

Niculae Gheran

Horace Newte's *Master Beast*: Space, Time and the Consequences of Trespassing against Nature

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the work of the British Edwardian writer Horace W.C Newte, *The Master Beast: Being a True Account of the Ruthless Tyranny Inflicted on the British People by Socialism, AD, 1888–2020*. Newte's central aim in the novel seems to be that of showing that as long as a social system that does not go along the laws of a Darwinian nature in which 'survival of the fittest' is the central axiom governing, it cannot succeed as a viable alternative and will end in tyranny. The article comments on the way in which the author constructs his dystopian city as a *topos* disconnected from the laws of nature, and the ways nature makes itself felt despite ideological repression in violent outbursts that threaten to destabilize the system. A spatial analysis is also conducted in order to underline the symbolical connections between different types of geography that are marginal, overlap or are situated in the past of the narrative. The author seems to use these alternative spaces as symbolic points of reference in contrast to the dystopian city.

KEYWORDS

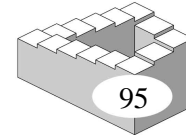
Dystopia; Horace Newte; *Master Beast*; Nature; Darwin; Communism; Symbolic Geography.

NICULAE GHERAN

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
dum_spiro_spero09@yahoo.com

The first honest thing that must be said about Newte's text is that we are clearly dealing with a work that has its own assumptions apart from those it seeks to criticize as unnatural. Having this in mind, the purpose of this paper is not to take a moral stance, and to agree or disagree with Newte's conceptualization of natural space or his views on what he sees as the immutable laws of nature that politics should reflect, but rather to present them as such from a detached viewpoint. For this reason, my only purpose is to analyze his conceptualization of nature at the level of imagery and also the negative consequences the author attaches to trespassing against it.

I think that there are both differences and similarities between other writers of anti-utopias such as George Orwell or Yevgeny Zamyatin and Horace Newte. All these authors presented the repression of nature (one that is not ideologically bound in a negative light) and the ways in which this nature reacts violently against this process. However, while the former constructed dystopian fictional spaces from which "nature" was symbolically repressed to a marginal topology existing in the same time frame with that of the city, – the forest near Orwell's London, the space beyond the green wall etc. – and from which it violently

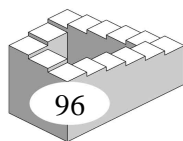


returns personified to haunt the city, in Newte's case, nature overlaps the dystopian space and causes problems from within to the ideologically bound symbolic topology constructed above it. Ideological repression still exists but the fact that it goes against nature is portrayed as causing aberrant and grotesque manifestations of it. In a sense Newte is the most optimistic of all authors of anti-utopias because of a firm belief that no system that trespasses against the laws of nature cannot survive. Charles Darwin seems to be the author's main influence, for he believes that a political system is successful only inasmuch it runs along the Darwinian world view. Darwin of course believed that 'survival of the fittest' is the most important law that governs nature. From this particular perspective, we note how an egalitarian system such as socialism is to the author a system contrary to nature. In his opinion, freedom can be achieved only if a political system is at a particular time, the fittest. The author does not necessarily take a political stance; rather he believes that the battle of different political ideologies is governed by the same laws as nature. Thus, socialism may even win at a certain point if it exhibits a strength of cause greater than that of what it seeks to replace. However, its main weakness is the fact that, in the long run, its theories go against nature and would fail on this account and be replaced by another. His theory of the Master Beast is expounded in the beginning of the novel.

The keen faced man began by admitting the justice of Socialism in the abstract. "Were it not for the human factor, and the dominating purposes of nature, a system satisfactory to all might be established on present day conditions, which last had been inevitably evolved from pre-existing circumstances. But, as the obsession of nature cannot be eliminated, it must be taken into account", he said. The speaker then

contended that the human race is as ruthlessly governed by natural laws as is any other species of animals, plants, fishes, birds or insects; that nature produces more of any given genus that can possibly find subsistence, and the pitiless competition for subsistence not only cuts off the weaklings, but strengthens the survivors. Then, amidst murmurs of disapproval, he went on to say that in most herds or flocks was what farmers called a master beast, who took more than his fair share of food and generally did himself well at the expense of others. He contended that the master beast was entitled to the good things it monopolized on account of the superior courage and strength it exhibited. Then he declared that mankind had always been dominated by a master beast. Sometimes it was called Divine right, at other priesthood or, again, tyranny of a revolutionary republic; now it seemed to be capitalism that held the world in its grip; tomorrow it would probably democracy; the day after it might be Socialism. But, whatever shibboleth was top dog, it got there owing to the inherent strength of its cause, and maintained its proud position so long as it fell in with nature's law, which was survival of the fittest for time and place as occasion arose. He declared that the laws of nature were immutable; also that socialism, in preparing to go counter those laws was only looking for trouble.¹

There are several key issues and images in the novel that the author uses in order to show the ways in which socialism intentionally departs from these facts in order to correct nature itself. First, there is the issue of property. Newte believes in a natural instinct to acquire propriety. Fear of poverty is necessary in his opinion because, he believes, that it is the only way by which those who are naturally thriftless and lazy are compelled to live hard working, self respecting lives. Whether or not we believe



this to be true, this is how the author constructs human nature. Childbearing and childcare as linked to the issue of propriety is also tackled. One of his assumptions is that all parents have a natural wish to acquire sufficiency for their offspring. To curb this tendency, some older versions of socialism proposed that all women should be held in common and that children should be taken away from their mothers in order for them to be raised by the state. “The chief concern of the state is to destroy anything that approximates to the proprietary instinct in human nature.”² The family unit is portrayed as especially dangerous to the new order because, the idea of family awakens selfish instincts in the father, who is resolved to do the best for his children, which, “if permitted would end communism tomorrow.”³ The novelist uses explicitly gruesome imagery in order to illustrate the disturbing natural effects that a method such as collective breeding may cause.

The mental hospital occupies an important place in the novel. In Newte’s book, the ideological frame of the dystopian world constructed everybody that opposed the system as insane. “To oppose, or so much as question, [...] was to raise the question on one’s sanity.”⁴ The mental hospital is also portrayed as the place where mothers, who cannot get psychologically adjusted to the idea of collective breeding usually end up.

It is interesting to see how authors of anti-utopias elaborated on the idea of gender identity, especially on a topological scale. In most cases, the topography of the anti-utopia is gendered as symbolically masculine, with an authoritarian father figure in control (Orwell’s Big Brother, Zamyatin’s Benefactor, etc.) Newte’s Gole is actually labeled “the father of the people.” This happens despite ideological pretences at a frame that supposedly guarantees equality. The same applies to Newte. In fact, women are

excluded altogether from the political process that, in our case, is a simulacrum of elective democracy. There are two reasons for this political move. First of all, as argued above, in Newte’s anti-utopia, children are bred by the state. The author argues that women would naturally (and in fact in the novel did try to) vote against such a measure that takes their children from them.

“The Government is an annually elective matter in which every adult male has a voice”

“Not every adult female?”

“Scarcely, but not found – er – er strictly advisable to continue the privilege”

[...]

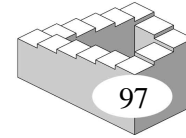
“But I believe Whale told me that once women had votes”

“They did,” interrupted Dale

“Didn’t they use them to prevent themselves being deprived of their children?”

“That is why they lost their votes. The Government was in great danger of being defeated by the women being against them; it passed a law in the nick of time, which, by taking away their voting power, made its tyranny secure”⁵

Secondly, there is the fact that female identity is constructed as subversive to the social order because – from the author’s perspective – it is constructed in accordance with a principle that opposes the male rational order. They are repressed from the political process because they supposedly “lack restraint.”⁶ For this reason, unmarried women are not allowed to mix freely with men until the day’s work is completed. In the absence of a moral system or of a religion, young women are kept under lock and key in seminaries from which they are not allowed to mix with other men. Newte’s

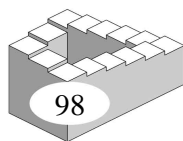


point seems to be in this case that all socialism manages with respect to the issue of gender is the replacement of one type of repressive system with another. In fact, Gole, “the father of the nation” believes in the novel that it may be an option to reintroduce religion to compensate for the lack of useful repression of female sexuality. Indeed Newte does his best to picture a world in which sexual desire runs out of control in the absence of a moral system. The socialists also do not seem to endorse fully this extreme sexual freedom since it is a part of nature. However, they are conscious that sexuality was now the only natural valve left open for manifesting all other repressed natural instincts and it was dangerous to tamper with it. Thus, they tolerate the “saturnalias,” which are nothing more than violent collective orgies taking place from time to time and last for a few days. These brutish manifestations of repressed human nature were all that was permitted, for lack of a way of constrain, and are presented to us by the author in a delirium of images that the author likens to a Satanic revelation.

Men and women of all ages made unrestrained, obscene gestures; their eyes shone with lewdness. Any man or any woman would throw arms about anyone of the opposite sex to embrace them voluptuously. [...] The clamor broke out afresh but now it was subdued to a languorous note, as if the night were dominated by sensuous longing. Women sobbed softly owing to excess of delight; others of their sex, surfeited with delicious kisses from complete strangers, would throw up their white arms to faint with ecstasy. The warm night air clung to the earth with a long, voluptuous kiss; the world seemed embraced by loving lips; the universe was stepped in love.⁷

Where male identity is concerned, things are somewhat similar in the sense that, here too we have outbursts of natural animal instincts that can no longer be kept in control by a moral system. As the character Dale argues in the novel ‘balked lust is the only thing that can arouse the manhood of the nation’ in Newte’s anti-utopia. Thus individuals become soulless automatons, manifesting occasional outbursts of animalism. The absence of competition is again criticized from a Darwinian perspective. That is, if there is no competition that separates the less prepared from the experts, quality of services drops. Officials are afraid of the quality of drivers, or doctors that are less than prepared. The class system is eliminated in theory but maintained in practice. In fact, we are dealing with ruling oligarchy that maintained its privileges over the great majority of other people.

Another important thing that sets apart Newte’s narrative from that of Orwell or Zamyatin is the fact that we are dealing with a time-travel narrative. The author is quite original in the manner in which he introduces the traveler motif, common to utopias or anti-utopias. In the novel, an Englishman, during a war situation between Britain and Germany, hides in the basement of a building and is given a miracle drug that puts him to sleep just before the building collapses on top of him. The substance apparently preserves his life functions in a state of stasis. When he is brought back to life, after more than one hundred years, he awakens in a dystopia. Britain had become a socialist country in a meantime. Thus, the plot moves forward by virtue of comparisons between the non-socialist past and the dystopian present. The author also constructs characters in his anti-utopia that mirror characters from the pre-dystopian past. We see thus how, besides constructing a marginal topography that is in the same time frame with the



dystopian topos, Newte posits a marginal topography set firmly in the past. The main character bears with him fresh memory of the world before the anti-utopia and does not need to reconstruct this memory out of the palimpsest created by the state by connecting with an architectural topographic memory as Winston Smith does in *1984*. However, similarly to Orwell and Zamyatin's worlds, travelers linked to this antinomian, alternative space have the symbolic potential to create a point of fracture in the symbolic cohesion of the dystopian world.

Individualism is abolished under socialism. Newte repudiates the fact that the natural trait of people to develop personal idiosyncrasies that used to individuate each character have all been swept away in the fictional space of his anti-utopia. It is important to observe that the first thing the main character notices upon awaking more than one hundred years after the socialists have taken control of Britain is the utter uniformization of space.

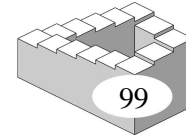
When I got to the window and looked out I saw an unexpected sight. Instead of a view of a portion of London street with all its variety of commonplace architecture, I saw that I was in a road in which all houses were built in precisely the same way. [...] I saw what was a seemingly endless vista of similar houses, in the midst of which rose at regular intervals a square, unlovely structure. I could discern no sign of church tower, factory chimney or such landmark: as far as I could see, the town was laid out strictly according to design.⁸

In contrast, overlapping this type of regularized space, we have the spaces the regime maintained from the pre-revolutionary era with the ideological purpose of

reminding of the bad conditions the workers endured before the socialists came to power. The familiarity of this space proves welcome to the main character coming from the past rather than disturbing. As for greater structures maintained we have Buckingham Palace, its original function usurped and transformed into the place from where now Gole ruled the country.

In the neighborhood that was once Victoria there were landmarks I recognized. Where so much of comparatively recent date had disappeared it was strange to see the quaint little cottages which, in a turning off the Buckingham Palace Road, once formed an oasis of old worldliness in a desert of stucco, still in existence. [...] It was a relief to recognize the stable wall of Buckingham Palace. When the familiar Philistine splendor of the palace itself came into view it was like meeting an old friend.⁹

Thirdly, there is another type of space that the author constructs in his novel, one that mirrors the downfall and decay of the old society. More than the architecture and space mentioned above that was kept in shape for ideological purposes, this space bears witness to the passage of time. It is a space, alongside the monuments or buildings that occupy it, that functions as a repository of cultural memory. The image of a beheaded statue of Queen Ann points not only to the disappearance of the centuries old tradition of monarchic rule from British soil under socialism but also, in my opinion, hints at other failed attempts of revolution, particularly the French Revolution where the monarch was beheaded at the guillotine. Also it seems to hint at how revolutionary ideology threatens to transform the environment and adapt it to ideology, a crime that is certain to trigger its downfall. Space becomes important in relation to memory preservation because space, and more specifically buildings and architecture, have the potential to outlive the individual and



maintain his cultural heritage even in the face of annihilation. Robert Bevan makes this clear in his book *The Destruction of Memory* (2006) where he points out the cultural importance of what he calls “totemic architecture”¹⁰ as caches of historical memory. He gives historical events where buildings were targets precisely because of their memorial role: the French Revolution, the Nazi Kristallnacht, Stalin’s destruction of churches, Guernica, Dresden, Cambodia, Bosnia, the destruction of Sarajevo’s National Library and most recently al-Qaeda’s destruction of the World Trade Centre seem to confirm Bevan’s thesis that there is not only a war against people but a cultural war against architecture and its symbolic role.¹¹ Within the context of the French Revolution, the mansions of Place Bellecour were condemned to death because “they were an insult to Republican morals”¹² and bell towers were threatened with demolition because “their height above other buildings seems to contradict the principles of equality.”¹³ As the philosopher Henri Lefebvre argues: “monumental space offered each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage [...] It constituted a collective mirror more faithful than any personal one.”¹⁴ There is also the issue of the statue of Queen Anne placement, in the churchyard of St. Paul’s Cathedral, another historical *lieu de memoire* on which the passage of time is shown in Newte’s novel. The image points to the former British powerful position in the world when the cathedral and statue were built. In 1712 Queen Anne laid claim to England, Ireland, France and North America, all territories being represented on the base of the statue. The Royal Coat of Arms of the time was quartered with the French Fleur-de-Lis as well as the Gaelic Harp and English Lions. Newte’s point in showing us a beheaded Queen Ann and decayed cathedral is that Britain has become

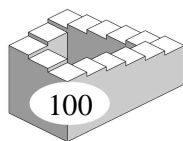
under socialism only a shadow of its former self.

[...] many of the warehouses, which were empty and had their windows broken, seemed to brood mournfully over their former activity: grass grew here and there in the streets; the city churchyards were smothered with rank, noisome vegetation; the statue of Queen Anne set up in St. Paul’s Churchyard had lost its head, while the Cathedral itself, neglected and in sad repair, looked down on a city from which the wealth and consequent importance had departed.¹⁵

The image of the former power and glory enjoyed by the British nation in the past is contrasted with images from the present weakened state of affairs when the colonial Other that in the meantime became stronger returns to conquer Britain. Because of natural weakness, the colonizers become the colonized.

In Newte’s case, as in works by Orwell and Zamyatin, we note that there is also a marginal topography where people who turn their backs against socialist civilization for the sake of their children or spouse and run away to live “in the wilds” “like beasts of prey.”¹⁶ Here, they live an existence menaced by nature itself, which becomes the enemy; the cold winters that kill off those that cannot survive. What Newte suggests here is that they much rather prefer this existence at the mercy of the elements than the terror of Gole’s state.

Images of wild nature fascinates the author who portrays both images of Darwinian influence where survival of the fittest is the most important law governing nature, and a romanticized nature of the sublime variety in the vein sung by British poets such as William Wordsworth. Living



in harmony with this natural space is seen by Newte, as it was by the British poet before him, a source of revelation and inner peace.

“Has it ever struck you how certain things in nature – a running stream, a particular tree, a view of a bay in some lights, moonlight a corner of a wood, irresistibly appeal to one’s being; how watching them seems to satisfy a definite mind hunger, and, for the time being, appears to complete one?”

“Certainly, I have often remarked it, I replied”

“So it is with this tree; its strength and repose appeal to me more than I can say. When I’m very depressed I get away to it if it’s possible. Its strong philosophy does no end of good.”

I followed Merridew’s glance, which roved appreciatingly first over its stately trunk, and then its limbs, which, as if it were the easiest thing in the world, confidently supported its burden of lesser branches and leaves.

In the above, we saw how in Newte’s conception of space and time, nature is the only constant. Political systems rise and fall depending on whether they abide by these laws or not. Socialism came to power in a moment when it proved stronger than the system that preceded it. However, its own departure from nature caused its downfall in the long run. An image of helplessness on the part of our attempts at spatial and political organization emanates from the novel. As the author notices “mankind had always been dominated by a master beast. Sometimes it was called Divine right, at other priesthood or, again, tyranny of a revolutionary republic; now it seemed to be capitalism that held the world in its grip; tomorrow it would probably be democracy; the day after it might be Socialism. But,

whatever shibboleth was top dog, it got there owing to the inherent strength of its cause, and maintained its proud position so long as it fell in with nature’s law, which was survival of the fittest for time and place as occasion arose. [...] Nature’s law is the Master Beast of all Master Beasts.”

Bibliography

Bevan, Robert. *The Destruction of Memory*, Reaktion Books, London, UK, 2006

Gamboni, Dario. *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, Reaktion Books, London, UK, 1997

Newte, Horace W.C, *The Master Beast*, Rebman Limited, London, UK, 1907

Hibbert, Christopher. *The French Revolution*, Penguin Books, London, UK, 1980

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, Oxford, UK, 1991

This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-ID-PCE-2011-3-0061.

Notes

¹ Newte, Horace W.C, *The Master Beast*, Rebman Limited, London, United Kingdom, 1907, pp 12-13.

² *Ibidem*, p. 82.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

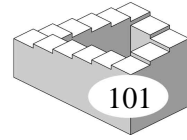
⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 188.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

¹⁰ Bevan, Robert. *The Destruction of Memory*, Reaktion Books, London, UK, 2006.



¹¹ *Ibidem.*

¹² Gamboni, Dario. *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, Reaktion Books, 1997, London, UK, pp. 33, caption 6.

¹³ Hibbert, Christopher. *The French Revolution*, Penguin Books, London, UK, 1980.

¹⁴ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, Oxford, UK, 1991.

¹⁵ Newte, Horace W.C., *The Master Beast*, p. 105.