Utopia III or an ambiguous humanist utopia for the second millennium

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Abstract

There is a very long tradition of literary texts dealing with the city in literature. Many of them belong to the genre of literary utopia, founded by Thomas More in 1516. The most common issue dealt in these utopias has to do with an attempt to balance social conditions and relationships. Therefore, they usually present or defend different political statuses as a response to the actual society the author lives in. This means that utopia is naturally conditioned by time and space, and the reader must make an effort to “transport” him/herself to that time and space if s/he wants to appreciate fully the fictional world construed by the author.

This said, utopian literature is rarely part of the established social, political and cultural scheme that is responsible for the welfare of the city, seen as human creation. The defence of a Portuguese identity and the appeal to a humanist renewal.

Keywords: Utopia, Humanism, Pina Martins, Social Harmony, Identity.

1. Utopia; a literary genre in search of social harmony: The beginning

Thomas More founded utopia as a literary genre in 1516, when he published his short homonymous book, written in Latin and intended for his peers, the Christian Humanists, both as a Jeu d’esprit and as political intervention. This option was in accordance with some of the movement’s most eminent representatives, namely, Pico della Mirandola, Italian humanist particularly appreciated by Thomas More and his friend Erasmus. In fact, one of the characteristics of the humanist movement, which originated in Italy and then spread throughout Europe along the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was the concern to place Man and his city at the centre of the philosophical debate. In his memorable Oration On the Dignity of Man (1496), (also known as Manifesto of the Renaissance), Pico defends the supreme status of human beings in God’s Creation. They alone have the power to choose freely their own destiny, to determine whether to descend to the level of the beasts or to ascend to heaven, equaling the angels if not surpassing them (for angels are what they are, they have no freedom of choice). This focus on the on free will, became be the corner-stone of the humanist movement, at least until the the sixteenth century religious secession [Pico’s statement is cited by Pina Martins in Utopia III, Integrating explicitly his novel in the humanist movement (1989: 152)]. It would become the focus of Erasmus’ and Luther’s debate, a milestone of European cultural history.

Placing Man at the centre of creation, Pico and his fellow humanists - highly qualified in the study of humanities - saw themselves as having the moral obligation to promote the education of their fellowmen. Humanists’ natural milieu was the cities, the centres of knowledge and power; therefore, it became natural for them to mingle in the circles of power, as were the great Italian cities of the time: Rome, Florence, Bologna, Venice, as well as other European political centres. The great lords and nobles sought them as counsellors, ambassadors, teachers for their children. Moreover, the humanists, now looking from afar, cherished the naive dream that if they could turn a lord, a city master, or a prince into humanists, through proper education on the disciplines of humanitas, their apprentices would become better governors, better chieftains, and better kings. The city would come to be a harmonious place, almost a paradise on earth, where peace would reign, for war was the most degraded human activity, especially when it took place among brothers in faith.

The Christian humanists, as came to be known the northerner scholars educated either in Italy or by humanist teachers, developed an excellent net of contacts via exhaustive exchange of letters written in Latin (the lingua franca of knowledge), and adapted the Italian humanist principles to their northern reality. Northern Europe had been profoundly marked by Thomas Kempis’ The Imitation of Christ, written between 1418 and 1427 (1901), a fundamental text for a new form of experiencing Christians’ spiritual life, the Devotio Moderna, that flourished in Germany and the Low Countries during the fifteenth century. Erasmus, Thomas More, Busleyden, Beatus Renanus, Budé and so many others, formed a circle of humanists sharing the same fundamental principles, debating the same problems and accepting their differences of judgment. All of them were concerned with the welfare of the city, seen as human creation, not a divine paradise. It is within this circle that Thomas More wrote, in 1516, mainly to his fellow friends, a small book later entitled Utopia (1965; 1978; 2009) where, in a fictional form, the humanists’ apprehensions, beliefs and doubts concerning the best way to organize a Christian republic were presented. This was done wrapped in an ironic self-contradictory language, intended as an in-
intellectual game, the counterpart of Erasmus' Praise of Folly, written in 1508 at More's house and published in 1511 (1913). It was also a game of mirrors, where reality was reflected in a distorted, inverted yet better image. Since Thomas More's Utopia is not the main focus of this text, though being an unavoidable work, please refer to André Prevost's and Pina Martins' introductions to the cited editions. In my opinion, the best, most lucid and well informed analyses of More's Utopia, and also of its relation to Erasmus' Folly and the Christian Humanism, More's Utopia, being the "praise of wisdom", should be read not as political program, but as a literary text where More expresses his opinions and the doubts debated by Christian humanists concerning the best government of a commonwealth, using as foundation Plato's Republic (1997: 971-1223; 2001). Therefore, in my opinion, Utopia is, in a way, an open narrative avant la lettre, since the final comment, made by the character More, leaves several doubts and concerns unanswered, expecting a future dialogue with Hythlodaeus about Utopia: When Raphael had finished his story, many times he came to my mind which seemed very absurdly established in the customs and laws of the people described [...]. I knew, however, that he was wearied with his tale, and I was not quite certain that he could brook any opposition to his views, particularly when I recalled his censure of others on account of their fear that they might not appear to be wise enough, unless they found some fault to criticize in other men's discoveries. I therefore praised their way of life and his speech and, taking him by the hand led him in to supper. I first said, nevertheless, that there would be another chance to think about it these matters more deeply and to talk with them over with him more fully. If only this were some day possible! (1965: 245; 2009: 414-415).

2. Utopia III, or a contemporary evolutionary Utopia Portuguese literature does not have many examples of successful or renowned utopias, though having many readers of utopias, judging for the number of published translations. There are several reasons that may explain this phenomenon (not to be dealt in this text), one, and probably the most self-evident, being the almost continuous strong exercise of religious and/or political censorship imposed in Portugal from the late sixteenth century to the last quarter of the twentieth century. Every utopian text gains its full meaning when its reading is integrated in the political and cultural milieu that triggered it, for utopia presents implicit and explicit political differences meant as responses to the actual society the author lives in. Therefore, they become obvious targets for censorship. However, since the last quarter of the twentieth century, Portugal has become a democratic political system enjoying freedom of speech. If censorship was the only reason for the scarcity of Portuguese utopias, the regained freedom of speech should have allowed for the development of Portuguese utopian literature, but unfortunately, it did not. Pina Martins is definitely the Portuguese writer that seized the opportunity given and wrote an extensive utopia, having More's text as both paradigm and trigger. Due precisely to the "openness" of More's Utopia, and its final appeal for further debate, Pina Martins proposes a new discussion, not about the sixteenth century Island of Utopia, but about the contemporary one, the country that the Portuguese Raphael knew and probably would have to had evolved in time. Therefore, the character Pina Martins has for interlocutor a descendent of the Portuguese Raphael Hythlodaeus, named Miguel Mark Hythlodaeu. [The choice of character's names, both More's text as both paradigm and trigger.]

The response to these closed "perfect" commonwealths has been, naturally, dystopia since, apart from other obvious problems, literary utopias seemed incapable of assuring the necessary means for individual evolution, and this has been the fundamental basis of occidental culture. The erasure of individual needs in profit of the common good is a price definitely too high to be paid, and accidental culture evolved precisely in the opposite direction, basing its history, policy and culture on the centrality of individual beings, for whom there is even a Universal Bill of Fundamental Rights. For some time, dystopia and contemporary culture seemed to have decreed a death penalty on utopia, the eutopia, the promise of happiness. Fortunately, several writers found a middle way, a third route, or a compromising position. Pina Martins followed this path. 2.1. Retrieving the dialogue Pina Martins writes an ambiguous utopia, open to evolution. In Utopia III there are several structural, political and cultural transformations comparatively to its sixteenth century prototype. A sociedade que o meu antepassado Rafael descreveu a Thomas More foi a semente
que cresceu e medrou. Não ficou imobili-
zizado institucionalmente no momento histó-
rico [...]. Essa sociedade evoluí, mod-
ificou-se. Ampliou-se. Progrediu. É hoje dí-
ever. Os homens vivem, multiplicam-
se, morrem, renovam-se. Como que seja transformam-se. (1989: 11)

[The society my ancestor Raphael de-
scribed to Thomas More was the seed that
grew and thrived. It did not institutionally
stood still in that historical time [...]. That
Grew. Progressed. It is different today. Men
live, multiply, die, and renew themselves.
Anyway, they change.]

At the same time, just like Thomas More,
he presents a rational, sometimes violent criticism
of both Portuguese and Utopian contemporary
state of affairs, with the two characters stating
their points of view, arguing them, as the char-
acter More had wished.

Miguel Mark Hythlóideu, as his ancestor, has a
rough personality, prompt to acute and violent
criticism but not accustomed to receiving ob-
jections to his ideas, feeling quite uncomfort-
able whenever Utopia’s way of life or options
are criticized or questioned by his friend. On the
other hand, the character Pina Martins, unlike
his model, is not afraid to express his opinions,
to reply sharply but politely to his interlocutor,
but also to agree whenever he assumes he is fac-
ing fair criticism.

The utopian ambassador commissions the char-
acter Pina Martins to write the history of twenti-
eenth century Utopia based on few documents and
on the information the ambassador is willing to
share (which is sometime scarce). The endeav-
our lasts for fifteen years. The first encounter
took place in Olinda, Brazil, in 1980, and the last
conversation in 1995, in Lisbon. Sometimes, sev-
eral months pass without any contact, but when
they occur the reader faces sharp debates, two
minds both informed on the principles of Renais-
sance humanism, fending rational arguments,
exchanging opinions, agreeing and disagreeing
on several issues. It is a contemporary recrea-
tion of the humanist net of communication, then,
by letter, where friends debated ideas, some-
times in a fierce tone but also exchanged com-
plings.

The long novel is divided in three parts: “A re-
velação numinosa” [The numinous revelation]
(1989: 3-83), “O confronto de dois Mundos” [The
confrontation of two worlds] (1989: 85-303) and
“A Utopia Nova tal como Miguel Hythlóideu ma
relatou” [The New Utopia as Michael Hythlóideu
related it to me] (1989: 305-565). The titles of
each part are almost self-explanatory: The first
narrates the encounter of the two characters in
quite peculiar circumstances. In my opinion this
is the most “literary” part, leaving the reader
in doubt concerning the “actual” existence of
Miguel (and of Utopia III, naturally), suggesting,
sometimes, that he is, in fact, a figment of Pina
Martins’ imagination, a mixture of alter ego and
wish fulfilment.

... a sua voz tornava-se palavra dentro de
mim mesmo, como se fosse uma revelação
interior, mas que, sem ele, não existiria,
embora só ganhasse sentido no meu en-
tendimento. Possuía-me a ilusão de que
uma voz de Miguel Hythlóideu fosse a minha
própria voz. (1989: 11)

[the voice becoming word inside myself, as
if it was an interior revelation, but, with-
out him, it would not exist, though it only
gained sense in my reasoning. I was pos-
sessed by the illusion that Miguel Hythlo-
deu’s voice was my own.]

Eu sou a Voz [diz Miguel]. A que revela e a que escuta. [...] Enquanto tais palavras se iam formando em períodos coerentes pronunciados pelo meu interlocutor, não me abandonava a impressão de que essas palavras me eram
conhecidas, por estarem inscritas dentro de mim [...], E, no entanto, eu escutava-as pela primeira vez. Eram palavras de-
finidicas. Para serem curtidas. Para se converterem em realidade talvez não de
cariz histórico, mas decerto em realidade de vida, de vida vivida e transmitida. Eram
ditas por outrem e constituíam a expressão
forte do meu entender e do meu querer foi
talvez por isso que me surpreendi dizendo,
se meu saber como, como se escutasse
dentro de mim um outro a exprimir-se pela
minha própria voz:

- Quod vis volo ac facio. Fiat Utopica Vol-
untas! (1989: 11, 13)

[I am the Voice [said Miguel]. The one
that reveals and hearkens. [...] We will finish praising, if Gods will, Plato’s
famous sentence - Happy are the Repub-
lics that accept philosophers for leaders,
or whose chief is a philosopher! Though History
teaches us that, on the contrary, the worst
government has always been the one lead
by a man who aspires to be a philosopher
or with a fatuous claim of great literate!]

While those words were gaining form, be-
coming sentences coherently pronounced
by my interlocutor, I could not shake the
feeling that those words were known to
me, because they were inscribed inside me
[...]. Nevertheless, I hearkened them for
the first time. They were definitive. To be lis-
tened to. To become reality, maybe not his-
torically so, but surely in a lively reality, of
a life lived and communicated. Someone else
spoke them and they consisted of a strong
expression of my own judgement and will.
Maybe that is why I surprised myself saying,
as if listening inside myself to another
expressing himself through my voice:

- Quod vis volo ac facio. Fiat Utopica Vol-
untas!]

Thus, Pina Martins places the novel in a fiction-
ally but ambiguous universe, where literary uto-
pia is naturally born. It also gives the author
the necessary liberty to engage in violent cri-
ticism concerning actual Portuguese (and Euro-
pean) political, cultural and social statuses.

This criticism runs through the novel, but it is
more persistent and direct in the second part
- “The confrontation of two worlds”. This sec-
tion is introduced by a quotation from Eras-
mus’ Moriae Ecomium:

Acabaremos por encomiar, querendo os
Deuses, a sentença célebre de Platão
– Felizes as Repúblicas que
aceitem por chefes os filósofos ou cujos chefes
filosofem! Porém a História ensina-nos
que, pelo contrário, o pior governo foi
sempre o de um homem com príridos
de filósofo ou com uma fáта pretensão
da grande literato! (1989: 85)

[We will finish praising, if Gods will, Plato’s
famous sentence - Happy are the Repub-
lics that accept philosophers for leaders,
or whose chief is a philosopher! Though History
teaches us that, on the contrary, the worst
government has always been the one lead
by a man who aspires to be a philosopher
or with a fatuous claim of great literate!]

The second part, divided in eighteen chapters,
consists on several polite, but also tough, intel-
lectual confrontations between the characters
Pina Martins and Miguel Hythlóideu. This one
plays a similar role to the one Raphael has in the first book of More’s Utopia. He criticizes almost every relevant aspect of Portuguese political, cultural, social and educational status quo. The lack of culture; the excessive pollution; the awful habit of never being punctual. In politics, the target is the lack of culture exhibited by Portuguese politicians with no preparation for public service. Levels, in politics, lacks quality, being unable to perform its function: to promote humanist values, to develop rational and productive citizens. The University became a corpora- tion of petty passions and favours instead of the house of ultimate knowledge, of continuous in- vestigation, of intellectual merit, the House of Solomon. The arrogance of those in power; the appropriation of public money by political par- ties, the power of corporative societies that es- cape public scrutiny, the inefficiency of the judi- cial system, corruption in general, etc.

The character Pina Martins plays the role of More and Peter Giles, sometimes agreeing but also try- ing to minimize Miguel’s opinions and demolishing statements. Both characters repeatedly affirm the well-known concepts of Renaissance humanists: education, religion, the return to the origins, and the condemnation of war, the importance of read- ing classical texts and authors, the need for critical thinking. These reaffirmed principles are precisely the starting point of almost every criticism. These reaffirmed principles are precisely the starting point of almost every criticism. However, the character Pina Martins tries to honour More’s last wish: debate what seems unacceptable in the imperfect world.

Miguel even claims Utopia’s sin is the lack of lucidity and tanta porcaria, this capital conti- nua a ser para mim uma terra de sortilegio, de encanto indizível e permitem-me que the confesse, do mais fundo da minha alma, que eu desejaria viver sempre aqui e aqui terminar os meus dias. Na Utopia Nova o meu ritmo existencial quotidiano é des- masiado monótono. A ordem é demasiado repetitiva. Há limpeza, respeito, educação, mas os meus queridos contrâneros não são dotados de originalidade imaginativa, de criatividade. (1989: 106)

Even with all her flaws, the excessive pol- lution and so much dirt, this capital still is a place of sortilege, of inexplicable charm and allow me to confess, from the deepest of my soul, I wish I could live here forever, and end my days in this city. In New Utopia my daily routine is too monotonous. Order too dull. There is cleanliness, respect, po- liteness, but my dear fellow citizens are devoid of any original imagination, of any creativity.

This is precisely the most frequent and acute criticism one can present regarding More’s Uto- pia and utopian texts in general. In order to protect collective interests placing them ahead of any others, utopias tend to kill human crea- tivity, because in it resides the ability to evolve, to make things differently, to discover new knowledge, and to question. This is what keeps utopias stuck in time, what turns them into dis- harmonious states, what causes lack of identity. Miguel even claims Utopia’s sin is the lack of alternatives:

Há uma relativa perfeição, uma relativa satisfação, [...] uma relativa alegria de viver. A vida verdadeira é, porém, feita de luz e de sombra. Não, a perfeição não é deste mundo imperfeito. (1989: 106)

There are several moments throughout the novel where Miguel is forced to admit that there are flaws in his world, and if sometimes the confes- sion seems quite spontaneous as the one quoted above, most of the times it is almost “extracted” by force or “confirmed” with rage, denouncing his wild (warrior) temperament, similar to the one revealed by Raphael. The intellectual duel is vivid, tough, but always fair. Though the reading of the second part gives the reader some information regarding Utopia, the more accurate and complete list of what changed through the centuries in Raphael/ Miguel’s Island is presented in a more systematic way in the third part of the novel: “The New Uto- pia.” Chapter 34 exhibits, side by side, More’s utopian organization and Miguel’s one. Now, the island is an archipelago due to a violent earth- quake that destroyed most of the buildings and changed the geography in a radical way. Amau- rote now has a rectangular structure, the cities are no longer identical, private property is al- lowed (though uninhabitable) the orchards are now gardens with fountains and small libraries. Agriculture is no longer a common work, each utopian may choose his own trade of business, and women are no longer obliged to learn a trade. Full time motherhood is accepted, since mothers are considered the first tutors of future citizens. Work is limited to six hours per day, plus the practice of nonviolent sports. The rest of the day is dedicated to reading according to each one’s preferences. Thirty-three ambassadors travel around the world establishing commer- cial treaties. Clothing is no longer equal. Family is still the basic structure of society, but every couple has their own home. The elderly are still considered as a valuable repository of knowl- edge, deserving society’s respect, but they are no longer communal except for festivities. Money, gold and jewels are now used by the state for the general organization of foreign diplomacy and commerce. The lack of cultural barriers and the ability to imitate. Foreign guests are scarce and subject to prior disinfection. Slavery was abolished, but convicts are condemned to up to thirty-three years of reclusion and there is no death penalty. The political system is now a de- mocracy. The process of election is in pyramid; meaning all citizens vote in their locality, the one who in a given locality is the first to vote on a smaller number of other voters, until there are thirty-three deputies that constitute a council. The Council then elects the three Mag- istri, who are responsible for the regulation of all social, economic, and political life, within the boundaries of citizens’ individual rights.

3. Conclusion

Despite all the transformations, Miguel Hythlo- deu, giving voice to contemporary doubts con- cerning the ability of creating a harmonious so- ciety, based on ethical values, on the valuation of merit, on the respect for human rights and human differences, recognizes that, although having many positive aspects, modern Utopia is only the best provisional state that can be achieved at the actual stage. However, even this perfect imperfection has a price to pay. New Utopia, or Utopia III, cannot
yet find a perfect balance between order and creativity, between rights and laws, between reason and desire. It cannot find its place in the world without the constant fear of losing what was achieved. Therefore, there is a continuous supervision and censorship, as if utopians’ identity is still such a fragile achievement that any commotion might threaten its disintegration:

This esordem [de Lisboa], esta indisciplina, estas palavras, esta agressividade, tudo isto me diverte, me estimula, me excita. [...] Ordem, a disciplina, a mansão e o silêncio podem causar, aborrecer ou mesmo adormecer numa inóvel monotonia, numa espécie de modorra, numa inércia infecunda. [...] You dizer-o muito em segredo - e Miguel Hithloudeu baixou o tom de voz quase a um sussurro [...].

Therefore, the novel reaffirms the need for utopia but set on different bases: on human and democratic principles. Utopia, to be viable, must give way to imperfection, must assume its essential inability to create a perfect society, but also believe in people’s capacity to become better. A society that should have as corner-pillars humanist philosophy, ethical and moral values, shared by all, aiming to the common good. A kind of meritocratic society. An ambiguous utopia set on earth and aiming at the heavens, as Christian humanists would express it.

Como homens, todos somos imperfeitos, embora sejamos talhados para a suprema perfeição. O lhe para este rio já tão impuro. Mas erga a cabeça e admire a pureza inaculada deste céu azul e tão limpido. (1989: 565)

[Being humans we are all imperfect beings, though destined to be supreme perfection. Look at this already so impure sky.]

Utopia III. Since it is a utopia written in Portugal after the recovery of freedom and democracy, which seems to be well set in the minds and habits of the Portuguese people, one must wonder why the novel remains unknown to most readers, and attracted little criticism, with very few exceptions worth mentioning (NASCIMENTO, 2013). Since it is a utopia of a novel that may not justify the “silence” surrounding Utopia III. I dare advance my own interpretation: Pina Martins’ novel demands a reader with some knowledge on Renaissance humanism and history. The text is a deep well of knowledge that demands, from the reader, a strong will to learn. Its lexicon is vast, the suggestions for further readings constant. Nevertheless, it also demands a reader prepared for a fierce denunciation of Portuguese (bad) habits in culture, politics and way of living. No one is spared in Pina Martins’ criticism: politicians, clergies, judges, scholars, writers, all who hold a position that may make a difference and fail to do their part, are sometimes violently “whipped” by the characters’ arguments. Consequently, in a country where freedom of speech is recognised, Pina Martins’ Utopia III has been subjected to the subtle but effective censorship of silence. The “blue pencil” (popular expression to designate official censorship) does not exist, but silent censorship is even harder to confront, because it does not have a face, a name. Neither the author nor the novel deserved it! Utopia III is a long, exhaustive lesson on humanism, Pina Martins’ last gift for those who believe knowledge makes one a better member of society and humanist values create better human beings.

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