you listening to me?”

“I think we should get a divorce,” he said without taking his eyes from the screen. “I’ve been thinking about it for some time. It’s the gap between our worlds, Christmas, and I don’t think either of us can build a bridge. You see, you are a post-modern structuralist ecologist while I am a post-structural modernist economist and the two really don’t fit.”

“Mickey, I can’t believe what you’re saying! We both agree that capitalism is wrong, we both agree that something drastic needs to be done and you only care about our small differences!”

“I’m sorry but that’s just how it is.”

Mickey left the room without even touching his coffee and it was as if he had never been there. Sometimes Christmas would bang her head on a wall or a table and say “this is not a real world, this is not a real world.”

4

Years earlier she was a teenager dreaming the perfect life, if only she made the right career choices. Her parents were retired farmers. The last generation actually, as it was a job that robots could easily do and better. When Christmas went to college, there weren’t half as many career options as before and she chose to keep studying for the rest of her life, so she became a lecturer. Soon after, she concluded something was wrong with the world and wrote articles about civil resistance. She always took part in riots and protested against discriminating laws and austerity measures and then, after her anger was released, she would return to her little office-nest, smiling, relieved, pleased with herself and happy to be working for a private university.

5

“What happened to your fingers, sis?”

Christmas didn’t want to answer. Edward understood. He hugged her and they were both silent. He took her things from the pavement and prepared some tea.

“It’s a bad habit, chewing your fingernails off. But tell me, have you decided? Are you going to the ceremony?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we have to.”

“We don’t. No-one cares what we do.”

“Then maybe we’re doing it wrong.”

“Correction. We are doing nothing. It’s our job. We are theorists.”

“Revolutionary theorists.”

“Right. But not revolutionaries. So, we have no responsibility.”

Christmas realised her fingernails weren’t available, so she wept.

“Wasting the best years of our lives debating whether this or that poem should be analysed structurally or... An endless linguistic wanking! I feel useless, Edward.”

“Why useless? What would you rather do?”

“What must be done!”

“But do you know what must be done? Where to start? If you read any random page of any random history book, you will find that what must be done never has and never will be done.”

The computer screen in the room claimed their attention. To calm their nerves, it began playing a relaxing tune. Christmas looked at it, then at the poster of the world leader next to it, the hated man, a man who was richer than entire countries of people.

“Have you ever wondered, brother, how can a theorist turn to a practitioner?”

Edward didn't get the message immediately. When he did, his forehead got wet with sweat and he found himself chewing his fingernails.

6

Time. The work hours passed like they didn't matter. The life hours were never enough. The sleep hours were neglected because life was suddenly a priority and sleep was not.

The life of Christmas Red finally had meaning. She had lost patience with her students and the people she worked for. She tolerated no mediocrity. When she'd give a lecture, she was on fire. She ignored the screen behind her and narrated poems she'd learn by heart. Verses, mixed, in no particular order, never filtered through pretentious critical theories, only wild rivers of words flowing from her mouth and eyes. She was out of control, out of order. She'd recite Shakespeare at the Marxist theory class. She would perform monologues from Greek tragedies at Victorian literature seminars. She was Antigone and Electra and Medea and she longed to be freed.

For days she didn't mark any essays or answer any student's questions. She entered each room like a hurricane and like a hurricane she left. No-one had to listen, let alone understand. Some students stopped coming to her lectures, others followed her like fans. A couple of girls started dressing like her and when she noticed, she changed her style and started wearing her pyjamas and going everywhere in them.

Time.

Time passed faster than she could run, faster than she could think or read or make love or dream or learn the location of the cameras and every corner of the great chamber where the graduation would take place and see herself emerging from the crowd with a gun in her hand and aim and shoot at the man whose face was tyranny.

Time. Her fingernails had grown too long and she bought some new scissors.

7

“How are you going to do it?”

“I don’t know, Eddie, I’ll think of something.”

“And then? What will happen afterwards?”

“What do you mean?”

“One person cannot be the revolution.”

“Of course not. But one person can start it.”

8

Edward was the practical mind. His research was on modern technology and he could use a laser or understand the mechanics of the hovering car, for example. He could easily do what Christmas asked but her plan was perhaps too simple to work.

She recalled seeing the award in Mickey’s office. A shiny globe with a figure of a man stepping on it like he owned it. The plan was to make a replica of the award, in which Edward would place an explosive. Christmas would get in Mickey’s office and switch the two. The explosion was to take place not during the ceremony, where their colleagues would be in direct danger, but a while later, when Mr. Gap would be in his helicopter. What this firework would mean to the world, neither of them could predict but at least they agreed it was better than doing nothing.

Everything seemed so simple, as long as Mickey was in complete ignorance. Christmas went to his office, wearing a red dress like the woman in the advertisement Mickey was so fond of.

“What do you want, Christmas?”

Christmas showed him a printed book, the kind that was no longer available in the market. It was a small paperback with a sky blue cover. Its first page wrote “To my fiancée, Christmas Red, with whom every day is a celebration.”

“Give me that,” he said.

“First I’ll read you a poem.”

Mickey sighed and crossed his hands. The screen behind him showed a recent photo of the world dictator, smiling the way only a man who has everything can. And Mickey must have spent hours worshipping and hating that smile.

“I will read that funny poem you wrote for me.”

“Get over it.”

“The Free Brain. How do you want me to read it though?”

“I don’t care.”

“What about a formalist interpretation?”

“Well maybe...”

“I mean, obviously you don’t want a Marxist reading, it’s a love poem.”

“There is always something about class.”

“No, I’ll read it as a cultural criticism.”

“Modernism, go for modernism!”

“Ok, let me begin...”

“No, let *me!*”

Touch. His hands, automatically, as if he was one of the police robots, or robot waiters or robot farmers, as if his hands were programmed, went for her hands instead of the book. She laughed. She threw the book outside the room and he grabbed it and she closed the door and he laughed, and they were like children, and she said this is my room now, I’m professor of economy now, and very quickly, from her bag, she took out her award to the tyrant and switched the two and got out.

“I will see you in my office,” said Christmas playfully, “if you read to me those poems again.”

Mickey was smiling somewhat bitterly.

“I will, professor.” He had already disposed of the copy. “But I will read them from the ebook.”

9

The day came and a helicopter landed on the ruins of the library building. Two men in black costume came out of the vehicle, followed by George Gap himself, in army general uniform, bald head and grey twisted moustache.

The fireworks, even in the middle of the day, were a spectacular sight to watch and probably they alone cost more than a year of the professor’s salary. Mickey felt so small all of a sudden he forgot that according to the theories he taught to his students, none of this mattered outside the psychosis that was capitalism.

Then, one after the other, the kings of the countries arrived, all loyal to the one world leader, and the city choked with all that luxury and glamour. As for the working class, they formed a sea of meat around the university. At least, this is how the wealthy few perceived them.

But apart from the minor monarchs, only people who worked at the university were allowed entrance to the main building where the ceremony was held. As for the students, they had a day off. Twelve hours life, twelve hours sleep, like on Sundays.

Inside, the chamber was like a temple. Electronic music played from computer screens to the left and to the right. Professor Bloom rushed to the centre of the stage, holding the murderous award in his hands. Lights on. His hands trembled. Somewhere in the audience, his wife held a detonator under her coat. *Her* hands trembled.

Professor Bloom spoke.

“Tonight is, um, a great night.”

The professor took some breaths.

“Tonight, the George Gap University is proud to present Mr. George Gap with the one and only George Gap Award!”

The crowd cheered. The man in question walked to the stage. From that close, Mickey thought, he seemed like a normal everyday man. From that close, there were no class distinctions between the many-too-many and the one-and-only.

Mr. Gap shook his hand and the class distinctions came back to life. Mickey felt he was in that Michelangelo’s painting, but more privileged than Adam, because *he* was able to touch his god. Mr. Gap accepted the award.

Cheers. Photographs. Orgasmic applause. All expected, all programmed. Gap applauded himself too. Laughter. The king and the pawns, so happy together when the king confirms their existence. The whole spectacle was so disgusting to Christmas she no longer cared if Mickey survived it.

Everyone froze when the woman stood up and cried “now, it’s now or never!”

The room turned silent. Mr. Gap looked at her as if he was studying an alien.

“Now what, my dear?” he asked. The wealthiest and, to her knowledge, most powerful man in the world, had spoken to her. Christmas was paralysed. The two men in black turned to her. “Leave her,” said Gap. “She’s not a threat.”

“Of course I’m a threat!” Christmas reacted and took out the detonator and lifted it high for everyone to see. “There is a bomb in this building...”

The crowd gasped. The men in black moved closer.

“Leave her, I said,” Gap ordered. “Go on.”

“A bomb,” said Christmas and her feet felt too weak to hold her up there at the same level as academically superior professors and financially superior businessmen.

“Come on then, detonate it!” said Gap.

Christmas looked at her brother then at her husband. She looked at the faces of her colleagues, most of them comrades in ideology but enemies in practice, faces she now hated because they had applauded the tyrant. What would happen to these people if there and then the tyrant fell? What would happen to her?

She took a few steps forward, towards Gap, Mickey and the bomb.

“Come on, little girl!” said Gap. “Blow us all up!”

She was now on the stage, only a few steps away.

“Christmas, get away from there!” shouted Edward but no-one paid attention.

All eyes were on Christmas. For a while, she was more important than the world leader himself, for a while she was everything.

“Do it,” said Gap and his eyes burned.

Mickey was on his knees, crying like a baby but soundlessly. The tiniest male on the planet, professor nothing. Christmas wouldn't even look at him. For a moment no-one else was in the room, or in the world even, but her and Mr. Gap.

“Why don't you try to stop me?” she complained.

“Because you won't do it,” said the old man. “It's that simple. What's your name, girl?”

“Christmas Red,” she said, holding the detonator between his face and hers.

“Well, Christmas. Do you know why there is no censorship in universities?”

“I'd love an answer to that,” she replied.

“Simple. Why censor people whose job is to censor themselves?”

“That's not true.”

“What is your job then, Mrs. Red?”

“Dr. Red. I'm a Marxist literary scholar.”

“That is so romantic. But what do you actually *do* about it?”

“I'm going to do something about it in a moment.”

“Ah, but I mean in *life*. I imagine you live a different kind of life than people who have neither your education nor your ideology. You couldn't possibly have the same addictions, the same taste in music, the same habits as capitalists. Am I right?”

At this point, Christmas nearly fainted from the tension, drew back and let the detonator drop on the floor. One of Gap's men grabbed it. The crowd held its breath. Edward, sweating all over himself, tried to disappear under his seat.

“What are you going to do to me?” said Christmas, defeated.

Mr. Gap raised his hand and she closed her eyes, expecting a hit. Instead the world leader's hand caressed her hair.

“Nothing,” he whispered. “Isn't that the most horrible thing I can do? Won't that simply crush your entire existence? And I will make sure you keep your job, and you keep teaching any revolutionary theory you like, knowing that people like you are the reason it will never happen. And this will be your punishment.”

Gap turned to the crowd.

“Apparently, this woman thought I was some kind of tyrant. It’s true, not all people have faith in me, but you saw today that I am kind even to those who don’t. Because that is what makes a true caring leader.”

As if awoken from a thousand year sleep, the crowd went from dead silent to hysterical within seconds. George Gap then raised the George Gap award and thanked them all for a wonderful day, before departing the same way he came and in more or less the same mood. On the way out, he disposed of both the award and the detonator.

As soon as everyone else left the room, Edward sneaked out from under his seat. Christmas looked at him with empty eyes. Neither could really blame the other.

10

The next day, Christmas was back in her office. Her little nest. Locked from inside. With a manifesto she enjoyed reading and teaching and analysing and nothing more. And chewing her fingernails off. Her red fingernails.

The World We Want

Her beard hung erotically between her breasts. Her raven-dark hair danced in the wind but her body remained still, like the statue of a modern Aphrodite. What is your name, he asked finally, resting his bald head like a skin-coloured football on her knees. “I’m Bon,” she said. She smiled generously. He couldn’t tell. “We have the same name,” he said. They had so much in common. They weren’t in love but they had spent the day together.

#

Bonbon were twenty years old when they met at the Pop Uto Hotel earlier that day. Bon was sitting alone in a table on the beach and Bon joined her for breakfast. They talked vividly about the future while drinking cold chocolate and coconut milk, then walked across the sand and removed their clothes.

They smelled a lot like dead fish, which was appropriate given the setting of their love-making. They made all sorts of love since, being good-willed, they enjoyed pretty much everything their bodies and nature in general produced, in liquid or solid form. This is how open-minded they were, a typical couple of their time. When the day was over, they introduced themselves and speculated about having a relationship.

It was a time of great change. The entire island had spent the previous night celebrating the new laws regarding parenthood. These little changes seemed at first irrelevant to Bon but Bon explained their importance.

Bon had always wanted a child but Bon had already had that experience. His complicated relationship with his former daughter had poisoned his dreams of running a family. She wasn’t happy to be his daughter – or anyone else’s – and he couldn’t force her to play that role.

Bon insisted it was different now, with the new law. It was easier than ever to obtain a child and there was no commitment or penalty should you want it returned. Bon wasn’t particularly strong-willed and, as it turned out, was even more submissive during sex, and so in the end Bon convinced him they should have a baby and see how that goes.

#

The child arrived the next day in a large metal egg to Bonbon’s hotel room. They collected their young partner as if it was a gift. It had already undergone the basic surgery to ensure total anatomic equality with all other infants in the country. They

would refer to its presence as, simply, “It” for the years to come. It would pick its own name and gender when it grew up anyway, so why bother naming it?

According to the new law, age officially made no difference. If a person can do x, it can do x regardless of age. If a person can have x been done to them, it can have x been done to them regardless of age. All else was old-fashioned ageism.

Bonbon breastfed their new baby in turns. Neither Bon’s breasts produced any milk of course, but they performed the process for their own experience and pleasure. When its turn came to play, the baby pulled Bon’s beard and they all laughed.

They were destined – another word is “designed” – to be a successful family. They had everything they wanted, so were happy together, just as happy as they’d be separately, which was exactly the point. Most days they’d take the baby to the beach and play there. Most nights they would leave the baby at the hotel and improvise with their own bodies under the curious moon.

#

The days passed, occasionally bringing a new arrival to the island and its great Pop Uto Hotel, the mountain-sized building which rested on the centre of the land like a palace. In the weeks that followed, the hotel welcomed an old blind pirate who talked only to himself, a pair of witches once lost in some swamp and a poet who had drowned himself in a lake out of broken heart.

One by one these were initiated to the laws of the island, and started families similar to Bonbon’s. The local government – or rather the hotel management – was a great help too. The pirate was given new mechanical eyes, the witches their own shrine, and the poet was finished off.

Bonbon were eventually offered a family room in the newly built right wing of Pop Uto and their very own part of the beach where they could play with their child and themselves undisturbed. Not that they had trouble with the other hotel residents in the past, but some privacy was always welcome.

#

It was during the baby’s second birthday – correction: delivery-day – that their peace of mind was taken away, as a white-clothed figure was washed ashore on their part of the island. The man was middle-aged with short black hair and a pair of round glasses he produced out of his pocket the moment he regained his senses. Bon was on his own at the time, while the other Bon was in their room, breastfeeding the child.

The man with the round glasses looked around as if Bon was invisible, then finally focused his attention on him.

“I’m sorry, young man...” he said. Bon moaned at that double discrimination. “But it seems I’m lost. My name is Ernst.” Again he looked around first, then at Bon. He attempted to shake his hand but Bon wouldn’t move.

“When are you from?” said Bon.

Ernst scratched his head then replied with a location.

“When?” Bon insisted.

“It doesn’t matter, I can find my way,” Ernst replied, thinking Bon crazy.

“I don’t think you belong,” said Bon.

“Of course not,” said Ernst, faking a smile. “I’m a castaway, aren’t I? I didn’t come here on my own will. I don’t even know where here is.”

“When,” Bon repeated.

Ernst paused.

“What is the name of this place?”

“The hotel?” said Bon. “This is *the* Pop Uto. It’s a paradise for superior spirits, open-minded people like myself.”

“I’m a professor, so of course I’m open-minded.”

“I said open-minded, not educated,” Bon groaned.

“Who is our guest?” shouted the other Bon. She had been watching from her window and had come to them with the child in her hands. She was dressed in a peculiar black robe that made her look like a priest to Ernst’s eyes.

“Good morning, Father,” said Ernst. Bon’s voice was deep enough to be mistaken for a man’s which helped convince Ernst that that person was a priest.

Bon was impressed. Bon wasn’t.

“Well, I *am* a parent,” said the impressed Bon, putting down the child she was carrying. It made a few steps then dropped to the sand and crawled to its other parent.

“You can help me, perhaps?” said Ernst to Bon.

“My name is Bon,” she said and shook his hand. “This is my partner, Bon.”

Ernst stood there in silence.

“The baby will pick its own name one day,” Bon concluded with a smile. Ernst didn’t notice the smile. It would take him a while to realise he was in a place where people thought about things differently. “And you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Your name?”

“Oh. I am Professor Ernst Sapiens, nice to meet you... Bon.”

“How lovely, a professor!” said Bon to Bon. “A professor of what?”

“Psychology,” said Ernst, satisfied with himself.

Bon grabbed the child and turned his back on Ernst.

“Get rid of him,” he whispered to Bon.

“But Bon...” she said. “I like him.”

Each Bon stared into the other’s eyes.

“Call the manager. The manager will send him back where he came from.”

Bon turned to Ernst. There was an awkward pause.

“You can stay with us,” said Bon. No-one said anything for a while. The child left Bon and crawled to the professor’s feet. It had a sweet, innocent smile. It tried to whisper “help” but its tiny lips couldn’t form the word.

#

The manager approved of Ernst Sapiens’ presence on the island but only under Bonbon’s supervision. Bon complained to Bon and asked that the professor wouldn’t intervene with their relationship to each other, each other’s relationship to the child or each other’s relationship to the world. “But he’s a doctor,” said Bon. “Even better, a professor. Surely he knows about that stuff.”

“He better unlearn what he knows then,” said Bon. “His prejudices are not welcome here.”

It was the first time that Bonbon disagreed with themselves.

#

At first, Ernst spent most of his time alone in a small room next to Bonbon’s. He wished he had a book to read but soon realised the island was nearly illiterate. The only readable text was the giant sign of Pop Uto above its main gate. From outside, it looked like a castle, he thought. And it was built around a volcano, though several of its towers were taller than the mountaintop.

He asked around for information, but no-one revealed much. The only thing that seemed certain was the lack of any communication between the island and the rest of the world – if there was still such a thing as a rest of the world. He also found many of the hotel’s inhabitants to be pretty ugly by his standards. What’s more, most of this ugliness was self-inflicted.

This is a great opportunity, he thought to himself, realising how many of these people were potential mental patients. This man believed he was an ancient druid, that girl insisted she was a victim of the Great Plague. And for some reason Bon seemed convinced she used to be in a 19th Century freak-show. But it was not just their sense of time that was awkward about these people. It was their aura, the way they talked to one

another, with a complete confidence that seemed to belong to the inhabitants of a truly blissful island – with very few exceptions.

It, for example. Ernst was particularly concerned about It and Bonbon. Bon wouldn't talk about It in front of him, but Bon was eager to discuss It with him.

“I like It very much,” Bon would say.

“But what is It?” Ernst would reply.

“Whatever It wants. Like everyone.”

“But how do you raise It?”

“It grows up... on its own.”

“When will It be old enough to decide for itself?”

“It was born old enough to decide for itself.”

“What if It eats something that's bad for Its health? What if It dives in the sea before It can swim? Would you let It drown?”

“If that's what It wants. You believe in free will, don't you? You do believe that people can do whatever they like?”

Then one most unfortunate day, its third delivery-day, It was reported missing. Bonbon were upset, more than they had ever been. Bon suggested they ordered a new child, Bon suggested they wait. Ernst tried to console Bon. “It's not your fault,” he told her. But he didn't mean it.

#

Fortunately, all problems were fixed in Pop Uto and the mystery was solved in a few hours. Another resident reported having seen It playing with a dog in the north-west wing. The dog was found but no sign of It. The dog had blood around its mouth.

Bon recognised the dog but didn't complain to the hotel manager about its actions. Bon didn't recognise the dog. She was in tears. Ernst had followed her to what seemed to be the scene of the crime.

“Do you know this girl?” Ernst said but the others wouldn't reply. “What a strange case. Why is she dressed like this? Who are her parents? What are you going to do about this...?”

Bon interrupted him.

“Shut up, professor.”

Ernst couldn't believe that Bon hated him so much he'd rather defend that bloodthirsty young woman than support him. The young woman in the dog costume barked threateningly.

“I wanted that child!” Bon shouted to her.

She barked again.

“Don’t blame Dog,” said Bon. “Dog didn’t want to harm our child, animals don’t have bad intentions...”

Ernst was suddenly afraid of these people.

“Why do you refer to this girl as Dog?”

“Listen, professor...” Bon whispered in his ear. He had lost his patience with Ernst once and for all. “People choose to be whatever they want to be. When I learned that my daughter was the spirit of a dog trapped in a human body, I did what any good parent ought to do and had her go through the necessary surgeries and medication. As you can see, she has grown her own fur and is living the life she chose for herself. It is illogical to tell people how they’re supposed to live their lives, and immoral too. Now that you know, if you keep addressing Dog as a human, I’m going to report you to the manager and have you exterminated like the fascist vermin that you are. Get it?”

Ernst nodded silent, defeated.

“Good.” Bon walked towards Dog. “It’s ok.” He caressed Dog. He shed a tear that no-one else noticed. He then turned and gave his hand to Bon. “It’s ok,” he said to her in the same tone.

“It’s ok,” said Bon.

“It’s ok,” said Ernst.

Dog barked and left.

#

The next day, Bonbon moved from their family room to a triple room where Ernst would also stay. His acceptance of the recent event confirmed his place in the Bonbon family and the community of Pop Uto. He was invited to participate in the sexual activities of Bonbon, but kindly rejected the offer. Despite what he told them, he hadn’t gotten over the incident with Dog and It yet, and was thinking of escaping from the island, though he doubted it was possible.

Bon started seeing other persons – “person” is discrimination in a way.

Bon started seeing other animals – “animal” is discrimination in a way.

Bon started seeing other creatures – “creature” is an acceptable term – and Bon pretended she wasn’t jealous. She spent more time with Ernst those days than with Bon and Bon pretended he wasn’t jealous.

#

Ultimately, the manager decided the hotel was full and wouldn’t welcome any more visitors. The sky turned black for seven days. No-one asked why. There were

some suicides and the management introduced happiness pills that supposedly eliminated misery and melancholia.

Bonbon took part in the new treatment. Ernst claimed he had cured himself of such emotions, being a psychologist. Sometimes at night, and when he was sure he was alone, he wept.

#

Bon left Bon.

Bon and Ernst moved to a double room. Bon moved to a single room with a dog. They were married. Dog had made the marriage proposal. During sex, Dog asked Bon to play the giraffe. Dog said "You're my giraffe, bitch!" They were very happy. Bon went through the relevant operations and changed his name to Giraffe.

Bon and Ernst had a more platonic relationship.

#

Co-existence required a tolerance of sorts. From her point of view, Bon liked contemporary spiritual exercises, such as the steady mutual slapping that was known to lead to certain transcendence from the ego. Ernst didn't understand or always agree with Bon's definitions of things but then again neither did Bon. Apart from hitting each other and calling it spirituality, they didn't have much psychical contact.

Generally speaking, Ernst enjoyed talking with Bon. There was no-one else in the island who would talk with him, no-one who would listen. But Bon wasn't always happy about it. She didn't like him invading the private corners of her mind.

"Let me help you," he told her once.

"With what?" she said. "I don't need help. No-one does."

"Trust me," he said. "Everybody does. Need help. It's ok. It's ok to accept we are not perfect. It's ok to ask for help sometimes."

Bon considered this. Then she exploded.

"You do not understand Pop Uto, do you? The real meaning of Pop Uto! The freedom that is Pop Uto!"

"But you are sad inside, aren't you?" he said.

"I am the happiest creature I could be," she said.

"You put on your happy mask, but you are miserable."

"Do you judge me, professor?"

"It's called diagnosis, not moral judgment."

"Am I sick then according to your diagnosis?"

"Not sick, only confused."

“You know, it is unethical to judge another person. You cannot express an opposition to another person’s opinion, taste or lifestyle. You cannot advise people what they shall do with their lives. Who are you to judge me, or anyone? Judgment is a crime in Pop Uto.”

They had a short fight but in the end he faked an apology. The next morning, Bon woke up to the most unpleasant surprise. Her beard was gone. Someone had shaved her entire face. She looked in the mirror and the horror was confirmed. She screamed at the top of her voice.

Ernst was sitting on the bed next to her, anticipating a more positive reaction.

“Beautiful, no?” he managed to utter. He daren’t look in her eyes.

Bon left the room without second thought. Ernst knew she was heading to the reception desk. He jumped out the window and ran across the beach. He kept running until there wasn’t any further he could go. Only when the witch-hunt truly started, he found the courage to jump in the water and try swimming past the horizon.

The last image he remembered from that day was the hundreds of indefinable bodies, a floating zoo of claws, tails and deformed faces, chasing him underwater. As he lost his senses, he could swear he saw a miniature Earth at the bottom of the ocean.

#

He woke inside a rusty round cage, on top of a cart led by a horse and a man with implanted horse hair and artificial hoofs and tail. The tower behind him, which he had been unable to see from the beach, was proudly stretching its neck among the clouds on top of the island’s sleeping volcano.

In front of him were a battalion of clowns from all corners of human history and a short caped masked man whom the entire Pop Uto simply called “the manager.” Ernst never got to see his face. The mask was but a mirror attached to a helmet with strange corners and horns. His voice echoed. It was unpleasantly high-pitched. Ernst quickly diagnosed his person as rather hysterical.

“This *individual* defines itself as professor, calls itself Ernst which is – need I put emphasis on this? – *not* a unisex name, this is *not* a unisex name I repeat, and by this alone we understand the person’s intentions, its character, this certain Ernst...” Here the manager spat. “...Sapiens, as it has labelled itself, *two* names, I must note the combination of two names, as if one wasn’t enough, and I imagine the last name was not the mother’s...” Here the manager spat again. “...I mean the last name was only one of the parent’s and what does that mean, eh? An old-fashioned idea of a family it means, no doubt, a family that doesn’t include the entire planet, a very old-fashioned idea of a

family, indeed!” Here the manager spat a third time. “The idea that a person has a *family name!*” Here the manager spat a fourth time. “A person that would no doubt refer to another human as He, She or, the more pretentious one, They, rather than It. *They* rather than *It*, even when the human implied is clearly an It, no doubt about that. No doubt that person would refer to itself as a They to convince the rest of us of open-mindedness, rather than It. The eternal object-subject problem, no doubt.” Here the manager spat a fifth time. “Look at this creature. No doubt it looks after itself, desperate to impress others, as if sexual companions were chosen on basis of appearance. Clearly not enjoying life enough. Too thin a thing, no doubt. And, and, and...” The manager opened his mouth but merely coughed. “And it calls itself a psychologist, which is one of those things people cannot be anymore, one of those things that belong to the dead past. Psychologists are unemployed in Pop Uto, why, why, why, because people here are confident in themselves, confident that whatever they have chosen to be is right, is right, is right, is right!” Here the manager raised his fist and the clowns cheered. “Every It here is right and will not let anyone criticise It for the choices It has made, and every It must be respected for absolutely anything It does, every It deserves respect for, for, for, I have nothing else to add.”

At this point Bon emerged out of the crowd, the new Bon, that fragile creature that was hairy everywhere but the face. She appeared to Ernst as a beautiful face from the past trapped in a body from an ugly future. She walked past the horse and the man who defined himself as a horse and whispered something to the manager’s ear or at least close to that area of the head where ears are normally found.

“Intervened with another person’s freedom, the professor did,” remembered the manager. “Judged that formerly bearded thing, the professor did,” he emphasised, though unsure he had chosen the right words. “That formerly bearded person,” he added. “And what must we do to those who intervene with our precious freedoms?”

“Burn It, burn It, burn It!” the crowd shouted, in tempo.

The manager raised his hands as if to scratch the sky’s bottom. The crowd was cheering and Ernst couldn’t tell the difference between ancient fanatics and modern fanatics, if indeed these were time-castaways and not just lunatics. To his eyes, the manager of Pop Uto Hotel had little difference to the Holy Inquisitor, and the Pop Utopians defended their supposedly progressive ideas with the most conservative hysteria. What could he say to that crowd that would make a difference? What use would arguments have? He groaned but in the end he was speechless. He collapsed on the metal floor of the cage and surrendered to his fate, as the clowns, with joyful

dancing moves, added chunks of wood to the cart and set them on fire while singing songs about tolerance.

The man who believed himself a horse was laughing at the top of his voice. For a moment, Ernst could hear no other sound but the pseudo-horse's laughter. No-one else realised he was in a far more tragic position than the professor.

Phantom Jesus

3rd Move

“There are two kinds of resistance. The first is the popular one, the passive, in which you get to moan, *protest*, post angry comments online, march up and down the streets chanting slogans to release the tension from being oppressed...”

The boy scratched his head, unsure how to respond.

“What’s the other kind?”

“Why, action.” The masked person handed him the device. “Here. Just like I promised, a non-traceable explosive.” The boy studied the fake phone with interest, then put it in his pocket as instructed. He experienced this like a scene from an action film. Before they went on though, he had to know more about the man. Apart from the domino mask, his face was covered with a hood and a black scarf. Of his entire body only the eyes could be seen, though these preferred to hide under the hood.

“Why is your uniform entirely black?” asked the youngster.

“Universe camouflage. To blend in with the cosmos.” He paused, unsure if the boy received this as an unfunny joke or fact. “I still need to shut my eyes whenever I break the laws of physics.”

Remaining under his spell and more intrigued than ever, the boy’s hand dove in his bag of mini cheeseburgers and fished a few out of it. His young brain required refuelling to process the information.

“Can you go back in time like the incredible Faster-Than-Light-Man?”

“Nonsense. You spend too much time at the Deception Centre.”

The man pointed at the enormous building some hundred meters to the east. Its main tower extended to the skies, a lighthouse for wandering consumers. The Centre’s many attractions included two dozen cinemas, an amusement park that went on for several kilometres to the south and, to the west, relevant government buildings such as the Ministry of Entertainment.

Its main gate seemed keen to swallow the whole desert, if its stomachs weren’t already filled with an entire society. Indeed, the closest city looked abandoned, as the civilians would only return to their homes to get sleep, though most would rather take a nap in the comfortable cinema beds or even outdoors, to always be a step away from their glamorous utopia.

There was a colourful explosion of fireworks every thirty minutes, and the boy asked if the bomb would go off during one of those. The man was partly amused.

“It won’t matter. When the bomb goes off, the entire desert will go silent.”

The boy felt the device in his pocket.

“I told you,” insisted the man, “they can’t spot it. It’s my people’s technology, so they won’t recognise it. There’s really no need to worry.”

“But won’t you kill everyone that way? Won’t you kill *me*?”

“I’ll wait for you to come out first. Don’t you trust me, kid?”

The boy looked at the enchanting anti-hero. He knew that all anti-heroes were cool. He knew that mysterious people in black costumes and capes were cool. Plus he wanted the reward, he wanted the same superpower that he had. That way he’d be an anti-hero too. Even so, the idea of the bomb being carried in his pocket almost woke his logic up from its hypnosis.

“Are you really *him* though? Phantom Jesus, the man they call terrorist?”

“Why are you still in doubt, kid? Who else could I be?”

“And you say you broke out of prison this morning?”

“This is why we must do it fast. Before they realise I’ve escaped.”

The boy wanted to be convinced, so he was. He glanced behind once more, then walked across the field to the main gate where he joined the queue. One by one everyone was scanned by the fat police robots before they were allowed in. When his turn came, he couldn’t hide his stress.

Phantom J watched with outdated binoculars. He pressed the button on his own phone when the youngster walked past the guards. The boy’s phone started ticking loudly, exactly as a bomb should. The boy froze. Everyone looked, gasped at the thought, and only started screaming after their fear was confirmed.

“Get it off me!” cried the boy to the guards. “It’s a bomb, a bomb!”

The crowd ran amok, repeating the boy’s statement like an echo, until there was no-one inside or near the Centre who hadn’t heard the news. One of the robots grabbed the phone and tried to disarm it but it wouldn’t stop ticking. Another pushed the first and ordered him to take it as far away as possible. A third robot asked the boy to calmly explain how that bomb had got in his pocket.

Tears added to the tension. The boy pointed at the direction of the terrorist and told the robot how that terrible man, Phantom J, had manipulated him into carrying out this crazy task. The guard’s mechanical eyes spotted the man. The robotic arm transformed to a fully automatic cannon and aimed. But the enemy was already far away and by the time it started firing, he was gone.

Speaking inside its head and the computer there, the robot requested backup from the heavily-guarded Central Bank, located about a mile east. It seemed that the terrorist was headed that way. The first robot returned without the device, said that it never went off and that all this fuss must have been created for distraction.

“What about the Deception Centre?”

“Everybody fled when they heard about the bomb. The building is completely empty for the first time in years. Shall we close the gate and go after the criminal?”

“It’s our only option,” said the second robot. “Until the matter is resolved, the area is officially off limits. Permission is requested to leave our post, so that we may capture this annoyance before he reaches the bank and causes more trouble.”

5th Move

Phantom J jumped into the sand and the sand made way. His technology couldn’t protect him from their bullets, but could help evade them. He swam across the sand as if it was water, but faster than any swimmer could. At some point robots surrounded him and he disappeared inside a palm tree. Then they shot the tree down and he dove back in the sand.

But they were faster than him, programmed to deal with his kind. Their weapons couldn’t ignore as many limitations of space but their radars spotted him whenever he popped out of the ground. And since he couldn’t remain underground, since for practical reasons parts of the body had to stay outside of the ground, he didn’t have much hope against that many foes.

He did make it to the bank, at least. After his failed attempt to bomb the Deception Centre, his arrival there was unexpected, as this place was far better guarded than the last and his chances to succeed were even less.

Finally, the bloodless arm of the law got him some hundred meters outside the bank. Having failed to even reach the building, he kneeled, put down his weapon – an out-of-fashion pistol from a previous century – and took off his mask. The robot army – for an entire army had gathered – hadn’t calculated this possibility. Seeing the long red hair was a subtle shock but this face they hadn’t even registered in their database.

“This is not Phantom J,” they said.

“No, it is M,” said the woman beneath the mask. “I tried to avenge my friend but failed him. I don’t ask you to have mercy on me but if you want to catch me alive, I demand that you put me in the same cell.”

The circle of robot soldiers closed in on her, almost too many to count. All the guardians of the Central Bank were there, and many who had left their post at the War Centre where the weapon factories were and the barracks. All kinds of metal warriors had gathered to eliminate this unpredictable new threat.

“Put down your watch too,” said a robot general. They knew well that all the power of a Phantom lay in their watch, as they couldn’t teleport in and out of matter without it.

M did take off her watch but she pressed it in her fist till it broke. The robots were surprised that she had the physical strength to do such a thing, but they’d soon get the explanation.

“It’s safe,” said an officer. “She’s unarmed now.”

“You know, my lucky number is thirteen,” said the woman. “How close is the cell number thirteen to J’s?”

Her eyes shined as she stared into the officer’s eyes. Literally shined.

“Not really. He’s in number forty,” said another. Each knew what information everyone else shared, as all were connected to the same computer and power source.

“Ah that’s fantastic! Let me have a look at those blueprints then...” said M but didn’t move, nor did she seem to have any papers on her. “It’ll only take a second.”

“What is going on?” said a senior officer. “Won’t somebody arrest her?”

“Just another second, love. Why, that’s great. The cell’s in the south side of the building, should be easy access. No windows though. Not that I need them.”

“How do you know?” said the same officer. M appeared to be searching inside her mind the way robots would. The officer went closer and grabbed her hand. There was an awkward pause. “Tough,” he said. “Metal.”

“Thanks for noticing, officer.” The voice adapted again, for the third time that day, to the same tune as the robots’. “And thanks for your help, I don’t think I’ll need you guys anymore.” The robot, through which Phantom M spoke, opened her arms wide as if she could embrace them all. Her heart was armed and started ticking.

“Oh no you wouldn’t!” shouted the officer. Next thing he knew he was flying up in the air along with hundreds of his companions’ parts, eventually losing control of his machine-made body and that virtual imitation of a conscience.

7th Move

Elsewhere. A woman in a dark costume ran across the desert with the certainty of a queen flowing from one side of the chessboard to the other, her elegantly crafted

body in the delicate hands of the player. Having sacrificed a favourite rook, now was the time for her to push forward. The enemy had lost half his pieces to get that rook and he must have realised by now that it wasn't worth it. Surely now he was staring at the chessboard confused, thinking he couldn't have avoided that bad move because that rook had threatened a king. The outcome though was still uncertain, as *the* enemy had *his* enemy's king blocked. For now.

Now, from a prisoner, J had been promoted to a hostage. The guards of the War Centre raised the alarm, ready to face the new intruder. All gates closed, all laser cannons and machine guns and missile launchers armed. But M was already there.

One moment her head and arms were inside the prison wall, next moment her feet disappeared. On the other side of the wall, J opened his eyes and smiled warmly. Then the smile degraded to something more formal.

"Hello M."

"Hello J."

They saluted each other like they used to back at the hideout in front of the others. Each put their right palm where the heart was, then raised that hand in salute.

"I'm glad you're here," said J finally.

"You got us all worried. Was getting caught part of your plan?"

"I improvised. I pretended that my target was the main power source located in the War Centre behind the prison. I pretended to attempt to blow the thing up, then let them capture me."

"Could you have succeeded if you had actually tried?"

"Impossible. But I wanted them to think that *this* was my target."

"Isn't it? I'm surprised. Destroying their main power source would be the most logical thing to do."

"That's what *they* think. But it's extremely well-guarded."

"I destroyed half their army myself. Well, my robot suicide bomber *offered* to help. After a false flat operation, the Deception Centre was evacuated and I got my robot to find out about your location. It hacked one of the soldiers' brains during its capture then transferred the prison's blueprints to my Phantom watch."

The advanced watch-like device on her hand flashed in response, itself a semi-conscious robot.

"And now," J declared, "you're here to get me out."

"Not so soon," said M. "You haven't told me yet which is the real target."

“I was hoping you’d help me decide. Let’s go through this again. The Lord preached non-violence towards living creatures but had no objection to violence towards objects. In fact, he got pretty violent once against people’s property. This vandal who denounced wealth and destroyed the goods of rich traders, chasing them away from the temple with a whip, is my role model. With this in mind, think again.”

“With this in mind, all three targets sound good to me.”

“Wrong. There are three potential targets in the area: the Deception Centre, the War Centre and the Central Bank. Of these, the War Centre and the Bank are too heavily-guarded and we can’t penetrate them unless their guards are distracted.”

“Or we can make another robot-bomb.”

“You were lucky once, they won’t fall for it again. They would have scanned you if they didn’t think they knew who you were; me, in this case. Anyway, the other thing is that the Bank and the Deception Centre are open to civilians and we follow a non-violence-towards-people policy, so we can’t attack these either. Therefore the only logical target would have to be the War Centre, provided we first distract its guards by threatening the safety of the other two.”

“But! The way you’ve planned it, the only heavily-guarded place of the three is now the War Centre and, what’s worse, now they know that the attacks to the Bank and the Deception Centre were mere distractions, and they know you’ve located their main power source and that I’m about to rescue you, so they *expect* an attack there.”

“So...?”

“I’m not sure. Should we rob the Bank?”

Phantom J nodded and asked for his watch. As he put it on, they vanished. In the meantime, new guards emerged from immense machines at the nearby factory and soon the War Centre was flooded with them. The enemy waited without even blinking his eyes – because how could he? – while J and M simply walked away.

“I don’t get it,” she said about an hour later, while removing her hood. Behind her, a single impressive firework blocked the sunset. “Why this one?”

“It was the easiest target. Plus, it was deserted.”

“But we went through all that trouble for *this*?”

Phantom J laughed.

“They’ll never know what hit them.”

“I know it was grand and glamorous and all that, but the Deception Centre wasn’t as harmful as the Bank or the weapon factory, was it? Or of course the power

source without which the entire army would be useless and the people would be free to start a proper revolution and...”

“Free, but not willing.”

In the middle of the desert, a metal gate opened in the ground. A larger group of Phantoms flowed past them, waving, their hands the only part of them above the earth. Phantom J asked her if she would enter first. She didn’t move.

“It’s just not logical,” she said. “All this for a simple amusement park?”

“It was more than that. People practically lived in that thing. Everything was provided for free, entertainment, pleasures, virtual reality. The robots did all the work, so they could provide these to the locals and the locals let the robots get all the power in exchange for the robots’ servitude. Which is sort of a contradiction, if you ask me. And of course the Bank was the gate between tourists and this unique utopia of fake, the Deception Centre.”

“I insist that our target should have been the power source.”

“They’d build new robots to rule them. They’re the ones who created them in the first place. Listen, satisfying people is what keeps dystopias going. The target was the Deception Centre because when you free people from those things they think they like and have been trained to want – when you free them from pop culture – they’ll bomb the banks and the war factories themselves.”

Both Phantoms looked behind with some expectation, if only to see the sun one more time before it disappeared under the one-dimensional bed of the horizon. Phantom J sighed and Phantom M laughed.

“Just give them some time,” said J and started walking down the stairs. The round gate closed behind them and a strange mechanism, like long iron hands, came out of the ground and ritually covered the gate with sand.

Conclusion

Utopia can be a particularly attractive subject, and since the hope for a better future concerns everyone, the academic field of utopian studies includes scholars from diverse backgrounds, from literary critics and philosophers to architects, ecologists and writers. However, despite the rich tradition of utopian literature and despite the frequency with which utopian ideas are explored in contemporary fiction (science fiction in particular), I believe that with a creative writing research in this field I have examined the same ideas I would have in a literature PhD or a PhD in philosophy but in different, and perhaps more creative, ways. A story, as opposed to an essay, is not expected to ‘explain’ as much as to wonder, and is also permitted to imply, rather than deliver in a straightforward manner, its message. As Le Guin said in her Paris Review interview when discussing her novel *The Dispossessed*: ‘I was not writing a program, I was writing a novel.’¹²¹ Besides, a story can be allegorical and may thus – for instance – even address political issues without a political terminology or a political theme.

These however, as I have discussed early in this thesis, are different means, not ends. In the end, the message may be delivered differently than in a literature or a philosophy PhD, but the message is not necessarily altered. In a creative writing work though, there is the option to address a matter from more perspectives other than the writer’s own, and several of the stories in this collection have unreliable protagonist-narrators that experience a utopian situation in a negative manner or a dystopian situation in a positive manner. This approach addresses, I believe, the relationship of subjectivity and utopia more effectively than a critical work could.

Finally, a certain advantage that a philosophical story has, as a thought-experiment, is that it is not necessarily a final statement; in many cases, a story can express the writer’s own doubts or hopes, but it may well involve a number of ideas that contradict each other; besides, the utopian scholar Tom Moylan has written that ‘Utopian writing in its many manifestations is complex and contradictory.’¹²² Also, a utopian story is not told from the perspective of someone who knows what utopia would be like, but from the perspective of someone who – due the impossibility of a perfect

¹²¹ Ursula K. Le Guin, “Ursula K. Le Guin, The Art of Fiction No. 221,” Interview by John Wray, *The Paris Review* 206, Fall 2013, accessed June 18, 2014, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6253/the-art-of-fiction-no-221-ursula-k-le-guin> .

¹²² Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York, London: Methuen, 1986), 1.

judgement and the inconceivability of utopia – merely suggests what, in his or her view, the first step could be towards the realisation of utopia.

In that sense, it is clear to me that the very first step takes place in the mind of the individual and that – since the kind of utopia presented here is a utopia-in-progress – that first step is a part of the individual, and consequently, social transformation that Etherotopia suggests. Having arrived at the end of this thesis, it would be appropriate here to summarise here and list certain key arguments of this research,

First of all, Etherotopia is not, strictly speaking, a utopian theory or a religious system but a philosophy of life that combines elements of both. Under no circumstances could it replace a religion, as it doesn't offer an alternative cosmology and it may or may not be interpreted as meant to replace a social theory. I have used the term 'Etherotopia' in this thesis to indicate a way of thinking about utopia; in that sense, Etherotopia is above all a perspective and a state of mind.

Etherotopia is neither the vision of a utopian future that is positioned elsewhere nor the vision of a utopian world positioned elsewhere. Since individual development is Etherotopia's starting point, the process that is Etherotopia begins the moment it is conceived. From that moment onward, individual and social change do not exclude one another but are interconnected. The very least, by improving oneself, the member of society is improving that member of society which is oneself. The role model in this case may well be Diogenes, the reason being the supposedly perfect co-ordination between theory and practice. Ferguson refers to 'the *askesis* he inflicted on himself, the inuring of body and mind to hardships by continuous practice, as in manual crafts, music and athletics, the experts achieve their surpassing skill by dint of incessant toil.'¹²³ Julie Piering mentions Diogenes' ethical model arguing that 'the life he lived is as much his philosophical work as any texts he may have composed.'¹²⁴ In his analysis, Ferguson adds the following:

Diogenes was not in general offering a Utopia in the way that others were. He was asking what a community would look like if people lived according to nature. His answer was not systematic. The cardinal point was the abolition of property; most of the rest flows from that.¹²⁵

¹²³ Ferguson, *Utopias of the Classical World*, 93.

¹²⁴ Julie Piering, "Diogenes of Sinope (c.404—323 B.C.E.)" *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed June 18, 2014, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/diogsino/>.

¹²⁵ Ferguson, *Utopias of the Classical World*, 97.

This is particularly important here, the fact that his answer was not systematic and that everything ‘flows’ from a particular change of perspective. Poetically speaking, we may say that utopia is a stream, that there is a certain barrier in the individual’s distorted perception of oneself and that utopia is automatically realised when that barrier is destroyed (nirvana would, in this sense, symbolise the destruction of that mental barrier.)

Diogenes’ view, if it is indeed that the abolition of property leads to a better community and even to utopia, is more specifically described by Le Guin. In the words of the utopian thinker Odo from Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*: ‘No man earns punishment, no man earns reward. Free your mind of the idea of *deserving*, the idea of *earning*, and you will begin to be able to think.’¹²⁶ This is also helpful for our discussion of Etherotopia, since it mentions the process of ‘freeing the mind’ from a particular idea that blocks the utopian process. In any case, the priority must be the utopian state of mind, as the non-utopian mind is unable to imagine or practice utopia.

As a vision for an ideal society, Etherotopia would be a society that consists of utopian citizens, personalities who think and act in a radically different way than non-utopian ones. However, unlike a possible elitist interpretation of this, Etherotopia does not exclude the non-utopians themselves but involves the transition of society and its members from the non-utopian to the utopian condition and therefore functions as both religion and social theory.

The reason why there is no social discrimination in Etherotopia is not because identity is subjective and thus there is nothing to discriminate; rather because the differences between the members of society are glorified and respected. Thus Etherotopia solves discrimination by positively emphasising on the differences between definable identities rather than attempting to hide them, make them irrelevant or destroy them. This is a political, aesthetical as well as an existential matter. In an everyday language, the idea is to accept people *because* of their differences, not in spite of them. This is also in accordance with the Christian idea of loving the enemy; in this case, the radically different state of mind.

Progress is not interpreted as inevitable because that very idea might prevent progress. Doom is not inevitable either, for the same reason. The Etherotopian state of mind is non-fatalistic in that sense and there is neither trust nor distrust in the future; the Etherotopian perspective gives full responsibility to the individual’s participation in the

¹²⁶ Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 295.

present moment. This is also important in the study of utopian scholarship – and stories, for that matter. As Eliav-Feldon writes: ‘A historian reading utopias as social documents must learn, therefore, to disentangle the specific from the universal, as well as to remember that he is offered in fact a view of society from aside or from above.’¹²⁷ This has been the approach of this study and the reason I am examining utopian ideas regardless of their current status and popularity in utopian studies, in science fiction literature and culture in general. As Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor put it, in order to judge a utopia, “we should not consult our prejudices but should apply an impartial test to determine whether it would benefit people by comparison with the society in which it constitutes, or constituted, a critique.”¹²⁸

What defines the Etherotopian state of mind and why is it a utopian way of thinking? A utopian mind is immune to propaganda (the popularity of an idea is not a criterion for its value, as demonstrated, for instance, in the stories ‘Cannibal Popular’ and ‘The New Emotion’), is not easy to impress or deceive, and thus is in the position to tell utopia from dystopia. This is essential. I consider it impossible to suggest a utopia whose citizens couldn’t tell the difference, should dystopia be experienced as utopia. Furthermore, the utopian mind recognises its own limitations and the faulty logic that inevitably derives from them. The idea that truth is subjective is rejected, thus the individual is not satisfied with the truisms their own mind create as a substitute for reality or – should a religious approach be accepted here – the inaccessible objective truth: this is precisely what fuels the need for nirvana or enlightenment or any other concept that can be interpreted as the access to objective knowledge and the rediscovery of the self.

Finally, regarding the utopia that one ‘wants’ and the one that one ‘needs’. In dystopian stories like ‘The World We Want’, utopia as well as identity are defined and redefined to fit one’s egocentric perspective of reality; due to a particular subjectivist attitude, the anti-utopian mind assumes that reality is in the hands of the individual, and not that the individual is part of an objective reality. Etherotopia is imagined not as a place but as a society of utopian minds which means, poetically speaking – but perhaps there is no more appropriate way to put it – that Etherotopia as a totality consists of the minor Etherotopias that are its citizens. In that sense, Etherotopia is the utopian state and, at the same time, the utopian state of mind.

¹²⁷ Miriam Eliav-Feldon, *Realistic Utopias*, 2.

¹²⁸ Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia: A Study in Theory and Practice* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 7.

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