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Immortality as a Dystopian Counter-Ideal

Abstract: Pain, sickness, ageing and death are some of the flaws of human nature that more ambitious utopians tried to expose by imagining different solutions for eradicating them. However, the attainment of immortality, as the supreme remedy for old age and death, was not seen by everyone as an affordable or desirable ideal. Dystopian writers offered a different perspective, showing that extinction is inherent to all beings and that avoiding it would destroy humanity itself. To allow this conclusion to emerge, one of the dystopian devices they used was *reductio ad absurdum*. Staging some kind of "thought experiment", dystopian writers took on the utopian premises for obtaining eternal life and put them to work, in order to show that the final results to which they inevitably led were not eudemonic, but nightmarish. I analyze in this paper how such a demonstration *a contrario* functions in some significant works, such as the *Fable of the Bees* by Bernard Mandeville, *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, *Erewhon* by Samuel Butler, and *Moderan* by David R. Bunch.

Keywords: Death; Immortality; Dystopia; Reductio ad absurdum; Bernard Mandeville; Jonathan Swift; Samuel Butler; David R. Bunch.

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According to Nelson Goodman, Thomas Pavel, Lubomír Doležel and other theorists of possible universes and secondary worlds, there is no such thing as a radically new imaginary world[1]. All recent "versions" of the world have grown out of earlier "versions", through more or less extensive innovation, modification, reformatting and so on. The construction of a fictional universe, or the organization of a chronotope, involves a series of processes of recreation from existing materials. Nelson Goodman lists five "ways of worldmaking": composition and decomposition, i.e. separating and reassembling components belonging to pre-existing "versions"; emphasis or relatively new importance given to each component; different organization or (re)arrangement of constituent elements; elimination of old elements or introduction of new ones; deformation or remodeling of received elements[2]. Myself, in my book *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, I listed four utopian methods: separation or selection of good vs. bad elements of the primary world; extrapolation of these elements to another space; inversion of good elements into bad ones and of bad ones into good ones; and reduction to the absurd[3].

In this paper, I will focus on the device of *reductio ad absurdum*. It was used primarily by counter-utopian writers who wanted to demonstrate that the utopian projects are flawed, even wrong, and lead necessarily to failure and disaster. Demonstration by reduction to the absurd starts from the same premises as utopian (or anti-utopian) projects and proves that the result is the opposite of what was expected. Let me give just one rapid sample. It is Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*: the text was published anonymously in 1705 as a poem entitled *The Grumbling Hive*, then it was edited, again anonymously, in 1714, and finally, in 1724, it was published together with an *Essay on Charity and Charity Schools* and *A Search into the Nature of Society*[4]. It invokes the bees as an Aesopian metaphor for human civilization. The beehive is an imaginary experimental space, in which Mandeville applies the principles of moral and social recovery suggested by contemporary satires and utopias. He does not attack society as it is, but rather what it would become if a utopian legislator had the power to reform it according to his standards[5].

In this counter-utopian experiment, the author attributes the implementation of the utopian project not to the bees, but directly to the gods. A veritable *deus ex machina*, Jupiter intervenes in the life of the hive, outraged by the hypocrisy and impudence of the priests and the rich. With a wave of his magic wand, he rids the "braying hive of dishonesty" and fills the hearts of all the bees with piety and rectitude. As if by a miracle, they all change their attitude, ashamed of what they have done, blushing at their swindles and deceptions. The ethical utopia, the ideal of every legislator, is fulfilled in the blink of an eye, offering the model of a morally perfect society. And so, the bees begin to practice the virtues with which utopians boast to fill their ideal societies: uprightness, probity, sincerity, austerity, absence of pride, disinterest in self-image, pacifism, abandonment of colonialist and aggressive policies. Lawyers, doctors, priests, ministers and civil servants no longer want to touch anything that is not their due.

"But, O ye gods! what consternation / How vast and sudden was th' alteration!"[6] Instead of beginning to function as a paradise on earth, the hive enters a rapid decline. The eradication of vice and fraud, acclaimed by all, causes the collapse of the economy and commerce, of all activities involving "luxury". Prices fall, wages plummet, unemployment spirals. The disappearance of crime, for example, leaves judges and lawyers, jailers and locksmiths unemployed. General splendor and wealth disappear. Wonderful palaces lie in ruins, land is sold for nothing, craftsmen are out of work, painters and sculptors have no commissions, tavern and cabaret owners close their doors, companies shut down entire factories. Economic crisis leads to political and military weakness. Competing hives, envious of the power and prosperity of the reformed hive, rush to invade it. Refusing to use mercenaries, the citizens bravely defend their property and are slaughtered. The survivors retreat to a modest, isolated tree hollow, where they continue to live by the values of sobriety, contentment with the bare necessities and integrity. It's a totally dysphoric and depressing ending to a story that allegorically recounts the fate of Protestant sects forced to leave Europe.

Bernard Mandeville proceeds by *reductio ad absurdum*. He doesn't rush to criticize utopias at the stage of mental "project" or fantastic ideal, but rather puts together a sketch of utopia and sets it in motion, to see where it will lead. The conclusion is pessimistic: utopias are societies destined to wither and implode. The Puritan ethical principles proclaimed by so many preachers, orators, moralists and philosophers run counter to an economic and spiritual prosperity based on the satisfaction not only of primary needs, but also of fantastical desires[7]. In this vein, François Grégoire thoroughly analyzed the social role that the psychological factors of pride and vanity play in Mandeville's work[8]. The "moral" of the fable is that an ethical proposition of social improvement is "a vain / Eutopia seated in the brain"[9].

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Now, among different flaws of human nature and social life that more ambitious utopians tried to expose by imagining different solutions for eradicating them, some of the most terrible are sickness, ageing and death. However, the attainment of immortality, as the supreme remedy for old age and mortality, was not seen by everyone as an affordable or desirable ideal. Dystopian writers offered a different perspective, showing that extinction is inherent to all beings and that avoiding it would destroy humanity itself. To allow this conclusion to emerge, one of the dystopian devices they used was *reductio ad absurdum*. Staging some kind of "thought experiment", dystopian writers took on the utopian premises for obtaining eternal life and put them to work, in order to show that the final results to which they inevitably led were not eudemonic, but nightmarish. I analyze in this paper how such a demonstration *a contrario* functions in three significant works, from the classical to the modern age.

The first is Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). If in Gulliver's first and second travels, the physical disproportion of the Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians serves as a moral allegory, according to which the small and big connote the morality and knowledge of the respective peoples, the third travel, in Laputa and Lagado, features creatures whose deformity is subtler, focused not so much on anatomy as it is on the relationship between the human being's main components, i.e. the body and soul, intellect and good sense, etc.

The next two countries, Glubbdubdrib and Luggnagg, play on an ancient and medieval monstrosity: the abnormalities affecting the timeline and life cycle of exotic Asian races, such as the macrobii (long-lived individuals), the microbii (individuals who live only eight years and give birth at five) or men who live their age in reverse, from old age to youth[10]. The necromancers of Glubbdubdrib (the island of sorcerers or magicians) summon the spirits of the dead to use them for various tasks and chores. The Struldbruggs of Luggnagg are immortals, except that the suspension of death does not prevent them from experiencing the decrepitude and physical and mental decline of an ever-increasing age.

Through these two races, Swift takes aim at humanity's age-old obsession with immortality, in its two complementary forms, the immortality of the soul and the immortality of the body. The survival of the soul and access to a higher condition was the central eschatological promise of most

ancient religions, from the various forms of shamanism and mythological religions to the Orphic-Pythagorean mystery cults and Christianity (including its heretical and Gnostic alternatives). In these conceptions, shamans, the brave, heroes, initiates, the righteous, the pious and the chosen became, after death, spirit-ancestors, epichtonian or hypochtonian daimons, gods and genies, saints. They became part of a community of beings with a status far superior to that of humans on earth. These eschatological societies were a type of theological utopia, where spiritual transcendence had the same function (albeit, considerable augmented!) as technological and social-administrative progress in utopias.

Gulliver expresses exactly this kind of expectation regarding the status of the dead. When the necromancer of Glubbdubdrib offers him the chance to contemplate the distinguished figures of the past, the first ghosts he conjures up are those of Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Pompey and Brutus. The Roman Senate appears to him, at first glance, as "a gathering of heroes and demigods". The protagonist even has the opportunity to build himself a personal pantheon, made up of Brutus, Junius, Socrates, Epaminondas, Cato the younger and Thomas More, "a sextumvirate to which all the ages of the world cannot add a seventh"[11]. At first glance, the other world of Glubbdubdrib seems to serve its purpose as a breeding ground for human and character models, as those evoked by William Temple in his essay *Of Heroic Virtue*[12].

But over the course of talking longer with the ghosts and retracing genealogies and histories, Gulliver quickly grows disenchanted. The company of great characters turns out to be the long list of "tyrants and usurpers" of universal history. Their power and glory had been acquired by "perjury, oppression, subornation, fraud, pandarism, and the like infirmities". Some of them confess "they owed their greatness and wealth to sodomy or incest; others to the prostituting of their own wives and daughters; others to the betraying of their country or their prince; some to poisoning, more to the perverting of justice in order to destroy the innocent"[13]. The dynasties of which historians offer such flattering images have sordid origins[14]. These discoveries lead Gulliver – unwittingly, we might say, if we didn't know he was a backhanded spokesman for Jonathan Swift – "a little to abate of that profound veneration which I am naturally apt to pay to persons of high rank". His conclusion is that "the Royal Throne could not be supported without Corruption"[15], which amounts to a wholesale condemnation of the historical European civilization.

The kingdom of Luggnagg, with its immortal Struldbruggs, addresses another soteriological fantasy, that of bodily immortality. Older than spiritualist eschatologies, the idea of survival in the physical condition refers to archaic burial and mummification rituals, including the "hero's position" in the funerals of Indo-European and Near Eastern chieftains[16]. This scenario survived in acculturated form in medieval Christian legends, where it inspired initiation quests for the garden of God. As we demonstrated in the two volumes devoted to the journeys to the Garden of Eden[17], Judeo-Christian theology, with its insurmountable distance between Creator and creature, had foreclosed the possibility of these expeditions reaching a successful conclusion. After the original

sin, with the exception of Enoch and Elijah (the only individuals admitted to the Garden of Eden after the fall), all others can no longer hope for physical immortalization in their present condition. Humanity must pass wholesale through death, as a compensation and absolution for sin, and only then, in a renewed condition, will another paradise, the celestial Empyrean, be opened to it.

With the parable of the Struldbruggs[18], Jonathan Swift reinforces this very orthodox dogma of the "good death" preached by the Church. At first, Gulliver is convinced that the Luggnagg immortals are the blessed specimens of an anthropological mutation affecting the mortal condition. "Happy nation", he exclaims, "where every child hath at least a chance for being immortal! Happy people who enjoy so many living examples of antient virtue, and have masters ready to instruct them in the wisdom of all former ages!"[19] Like all seekers of paradise, and like many utopians, Gulliver is euphoric at the prospect of having reached the fountain of youth. He begins to fantasize himself as an immortal, programming his supposedly infinite reserves of time to "excel all others in learning", to become "a living treasury of knowledge and wisdom", "the oracle of the nation"[20].

Alas, the revelations that the Luggnaggian people make quickly ruin Gulliver's messianic illusions. Unfortunately, the Struldbruggs are not fixed by immortality in a condition of eternal youth and vigor, but in the condition of old men, with all the hardships and weaknesses of old age. What's more, being stuck in infirmity and impotence makes them stubborn, gruff, stingy, chagrined, babblers, incapable of friendship and devoid of pleasure. From the age of forty-eight onwards, they are considered "civically dead", and their property is divided among their heirs or handed over to the state. In other words, the Struldbruggs' immortality amounts not to a transcendence of fallen nature, but to a blockage for eternity in the lowest and most painful stage of Adam's condition, the one just before death. This is why Struldbruggs curse their fate, and their greatest desire is to die. This moral was already apparent in medieval legends about Hyperboreans and other macrobii races who, after a happy and wise life, articulated their own desire to expire. Swift reverses the meaning of the "*memento mori*" adage and the "*mors certa, hora certa sed ignata*". Through the Struldbruggs' experience, death no longer appears as the great scarecrow of life, but as its desirable conclusion. Paul-Gabriel Boucé believes that the episode "firmly establishes our ineluctable death as the *sine qua non* of human freedom"[21]. Contemplating these living dead, reduced to chronic impotence, Gulliver confesses that he has lost all desire to become immortal. His hosts even invite him to send one or two Struldbruggs to Europe, "to arm our people against the *fear of death*"[22].

It should come as no surprise that, after these two visits, Gulliver develops "a base idea of humanity". The world of the spirits, as it appears in the evocation of the dead, the *nekyomanteia* that the governor performed for his guest, is an infernal cesspool. Instead of being correlated with a heavenly space, the antipodal island of Glubbdubdrib has an umbilical communication with the Hell of tyrants. The world of the Struldbruggs is, in turn, a society where the physical degeneration of human

beings reaches its ultimate stage and is frozen for eternity. The past of the dead and the future of the "immortal" are temporal anti-utopias that block both directions of history's vector and destroy the hopes of escape from the present.

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The second sample is *Erewhon* by Samuel Butler (1872), a dystopia[23] written as a counter-reaction to the *fin-de-siècle* meliorist utopias, whose typical text will become Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1887). From the title and names (Erewhon for nowhere, Nosnibor for Robinson), the antipodal kingdom of Erewhon is a world upside-down, in which bad deeds are appreciated and applauded, theft, corruption and crime are mere indispositions for which the "sick" receive sympathy from others, condolences and even medicines and cures.

Finally, before fleeing Erewhon, the narrator reveals the purpose of this aberrant counter-utopia: to demonstrate that "reason, uncorrected by instinct, is as bad as instinct uncorrected by reason"[24]. To correct the excessive rationalism of his world, Butler imagines an anti-utopian world, turned upside down and dominated by the irrational.

Another inversion in *Erewhon* touches one of the deepest angsts of the human being: the relationship between life and death. One of the marvelous races of medieval India lived life in reverse, from death to birth[25]. Taking up the theme, Butler makes "the Erewhonians say that we are drawn through life backwards; or again, that we advance into the future as into a dark corridor"[26]. According to this view, birth is a crime, so that a subsequent death sentence can only be a deserved punishment. And while the birth of a child is commemorated with melancholy, the death of a person is celebrated with pomp. Consequently, the other world is in turn subject to an inversion: while Christianity and other religions make promises for the afterlife, the religion of Erewhon values the beforelife, the state before birth. The souls of children actually come from other planets and, in order to be born, they must commit suicide in their previous condition, so life on earth appears to be the result of a prior sin.

The idea of the future decay of the human race, fueled by the decadent atmosphere of the late 19th century, appears in works such as Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) or Wells' *Time Machine* (1895). For example, criticizing 19th-century economic and social utopias, H.G. Wells envisions a future in which the pure, childish, angelic race of the Elois (children of the Ancient Testament Elohim), is the meat stock for the underground, brutal, monstrous Morlocks (people of Moloch). In contrast with other works such as William J. Shaw's *Under the Auroras. A Marvelous Tale of the Interior World* (1888), Mary E. Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1890) or Marshall Theodor Fitch's *Le Paradis à l'intérieur de la terre* (1920)[27], where "subterranean races" connote gestation and rebirth, in Bulwer Lytton's or H. G. Wells' novels they suggest degeneration and monstrosity, as if the "supreme points" were no longer centers of life and evolution, but of involution and death.

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My last sample of counter-utopian pessimism is David R. Bunch's *Moderan* (1971)[28]. A couple of decades

before the emergence of the concept of transhumanism, Bunch suggests that 'robotization,' although it connotes dehumanization and the massification of individuals, is intended to respond to a deeper human aspiration, that of overcoming the perishable and mortal condition of the flesh. Replacing the biological body with a more resistant, replaceable and therefore almost indestructible metallic body would make it possible to achieve immortality. In his book, Bunch gives a textbook demonstration of the process of reducing this theme to absurdity, exploring the inhuman (or post-human) consequences of the desire for eternity put into practice through technology.

Bunch's protagonist is a military strategist who survived the (Third?) World War. Radiation and pollution have made the Earth almost unlivable, so the central government ("Ruthless Central", the Capitol's "elite-elite") has decided to transform earth and humanity, making full use of technology. After the atomic apocalypse, these "gods" of the future are creating a "new earth" and a "new man". The entire surface of the planet, poisoned by radiations, is levelled by huge machines and then encased in plastic. The oceans are dried up or frozen over and also covered in plastic. The flora and fauna are exterminated and replaced by artificial metallic plants and animals. The new man, in turn, is transformed by complex surgical operations into a being of steel, who retains only a few strips of flesh and skin caught in the metal. Traumatized by the nuclear apocalypse and threatened with extinction, the survivors find no better solution than to make themselves indestructible. Each "master" is given a fortress ("stronghold"), with which he assimilates physically. Here he leads an artificial life, with oils for food, robot-women for lovers, and wars with neighbors for hobbies. The man of the future is practically a machine, whose organs - heart, brain, blood, nerves - are metal "spare parts", everything is automatic, everything is programmed. To fall asleep is simply to switch off[29].

What is at stake in this future e/in-volution is, as we have said, eternal life. David R. Bunch sets out a Promethean atheistic soteriology, a salvation offered by science and technology, which transforms human beings not into spirits reunited in heaven, but into automatons enjoying physical perpetuity. However, this materialistic promise, which runs counter to Christian eschatology, is addressed to the body and ruins the soul. The price to be paid for immortality is the loss of humanity. If the fear of death gives depth to our spiritual life, making us humble and open to peace and beauty, the prospect of a life without end feeds egocentricity and violence. The "masters" of fortresses must wage war and cherish hatred in order to bear the weight of boredom and spiritual nothingness.

And the anti-utopian demonstration continues. The story of the "master" of Stronghold 10 is presented as a manuscript discovered and commented on by a character from a much more distant future. The voice of this (pseudo)editor of the text belongs to a member of "Essenceland Dream People", a civilization where the metallic nature of the inhabitants of Moderan has been sublimated into an energetic nature. Here, all individuals are waves who no longer have material bodies. Like the machine-narrator, the wave-narrator is euphoric about his condition, presenting it as an accomplished ideal of indestructibility

and eternal life. But we realize, in spite of him, that this condition is not only subject to the totalitarian control of a "Love Dictator", but also evanescent, with no grip on the material world and the real facts, and fragile, since it depends quite simply on the functioning of the machines emitting the rays. The immortality offered by atheistic science and material technology is a factor in the damnation of humanity.

In conclusion, Jonathan Swift, in *Gulliver's Travels*, displaying a deep personal misanthropy based on the Christian anthropology of the decayed human being, suggests that neither the spiritual existence of the ghost-like souls in Glubbdubdrib (the Island of necromancers), nor the bodily persistence of the Struldbruggs in Luggnagg offers a happy alternative to death. As the title *Erewhon* suggests (by reversing the name of the utopian noplace), the world imagined by Samuel Butler is an upside-down polity in which current vices are virtues, life is lived in a reverse order, from death to birth, so that, in contrast with Christian afterlife, Erewhonians praise existence before birth. Finally, David R. Bunch's *Moderan* (1971) heralds postmodern transhumanism, presenting a postapocalyptic humanity who reaches immortality by translating their psyche from bodies of flesh to metallic carcasses (fortresses) and later on to ethereal radiations. These demonstrations by *reductio ad absurdum* aim to show that the quest for immortality cannot be satisfied and that instead of bringing happiness, it leads to anti-utopian consequences.

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2. Nelson Goodman, *op. cit.,* p. 7-17.
3. Corin Braga, *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2018, p. 97-106.
4. Michèle Le Doeuff makes some interesting observations on the order in which Thomas More and Bernard Mandeville wrote, firstly the description of Utopia and the Fable, and secondly the description of England and the theoretical essays. "Chronology here runs the risk of inducing a psychoanalytic model of the fantasy—secondary rationalization type, or worse—of bringing us back to an operation dear to classical criticism: distinguishing the moment of inspiration, or even vision, and that of work". Her theory is that the second (chronologically) text is supposed to reduce the polysemy of the first, to make it accessible to readers. "Dualité et polysémie du texte utopique," in Gandillac & Piron eds. 1978, p. 327. While agreeing with this idea, we cannot help but observe that "secondary" texts not only play the role of theoretical clarifiers, but also that of builders of the double utopian device which, according to our analysis, simultaneously calls for the image of the positive topia and the image of the negative topia, of the elsewhere and the here.
5. See Jean-Michel Racault, *L'Utopie narrative en France et en Angleterre. 1675-1761*, Oxford, The Alden Press, 1991, p. 121.
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8. François Grégoire, *Bernard de Mandeville et la « Fable des Abeilles »*, Nancy, Imprimerie George Thomas, 1947, p. 29.
9. Bernard Mandeville, *op. cit.,* p. 23.
10. See Corin Braga, *Le Paradis interdit au Moyen Âge. La quête manquée de l'Éden oriental*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2004, p. 269-270.

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