Utopia and Melancholy:
an Intriguing and Secret Relationship

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At first sight, utopia and melancholy appear to be two contradictory terms, because utopia is always associated with the idea of happiness, of harmony and of enjoyment. Indeed, Utopia is presented as a rational project, supported by a reason which wants to remove all defects and evil from reality in order to create order within chaos and to correct the disharmony and badness of the world. My working hypothesis consists of revealing a paradox: the works conceived in unison with the principles of reason are often provoked by an emotional drive or response. For this reason, when studying the intimate and intriguing link between utopia and melancholy, it seems to be very important to trace the reasons which induced the utopian writer to design his/her utopia. As emphasised by utopian scholars, there is a precise utopian temperament, which has characteristics similar to the melancholic one, as defined by ancient medical treatises up to the theories of the humours between the 16th and 17th centuries. Hippocrates mentions Democritus as the legendary philosopher from Abdera, who wants to study the cause of melancholy in order to cure and prevent it. Like the melancholic, the utopist can be regarded as a human being who is not in harmony with his/her time: the name Erasmus playfully attributes to Thomas More in his preface to Praise of Folly is precisely that of Democritus junior: “You, in your ordinary converse, approve yourself a Democritus junior: for truly - you do by a singular vein or wit, very much dissent from the common herd of mankind”¹.

This condition of discomfort and maladjustment prompts the utopist’s critique of contemporary society and raises the desire to leave his/her land as a voluntary exile in search of a world which better responds to his/her ideals.

The melancholic humour can but be defined through pairs of opposites which highlight its double nature: Latin acedia or tristitia, and furor or divinatio; cowardice and fervour, sloth and energy, passivity and hyperactivity. Tracing the origins of the Saturnine temperament means revisiting the myth of the god Saturn, focusing on its double meaning: Saturn, the mythical architect of the world, the projective and utopian constructor, is a destroyer at the same time: “proud, profane, cruel, devourer of children and gods. Dethroned by Jupiter, the god is exiled to the gelid ends of the Earth and the Sea”². When the Ancients attributed divine names to the planets, Saturn was given a superior role in the solar system. Precisely because of its distance, it casts a weak and dim light on the Earth. As early as ancient times, then, the Saturnine temperament is dominated by antithetical and contradictory tensions, because its humour is influenced by the bile which, due to its cold nature, can warm up and blaze, providing the intellect with vivacity, wit and perspicuous vision. The black bile also influences the gloomy melancholic from a physiognomic point of view: he has small deep-set eyes and dark skin.

UTOPIA AND MELANCHOLY: AN INTRIGUING AND SECRET RELATIONSHIP

The etymology of the term, of uncertain derivation, also hides ambivalence. According to Denis Diderot:

MELANCHOLY (medicine) μελαγχόλια is a word composed of μελανα, black, and χολη, bile. ¹

On the other hand, according to a popular, fantastic, less certain and quite fascinating etymology, melancholy derives from malus, the apple which Adam wanted to taste and which caused his expulsion from the Garden of Eden. This is why the hour of Saturn is associated with the hour of evil ⁴. These two etymologies help us to understand how melancholy, originally connected with a physical illness, gradually becomes a moral malaise with negative connotations: from this, we have the melancholic who is obstinate, stubborn, rancorous, envious and subject to major mood changes which lead him/her to get excited or to close inwards.

When coldness and apathy fade away and the inability to look at reality and other men gives way to a condition of euphoria and pathos, the melancholic is taken over by a furor, a visionary capacity which Plato compares to the δαιμον daimon which inspired the poets. My hypothesis is that this bi-polarity is essential not only to the melancholic temperament but also to the utopian temperament and that the tension between these two extremes leads to the utopian frame of mind and, therefore, inspires the project itself. The scholars who have studied the utopian temperament and mentality have highlighted not only the speculative faculty of the utopist but also his/her obsession with the project, the possession, the mania of the ordering principle which dominates every utopian project. The melancholic, like the utopian, is nourished by polarities and contrasts: s/he runs from one extreme to the other, from dark to light, from a closed view of the world to openness, from the personal sphere to the public sphere, from social disorder to individual order, from healing the world to self-therapy. The contrast between temperamental opposites places the discourse in the moral sphere: doing and not doing is related to a moralistic attitude, which sometimes takes shape as an excess of teaching and goading. It is no coincidence that in utopia, considerable space is given to pedagogy, which reveals how the need to correct the deviations of human nature becomes central for the utopian writer, in his/her passion to reform the world. Therefore, as Starobinski has noted⁵, in utopia, as in Dante’s Comedy, the law of retaliation often rules. Due to a temperament which tends towards laziness, the melancholic and slothful utopist, plans utopias in which not only are action and work rewarded, but the lazy are cruelly punished. We cannot but think of the terrible punishment for the slothful in Inferno: bothered by wasps, because they were passive in

⁴ Pietro Citati, La luce della notte. I grandi miti nella storia del mondo, cit., pp. 60-61.
life, the slothful have to run tirelessly; in this way, the melancholic goads others to goad him/herself, he strikes down the evils of others to strike down his/her own evils. By studying the utopian temperament, we grasp the most obscure aspects of utopia, which lurk in the deepness of the human being. Dark and shady features, typical of the melancholic, which Freudian psychoanalysis sees as a proper illness related to obscure ill-being and depression, appear, in ontological terms, to fit into the temperament of the utopist.

There is also another component of the utopian temperament which links utopia with melancholy and satire. As a matter of fact, the attitude of the satirist is characterised by the intermingling of melancholy and lucid madness. From the very Renaissance, utopia has been considered as the result of imagination, thus intrinsically ambiguous. On the one hand, it is connected with genius, and with its prophetic, divinatory powers, according to the conceptions of Plato and Aristotle; on the other, utopia is the mark of the disturbed nature of a man whose mental faculty is impaired by the ascending, obnubilating vapours of the bile. If the foreseeing powers attributed to the utopian reformers allow them to speak out, thus boldly expressing an alternative vision of the world, this same capability exposes them to public jest, malevolence, and harsh criticism. As a matter of fact, the link between the utopian thinker as a serious reformer or as an idle dreamer and fabulator, originates from More’s *Utopia* itself. The traveller’s name, Hythloday, is a Greek term indicating a tall-tale teller and a liar. A clear example of the ambivalent value ascribed to utopian imagination is provided by Francesco Doni’s *Mondo Savio*, where the dialogue between a wise man, Savio, and a madman, Pazzo, shows how difficult it is to follow the thread interweaving wisdom and lunacy, to trace the path leading from reality to dream. This can be explained because during the Renaissance wisdom and insanity are interchangeable, and each of them is itself and its reverse.

In Joseph Hall’s *Mundus alter et idem* (1605), the first dystopia in the English tradition, the utopian imagination is regarded as dangerous, since it drives men to “imagining and framing fictions to themselves of things never done, nor never likely to be done: in believing these their fiction, and in following these beleefes” Hall distinguishes between melancholics and cholerics: in Liperia, one of the duchies of Moronia, the land of Melancholy (“which others call Maninconica”), people are “hairy, thin, savage, swarthy, black haired, with skin tough and uneven, stern in countenance, carelessly dressed…”, their country being wrapped in darkness. Instead, the inhabitants of “Orgilia, the Second province of
De como se perde o tempo. Gravura do Mestre de Petrarca para a obra de Petrarca *Von der Arzney bayder Gluck des guten und des widersaartingen*, Augsburgo, 1532, que ilustra a lamentação da dor: *Temporis ammissionem fieo* (Choro a perda de tempo). A obra de Petrarca *De remediis utriusque fortunae* pertence às mais conhecidas de toda a literatura moralista do humanismo.
Moronia Aspera,” the land of irascible lunatics, have “pallid faces, red hair, glowing eyes, trembling lips, and uncertain but quite rapid gait.”

Like the utopian writer, the satirical writer is always pervaded by melancholy: it is this humour which leads both to assume a detached attitude from the reality of their time. The utopian and the satirical writer work at a distance, they move away, to assume a critical and deconstructive attitude in relation to evil and contemporary society. Utopia and satire presuppose a corrosive attitude and total refusal of the world. The utopian and the satirical writer, like an anatomist, want to dissect the world so as to be able to expel evil. The difference between the two is that, while the satirical writer is fully concentrated on anatomising reality in order to reveal its defects, the utopian writer is able to go beyond the *destruens* stage through creating a project: s/he dismantles the real to reassemble it using his/her own *nomos*. In the positive utopia, there is always a shift from a *destruens* phase to a *costruens* one. Common to both, however, is the attitude of estrangement towards a reality in which one does not recognise him/herself. Looking at conventions and institutions from a point of view of otherness means removing the meanings which are generally attributed by common sense. Estrangement is thus a standpoint which leads them to subvert the current logic. The utopist and the satirist, like the melancholic, isolate themselves, because they do not find similar persons who understand them. Common to both is the strong feeling of maladjustment. However, while the satirical writer focuses on a dissection of the world and only implicitly evokes alternative values, the utopian writer, on the other hand, is fully dedicated to shaping another world through the imagination and the desire to speculate on the alternative potentialities of experience. The estranged look is detached and passionate at the same time, because criticising things, first and foremost, requires “seeing them”, like phenomena that are being seen for the first time, because freed from the obvious and trivial standpoint sustained by common sense. Estrangement always engenders a cognitive tension, because the person observing, as s/he is not happy with what s/he receives from the current public opinion, wants to gradually unveil the unpredictably strange features of a familiar object. Not only does estrangement involve a mental attitude, but it also becomes a literary mode of representation and, eventually, it is a way of de-legitimising every political, social and religious aspect of the society in which the melancholic lives.

For these reasons, in my opinion, the utopian project, which can no doubt be unravelled through the life as well as the emotional and personal drives of the utopian thinker, is inherent in the very concept of melancholy. From this point of view, paradoxically, we can say that, precisely because it presupposes an estranged point of view, the condition of the utopian thinker is melancholic in ontological terms. Another element which helps us to understand the inter-relatedness between
utopia and melancholy is the relationship of utopia with time and, therefore, with history. Every utopia assumes the utopian writer's will to erase history, to set up a new start through a radical and founding act. It is no coincidence that Thomas More's *Utopia* gives such importance to the cutting of the isthmus by King Utopus, a metaphorical act of separation and origin. This act, however, does not solve the problem of the passing of time: in the creation of a new history, a series of strategies are set up by the utopian to freeze and set the state of perfection and harmony which, once obtained, cannot be spoiled by the processes of corruptibility and transience of human things. It is as if the rational principle which must stand over every aspect of reality was subjected to the anxiety and pressure of time. This is why the utopias, once analysed with a magnifying lens, let you see gaps and fissures which reveal the utopian writer's phobic obsession for illness, ageing and death, the aspects of reality connected with decay. Thus, the utopian always dedicates considerable attention to care for the body through dietary prescriptions and always tries to rationalise the inevitable advent of death through its precise planning. In the impossibility of deleting the end, the utopist does his/her best to organise it: s/he will examine, then, the possibility of pleasant death, euthanasia, or will try to make it acceptable to the community by encoding it through rituals, with ceremonies involving the members of the society.

Utopia can be considered as the search for a compensation for something missing and strenuously sought after, both in personal and social terms. Thus, the utopist's relationship with time and history is complex and intricate. Utopian historians have always identified two precise trends in utopia: on the one hand, an Arcadian trend of regression, whose centre is nature and the countryside; on the other hand, a technological and progressive trend developing on urban planning. In relation to our discussion of the intimate relationship between utopia and melancholy, both trends can be explained as strategies for escaping the problem of time, the real obsession of the utopian thinker, because in each and every one, at least until the 19th century, the dialectic of time and history is cancelled. The classic utopias appear to be crystallised in a mortuary fixedness. In the regressive trend, the relationship of the *Utopia* with myth seems to be central; in the Arcadian utopias, the melancholy of the utopist is combined with a nostalgia for the past, lived or envisioned. The myths of the earthly paradise, the Garden of Eden, the Golden Age of Antiquity and, later, of Arcadia, predominate. In such utopias, then, the active aspect does not prevail: the toil of work has been eliminated, and happy, beautiful creatures, uncontaminated by the corruption of time, thrive on the fruits of a prolific and abundant nature. This is the fulcrum of existence. In the progressive utopias, the melancholy produces a project furor which wants to redeem the initial blow of the Fall and original sin through the active work of men who

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build a perfect and happy society on a constant day-to-day basis. The obsession with time is overcome by the obstinate regulation of every aspect of nature and reality which could cause disorder and chaos in society. This inability to accept time as change leads to the geometric desire for classification and the managerial and censorial aspect of the utopist. This discourse becomes more complicated with modernity, when the utopian writer has to deal with the ideas of progress, the dialectic sense of history according to the Marxist conception and the best of possible futures. In my opinion, the problematic issue of the acceptance of historic time is left unsolved, as is clearly shown by the 20th century anti-utopias. F.E. Manuel's and F.P. Manuel's definition of utopia as a hybrid plant remains valid. This definition considers two parts, classical and mythical thought on one hand, Christian Judaic thought on the other. The two mix and fuse in the Western utopia; the first implies a circular conception, in which the end goes back to the start, in a myth of the eternal return. The second implies an eschatological tension, in which the telos is projected forward.

Editing *Vite di Utopia*, a volume on the relationship between utopian writing and biography, I have attempted to show the intimate link between the writer's biography and utopian writing: studying the utopists' biographies reveals not only the features of their mentality but also aspects which at first reading appear to be obscure with relation to the epistemology of the era as well as to the artist's political and philosophic position. Biography, then, functions as a text in which a complex set of relations is enacted, since the Author can no longer be regarded as a univocal and trans-historical subject, but rather as the participant in a specific cultural community, and thus affected by the all-pervading cultural episteme. Therefore, utopian writers like Robert Burton and Jeremy Bentham become emblematic for understanding not only certain aspects of the personality of the utopist but also for understanding the persons themselves.

Two emblematic examples can be provided: Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and Bentham's *Panopticon*.

Burton's utopia is almost accidentally located in the final part of the introduction to his gigantic monograph on melancholy entitled "Democritus Junior to the Reader." Under the pseudonym of Democritus Junior, Burton follows the model of the legendary philosopher from Abdera, Democritus. The interesting aspect is the self-consciousness characterising his identification with the melancholic doctor philosopher. As Winfried Schleiner acutely observes, Burton is deeply aware of the ambivalent and contradictory features of the melancholic temperament: Eraclitus's weeping and Democritus's laughter are the equivalent and perhaps synonymous reactions to the world's perversity, two interrelated themes in Burton's Preface to "Democritus Junior to the Reader".

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As we have previously highlighted, Burton’s frame of mind presents features which are constitutive of the melancholic: he becomes the real utopian projector who wants to play the utopist:

I will yet, to satisfy and please my self, make an Utopia of mine own, a New Atlantis, a poetical Commonwealth of mine own, in which I will freely domineer, build Cities, make laws, Statutes, as I list myself.

Burton’s attitude towards melancholy is very complex: if on the one hand he can lucidly diagnose his own disease, on the other hand he can ironically exhibit himself as playing the role of the melancholic. In this perspective, his own utopia can be seen as serious, thus as a kind of self-therapy, and as playful, as the expression of an individualistic game.

The peremptory injunction of melancholic Burton — “… I will suffer no beggars, rogues, vagabonds, or idle person at all, that cannot give an account of their lives how they maintain themselves” — sounds like a kind of antidote for his own personal sloth. In this respect, Burton’s utopian fantasy and the writing of the book itself appear as a kind of therapy for the author’s personal disease. While he presents aspects common to most utopian thinkers, such as geometric planning, dirigism, eugenics, one aspect stands out as specifically connected to his melancholic humour: his anxiety towards aedía. His melancholic, twofold depression/fury leads him to conceive a society founded on a rigid list of laws that punish all transgressors:

He that commits sacrilege shall lose his hands; he that bears false witness, or is of perjury convict, shall have his tongue cut out, except he redeem it with his head.

This definitive legislation shows how order in the State is maintained through a rigid system of control and vigilance and, above all, through authoritarian and censorial violence. The distinctive principle on which Burton’s utopia is founded is precisely compulsory work as a remedy to sloth: the jail and the scaffold await those who are lazy and parasitic in utopia.

Burton dedicates fifteen pages to his reformist utopia in the introduction, where, thanks to his omnivorous and encyclopaedic culture, he succeeds in establishing an interesting intertextual dialogue with utopias of the past from Plato to Thomas More’s Utopia, from Campanella’s La Città del sole to Francis Bacon’s New Atlantis. The relationship Burton establishes with the 17th-century system of knowledge can be ascribed to one of the specific traits of the Saturnine vice: avarice. Due to his voracity, even gluttony, Burton swallows and digests enormous quantities of knowledge, as if possessed by a retentive compulsion. His faculty to retain notions is very similar to

the ability to retain physical secretions and food within one's stomach. Burton himself uses the metaphor of ingestion and digestion in order to describe the process through which he appropriates an enormous quantity of quotations, verses, proverbs, legends in order to nurture and increase his own work.

The second example I should like to provide as emblematic of the twofold nature of the melancholic temperament regards Bentham. He was obsessed by the Panopticon, an architecture project of a model prison relentlessly pursued all life long. By means of a rigorous methodology extended to all the possible aspects of reality, the principle of the Panoptic machine can be applied without distinction to both prisons and houses of correction, to factories (manufactures) and hospitals and to mad-houses and schools:

To say all in one word, it will be found applicable, I think without exception, to all establishments whatsoever, in which, within a space not too large to be covered or commanded by buildings, a number of persons are meant to be kept under inspection*.

(Letter I. Idea of the Inspection Principle)\(^{15}\)

Investigating Bentham's life reveals how the melancholic temperament is expressed both through his obsessive and maniacal will to realise his architectural utopia, and through his lucidity in describing the utilitarian feasibility of his project. In this perspective, Bentham's biographical data reveal his subtle sensitivity and uncanny personality, split up between hyper-rationalism and over-emotionality. The all-controlling eye which projects his enlightening power everywhere, the myth of global transparency can be regarded as a kind of compensation for Bentham's fear for the shady, gloomy aspects of reality. The model prison is enlightened by the reason which rejects and overcomes the darkness of medieval jails. However, this dichotomy between reason and irrationality, between light and darkness, can be interpreted as Bentham's phobic attitude towards obscurity, which equates crime and sex as two activities which take place unseen, and are thus perverse and criminal.

If we go back to our working hypothesis that the utopian temperament is ontologically melancholic, we can fruitfully search for the clues of a temperamental continuity linking the utopian thinkers from the 16th century humanist More to the 19th century Victorian Morris. Like F.E. and F.P. Manuel have pointed out, in More himself the two aspects coexist. According to Freudian categories, the aspect of gloomy, deep introspection is a form of aggression turned inward, while the jovial, witty, convivial inclination testifies to an aggression turned outwards and functioning as an act of defence. In both his essays and letters to his family and friends Morris refers to his double nature: the mood of energy and the mood of idleness. While the first dominates

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his inexhaustible, multiple activities, both intellectual and manual, the second is characterised by a sense of exhaustion, of utter tiredness which can be interpreted as an existential fear and anguish for decay and death. His letters of 8 October and 25 November 1872 to Aglaia Coronio disclose a disquieting melancholic self-portrait:

... I have been backwards and forwards to Kelmscott a good deal this summer & autumn ... The weather has been lovely here this autumn, but doesn't seem to have suited me very well. I have been queer several times, and am not very brilliant today—As to any mental health—I have had ups and downs as you may very easily imagine: but on the whole I suppose I am getting less restless and worried, if at the same time less hopeful, still there is life in me yet I hope.

... One thing wanting ought not to go for so much—nor indeed does it spoil my enjoyment of life always, as I have often told you: to have some real Friends and some sort of aim in life is so much, that I ought still to think myself lucky—and often in my better moods I wonder what it is in me that throws me into such rage and despair at other times: I suspect; do you know, that some such moods would have come upon me at times even without this failure of mine. However that may be though I must confess that this autumn has been a special dismal time with me

There, dear Aglaia see I am showing my pettiness! *please* don't encourage me in them; but you have always been so kind to me that they will come out. O how I long to keep the world—from narrowing in on me and to look at things bigly and kindly!

I am going to try to get to Iceland next year, hard as it win be to drag myself away from two or three people in England; but I know there will be a kind of rest in it, let alone the help it will bring me from physical reasons; I know clearer now perhaps than then what a blessing & help last year's journey was to one; or what horrors it saved me from....

Forgive my rambling and most egotistical letter.

Not only is Morris's melancholic temperament evident in his oscillation between self-restraint and an explicit search for sympathy, but it is strongly expressed in a multi-faceted personality characterised by contrasting attitudes, which variously intertwine in his utopian search for an inner as well as outer centre of gravity. The sense of loss and anguish is opposed to his efforts of will, his disillusionment and resentment are contrasted with his desire for peace and rest. The very essence of his utopian frame of mind is the dichotomous interplay of force vs. frailty, time vs. vacuum, over-commitment vs. rest, concentration vs. distraction, activity vs. restraint. The ceaseless dialectical process aiming to achieve a rounded personality, a balanced identity, starts as an introverted activity and develops into a public practice fourteen years later in the lecture *The Aims of Art* (1886), where he first gives the definition of the moods of idleness and of energy.

Now, when I consider my life further, I find out, or seem to, that it is under the influence of two dominating moods, which for lack of better words I must call the mood of energy and the mood of idleness: these two moods are now
one, now the other, always crying out in me to be satisfied. When the mood of energy is upon me, I must be doing something, or I become mopish and unhappy; when the mood of idleness is on me, I find it hard indeed if I cannot rest and let my mind wander over the various pictures, pleasant or terrible, which my own experience or my communing with the thoughts of other men, dead or alive, have fashioned in it; and if circumstances will not allow me to cultivate this mood of idleness, I find I must at the best pass through a period of pain till I can manage to stimulate my mood of energy to take its place and make me happy again. And if I have no means wherewith to rouse up that mood of energy to do its duty in making me happy, and I have to toil while the idle mood is upon me, then I am unhappy indeed, and almost wish myself dead, though I do not know what that means.

Well, I believe that all men’s lives are compounded of these two moods in various proportions, and that this explains why they have always, with more or less of toil, cherished and practised art."

Even though Morris allows a dialectic sense of History into his utopia in News from Nowhere, he attempts to expunge the sense of the end which pervades everything human, and to remove death and the corruption of the body. In his utopia, there is a constant appraisal of the beauty of the young, who are agile and strong, and of women, in particular. But, in this Eden-like world, we feel the fear of the void as revealed in the anxiety of the character-narrator William Guest, because he fears that the vision and the experience in this new society is fleeting. Morris’ response to the problem of time decay and death is aesthetic: only art and artworks can defeat time and the corruption of the body.

An interesting research perspective can be opened up by the search for a nexus between utopia and nostalgia. If this is evident in utopias with strong Arcadian elements, or in utopian writers willingly reviving myth, like that of Morris’s idealized Middle Ages or William Hudson’s Garden of Eden evoked in The Crystal Age, this nostalgic aspect finds its most crucial, controversial expressions in some 20th century dystopias. George Orwell’s 1984 represents the protagonist Winston Smith as the man who cannot integrate with the totalitarian society. He inevitably looks back at the past: the revival of the myth of the Golden Country testifies to Orwell’s awareness that nature has been spoiled and violated in the totalitarian regime.

"It’s the Golden country – almost," he murmured.
"The Golden Country?"
"It’s nothing really. A landscape I’ve seen sometimes in a dream."
"Look!" whispered Julia.
A thrush had alighted on a bough not five meters away, almost at the level of their faces. Perhaps it had not seen them. It was in the sun, they in the shade. It spread out its wings, fitted them carefully into place again, ducked its head for a moment, as though making a sort of obeisance to the sun, and then begun to pour forth a torrent of song. In the afternoon hush the volume of sound was startling. Winston and Julia clung together, fascinated. The music went on


19 Cfr. A.L. Morton, The English Utopia, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1953, p. 164: “Morris’s is the first Utopia which is not Utopian. In all its predecessors it is the details which catch our attention, but here, while we may be dubious about this detail or that, the important things are the sense of historical development and the human understanding of the quality of life in a classless society”; E.P. Thompson, William Morris. Romantic to Revolutionary, New York, Pantheon Books, 1965; republished 1976, “Postscript”, in particular pp. 779-786.
and on, minute after minute, with astonishing variations, never once repeating itself, almost as though the bird were deliberately showing off its virtuosity ... Winston watched it with a sort of vague reverence. For whom, for what was the bird singing? ... What made it sit at the edge of the lonely wood and pour its music into nothingness? He wondered whether after all there was a microphone hidden somewhere near.\textsuperscript{20}

In this passage Orwell shows a gradual progression from the idyllic description of a bucolic landscape to the contrasting feelings stirred up in Winston and Julia by the bird’s song, a beautiful sound which is soon charged with nostalgic overtones for something which no longer exists. The plaintive music ultimately recalls a sense of loneliness, of nothing, and can but remind, through the final ironic twist, of a reality of horror and violence.

Finally, I would suggest a challenging confrontation between the figure of the angel in Dürer’s \textit{Melancolia I} and the character of John, the good Savage in Aldous Huxley’s \textit{Brave New World}. In one of his recent essays, “L’angelo malinconico”\textsuperscript{21} (“The melancholic Angel”), Giorgio Agamben re-examines Dürer’s engraving by associating it to Walter Benjamin’s reading of Paul Klee’s \textit{Angelus Novus} as the angel of history. In Dürer’s work the angel is surrounded by the tools of active life, a square, a wheel, a plane, some nails, a hammer, a saw, and pincers; a glass-hour is behind him, an immobile sphere can be seen beneath. The angel of melancholia symbolizes the \textit{typus acediae} and embodies the human condition of transience along with man’s inability to accept it, after he has experienced the loss of the sense of time. Klee’s \textit{Angelus Novus} is regarded by Benjamin as the icon of the melancholic attitude man feels towards history. The angel is fixed because he has lost the capability of attributing sense to the events of the past; the only possible escape is not offered by a projection towards the future, but by utter estrangement from his own world, and deep nostalgia for a reality that can but be attained as unreal. In this respect we can understand why Benjamin considers the massive use of quotations in modern art as both the sign of nostalgia for and erasure of the past, since the act itself of retrieving history, by means of selected fragments of it, actually undermines its aura. Once de-contextualised, the fragments become estranged and thus incomprehensible in a new context.

Similarly, in \textit{Brave New World} John Savage has failed to develop a personal mode of verbal expression: he does not possess a language of his own, but strangely borrows the idiom of a past culture as well as the sets of values attached to it. He is always quoting from Shakespeare; nevertheless, quotation does not function as a remainder of cultural authority, but rather dramatizes the identity of a self caged thought. By exploiting Shakespeare’s words as his own words, John’s language erects a barrier between the self and the knowledge of others. John’s aphasia highlights not only his deep disregard for the languages of others, but


\textsuperscript{21} The essay is included in the collection \textit{L’uomo senza contenuto}, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2000, I ed. 1994, pp. 157-174.
also his inability to make himself understood. This very communication gap, this faithfulness to the code of myth brought to the extreme, will bring him to commit an act of self-annihilation, the first one self-enacted among utopian travellers.

In this sense John commits the extreme act of the melancholic: not only does his suicide represent the last attempt to maintain his own identity, but it is also the evident proof of his own isolation and estrangement from the new technological world as well as from the old one, impossibly surviving in the degraded Indian reserve.

BIBLIOGRAFIA


DONI, Francesco (1513-1574), Mondi celesti, terrestri, et infernali, de gli academici pellegrini. Composti dal Doni; mondo piccolo, grande, misto, risibile, imaginato, de pazzi, et massimo. Inferno de gli scolari, de mal maritati, delle puttane, & ruffiani, soldati, & capitani poltroni, dottor cattiu, legisti, artisti, de gli vsurai, de poeti & compositori ignorant, in Venetia: appresso Domenico Farri, 1575.


