

POWER AND WEAKNESS OF THE UTOPIAN IMAGINATION

I. UTOPIA AND HOW NOT TO WRITE ABOUT IT

Utopian literature is fascinating but impossible to summarize. Of course it is easy to see where its charm lies. We enjoy the “play” aspect of the utopian convention, the common certainty—essential to both the author’s intentions and the reader’s pleasure—that we are dealing with a supposition described as a fact. In a utopian text, we enjoy the power we have of imagining, and especially formulating, another overall framework for human experience—a framework which is specifically defined as being different and described as if it had concrete existence. This is the underlying attraction of a mode of expression which permits the author to talk of serious things in the protected and detached manner permitted by play. Why, then, are summaries of utopias so disappointing? Why does a re-transmitted utopia convey only the idea of an insipid world and an arbitrary creation? Why is it so hard to write about works of this type?

Let us start off with this very special kind of failure of the description and rendering of utopian works. When we are told about the utopian world of one famous book or another, every-

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thing is exact, but flavorless; exact, but disconcertingly flat; exact, but unusable. Nothing is more bewildering or disappointing than the narrative summaries of More or Fourier that can be found in histories of utopia or textbooks on the history of political or social ideas. It is not enough to say that summarizing these texts robs them of their charm. This loss of charm may be the clue to a misunderstanding concerning the underlying nature of the mode of expression, in cases where the exactness of the description is not incompatible with a basic distortion of the author's intent. Of course any summary is selective, and the question is the proper level of narrative selection. A summary that treats a utopian text as a reflective and conceptual work will stress its doctrinal side, will tend to bring out the abstract principles, will be guided by the political, economic and social landmarks whose intellectual connotations are best established. This kind of ideological analysis is led to harden what it is looking for and what it recognizes (that is, choices of principle: property, equality, etc.) as the logical key to institutions—thus overlooking the essential trait of the utopian imagination, which is to be completely systematic but absolutely impossible to formalize. When the summary tries to treat the utopian text as if it were setting forth an abstract doctrine, then all the concrete, striking, characteristic content of the text seems superfluous, and, in a way, external and anecdotal. The work breaks down between an abstract, serious conception and a multitude of disconnected details which are its imaginative incarnation. The writer of a serious résumé is often very much embarrassed by what seems to him a too-lively excess of disorderly details: it is not rare for him to express reticence toward the author's individual fantasies; often he presents him to us a thinker worthy of esteem *in spite of* nine-tenths of what he says, *notwithstanding* its apparent frivolity and absurdity. These same attempts to conceptualize utopia and rewrite it like the abstract treatise it ought to have been from the start sometimes give in suddenly to the temptation of the anecdotal material which they generally tend to repress, and are thus punctuated with an arbitrary selection of piquant details. In such cases, something purely adventitious is cited as being bizarre. Naturally this bizarre detail, which struck the author of the summary in passing, seems merely dull to the reader, who encounters it outside the context that gives it

integration and meaning. Thus we have a retransmission which breaks up the work into a few rather succinct general, abstract notions and an uncoordinated wealth of curious, arbitrary details. Hesitating between the thesis of the work and its anecdotal efflorescence, the summary ends by being insipid.

This shows a difficulty for historiography which forces us to reconsider the cleavage between the serious and the preposterous, between the important and the fortuitous, between theoretical positions and illustrations. Let us take another look at these flagrantly platitudinous doctrinal analyses which consider the utopian text to be a political essay, unfortunately frivolous and uncontrolled, in which the author was carried away by his imagination but in which brilliant bursts of foresight may be found. The inadequate attitude of the writer of the summary usually shows up in these two main ways: the intrusion of the anecdotal, presented as piquant—that is, understood at its most external level—and the congratulations addressed to the author for being a precursor, because of isolated characteristics which happen to have equivalents in our later civilization. It is about as relevant to congratulate utopia on predicting factory canteens as it is to praise the popular science writers of the eighteenth century for having expressed somewhere, in connection with other developments, a partial but exact intuition about electricity. In both cases, a positivistic filtering of these texts is thoroughly blind to their type of interest. For all those who are trying to find, in the utopian text, veiled and distorted statements of political concepts in the broad sense of the term, the implicit criterion for what is criticized and rejected, or praised and accepted, is what will work and what will not. Anything that it seems possible to put into practice (even though such a possibility may be highly improbable) is taken seriously; anything whose description, however painstaking, cannot be related to the mental coordinates of the analyst's world is abandoned as being mere fantasy. Seen from this perspective, what is serious is what approximates, as closely as possible, something workable. What is not workable is seen as pure extravagance in the tale. Now, it is clear that the criterion of what is workable is ruinous for utopia. This criterion is falsely realistic, because it treats the utopian text as a model, to be judged by whether or not it seems, in the abstract, to be virtually, subjectively, possible to follow in

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practice. Not only does it destroy the spectacle as a whole, but it reduces the meditation that supports the spectacle to the most rudimentary poverty, and tears the work into scattered and meaningless fragments.

On the basis of repetition or historiographical reconstitution in the broadest sense of the term, on the basis of the type of summaries that the utopia genre calls for or rejects, makes possible or impossible, a reflective point of view on the utopia as a literary vehicle begins to emerge. The mass of interpretations constitutes a body of data which sheds light on the utopia as something interpretable. What it leads people to say, the comments to which it may or may not satisfactorily give rise, show something about its own content. It is a vehicle linked to its own overall historiographical character: a source of insipid summaries and brilliant commentaries. I shall try to show that the utopian text cannot be summarized because it is not a vehicle for ideas; and that it is an undefined and privileged source of comments because it is systematic narration. What is necessary for the agile and fascinated activity of the commentator or essayist? A text, a pretext. Here—better still—we have a genre, renewed by the multiplication and superposition of texts, that presents us with a construction whose contours are consciously stylized. It is both a tale and a combinative composition; it magnetically attracts the riches of the story and the wealth of theory; it is situated in that very special mental space where we like to live, that of dreamy attention to a spectacle that has become a game. What gives life to the commentary is, in this case, precisely what makes the summary so flaccid: the fact that the anecdotal incarnation is not the vehicle for the expression of a pre-existing abstract concept—if it were, the means of expression chosen would be extremely awkward, and liable to distort the message conveyed. Perhaps the nature of the utopian vehicle will appear more clearly if, momentarily, within the framework of this study, we reverse the criterion of what is workable, assuming that what is told anecdotally is the chief content. This amounts to taking the excesses of the text as our base and considering what will *not* work as the essential. Then we see the real keyboard of the utopian imagination, and it immediately appears that its real problem, as is the case with all works of the imagination, is that of its verbal expression.

Let us consider the utopian genre, through the works that belong to it, as being constituted by a tension between two poles, the “problematic” and the “oneiric.” Or, if one prefers, as being an ellipse whose two foci might be concretely illustrated, at its Platonic origin, by the city in the *Republic* and the Atlantis in the *Critias*. The “problematic” pole (sublimated polemics, politics, humanism, education, etc.) is whatever gives the tale another dimension besides the fantastic. An essential characteristic of this literature is to present us, not with a world which is arbitrarily different from our own, but with an overall organization of the social universe which differs from ours *significantly*. Not all utopias raise as clearly and explicitly as does the *Republic* the question which is the absolute political question: how to conceive the proper framework for the best possible human fulfillment. But all have an intellectual and ideological dimension. The *theses* through which the author’s doctrinal position is expressed cannot be dissociated from the *themes* through which the modulations peculiar to the genre are expressed. The intellectual elements cannot be discerned underneath and in spite of the scenic form, through a direct process of abstraction which would annul their utopization. They are unthinkable outside of the setting in which they are presented to us. In this sense utopia, by comparison with an abstract treatise, is not a masked thought (attenuated or aggressive) but an enmeshed thought which presents itself through a spectacle. The narration is not the ironic element in a utopia—which is witty only in a very minor way—but, on the contrary, its oneiric substrate. The story is not a device from which the author keeps his distance while using it to lead the reader to reflect. The utopian tale is the very incarnation of an imaginary thematics. In the interests of simplification, in the present study, I shall consider only this thematic dimension, which makes the utopia a coded spectacle, leaving aside the ever-present ideological intentions and theses—or, if one prefers, forgetting the essential stakes of the *Republic* in favor of the essential confessions of the Atlantis.

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II. THE WRITING OF PRESENCE

In utopias—which are imaginative stylizations—the concrete explains the abstract. The government is only one example of the administration, which is only one example of the statutory, through which is expressed the codifying impulse that also produces ceremonials and rituals. The political regime we are shown is only of the abstract consequences of the general scenarization. In this respect, it is no more important in characterizing any particular work than are the scenes of meals taken together or of festivities, or, in a general way all the things we are shown. Beyond institutions, it is spectacles that are thus the great scenic themes of the utopian realm. And since the types of scenes presented or represented are very limited in number, utopian thematics seems poor from a typological point of view, in the sense that it is always the same basic situations that are exploited.

However, this quantitative poverty is not simplicity. The utopia sets up and presents in narrative form a certain number of sequences that are easy to define on the systematic or typological plane, but much harder on the plane of expressiveness. Here we come back to the problem of the study of imaginative literature in the broad sense of the term—that is, everything imaginary that is expressed in literary works and revealed through a formulation. In utopian narration, what stems from the dynamics of the plot itself, and what stems from the demands of style, from the requirements of verbalization? In this form, such a discrimination is impossible to make. And yet it is the basic problem of utopias to the extent that the powers and weaknesses of the narration of an imaginary world are reflected in the genre. I shall consider the descriptions and settings—that is, the utopian presence or presentation—as being linked, rather, to the contours of the imagination, and everything that concerns the verbal expression of difference and otherness—that is, the counterpoint of absence in utopia—as being linked to the processes of formulation. But this is obviously only a convenient distinction. To avoid a scattering of attention, I shall draw my examples from a very small group of famous utopias.

The code of rules: repression: In the seventh of the *Soirées de St-Petersbourg*, Joseph de Maistre recalls that the Romans took

care to ensure the dignity of military punishments by having them inflicted with a special kind of wood. "Your idea delights me," says his listener, "and all the more so as I think it could very easily be carried out. I assure you that I shall be glad to present His Imperial Majesty with a plan for an enormous hothouse which would be set up in the capital and devoted exclusively to producing the laurel necessary to provide punishment sticks for all the lower officers of the Russian army. This hothouse would be under the responsibility of a general who would be a knight of the Order of St. George, at least second class, who would have the title of High Inspector of the Laurel Hothouse. The plants could be tended, cut and prepared only by invalid veterans of spotless reputation. The model for the sticks, which would all be exactly alike, would be kept in the War Office in a silver-gilt case. Each stick would be hung from the officer's buttonhole by a ribbon of the Order of St. George, and on the façade of the hothouse would be an inscription reading: 'My wood produces my leaves.' Truly, this foolishness would not be stupid."

In any case, this "foolishness" sums up the processes of the codifying urge. It is suggested that the idea of an emblematic instrument should be carried out, and immediately what de Maistre calls *The Stick Code* is improvised. The mind turns toward the circumstances and material conditions related to the cultivation and distribution of the specialized laurel; and each of these circumstances is immediately raised to a ceremonial level of prohibitions, monopolies, obligations and privileged distinctions. This suits de Maistre's intentions perfectly, since the aim is to found a real cult of honorable punishment. The project involves first a plan, a volume, a site, a material construction: the hothouse; it prescribes the use for the laurel produced: a monopoly of production, obligatory general distribution; then come the hierarchical qualifications of the staff in charge: the rank of the chief and his special title, which emphatically repeats the description of his duties, and the biographical and moral requirements through which the population of gardeners is defined (old, invalid and virtuous). The project goes from production to the product: uniformity of the sticks, which the values of absolute regularity raise from the status of material objects to that of solemn objects, and official pomp surrounding the prototype;

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decorative and significant use of the sticks, which become part of the uniform; and finally the inscription over the gate, this kind of verbal reintegration of all the circuit that has been covered, which reaffirms the overall intent of the ideas suggested and at the same time closes them. This fanciful sketch covers "practical" elements which bring visual notations into the new code (each stick hung from the buttonhole by a ribbon, the model resting in a silver-gilt case). But, in this passage, the visual indications are at the service of a real dynamics of codification. All the practical aspects of the idea are gone over and transformed successively into set requirements and areas of regulation. The facts are seen as statutes, processes as procedures. Around the stick are rapidly deployed places, functions, populations, forms of behavior and, above all, a detailed network of standards.

And in this way this passage of de Maistre's is like a miniature utopia, although it remains in the conditional and denies itself the supreme utopian pleasure: that of expressing prescriptions as descriptions by projecting and objectivizing standards. Independently of its intent, what the Stick Code shows is how the process of codification is thrown into gear and continues on its own momentum. This same painstaking, totalitarian dynamics, which deals successively with the various aspects or situations that are conceivable in the logic of virtualities, also governs utopian inventions. When applied to human beings, codification becomes regulation. In this way an administrative imagination can give itself free rein, meddlesome and imperious. It covers the various possible fields of regulation, hastening to take care of details and foresee variations, either to provide for them or to forbid them. It flowers in the fields of government, the administration of justice, the various forms of economic and professional life, and often of private life, be it à propos of eugenics or metaphysical beliefs. In the descriptions, one can follow a real autogenesis of the code, which builds up by juxtaposition and accumulation, in a systematic but not deductive order. The way in which indications follow one another does not stem from their relation to principles, but from the proximity of the fields of application considered, or, if one prefers, from an inventory based on an association of ideas. In More or Campanella, for example, it would be easy to show how the

intentionally systematic order of the subjects treated breaks down and splits up fairly soon into an exploratory inventory of organizational problems as they come to mind. Disjointedness, confusion do not so much reflect weaknesses of composition due to a lack of rhetorical skill as they do the workings of the world-creating imagination, which calls forth the facets of its universe and organizes them by regulation. Utopian codification is a systematics, more or less impregnated with visual elements, without being an abstraction.

In this connection, rather than going back to the question of political regimes and administrative methods, I should like to take up the question that is more regulated and gives rise to more regulation than any other, that of repression. The Stick Code, which in this respect reflects deep-seated problems for de Maistre himself, regulates from the very heart of repression, since it deals with the material object for corporal punishment. Around the stick a world is described whose order implies disorder outside itself—a precise universe of pure sanction. This kind of inversion, which is one of the keys to de Maistre's phantasmatic sensitivity, is of course an extreme and isolated case. Ordinarily, repression is a marginal problem in the institutional whole. But it is also an inevitable question. When a utopia sets a graded, closed order for behavior, it is led to foresee the possibility of violations. What would happen if someone did not act according to the regulation model? There is a whole set of answers: Idyllic evasion, as in Fénelon's *Télémaque*, which consists of saying that since the men involved have been psychologically transformed, the situation cannot occur and is consequently "unrealistic." Preventive measures, as in More's *Utopia*, where "everyone is obliged to spend his leisure in an irreproachable way." An integration of legal measures, as in Campanella's *City of the Sun*, which orders magistrates to indict people for lying, for example, and to apply sanctions: denial of a seat at the common table, or of commerce with women, or of certain honors. Or again, in a critical and satirical utopia like Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, the very idea of social sanctions for transgressions is ironically de-fused by the fact that illness and financial failure are treated as offenses against the law. It is perhaps in Morelly's *Code of Nature* that repression

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is most directly integrated into the structure of utopia—precisely because the work is a code!

In Morelly's rigid and compulsive utopia, the plan of the city physically reflects the fact that violations are foreseen. Outside the town, beyond the workshops, the farm buildings and maintenance buildings, several other facilities are provided some distance away: a hospital with a healthful exposure, an old people's home in a convenient spot; on another side, in the least agreeable and most deserted site, a prison, and near there the cemetery and the *in-pace*. In an expressive topography, this is a way of relegating illness, old age, wrongdoing and death to outskirts of the city. Correlatively, the field of anti-social deviation is also very strongly characterized by a whole set of penal laws which are "as gentle as they are efficient." Thus, the most heinous of crimes consist of killing or trying to introduce "that detestable thing, property;" the culprit is walled up. Basically, it is the problem of spontaneity that the statute on the repression of transgressions translates into regulatory language. And that is why this statute is both marginal and central: marginal, because spontaneity, in relation to the code, is no more than a minor nuisance which must be treated and eliminated after it is shown; and central, because this very fact reveals the totalitarian character of any representation of organization.

The fact that the organizing imagination protects itself against deviance at the same time appears still more clearly in cases where spontaneity is valued as the source of harmonious diversity, as in Fourier, or, to take a more concise example, in the Abbey of Thélème. In this case, repression reverses itself and is expressed in the form of euphorization. The code becomes visual with Rabelais, in the meticulous description of the setting, in the verbal richness of the descriptions of clothes. Where these latter are concerned, the sumptuous abundance of terms, materials and colors euphorizes the fact that the clothes in question are uniforms, strictly regulated in every detail, incarnating the code in the joy of the spectacle. Thus the setting or the beautiful performance is the end that calls forth the means, if need be on several levels at the same time. For example, the costumes for the permanent ballet at Thélème are always perfectly matched, partly as a result of the intuitive sympathy that unites the

members of the community and partly because messengers transmit the necessary instructions at the proper time. The behavior of the group arises spontaneously through a contagion of desires, through "praiseworthy emulation," and examples of this lead to a semi-concrete evocation, to an illustration centered on the women's charmingly gloved wrists when they set out for the hunt. The magnificence of the spectacle, colors or movements displaces the hold of pure regulation and presents the order as a happy one. In this way the utopia combines the pleasure of an all-powerful code and the joy of fiction.

A spectacular code: town-planning: Even before the institutions are described to us, a scene is usually presented. With the general landscape, the plan of the city, the internal layout of the houses, we are introduced into a topography which is very sure of itself. Is this the spatial projection of an effort at pure rationalization? Yet these frameworks and settings sometimes approach the limit of the voluntary in dreamlike and mythical contours, and usually go beyond all meaning in a wealth of visual detail which is truly insignificant. Where the scene becomes individualized in a vision, it ceases to illustrate a thesis and becomes a dream or a description.

The model for such landscapes is Plato's Atlantis. In the middle of a plain stands a mountain transformed into a fortress, surrounded by concentric circles of land and water, inaccessible and yet linked to the sea, an island in an island, covered with walls whose stones come from the original mountain, built up and decorated to culminate in the baroque splendor of the central temple, and given life by a double hot and cold spring which is a gift of the god. Around the mountain-citadel is a large circle, a round external enclosure that re-forms the space and permits its animated inhabitants to be presented "in a din of all sorts night and day"; the buildings, activities and all the spatiality of human population appear. Then comes the plain, a rectangle surrounded by a ditch and crisscrossed by canals, and a circle of mountains which stretches to the sea: Atlantis is a marine landscape. It is also the most complete and complex of landscapes, the one in which mythical requirements, rational projections and the fixation of particular visions come together with equal force.

The other landscapes are aspects or fragments of this one. Campanella keeps the town on the hill, surrounded by seven

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circles of walls, and the round temple at the top, decorated with symbolic representations, with a book with golden letters as its esoteric center. More starts out with the uncrossable sea, the sea in which one isolates oneself in the strict sense of the term, and then turns toward the inner space of a countryside regularly dotted with fifty-four towns, centers for the movements of the members of the agricultural service. His square city has a sea, a river, a brook, a spring and cisterns. Elsewhere the sea, as in Bacon's *New Atlantis*, lead to Bensalem; elsewhere the external circle of mountains may introduce us, as with Butler, into Erewhon, or with Voltaire into Eldorado. The relationship between town and country is reversed in Salente, in *Télémaque*, where Fénelon gives the agricultural idyll its revenge on the encroaching city. The plan of the towns tends to make regularity in its various forms (symmetry, geometrical layouts and boundaries) a dominant value, because it is expressive of hierarchies and functions. Uniformity in architecture and town-planning is sometimes accepted as a consequence of rational regularity, sometimes denied in the name of a diversity which is claimed but of course not described, and which is sometimes expressly praised, as it is by Fénelon, who, it is true, wanted to tame the city. As for the details of architecture, decoration and furnishings, at this point the coded spectacle breaks up and becomes particularized; here the most remarkable trait is perhaps the anticipatory wealth of detail, and, so to speak, the patience of the text.

Even more than certain aspects of their layout, these landscapes and frameworks owe to Atlantis a mood and a tone. Just as Atlantis is the ideal island, the island of extraordinary fecundity, the island where everything is better than anywhere else, so the other utopian settings are described in a sort of joyous overvaluation. They express the inventive search for perfection in the human race, a perfection sometimes dreamed of, sometimes deduced, sometimes supposed and described. Tremendous exultation is hidden behind the slightly stiff sobriety of this imaginary creation of space.

Expressive function of clothing: In a series which would begin with the institutional code, then take up its topographical spatialization to end with ritual conduct and ceremonial, clothing occupies a central place, because it is at the same time a spectacle

and, through its choice, a form of behavior. For the utopia, clothing is the ideal place for rational justifications of the magical manipulation of appearance. True, we are told something about health and physical beauty, hygiene and longevity. But costume, as cultural treatment of the body, receives far more emphasis. And foresighted regulations always make the costume into a uniform. The striking thing about descriptions of and rules for dress is that they take on meanings: they are related to age, trade, social groups or classes, dignities and function. They may also express social or moral attitudes toward dress: sobriety, through the refusal of luxury, or, on the contrary, in a rich society, a profusion of colors and forms in the name of the esthetic values of orderly variety. But in every case the garment is expressive not of the wearer's personality, but of his role in relation to the group. It is determined by categories and conceived as a walking code. It expresses the social role of the person who wears it, and, still more, the status conferred on its inhabitants by the utopian world which prescribes it.

Let us start out with the big, milling, baroque circle of colors at Salente. Fénelon counts on color to establish a system of class distinctions which is not linked to sumptuousness, and hence not to wealth. "Thus, without any expense," he says, "each will be distinguished according to his condition." In the middle is the king, dressed in purple wool with gold embroidery. The first row is white with a gold fringe, a finger-ring and a gold medal; the second is blue, with a silver fringe, a ring, but no medal; the third is green, without a fringe or a ring, but with a medal. The fourth is dawn-yellow, the fifth light red or pink, the sixth flax-gray, the seventh yellowish white; and finally the slaves, on the outside, are dressed in grayish brown. A pictorial projection treated in broad masses—yet shot through with detail concerning the brilliant metallic and emblematic accents formed by the fringe, the ring and the medal. With relation to this image, the utopia may move either toward reducing the visual dimension of the clothing or, on the contrary, amplifying its decorative function.

The visual dimension is reduced where regulation is based on an attack against the values of luxury. This is the case with More, who, so to speak, cancels out colors with materials. Leather and natural wool are less neutral colors for clothing than they

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are anti-colors. This is an approach which resembles the reversed, devaluing treatment of gold and precious stones in *Utopia*. Jewels are still intensely charged with values, but the sign of the charge is reversed, since they are worn by slaves and children, and hence become ridiculous and objects of scorn. Similarly, the uniformly neutral tones of the costumes indicate a refusal of all coloration, not a mere attenuation. The same is true for the white linen clothes, cut in a way to make them convenient for waging war, that Campanella prescribes.

On the other hand, there are brilliant costumes galore in utopias that are more visual than institutional, like Thélème or the *New Atlantis*, or even in Cabet's *Icarie*, though this latter is entirely a phantasmagoria of method and form. The *New Atlantis*, which is an atypical utopia in many respects, has rich settings in which sartorial imagination has full play. Bensalem, the island Bacon describes, is not explained to us on the basis of its codes, because it is not dominated by the narrator's view. Hence, as the tale proceeds, we learn nothing more than the partial and anecdotal result of an underlying codification of costumes. We know, for example, that a first official appears dressed in a blue robe with wide sleeves, a green under-robe, and a green turban that allows his curls to show; then later we see another, also dressed in blue, but whose white turban has a red cross on top. We never learn the system of hierarchies that governs the turbans. We know it exists, but all we are shown is a few colorful arrangements. The spectacle becomes completely stylized and individualized at the same time in the masterpiece of description that depicts the procession accompanying the learned dignitary, a member of the house of Solomon. Attention is first called to this man's appearance, the material of his clothing, his linen, his bejeweled gloves and his peach-colored velvet shoes; it extends to the chariot with its interplay of sumptuous materials and its accumulations of ornaments; then it broadens to take in the whole procession, the horses, the lackeys, the symphony in blue velvet and white satin formed by the fifty young assistants with their colored plumes; then it comes back to the man sitting on blue cushions made of excellent plush. Of all the details given in this vision, so complex and so clear, the most enigmatic is one which relates not to a setting but to a portrait: the brown curls of the lord of learning and

his round beard, a little lighter-colored than his hair.

The ritual of meals and festivities: It is a difficult literary task to show men in action without individualizing them psychologically and without having any particular event intervene. One has only to recall the basic problem of writing and Montesquieu's failure, in the *Lettres Persanes*, with the story of the Troglodytes. How can one convincingly demonstrate the anarchical wickedness of a people which has no other contours than those of the fable? And, above all, how can one show in a concrete way how its behavior has suddenly become virtuous? First Montesquieu roughs out a vague sketch of the happiness of collective innocence, indicating the festivities, the cults, the meals, the games, the songs, all the themes of idyllic literature. But he also wants to show virtue, which is a relation to others without being a form of group conduct, and he decides to bring up, briefly, a series of exemplary cases: "One of them said one day, 'My father has to plow his field tomorrow; I shall get up two hours before he does, and when he goes to his fields, he will find it all plowed!'" etc. Now this anecdotal level, wavering between the abstraction of the principle, or even the generality of the typified collective scene, and the personification of the novelist, fails to arouse the slightest empathy. The virtuous Troglodytes are ridiculous, not because of any deficiency on the part of the writer, but because virtue cannot be shown in this way and at this level of approach.

Utopia must show us the spectacle of activities which do not bring about any change: it can show only collective activities, regulated activities, cyclical activities—since cyclical and institutionalized time is the only kind of time that is not disruptive for a spectacular order of things. Utopia has little choice. Among all the forms of human behavior, it emphasizes, preferably, those which lend themselves to imaginative ritualization: meals and ceremonies. Into this very limited universe of the showable, Fourier brings behavior at work and in the process of economic production, precisely because he transforms this behavior into a ceremonial game: he is merely extending and multiplying the space devoted to feasts and festivities. For the utopian imagination, the mealtime scene is an essential subject. This is particularly true in the case of the meal eaten in common, which is supported by an ideology but which, above all, supports a setting.

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Detailed arrangements are described, with delighted emphasis on the hierarchy of place and the choice of neighbors at the table, with moralizing justifications stimulated by selfrighteousness. The limitations of the scene are not the limitations of a concrete meal, but purely the force and direction of the institutional anticipation: thus More puts the women at the free side of the table, so that if one of them is pregnant and feels ill, "she can rise without disturbing the rest." Such touches are extensions or erratic upsurges of the obvious. Sometimes a moment of visualization brings flesh and blood into this schematic picture; suddenly Campanella notes how agreeable it is to be served by these "young people, so beautiful and clad in garments so suitable."

A meal is the normal, daily, repetitive ritual through which it is possible to show how utopian life unfolds. There must also be other rituals, more solemn and consequently rarer, which are regulated festivities and celebrations, religious cults, and, if need be, national or military ceremonies, or the ceremonial that goes with authority. To make such ceremonies more brilliant, even utopias that are restrictive where clothing is concerned brighten themselves with exceptional colors. Opposite the people, dressed in white, More puts the priest, dressed in bright, multicolored clothes that imitate wings and plumage full of symbols. With Campanella, the priests' vestments are extraordinarily beautiful and full of significant symbolism, like Aaron's. As for the utopias that emphasize costume, they generally do not escape the problems of style raised by this extraordinary setting inside a universe which is itself a setting. They deal with the scene through amplification, exaggeration of masses, colors, richness, solemnity—in a word, by excess. In addition, while a meal is relatively immobile, the ceremony involves a regulated series of motions that permits the author to organize sequences of actions in time—which is the most complete and sophisticated pleasure of utopian invention. For delectation, emphasis, sureness in the placing of detail, let us see how Bacon, in the *New Atlantis*, tells about the "feast of the family," a private celebration in honor of the Tirsan, as the head of each family is called. The spectacle is both a brilliant picture and a ballet in three episodes. Sometimes one has the feeling that color and ritual, for Bacon, are two complementary dimensions of the

spectacular, when the visual imagination turns away from transcribing movements to focus on a motionless detail which it magnifies disproportionately in relation to the general field of the spectacle and the development of the scene. A bunch of golden grapes, a present from the king, is given with great pomp to the Tirsan. The grapes are enameled, and if there are more males than females in the family, the enamel is purple with a little sun at the top, but if there are more women, the enamel is yellow-green with a crescent. The emblematic symbolism of the red or green grapes remains in scale with the picture, but the little sun or crescent that decorates each grape draws attention, in a close-up, to a detail that interrupts the majestic time-sequence of conduct. Much could doubtless be learned from the way a model feast is described.

The ceremonial that Plato ascribes to the people of Atlantis is the most esoteric and secret of all; it is also the only one that is treated through euphemism and suggestion and not through excess and magnification. When the ten brothers who are kings of the island have to sit in judgment on anyone, they withdraw by themselves, go through a religious ritual of sacrifice and vow, and "then, once night had fallen and the fire that burned around the sacrifice had grown cold, all, after putting on incomparably beautiful deep blue robes, sat down next to the ashes left by the sacrifice that accompanied the vow." We shall never know the secret of their night of judgment. Everywhere else, it is characteristic of ceremonies to be over-explained. Here, Plato confines himself to showing this deep blue circle around the ashes, and of all such ceremonies, this is the only one that leaves the reader dreaming.

III. THE WRITING OF ABSENCE

What I have tried to define so far are some of the bases on which the imagination works when it plays at Utopia. But even if the analysis were carried much further, this single direction would not be enough to permit us to understand what is happening. The utopian imagination is a verbal imagination; its invention is a formulation, and the formulation carries along, drives, limits, mutilates, increases and pervades the invention.

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In any case it brings it into being: the utopia is completely realized in its text; there is nothing else concrete for it, no other usefulness than the pleasure the reader feels as he follows the windings of the author's playful fancies. The author's theoretical positions, his problematical propositions, are conveyed through sticking to the path of the game. Here we are not dealing with abstract language that calls concrete images and illustrations to its aid; it seems as if we had before us a broad construction, very sensitive to itself, in which configurations and intentions converged in a common problem of expressibility. I should like to deal very partially with the problem of expression through the conceptual and verbal means available for expressing the experience of difference. To conceive of, to express and to make intelligible the differences between the utopian world and our own are the same problem and the same operation; and what is involved is not, of course, a representation followed by a communication. By convention, we are dealing with a universe which is entirely unreal but whose unrealistic situations are full of meaning for us: how does the author reach his statement of hypotheses that are other, in the strong sense of the term? What are the processes of this very special type of fiction?

Alteration: The processes of alteration are those whose aim is to make us realize the fact that utopian society, and especially utopian man, are different from our experience. Common experience here serves as an implicit reference to make us conscious of the change. The things we are told take on all their value or flavor through the implied comparison with things as they are, and we are invited to look behind the story and measure the extent of the change. Of course it is in this appeal to perceive the distance that the polemical and ideological aspect of utopia lies. The divergence between the utopian narrative and the common reference permits a tension which gives the utopian genre its dynamic function. This explains why even the account of a spectacle, always described in a static way, may be a call for change (toward another form of social organization, toward a psychologically new man). This inciting and transitional characteristic of utopia as the presentation of a changed world—our own, but managed differently—has been very frequently noted; Mannheim in particular has dealt with this point. Here, I should like to call attention to the literary processes by which the change

is expressed. And first of all to the question of the setting up of the new order. Some utopias go back into the past and include an account of their own constitution. They see themselves from the angle of reform, and bring in the radical gesture of a Utopus, a Solomona or an Icarus. Others, on the contrary, present themselves as daughters of Nature's wisdom and never were founded. Many variations may also occur in the tone in which the set of acquired differences is presented—for reasons of doctrine, but also for reasons of rhetorical choice. Thus the very tone of the tale—exclamatory or demanding—may establish the correlations and the degree of difference between the state of things presented by the author and our own situation, as is the case in the first book of More's *Utopia* and Cabet's *Icarie*. But we also find the process of cold irony, which consists of bringing in the most surprising elements as if they should be obvious to anybody. General though it may be, the didactics of change is not univocal.

Utopia shows us a set spectacle in which we are invited, surreptitiously or not, to see men who have become different. All the questions of social morality rise to the surface at this point and are brought into the utopian tale in an intentionally stylized way. At the level of the utopian convention, there are a number of signs or connections that express fundamental solutions or choices. What is characteristic of the utopia, with its underlying play function, is that the burning problems of human emotivity are attacked at some external point and treated in a minor key. For instance, the question of morals is treated from a purely institutional point of view: eugenics, marriage, the family, the community of women, monogamy, adultery, divorce. On the other hand, the status of gold is greatly overemphasized. Gold becomes not only the sign of the economic and psychological problem of wealth; it also carries the burden of emotional life as a whole: the irrationality of desires, and everything that can be involved in the relationship with any possession. All these cases are incarnated and exteriorized in gold, and at the same time are expelled and magically de-fused. So it does not matter whether gold is considered shameful and feared and eliminated, whether it is neglected in its over-abundance, whether it is reserved for a negative use, or whether it is scattered in profusion. What does matter is that gold incarnates and expresses,

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in a reassuring way, the frightful secret of human violence which it would have been too dangerous, because too direct, to relate to morals. Gold itself, being too explicit, is not a sufficiently strong element of security, and is replaced by wine. With relation to gold, wine is a kind of recessive and minor doublet. Since Plato's *Laws*, discussions of attitudes toward drunkenness keep reappearing: is it dangerous because it alienates or because it reveals, because it is deceitful or because it is truthful? The attitude one takes toward drunkenness, which is an uncontrolled form of behavior, expresses a concept of control. If man is really himself when he is under control, then drunkenness makes him a stranger to himself and makes him belie his underlying nature; but if control is considered to be a hold and a constraint, then the liberation of drunkenness is what makes possible a form of behavior that is erratic but, in the end, genuine. The role given to wine in utopias is also a means of talking about passion. In a similar way, with Fourier, the discussion about sex is transferred into a discussion about food.

Otherness: The question this time is not one of the relative difference compared to ourselves, but of the radical difference. How can a universe be represented that is absolutely other and yet not fantastic? How, within the overall framework of similarity, can hypotheses be formulated which will seem basically foreign to our points of reference? Here, we should examine the techniques of rationalization that permit the utopia to be integrated, as something discontinuous, into the continuity of the story: how it is approached, how and why it is left, the special destiny and stature of the person who left it; whether the point of view of the active subject—the absolute privilege of looking at the spectacle face to face—is given to the traveler-narrator or to the inhabitant-informers; through what device the realistic obstacle of the language of communication is mentioned—since every supposed difficulty is immediately surmounted.

Most often, the author tries to express the divergence of pure otherness by quantitative means, by increasing dimensions, numbers, and the over-abundance of wealth. The avenues of cities become immense, the people lead fabulously long lives, the authorities appear in gigantic processions and the meals are prodigiously plentiful. Sometimes, however, the text abandons

quantitative increases to attempt directly qualitative indications, giving, for example, sensorial details. "The fountains of pure water, those of rose-water, and those of sugar-cane liquors... flowed continuously in the big squares paved with a kind of stone that gave off an odor like that of cloves and cinnamon." Flavors and perfumes: this is how Voltaire describes the city of Eldorado; and he tries to evoke a slight but sufficient shift in the use of materials: "platters made of a kind of rock crystal," "a sofa padded with hummingbird feathers," "dresses made of hummingbird-down cloth." To express magnificence, Voltaire uses under-statement and ironic antiphrasis: "The antechamber was encrusted only with rubies and emeralds, but the order in which everything was arranged made up for this extreme simplicity." Further on, the travelers are led to the royal apartment "between two lines of a thousand musicians each, according to the usual custom." This last device—presenting excessive magnificence as something that goes without saying—is also used in Plato's Atlantis. The extraordinary island, the island of plenty, has everything that can be imagined; it is considered a matter of course that "elephants were very numerous." Plato also uses other processes. The over-abundance of vegetation and fruit ends as a kind of riddle or joke with the description of some unidentified fruits that surprise the reader's good faith and lead his imagination astray. A process worthy of Borgès, which, by distracting the reader's attention, forces him to abandon the certainties of realism. Plato also endows the island with a mythical metal, orichalcum, "which sparkles like fire," which is the most precious of all and of which nothing but the name remains. This brilliant name of a lost form of matter illuminates the unique excellence of Atlantis and helps persuade us that "the island that then existed under the sun bore all things without exception, in their sacred beauty, as marvellous as they were innumerable."

Legendary history: To get further away, to arm itself better with the credibility of fiction, the utopia sometimes brings in an extra dimension. By mimicking a counter-presence, it tries to assert its essential absence and to transform it into something coherent. It deals with us as one power with another. The question of contacts between the utopia and our world, for example, although it involves and reveals a number of problems which are

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more than problems of form, is also a stylistic process which helps to express what is not demonstrable: that the utopia is integrated into spatiality in the mode of absence. Some utopians shut themselves up fiercely in strict isolation; others are more open, or even, like Cabet's, expansionist and missionary. By contamination, the people in More's *Utopia* learn Greek, and through a few books acquire a quintessence of the European cultural heritage; the voyage leaves neither the visitors nor their hosts intact. Bensalem, Bacon's new Atlantis, knows the world but is unknown to it, thus incarnating the dream of omniscience combined with secrecy. True, Bensalem is "the country of the angels" and its privileged Christians have received a special miraculous revelation. And what can be said of the two speakers in Campanella's dialogue? The two travelers are a hospitaller of St. John and a Genoese who was a pilot for Christopher Columbus. One incarnates the adventure of the inner sea, which is Christian, the other the adventure of the outer ocean, so that, through this double arc, all Europe comes together to look at the City of the Sun.

Outside of the contacts that it maintains or refuses with our world, the utopia sometimes gives rise to an outer space of its own. This is a very special kind of external spatiality, whose aim is to localize the utopia in a network of relations. Such localization is something different from the more or less vague geographical identification that has filled Peru, Ceylon, Australia, etc., with secret civilizations. What is the meaning of the constellation of other peoples who surround More's Utopia—the Polylerits, the Achorians, the Macarians, the Nephelogetes, the Aleopolitanes, the Zapolets, the Anemolians? What does it mean to these peoples that they are located southeast of the island of Utopia or five hundred miles due east? What is the meaning of a precise location in relation to an unreal place? Warlike utopias, by definition, have adversaries: the inhabitants of the City of the Sun, for example, know that on the same island four kings envy them. Utopias that are refuges or retrenched camps, like imperialist utopias, have a hinter-world that confirms their space. These hinter-worlds, which themselves are two steps removed from reality, do this by providing extra "information" intended to help the reader's intuition carry out the difficult task of seeing the utopia as both similar and different.

The external topography in itself sends us back to an earlier past. In the codified spectacle that constitutes utopia, nothing happens; but sometimes some very enigmatic information is given us concerning an earlier time, spoken of as over and done with. To go back once more to More, Campanella and Bacon, we know that there was a time when Utopia was not an island, a time when the people of the City of the Sun left India to flee the queen of the Mongols, a time when the people of Bensalem, reformed by the wisdom of King Salomona, saw a pillar of light and a cross on the sea. Cabet gives a long account of the history of Icaria and the revolution of 1782 to which it owes its benevolent constitution. And Atlantis, as it appears to us in the combined light of the *Timalus* and the *Critias*, is inscribed many times over in the private temporality of legends. What is really at stake in the story of Atlantis is the question of whether or not Athens has a past and a depth in the past, even though she has "no wisdom white with age." The story is a meditation on the origin from which one is mythically cut off, which one invents for oneself, doubles and destroys. A propos of Egyptian wisdom, guardian and guarantor of all antiquity, we learn why Athens has no memory and yet has a past older than Egypt's, why her identity goes back thousands of years, even though her present is only a beginning. The antique Athens that was swallowed up in the struggle against Atlantis has been cut off from Plato's Athens by the violent drama of a cataclysm, and yet this Ur-Athens is no stranger to us; indeed, it is part of our own past. It is ourselves magnified: a vast, mythically fertile country whose ragged skeleton is all that is left after the nine hundred years that separate us from it; a rich land, with broad forests, inconceivable pastures, and springs that never run dry. The bygone Athens is like the wonderful island, which it completes on the level of the city and its institutions. It is as if the people of Atlantis were brilliant doubles, giant reflections of ourselves. Between the former Athens whose acropolis was irrigated by a lost spring with a constant temperature, winter and summer, and Atlantis, with a double spring, hot and cold, at its center, what kind of conflict can there be, except an identity conflict?

Between Plato's Athens, the Athens that has disappeared and the island of Atlantis, what projective reverie creates worlds

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to assure itself of its foundation in time, then declares them to have been swallowed up in order to free itself of them? Of the conflict, of the final catastrophe of the two fighting worlds we shall know nothing, since the book is unfinished, since Athens has no memory, since it is impossible to know the secret of our own excess. The secret the ten brother-kings were probably telling each other as they sat at night around a burned-out fire, dressed in incomparably beautiful deep-blue robes. The dying fire and this unbearable beauty: what are they saying about us on this night of judgment, these giant kings who are divine reflections of ourselves, in their city which is a grandiose copy of our own, a shining projection of the past we gave ourselves? Their problem—that of excess—is our own, we are swallowed up with them, and their catastrophe is our punishment. When we speak of them we are speaking of ourselves as we dream we are—of an earlier homeland, near wonderful springs. When we speak of them we reveal something about what we shall never know.