

LOCATING UTOPIA IN POETRY*

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary canon of utopian writing includes primarily philosophical works and narrative prose; nevertheless, utopias have appeared in the form of poetry as well. The article begins by sketching the relationship of utopia and poetry. Subsequently, it focuses on two poems with a utopian vision at their center – Jorie Graham’s “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia” (1997) and Elizabeth Bishop’s “Santarém” (1978) – with regard to the particular locations of utopia in these poems. Although these poems cannot be considered representative – as the article highlights in the conclusion by drawing attention to Nikki Giovanni and Charles Bernstein – they suggest a variety of utopian locations in poetry.

Keywords: utopia; poetry; Jorie Graham; Elizabeth Bishop; Nikki Giovanni; Charles Bernstein

In Book X of *The Republic*, Plato famously banished poetry from his “properly run state” (1955: 435). “The only poetry that should be allowed in a state is hymns to the gods and paeans in praise of good men,” he wrote, since “once you go beyond that and admit the sweet lyric or epic muse, pleasure and pain become your rulers instead of law and the rational principles commonly accepted as best” (1955: 437). The contemporary canon of utopian writing does some justice to Plato as it includes primarily philosophical works and narrative prose; nevertheless, utopias have appeared in the form of poetry as well. In the following pages, after sketching the relationship between utopia and poetry, I will discuss two poems with a utopian vision at their center: Jorie Graham’s “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia” (1997) and Elizabeth Bishop’s “Santarém” (1978), focusing on the location of utopia in these poems. Critics pointed out that while early-modern utopias were typically located in another space, modern “better worlds” are placed in the future. After the first futuristic utopias appeared in the seventeenth century, the genre began to shift towards “uchronia,” as Raymond Trousson observed, or as Tom Moylan wrote, for after the consolidation of capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century, utopias “could no longer look to an alternative located in the present time” (1986: 6). A number of

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contemporary utopias in prose exemplify this transformation of the genre, and texts from Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* to Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* envision utopia in the future. Nevertheless, the aforementioned poems by Graham and Bishop locate utopia elsewhere: "The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia" envisions utopia as a permutating immaterial space contemporaneous with the present and in "Santarém" utopia emerges in the past. Although these poems cannot be considered representative – as I highlight in the conclusion by drawing attention to Nikki Giovanni and Charles Bernstein – they suggest a variety of utopian locations in poetry.

Defining Utopia

Ever since "the spirit of neologism possessed the future saint" (1979: 1) Thomas More and resulted in his coining the word "utopia," as Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel put it in *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, various imaginary as well as real formations have been referred to as "utopias." Peter Fitting has pointed out that the genre nevertheless began to emerge in the Western world only at the end of the nineteenth century, when James T. Presley was asked to collect information about works that resemble More's *Utopia*. Presley's studies included imaginary voyages, satire, as well as philosophical and sociological texts, and his approach opened up a way to future interdisciplinary studies, such as *The History of Utopian Thought* (1923) by Joyce Hertzler, which discusses *The City of the Sun* by the Italian monk Tommaso Campanella and *The New Atlantis* by the English essayist Francis Bacon alongside the writings of the French philosopher Charles Fourier and the Welsh social reformer Robert Owen (Fitting 2009). The marked expansion of the genre at the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s came hand in hand with further attempts at its formalization. Lyman Tower Sargent's 1967 article "Three Faces of Utopianism," together with Darko Suvin's "Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia: Some Historical Semantics, Some Genealogy, A Proposal and a Plea" (1973), established a definition of utopia that scholars have been returning to ever since. According to Sargent, utopia is

a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space. In standard usage utopia is used both as defined here and as equivalent for eutopia or a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived. (Sargent 2010: 6)

Suvin, on the other hand, has defined utopia as

the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis. (Suvin 1973: 132)

Although these definitions are similar, as Sargent himself pointed out, they differ in that the former remains open to fantasy, while the latter is a verbally formed "non-exis-

tent country on the map of *this globe*,” a “possible impossible,” as Suvin put it elsewhere (1973: 126, original emphasis). Suvin’s “more perfect” rather than “better” is also worth dwelling on because it avoids both the stasis associated with the adjective “perfect” as well as the endless progress associated with the comparative adjective “better.”

However, my intention here is not to probe the differences between these two definitions of utopia – it is rather to highlight the fact that in principle, the genre is open to any “verbal construction,” while in practice, it has included primarily fiction and theory. For example, the 2010 *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* includes the following texts in the canon:

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| c.370–360 BC Plato, <i>The Republic</i> | 1759 Samuel Johnson, <i>Rasselas</i> |
| c. 100 Plutarch, <i>Life of Lycurgus</i> | 1762 Sarah Scott, <i>Millenium Hall</i> |
| 1516 Thomas More, <i>Utopia</i> | 1764 [James Burgh], <i>An Account of the First Settlement ... of the Cessaes</i> |
| c. 1605 Joseph Hall, <i>Mundus Alter et Idem</i> | 1771 Louis-Sébastien Mercier, <i>Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred</i> |
| 1619 Johann Valentin Andreae, <i>Christianopolis</i> | 1772 Denis Diderot, <i>Supplement to Bougainville’s ‘Voyage’</i> |
| 1623 Tommaso Campanella, <i>The City of the Sun</i> | 1793 William Godwin, <i>Enquiry Concerning Political Justice</i> |
| 1626 Francis Bacon, <i>New Atlantis</i> | 1795 Thomas Spence, <i>Description of Spensonia</i> |
| 1638 Francis Godwin, <i>The Man in the Moone</i> | 1798 Thomas Robert Malthus, <i>Essay on Population</i> |
| 1641 Samuel Hartlib, <i>A Description of the Famous Kingdom of Macaria</i> | 1808 Charles Fourier, <i>Theory of the Four Movements</i> |
| 1648 Samuel Gott, <i>Nova Solyma</i> | 1811 James Henry Lawrence, <i>The Empire of the Nairs</i> |
| 1652 Gerrard Winstanley, <i>The Law of Freedom in a Platform: Or True Magistracie Restored</i> | 1818 Mary Shelley, <i>Frankenstein</i> |
| 1653–94 François Rabelais, <i>Gargantua and Pantagruel</i> | 1826 Mary Shelley, <i>The Last Man</i> |
| 1656 James Harrington, <i>The Commonwealth of Oceana</i> | 1827 Charles Fourier, <i>The New Industrial World</i> |
| 1657 Cyrano de Bergerac, <i>Histoire Comique Contenant les États et Empires de la Lune</i> | 1836–44 Robert Owen, <i>The Book of the New Moral World</i> |
| 1666 Margaret Cavendish, <i>The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World</i> | 1840 Etienne Cabet, <i>Voyage en Icarie</i> |
| 1668 Henry Neville, <i>The Isle of Pines</i> | 1848 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, <i>The Manifesto of the Communist Party</i> |
| 1675 Denis Vairasse, <i>The History of the Sevarites or Sevarambi</i> | 1852 Nathaniel Hawthorne, <i>The Blithedale Romance</i> |
| 1676 Gabriel de Foigny, <i>The Southern Land Known</i> | 1864 Jules Verne, <i>Journey to the Centre of the Earth</i> |
| 1699 François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon, <i>The Adventures of Telemachus</i> | 1871 Edward Bulwer-Lytton, <i>The Coming Race</i> |
| 1719 Daniel Defoe, <i>Robinson Crusoe</i> | 1872 Samuel Butler, <i>Erewhon</i> |
| 1726 Jonathan Swift, <i>Gulliver’s Travels</i> | 1880 Mary Bradley Lane, <i>Mizora</i> |
| 1737 Simon Berington, <i>The Adventures of Sig. Gaudentio di Lucca</i> | 1888 Edward Bellamy, <i>Looking Backward 2000–1887</i> |
| 1751 Robert Paltock, <i>The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins</i> | 1890 Theodor Hetzka, <i>Freiland</i> |
| 1756 Edmund Burke, <i>A Vindication of Natural Society</i> | 1890 William Morris, <i>News from Nowhere</i> |
| | 1890 Ignatius Donnelly, <i>Caesar’s Column</i> |

- 1895 H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*
 1896 H. G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*
 1898 H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*
 1901 H. G. Wells, *The First Men in the Moon*
 1905 H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*
 1905 Gabriel Tarde, *Underground Man*
 1908 Jack London, *The Iron Heel*
 1915 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*
 1916 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *With Her in Ourland*
 1923 H. G. Wells, *Men Like Gods*
 1924 Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*
 1930 Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men*
 1932 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*
 1933 H. G. Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come*
 1937 Katharine Burdekin, *Swastika Night*
 1948 B. F. Skinner, *Walden Two*
 1949 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
 1953 Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*
 1954 William Golding, *The Lord of the Flies*
 1958 Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited*
 1962 Aldous Huxley, *Island*
 1962 Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*
 1970 Ira Levin, *This Perfect Day*
 1974 Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*
 1975 Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*
 1975 Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia*
 1976 Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*
 1986 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*
 1987 Iain M. Banks, *Consider Phlebas*
 1992–6 Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Mars Trilogy*
 1996 Jack Halperin, *The Truth Machine*
 1997 Ronald Wright, *A Scientific Romance*
 2000 Brian Aldiss, *White Mars*
 2003 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*
 2005 Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*
 2007 Chuck Palahniuk, *Rant*
 2009 Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*
 (Claeys 2010: xiv–xv)

This “Brief Chronology of Key Works of Utopian Literature and Thought” spans across several centuries and nationalities, and it includes theoretical texts as well as fiction. The absence of other literary forms besides the novel is nevertheless notable, and although in this particular case, it can be explained by the need to draw attention to a plethora of works in the genre, it seems that when it comes to utopian literature, it is common to privilege prose in general and the novel in particular. So what is the relationship of poetry to utopia?

Poetry and Utopia

To contemplate the question above, we may begin by noting that utopian prose often includes poetry, as a result of which a polyphonic nature of utopia becomes manifest. A good example is Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward 2000–1887*. The novel reproduces a fragment of Alfred Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall,” in order to prove that an artist may envision the future. Yet Tennyson’s poem is edited to fit the novel’s needs and merely lines 119–120, 127–130 and 137–138 are reproduced:

For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,
 Saw the vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be; [...]
 Till the war-drum throbbed no longer, and the battle-flags were furled.
 In the Parliament of man, the federation of the world.
 Then the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,
 And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law. [...]
 For I doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
 And the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns. (Bellamy 2000: 98)

In the entire poem, Tennyson's imaginary future is different from that of Bellamy. Therefore lines 121–122, which read “the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails, / Pilots of the purple twilight, dropping down with costly bales,” were omitted as visions of such heavenly technological miracles did not coincide with Bellamy's envisioned future. Lines 135–136 were left out as well, because Bellamy's utopia emerged as the result of an inevitable peaceful evolution, whereas Tennyson's poem offers a powerful image of a popular mass uprising: “Slowly comes a hungry people, as a lion, creeping nigher, / Glares at one that nods and winks behind a slowly-dying fire.” The fact that these lines were left out suggests that Bellamy consciously turned away from doubt and revolution. Yet “Locksley Hall,” of course, continues to haunt *Looking Backward*. The poem therefore stands in an intertextual relationship to the prosaic parts of the text, debating its central message.

Besides contributing to the polyphonic nature of utopia in prose, poetry has generated its own utopian visions, which Tennyson's “Locksley Hall” illustrated already. Some poets and critics go as far as considering poetry itself in utopian terms. The poet Charles Simic, for example, saw poetry as utopian because it lets us enter the lost past:

A young man in a small town in Patagonia or in Kansas reads an ancient Chinese poet in a book he borrowed from the library and falls in love with a poem, which he reads to himself over and over again as the summer night is falling. With each reading he brings the voice of the dead poet to life. For one unforgettable moment, he steps out of his own cramped self and enters the lives of unknown men and women, seeing the world through their eyes, feeling what they once felt and thinking what they once thought. If poetry is not the most utopian project ever devised by human beings, I don't know what is. (Simic 2012)

Andrew Lawson argued that poetry is utopian because it stands in opposition to capitalist society and instrumental reason that governs this society:

Poetry condemns society just by existing in its margin: only when it accepts that margin does it lose its force. Furthermore, poetry does not sacrifice itself entirely to the aesthetic, the intuitive and non-rational: its intuitive form is its rational or critical function. Precisely because poetry is useless it is free: its critical function is unavailable to instrumental reason, and offers a critique of that reason. In this way, modern poetry is both a utopian prolepsis and a space “within the present [...] where a feasible future might grow,” both a “space of experience” and a “horizon of expectation.” (1991: 98)

More recently, this idea has been developed by Alain Badiou, who departed from Plato's rejection of the poem as an imitation of an imitation, asserting instead that “the poem is an unthinkable thought” (2014: 48). “Poets,” according to Badiou, “are those who try to make a language say what it seems incapable of saying. Poets are those who seek to create in language new names to name that which, before the poem, has no name” (2014: 94). For this reason, “there exists an essential link between poetry and communism” (Badiou 2014: 93) – communism, needless to say, not in the sense of what has been referred to as communism by various regimes in the past, but as a utopian “life in common” (Badiou 2014: 93).

To see poetry as utopia may seem an attractive concept also when considering the Greek root of the English word, to “make” or to “create,” or the root of Czech and other Slavic expressions that mean to “fabulate.” But to perceive the poet and poetry in utopian terms is not the only way in which they may be viewed. The poet has been seen as a philosopher, a propagandist, a pedagogue, a witness, a political activist, a pretender, a fool, a neurotic, a Sunday man, a priest, a jurist and even an archetypal mother. Poetry, too, may inform, teach, delight, disturb, deceive, witness, and oppose as well as spread ideology. In other words, poetry exists alongside and across other cultural forms, from which it is moreover hard to distinguish. The only seemingly firm definition of poetry as opposed to prose is that the former is printed in lines the length of which is determined by the author, which, of course, is challenged by prose poetry and non-poetic discourses that use lines. It could be argued that there is nothing particularly special about poetry.

Again, my intention here is not to probe the definition and potential of poetry but to suggest that considering poetry (or literature and art in general) as utopian is ultimately explosive of the concept of utopia. To avoid rendering the concept meaningless, it is practical to return to the definitions offered by Sargent and Suvin, which enables us to consider only poems with a considerably detailed vision.

“The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia”

Another example of a popular poem with a utopian vision, besides “Locksley Hall,” is an anonymous thirteenth-century vision of Cockaygne, a land located “[f]ar out to sea and left of Spain” (line 1). In comparison to Cockaygne, Paradise pales: whereas “[i]n Paradise what’s to be seen / But grass and flowers and branches green?” (lines 7–8) in Cockaygne, the night never comes; rivers are filled with milk, oil and honey; houses are built of pastries; and there are no bugs and animals – with the exception of graceful singing birds and “best-dressed” geese that seasoned with “garlic in great quantity” fly “roasted on the spit” and “cry out ‘Geese, all hot, all hot!’” (lines 104–106). In Cockaygne, people eat and play: young monks, when in “sporting mood,” fly around “with their fluttering sleeves and hood” (lines 125–126), especially after young nuns, who dedicate themselves to swimming in the river with no fluttering sleeves or hood. Even though in order to gain entry to Cockaygne, one must serve a rather non-appetizing stint in purgatory, seven years of wading through pig shit up to the chin does not sound any less humane than the purgatorial fires imagined by the likes of St. Augustine.

Skipping several centuries, let me now turn to a contemporary poem that also considers utopia in “another space”: Jorie Graham’s “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia.” The poem exemplifies central methods of Graham’s oeuvre, namely “constantly changing experiments with looking and describing” (Spiegelman 1998: 244), marked by tension between ordering and disordering strategies (Tan 2007: 98) and “constantly long[ing] for the transcendent and the ineffable” (Molesworth 1988: 276). The poem appeared in *The Errancy* – Graham’s challenging seventh collection, which among other things includes several guardian-angel poems, each delivering a warning against stasis and an affirmation of errancy.

Yet despite the poem's free form – the absence of regular meter and rhyme, and the irregularity of line length – “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia” is marked by a sense of closure. Three separate, enclosed spaces are depicted: a dreary windy outside, an inside “cunning little hermeneutic cupola” (line 32) and a space on “upper floors” (line 48) inhabited by a restless angel, who is also the poem's speaker. Kathy-Ann Tan, Bonnie Costello and Brian Henry have all compared the angel to an artist, “sequestered on the upper floor of a house” and “thankful not to have to participate in the superficial conversations of the party guests downstairs” (Tan 2007: 108). The angel's rearranging of flowers, Tan added,

seems to allude to the act of writing itself as a process of endless reworking and revision, and the allegory of the upper and lower floors corresponds to the world of the artist and that of society, or to the freedom of the imagination versus the constraints of social existence. (2007: 108)

Costello expressed a similar point, arguing that in the poem, “we recognize poetry as an activity of restless rearranging, straining against both the noise of human discourse and the inchoate flow of existence” (Costello 1997). The angel is also the guardian of a “little utopia,” in which s/he arranges and rearranges ideas and dreams that rise up from the mundane downstairs.

The downstairs space is depicted in detail but with a condescending attitude. It is a material space that is plagued with souvenirs (line 23) and with pretentious relations, pretentious joviality and pretentious language, which is evident in lines such as “forcing the breaths to marry, marry” (line 31); “bobbing universal heads, stuffing the void with eloquence” (line 27), “whips of syntax” (line 25) and “effort-filled phrases” (line 67). Graham alludes to several utopian visions which the downstairs space does not embody. One of these is the land of milk and honey. Downstairs, we learn, “the hive is gone, queen gone” (line 66). Both the words “honey” and “honeycomb” have negative connotations here. “The sheerest innuendos” are “honeyed-open” (line 68), which implies flattery. When “the napkins wave, are waved, the honeycombing / thoughts are felt to dialogue” (lines 34–35), the word “honeycombing” can imply subverting and undermining, especially because in the previous line, “footprints stall and gnaw in tiny ruts” (line 33). “Honeycombing” may also imply honeycomb lungs as the pathological cystic patterns are diagnosed by x-ray and the word “wave” occurs twice on the same line as “honeycombing”; moreover, air, wind, evaporating and breathing occupy a central place in the poem. In any case, the aforementioned references to “honey” and “honeycombing” reinforce the depiction of downstairs as a dystopian space of homeless “buzzing” (line 65) beings who live without honey, sustained by mere “fluorescent drinks” (line 25).

The angel, or the conceited yet insecure utopian artist, stands above, constructing immaterial castles in the air and cities on a hill: “the hollow, fetishized, and starry place, / a bit gossamer with dream, a vortex of evaporations, / oh little dream, invisible city, invisible hill” (lines 45–47). Through these references to utopian visions, the angel's “little utopia” appears to complement the mundane space as well as answer what the people below need and lack (lines 41–42). It is an endless, evanescent project. Brian Henry has drawn attention to the concluding lines, namely the reference to Henry Vaughan's “Distraction” and the angel's final turn towards the outside:

Oh knit me that am crumpled dust,
the heap is all dispersed. Knit me that *am*. Say *therefore*. Say
philosophy and mean by that the pane.
Let us look out again. The yellow sky.
With black leaves rearranging it. . . . (Lines 74–78)

The biblical “you knit me together in my mother’s womb” is changed here (as in Vaughan’s “Distraction”) into “knit me that am crumpled dust” and the angel’s “little utopia” crumbles. Although it is unclear who the addressee of these lines is (it may be the people downstairs, the reader, or God), it is not possible to assert “I think therefore I am,” and the only philosophy is hence poetry. (The turn to the pane perhaps evokes Goethe’s comparison of poetry to a stained-glass window.) The image of black leaves rearranging the yellow sky parallels the utopian artist’s endless arranging and rearranging – s/he begins all over again as the poem ends.

As Costello put it, “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia” describes “a search for direction, for renewed terms of utopia, a heating up of passion for this object, a brandishing of language toward the plenitude, where it blooms and then fades for the exhausted imagination” (Costello 1997). Utopia is depicted here as a permutating space above where ideas and dreams are arranged and rearranged, and where the “dead cordless ones, the yellow bits past apogee” (lines 15–16) are removed like dry flowers. It hovers above the shifting mundane material space downstairs and remains separate from the autonomous outside. (There are no doors, only windows.) As a whole, the poem therefore presents a world where “all that is solid melts into air” but where no utopia exists: there is no utopian horizon towards which the world would approach.

“Santarém”

The second poem that I will discuss, Elizabeth Bishop’s “Santarém,” focuses on the utopian function of nostalgic memory. Locating utopia in the past is not original to Bishop. After the French Revolution, for instance, the Romantics projected utopia into the future or into another space, but texts such as Coleridge’s pantisocratic poems were counterbalanced by nostalgic visions that returned to the lost moment of hope, which is memorably depicted in Wordsworth’s “The French Revolution as It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement.” “Santarém” does not turn back to a major revolutionary event, but it is equally backward-looking, although it recognizes that utopia here is beautified through nostalgia.

“Santarém” is one of Bishop’s late poems, completed after she published her last collection, *Geography III*. Although begun over a decade and a half earlier, the poem differs from other reflections on Bishop’s life in Brazil, such as “Arrival at Santos,” “Brazil, January 1, 1502” and “Questions of Travel,” which describe and gently mock the traumatic confrontation of a traveler’s ideal with reality. “Santarém,” as Costello wrote, “makes perhaps the strongest contrast to the critical ironies of [Bishop’s] earlier work” (1991: 173). It depicts Santarém as a place of fulfillment, abundance and synthesis: the evening is golden, the port is gilded, and the inhabitants and animals lazily move on the golden

sand. Besides gold (and yellow), the scene is dressed in blue: buildings are “blue or yellow, / one house faces with *azulejos*, buttercup yellow” (lines 25–26, original emphasis); zebus are “gentle, proud, / and *blue*” (lines 29–30, original emphasis). “Hierarchies dissolve as people and zebus merge in the earth” (Costello 1991:173) and opposites are synthesized in the confluence of two rivers where Santarém is located. There is motion (rivers flow, riverboats skitter, people change their minds) yet the speaker perceives it as pleasant and despite the bustle, which resembles rather the buzz of bees in a hive, Santarém appears at a moment of closure and stasis. Momentarily, it even evokes the Garden of Eden: “Hadn’t two rivers sprung / from the Garden of Eden?” (lines 13–14).

“No, that was four / and they’d diverged” (lines 14–15) the speaker responds immediately. At several other places in the poem, she reminds the reader that Santarém is beautified through nostalgic memory, and that, “[o]f course [she] may be remembering it all wrong / after, after – how many years?” (lines 1–2). Moreover, the pleasing bustle of the port threatens to gradate any moment into disastrous calamity. The promenade and the belvedere are “about to fall into the river” (lines 22–23); the cathedral has a “widening zigzag crack all the way down” (line 61) and the priest’s bed is “galvanized black” (line 64) after being struck by lightning. “Santarém” also has an un-Eden-like history of colonization: “After the Civil War some Southern families / came here; here they could still own slaves” (lines 40–41). Among other things, “they left occasional *blue eyes*” (line 186, my emphasis).

Similarly to Graham’s poem, in “Santarém” the tension between an idealized vision and reality culminates in the concluding stanza, where the speaker admires an empty wasps’ nest. Given the utopian allusions in the poem, the contrast between a wasps’ nest and a beehive or a honeycomb offers itself. A wasps’ nest is a home for insects that few utopias have welcome. One example would be H. G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia*, where “houses, streets and drains [are] planned and built to make rats, mice, and such-like house parasites impossible” (1971: 230), but as specified already in Cockayne, “there’s no fly or flea or louse / In clothes, in village, bed, or house” [lines 37–38].) If this “dystopian hive” becomes a metaphorical representation of Santarém, it is possible to argue that it becomes “an artifact of beauty” (Diehl 1993: 26) or even a prize the speaker clutches and “carries off with pleasure” (Goldensohn 1992: 16, 187), but the golden glitter of the opening scene is gone. Costello has drawn attention to this when she wrote:

A miniature of the stucco houses in Santarém, it suggests some of the complexity of all the homes [Bishop] entertains in her poetry. Once the dwelling of pests, a source of stings, a motive for travel, it becomes, as a souvenir, not just innocuous but beautiful, a treasure, a kind of poem. (1991: 174)

But even Costello preferred to downplay the weight of the last words of the poem, which are not uttered by the speaker but a certain Mr. Swan, “Dutch, the retiring head of Philips Electric, / really a very nice old man, / who wanted to see the Amazon before he died” (lines 73–75). “What’s that ugly thing?” he asks, and the poem ends on the low note of “Mr. Swan’s song,” so to speak. Santarém definitely loses its utopian aura.

In a letter she sent from her trip to the Amazon, Bishop wrote: “Santarém – I’d like to go there for a rest cure or something – no pavements, just deep orange sand, beautiful

houses – and absolute silence – walks along the waterfront and two cafes – just the way a town should be laid out” (quoted in Goldensohn 1992: 16). As Goldensohn observed, in “Santarém” “Bishop inscribes longing in a strange constellation of images and feelings, pivoting of death, rest, underworld quietude and stasis, and within what looks like the deadly sleepiness of myths of completion and perfectability” (Goldensohn 1992: 16). But the picture of “Santarém” is knowingly underwritten by a utopian impulse and it is beautified: “I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place” (line 12), the speaker says. Moreover, as we have seen, this picture is repeatedly subverted and the static vision dis-integrates by the end.¹

The affinity of Graham and Bishop has not escaped the critics, so it is perhaps not surprising that their view of utopia is similar. Graham’s imagination in “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia” has the same function as Bishop’s memory in “Santarém”: they both generate evanescent constructs. But Bishop’s turn towards the past adds another dimension here. Utopias have a complicated relationship to the past. Even when located in the future, they often unconsciously recreate the past. (Bellamy is a good example of this; Milton Cantor has argued that “contrasting the old and the emergent, Bellamy continually reaffirmed small-town virtues in an urban society that seemed to threaten values he held dear” (1988: 24). These values were based on Bellamy’s childhood in Chicopee, which was “composed largely of Protestant, reasonably well-educated, English-speaking, churchgoing families with impeccable Anglo-Saxon credentials” [Cantor 1988: 24].) Sargent went as far as arguing that “most utopias are inevitably recreations of the past placed in the future” (2007: 311), but utopian past is

what the past would have looked like if the past got it right. One can call this romanticizing the past, and sometimes this is the correct label. Sometimes it is nostalgia, but nostalgia is always for a past that did not exist, that has been made better in memory, with the pasts that make us uncomfortable or embarrassed conveniently forgotten. (Sargent 2007: 311–312)

On the one hand, a positively selective approach to the past need not be politically conservative; as Fredric Jameson has written:

if nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with Fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plentitude, cannot furnish an adequate revolutionary stimulus as any other. (1974: 82)

On the other hand, Raffaella Baccolini has drawn attention to the ethics of forgetting (and implicitly, I think, of the positively selective memory of nostalgia) by recalling Ronald Reagan’s visit of the graves of SS soldiers buried at the Bitburg Military Cemetery. “I don’t think we ought to focus on the past,” Reagan said on that occasion, “I want to

¹ This insistence on motion that corrodes stasis is frequent in Bishop’s poetry, as Robert Lowell observed already in reference to her first collection, *North and South*, specifically poems such as “The Weed,” “North Haven,” an elegy Bishop wrote for Lowell, around the time when she completed “Santarém,” mourns precisely the lack of motion in his verse after his death: “You can’t derange, or re-arrange, / your poems again. (But the Sparrows can their song.) / The words won’t change again. Sad friend, you cannot change” (lines 28–30).

focus on the future. I want to put that history behind me” (quoted in Baccolini 2005). Baccolini asked,

what is one to do with traumatic memories? Who is to say what is right to do in the case of traumas? On what grounds is one to tell a veteran, an incest survivor, someone who has gone through the experience of the Holocaust, or someone who has lost a member of his/her family to a conflict to just put the past behind? (Baccolini 2005)

Such questions may not be answered in the abstract and once again, this is not a place to delve into them. What remains clear is that Bishop’s “Santarém” lays out the tension between nostalgic memory and memory that has a less (or differently) selective approach to the past. Finally, just as “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia,” Bishop’s poem does not envision any Utopia – no apocalyptic redemption of the past, no “[d]ivine intervention in human history” that would reveal “that time would have an end [and the] dead would rise again,” as I. F. Clarke described the apocalypse (Clarke 2000: 16).

Although contemporary utopias in prose envision a better world primarily in the future, Graham’s “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia” and Bishop’s “Santarém” locate utopia elsewhere. Moreover, both poems depict utopia as an evanescent and illusory vision. Yet these two poems can hardly be seen as representative and their authors’ skepticism is not shared by other contemporary poets. Nikki Giovanni’s recent collection *Chasing Utopia* takes a more vigorous approach. “Utopia” in the title here is not merely a better world, but also the name of an expensive special brew of Sam Adams. Due to its high percentage of alcohol (between 20 and 28 percent), the beer was impossible to find in certain American states. When Giovanni was invited to lecture in one government agency, she used the opportunity to ask its employees to locate Utopia with the help of their “world’s best computers” (Giovanni 2013: 2):

“Please, sir,” said I, “can you find Utopia?” “Of course, little lady,” said the Director. “It’s in your heart and mind.” He smiled a lovely smile and patted me on my shoulder. Not wanting to appear to correct him, I smiled the smile of the defeated. And waited for him to leave. I asked his assistant. “I think,” he pontificated, “it is in your soul. Search deep and you will find it.” I knew I needed someone of color. Finally an older man, grey hair cut short, came by. “Please excuse me,” I said, “I’m trying to find Utopia. Can you help?” “Why sure,” he said “as soon as I can find a safe computer.” We moved into another room and he made me stand way away from him so that I could not see the screen. He pulled up a website. “Here you go.” And he was right. “I can’t buy it as it’s against the rules, but get someone else to go to this site. I hear it’s a great beer. At \$350 a pint, it ought to be.”

And now that I’ve found Utopia, I am at peace [...] drinking the Jazz Series from Dogfish brewery: Brother Thelonious, Bitches Brew, Hellhound on My Ale. I have Utopia, and if I were Egyptian I would be buried with it. I use it to start conversations and make friends. It is not for Mortals. Or Americans. Utopia is for Poets [...] or the Gods. (Giovanni 2013: 2–3)

Although Giovanni’s approach may seem frivolous, the reason why the poet set on her “chase” after Utopia was the death of her mother and aunt, who both enjoyed drinking beer. Through Utopia, she “tried to find a way to bring them back” (Giovanni 2013: 1). Giovanni thus drew attention to the central problem of utopia – the problem of death.

Theodor Adorno once remarked that utopia is unthinkable “without the notion of an unfettered life, freed from death” (Adorno and Bloch 1964: 10) and that “every attempt to describe or portray utopia in a simple way – i.e., it will be like this – would be an attempt to avoid the antinomy of death and to speak about the elimination of death as if death did not exist” (Adorno and Bloch 1964: 10). Perhaps for the same reason, Giovanni suggested that utopias are superficial but her attitude to the mundane material world was not negative, contrary to the attitude of the white government officials she met (and contrary to the attitude of the angel/poet in Graham’s poem).

But I will conclude with yet another turn of the mundane. Poets such as Bernadette Mayer, Anne Waldman and Charles Bernstein have intervened into the genre of utopia with more optimism and, sometimes, with more political energy than Graham and Bishop. The anthology of Occupy Wall Street poetry, for example, includes Bernstein’s poem “In Utopia.” The poet himself noted that “In Utopia” “resonates strongly with the OWS moment,” but maybe also with other moments, such as the day of Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968, when Bernstein turned eighteen (Bernstein 2011). This is worth emphasizing because, as Ernst Bloch wrote, “one might live for the moment [...] in a completely superficial way” (1956: 207). The objective of the turn to the mundane for our purposes here is to explode the historical continuum and to bring “the now-time, which generates enthusiasm and partiality and which is worth it, into connection with other periods of awakening, no matter how long they were in the past and how differently embedded they were within the historical continuum” (1956: 216); it “is a liberating act that frees all essentially related, utopian moments from before and after” (1956: 218). I think the poem needs to be understood with the above qualification in mind. It is not a practical scheme but according to Bernstein, no politics may exist without the “political sentiment, even [...] sentimentality” that poems such as “In Utopia” generate – for the past, the present as well as the future:

In utopia they don’t got no rules and Prime Minister Cameron’s “criminality pure and simple” is reserved for politicians just like him. In utopia the monkey lies down with the rhinoceros and the ghosts haunt the ghosts leaving everyone else to fend for themselves. In utopia, you lose the battles and you lose the war too but it bothers you less. In utopia no one tells nobody nothin’, but I gotta tell you this. In utopia the plans are ornament and expectations dissolve into whim. In utopia, here is a pivot. In utopia, love goes for the ride but eros’s at the wheel. In utopia, the words sing the songs while the singers listen. In utopia, 1 plus 2 does not equal 2 plus 1. In utopia, I and you is not the same as you and me. In utopia, we won’t occupy Wall Street, we are Wall Street. In utopia, all that is solid congeals, all that melts liquefies, all that is air vanishes into the late afternoon fog. (Bernstein 2012)

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HLEDÁNÍ UTOPIE V POEZII

Resumé

Současný kánon utopické literatury zahrnuje zejména díla teoretická a prozaická, ale existují i utopie ve formě poezie. Po krátkém nastínění vztahu utopie a poezie se tento článek věnuje dvěma básním, které představují utopickou vizi: „Strážný anděl malé utopie“ („The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia“, 1997) od Jorie Grahamové a „Santarém“ („Santarém“, 1978) od Elizabeth Bishopové. Důraz je kladen na umístění utopie ve zmíněných básních. Kromě těchto dvou děl článek zmiňuje i jiné básně, které je možné interpretovat v kontextu utopické literatury, např. sbírku *Honba za utopii* (Chasing Utopia, 2013) básnířky Nikki Giovanniové a „V utopii“ („In Utopia“, 2012) od Charlese Bernsteina.

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