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### Utopia as Consecrated on Supposition and Sustained through Obsession

Birthing a genre of literature through his publication of *Utopia*, Thomas More crafted the primary conventions that construct such a no-place infused with the essence of obsession. In a rigid rejection of the emerging Commercial Revolution combined with the elevation of material artifice, More introduces Raphael, a man devoted to philosophy and the pursuit of knowledge to deliver a detailed account of the island. Raphael asserts that “I live at liberty after mine own mind and pleasure” for he is wholly fulfilled by the satisfaction of his intellectual appetite (More 16). Like horror or the gothic, the genre of utopia responds to the creator’s trepidations about their current reality and seeks to critique it. Milton’s prose in *Paradise Lost* acts as an allegory for seeds sown into society by God which inhibit the existence of a utopian state like the Garden of Eden. Authoring utopia is a tangible action that an individual can enact in order to soothe this anxiety or temporarily alleviate the mind’s obsessive impulse to take action and respond to this fear. An obsession with responding to a perceived social ill or more broadly, bringing utopia to fruition, evokes a euphoric high that the author or reader will engage with to experience again. However, utopia is only truly realized at the moment of its conception as its foundation rests on cultural conventions of the present which intend to mythologize an eternally impermeable future.

Setting the precedent of this critical, authoritative creatorship of a land which exists in a position of superiority, Thomas More's disdain for the social hierarchy emerging from early capitalism manifests in knowledge as the new coveted form of economy. Thus, all of the social ills a byproduct of this competitive, commodity centered market of the strengthening Commercial Revolution dissolve as "...the population passionately devoted themselves to reason, the pleasures of the mind" (Green 147). Wealth is not inherited through material means but rather the innate, familial assumption of occupation. Similarly, with closed borders requiring permission from the prince to pass, the only travel or external influence a Utopian may realistically and routinely experience is the journey the mind goes on while reading. This travel via the text and eternal acquisition of knowledge is in fact, not optional as the utopians are required to allot a portion of their minimal leisure time to daily reading. The acquisition of knowledge seems to be the only acceptable way to pursue idleness and even then, the mind is hard at work. With the elimination of the confusion and displacement encouraged by emerging capitalist practices, More seems to think that people will live rationally with strong regard for the common good as they have all of their individual needs met. When people's needs are met, they ought not to have any inclinations towards greed or malice; "the behavior of society is presented as rationally motivated" when in reality or Utopia, it is often completely arbitrary (Frye 324).

Herein lies the emphasis on the pastoral paired with the inescapable set of cultural presuppositions which governed More's writing of *Utopia*. According to the fantasy of pastoral life which he co-opts in rejection of the increasing modernity and artifice, "nature prescribeth (say they) to us a joyful life, that is to say pleasure, as the end of all operations" (More 77).

Living a pastoral life means that the utopians must rely on one another, producing not only for themselves but each other, finding pleasure in their productivity accompanied by a sense of pride in providing for one another. All desire is fulfilled in making an honest living through one's inherited occupation so there is no inclination to assert one's individuality through privacy or small acts of self expression like choosing garb. Julien Dupré's painting *Les faneuses* (The Haymakers) represents a similar response to Thomas More's (Fig. 1). The haymakers are depicted as vivacious, fit and the epitome of virtue despite the reality of peasant life being quite grueling. Dupré illustrates a romanticized representation of rural peasant life which was vanishing during France's industrialization.



Fig. 1: The Haymakers (*Les faneuses*) by Julien Dupré, 1886. Worcester Art Museum

In More's *Utopia*, this predisposition towards the pastoral is nuanced by the fact that a Christian set of religious rituals are presented as a facet of daily life. For example, the utopians "...begin every dinner and supper of reading something that pertaineth to good manners and virtue," most likely, passages from the Bible and are expected to elevate their Elders, honoring them to the highest esteem (More 67). If "...nature, as a most tender and loving mother, hath placed the best and most necessary things open, abroad" why must there be such an emphasis on the instruction and enforcement of morals if the conditions of Utopia are meant to reveal people's natural inclination to be virtuous (More 66)? Why did Eve allow herself to be prey to

the serpent, disobeying the one rule imposed upon her when she already lived in the garden's utopic abundance? This paradox perhaps may be explained through William E. Connolly's coining of the "human predicament" as a more practical alternative to the phenomenon of the human condition.

Thomas More's world view is predisposed and encompassed by the framework of Christianity. Through this framework, he seeks to condemn emerging materialism prompted by the discovery of the New World and increasing conceptualization of the power of capital because it "challenges a comforting orientation to the sources and remedies of suffering" (Connolly 97). Despite these competing concepts of culture whose value is individually determined, they all "share the sense that suffering comes with human life, joy is intermittent and unreliable, mortality is inescapable" and thus, even within utopia lies the need for redemption (Connolly 98). The writing of utopia in itself is a plea for redemption from the primary societal ill identified by its author, which likewise requires avenues of redemption embedded in it. The author of any utopia subconsciously addresses this inescapable awareness of the human predicament through discipline, the presence of an authoritative gaze, and the elevation of its creator's ideal to a social norm. By striving to uphold the lifestyle prescribed to utopians, they may find comfort in the fact that their "virtuous and good deeds rewards be appointed after this life..." with the fear that their "evil deeds punishments" will bring punishment (More 76). This call for redemption manifests in pushing the agenda of pastoral living with the same religious dogma of Thomas More's present reality.

In an ardent escape from one “predicament,” preventative measures are written into utopia in order to prevent its revival or the emergence of any other cultural phenomenon which does not align with its creator’s vision. Prevention comes in the form of strict surveillance including internal discipline among utopians who must accept these ideals as norms and by those agents of the state who enforce the agenda sparked by its creator’s obsession. Thus, the hierarchy and perceived evils of society which the utopia seeks to reconcile with or rid individuals of are merely recreated through being reimagined. When prevention fails revision is enacted; God in Genesis for example creates the garden, shifting his focus, when Heaven, the original utopia, is tainted by rebellion. This cyclical behavior of “progressive” social practices mirroring existing social structures is articulated in Pierre Bourdieu’s “Structures and the Habitus.” Referencing Jean-Paul Sartre’s insights on “the awakening of a revolutionary consciousness” which seeks to “create the meaning of the present by creating the revolutionary future which negates it,” Bourdieu sees as achieving only a mere variation of the present it abhors (Rivkin, Ryan 2070).

The not-so-simple act of gaining this consciousness that individuals in society “collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor” sparks outrage, sometimes even action, yet the revolutionary future is never realized (Rivkin, Ryan 2073). This is due to the fact that the new practices contended by those impassioned by a new found consciousness, cannot be born in a vacuum away from their environment. These “new” practices therefore mimic those previously unconscious, oppressive practices they seek to correct are “defined as the instantaneous sum of the stimuli which may appear to have directly triggered them, or from the conditions which produced the durable principle of their production”

(Rivkin, Ryan 2087). In a stark exhibition of disgust towards the current state, paired with the euphoria of having gained consciousness (eventually, an obsession) of oppressive conditions with a proposition to change them, utopia comes to fruition only in the present, at the hour of its design.

In More's *Utopia*, it is not the acquisition of capital which governs this hierarchy, but rather the acquisition of knowledge and the privileging of certain bodies over others. The privilege of these bodies depends on the presuppositions and cultural foundation of the author of the utopia. More had the foundation of classical philosophy, catholic faith, and positionality as an able-bodied white man. So bodies like his, like those of his respected elders, are perceived in Utopia as being most capable of possessing, administrating and upholding the knowledge economy. The patriarchy is firmly maintained in More's *Utopia* as "the husbands chastise their wives and the parents their children" (More 92). Extending beyond the family unit, the magistrates meant to surveil the utopians are to be considered "fathers," whom "the Citizens (as it is their duty) willingly exhibit unto them due honor without any compulsion" (More 93). Above the father-magistrates of course, are the princes and the Council of the Elders who must dictate punishment if an offense is deemed severe enough that their authority be required. Due to the power of ideology, or the "systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people" which distorts reality and assigns symbolic meaning to the world it governs, "the subordinate classes do not see themselves as oppressed or exploited" (Hemalatha 79). Peace is achieved in the unquestionable, unwavering faith that accompanies subscribing to or participating in the ideologies which command the space; in the case of utopia, a space which

only exists, uninhibited, only for a moment. Acts which consecrate the conditions of utopia, providing passing peace have the potential to become addicting. Whether this be the act of Thomas More writing, the the reader's consideration and suspension of disbelief while reading, or even the inhuman utopians who are actors in this space, utopia is realized only for a present moment with projections into the past or future which may only honestly be regarded as myth.

The legacy of myth derived from Genesis becomes an engine for orchestrating the volatility of man which renders the Garden of Eden, the original utopia, fragile and fleeting. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* editorializes Genesis by infusing it with his own politics and philosophy to create an origin story for seventeenth century Englishmen, the people group to which he belongs. God's obsession with his own divinity which he believes demands unequivocal obedience is juxtaposed alongside the absolute rule of the British Monarchs by Milton. Through this juxtaposition, Milton questions to what extent people have freewill under the rule of God or a monarch who is considered to be divine, acting as "His" agent. The story of Genesis, especially as interpreted by Milton, portrays an intolerant, egotistical God who maneuvers his subjects like puppets and Satan as his critical, social antagonist.

While More in his world-building process substitutes a capitalistic economy for one of knowledge, in *Paradise* the acquisition of knowledge by Adam and Eve threatens their creator. God, acting as his own protagonist demands absolute obedience from the versions of himself he has created who, like More's utopians, are not allowed to act on their humanity. Thomas More and God seek to eliminate specific aspects of human nature which contribute to the creation of social ills. In the process, they erase the subjectivity and suppress the agency of the individuals

they intend to protect. While “that one celestial Father gives to all,” he also takes without mercy as defiance is harshly punished even when the subjects do not do so intentionally (Milton 5. 403). God exists to Adam and Eve as entirely unexaminable yet not invisible. He masquerades as absolutely powerful in a way which does not render himself as legible, available to examination or questioning except from His angel, Raphael; he may be the inspiration for namesake of the orator of More’s *Utopia*. God performs his power through first creation, then surveillance and finally eternal damnation to whoever defiles his image with the expectation that they remain his loyal constituents, pleading to be welcomed back into his good graces. This anxious, compulsive performance of power as an act of perpetuating the survival of himself as a symbol is rooted in a fear of losing it. This obsession with uninhibited dominion means that God is constantly correcting himself. When Heaven is soured by rebellion, he diverts his attention to a new Utopia in his creation of Earth.

Utopias are always created as a reaction to a perceived dystopia. His ideal of perfection is constantly under vigilant revision thus the image is always reimagined and later revealed as actually imperfect all along. These obsessive revisions which allow God to retain his power are all in response to a behavior which believes undermines his authority but is often inherent to human nature. Adam and Eve through their accidental acts of defiance create the first “human predicaments” which warrant a plea for redemption (Connolly 97); or perhaps it is God’s loneliness, search for meaning and desire to create that he instills this yearning into the subjects created in his own image. Through his gaze, he judges whether or not his subjects are upholding this image in a way that he finds satisfactory. God’s biases and preferences construct the



presuppositions which govern the biblical epic of mankind. Adam expresses awareness of his maker's volatility via "Favor unmerited by me who sought Forbidden knowledge by Forbidden means" (Milton 12. 275). Yet he "...apprehend not, why those God will deign to dwell on Earth So many and so various laws are giv'n? So many laws argue so many sins" (Milton 12. 276-280). To which Michael, another of His angels, answers that "Law can discover sin but not remove" (Milton 12. 290). Yet even before there was sin there was still the law prohibiting them from eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Law is defined revealing sin through His constant revisions of perfection. Adam recognizes the inherent futility of this logic, but does not dare to rebuke God for he is not only eternally indebted to him, his power symbolized in every facet of His reality. Yet now he is no longer oblivious to his ability as a subject to evoke awful consequences. God, like England's monarchs, operates with an agenda. The agenda is born through pride and self-interest, but also "draws parts of its sustenance from the implicit sense of the human predicament that informs it" (Connolly 98). In the same vein as whether or not free will exists is the question of whether agenda governs obsession or obsession governs agenda.

The desire to construct a utopic space is born in the absolute valorization of a particular ideal (an obsession) with a strong awareness of and abjection to its antithesis. God valorizes allegiance and obedience to his power expecting that his constituents have no reason or right to discover more knowledge than that provided by himself. More on the other hand idealizes a particular type of acquisition of knowledge with the intention of upholding existing social hierarchy he has simply reimagined. In either case, knowledge is prescribed and regulated, justified by a system which derives its power from the inherently obsessive nature of utopia's

conception which demands acts of constant reassertion. Utopia requires unquestionable faith in an ideal or aspiration “but the future persistently meanders out of the utopian’s line of vision” (Green 151). Voyeurism, anticipating acts of surveillance, govern and enforce this faith as unquestionable. This practice is complicated by one crucial and in the matter of utopias, fatal flaw; the subjects can gaze back. God is not untouchable; “Men in other words, initiate action as well as being acted upon” (Green 152). Satan enters as an antagonist to God’s utopic space by acting as a voyeur which enables him to identify the human’s vulnerabilities, especially their capacity for lust, the manifestation of uncontrolled emotion which he shares.

Satan as God’s most deviant subject “...functions in a partial social vacuum, then, now, and always remote from the attitudes and interests of those who wield power, and the mass which acquiesces to it,” (Green 150). Solitary alongside the other fallen angels and rejected in this vacuum, an obsession of his own is born in opposition to God, to dismantle him as a sacred symbol. With this excommunication however comes a type of knowledge and mobility that the other subjects are blind to. Dante in *The Divine Comedy* likewise is granted mobility and the capacity for examination of power as he traverses through Inferno eventually witnessing the deepest circle of Hell. He too fulfills the role of the intellectual in modern utopian literature. Knowledge for Dante is



Fig. 2: Engravings of Dante's Inferno by William Blake, 1826. The Rare Book Room at Boston Public Library

simultaneously awful and inspiring. Any previously cherished worldly indulgences or infatuations which deviate from faith in God's power become futile, fleeting objects of pleasure which anticipate great pain. His journey through Inferno is depicted by William Blake's engravings commissioned in 1826 by John Linnell (Fig. 2). Through Dante's subliminal yet visceral journey, the terrible knowledge of the consequences of disobeying God's punitive patriarchal system evokes moral reconciliation. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan is the only character to which God is permeable and he renders even Him examinable through persuading Eve to eat the forbidden fruit of forbidden knowledge.

Satan seeks revenge, an entirely selfish form of reconciliation as he loathes God instead of fearing him. Through this parallel relationship, Satan's utopia is found in bringing to fruition God's dystopia. The most human of the celestial beings in the Bible, he understands how the expression of humanity is inevitable and ultimately incompatible with maintaining God's intentions for Earth. Satan knows the wrath of God, thus he does not require restraint. An angel gone rogue and returned, Satan in Milton's eyes fulfills the archetype of the probing intellectual in utopia that has emerged in modern, less optimistic depictions of utopia. Through Satan's probing at her formerly unchartered capacity for indulgent desire, "Eve seems to be succumbing to the power the gaze could offer her" (Finucci, Schwartz 147). Gazes sustains and dismantles utopia through all of its actors, including its creator. By positioning Satan as the intellectual and ascribing qualities to him intrinsically human in nature, Milton might evoke a rather sympathetic interpretation of the serpent from the reader, viewing his "...observation as politically liberating" (Finucci, Schwartz 153). Before Eve encounters the serpent, she only knows God's gaze, Satan

tells her that “We can look back, we can even look first, and we need not be sadists to do so,” (Finucci, Schwartz 153). This redirection of gaze and subsequent reversal of power which renders utopia as fleeting is crucial in Milton's editorialization of Genesis. He desires that his intended audience see the futility of yielding to an authoritative gaze without gazing back, questioning the absoluteness of the British monarchs who govern them.

More's *Utopia* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* exemplify how the inclination to respond to a perceived social ill or specific human predicament manifests in the pleasurable act of authoring an alternate, idyllic space. This idyllic space, the maker's utopia, is realized only in the moment of its conception as it is inherently fleeting. This fleeting quality is due to the fact that the authors of utopia have the ability to reimagine the systems of power but not create anything truly new or original; they cannot see beyond the cultural foundations and presuppositions which govern the reality they disdain. Utopia is realized in that instance of revolutionary consciousness which sparks its authoring and only then because it addresses the present moment by anticipating an impermeable, fluid future. This anticipation which seeks to recreate the euphoric feeling of dictating a utopic space manifests in acts of surveillance, temporarily relieving the compulsion to address their particular cultural anxiety. Digilant gaze, imposed through acts of surveillance, fosters an infatuation for power which is made palpable in the physical space of utopia as well as the positioning of its constituents. Righteousness, obsession and the assertion of gaze render utopia, like reality, unexaminable with the “Great Architect” making sure to pay careful attention to how knowledge is exchanged. Authors of utopia do “wisely to conceal and not divulge” as

their constituents too, may at any time reach their own revolutionary consciousness about the supposedly utopic conditions which govern their existence (Milton 8. 72-73).

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