

Utopias and dystopias/ Upepsia and Dyspepsia.

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There's no getting away from it. Food, sex and politics have been inextricably linked since Adam and Eve dallied with a snake over an apple in the Garden of Eden. In the Western literary tradition, elements of the Genesis story and its consequences figure prominently in utopian and dystopian visions to the extent that it isn't too much of a stretch to say that all Western utopias are versions of Eden and all dystopias visions of the consequences of the Fall.

According to the Christian version of Genesis, on the eighth day of creation, God 'created a garden Eastward in Eden' for Adam and Eve, the principal element of which was fruit trees, in particular the tree 'of the knowledge of good and evil'.¹ Genesis suggests that those first bipeds were fruitarians with one small caveat - 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but of the tree of knowledge you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'. In fact, they seem to have been naked fruitarians, without shame of their nakedness, equal as gendered beings, who innocently went about becoming one flesh. Underlying many a utopia is the desire to get back to this time of simplicity in food, dress, sex and gender relations.

Now, we all know how the story goes from here. In the pre-eminent act of dystopian creation, Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the forbidden tree and are cast out of Eden. An angel with a flaming sword is placed at the gates to keep them and their progeny from returning. They 'know they are naked' and are ashamed and hasten to sew fig leaves to cover themselves. Eve is condemned to have painful childbirth, and Adam is given power and authority over her. The earth itself is cursed. Adam is condemned to work in order to eat from it, as the earth will no longer give food to him freely. Did we become carnivores, too, under this curse? Genesis doesn't say. But it is certainly only outside of Eden that we begin to be shown as flesh-eaters. Dystopian visions are built on the exercise of repressive power of one people or gender over another; on the drudgery of labour; on the suppression of sexual expression or on the transgressive sex practices, often involving same sex relations, violence and pain.

What follows is an exposition of this perspective through the examination of five utopian and dystopian visions ranging over 1000 years within Anglocultural texts.

Cockaigne

There is debate whether the medieval texts and tales of the land of Cockaigne are utopian dream or satire. Certainly, they display many Edenic/late utopian elements, and the context of their generation has discernible dystopian elements.²

In Cockaigne, no one works. Food and drink is ever present and does not have to be cultivated or husbanded. Edible architecture is everywhere. Fences of sausages, beams of butter, windows made of fish, and roofs of custard tarts. The streets of the city are paved with spice and the hedgerows are made of more fish. In some versions you have to eat your way into the city through a wall of porridge. Pigs walk up to you, knife and fork

¹ My source for quotations from Genesis is the Authorised King James version of the Bible as published in the Oxford World's Classics series, 1998.

² The discussion here on Cockaigne and its meanings is taken from *Dreaming of Cockaigne. Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life*, H Pleij, Trans. D Webb, Columbia University Press, 1997

embedded in them to make it easy for you to cut a hunk, and they then proceed merrily on regenerating themselves for the next diner. It rains eels and meat pies. Beer and wine flow as its rivers. It is always spring; you can have free sex with ever-willing partners.

Cockaigne has been interpreted by some within the religious framing of hunger and the arduousness of agrarian labour during the Middle Ages as a continuation of our punishment for the Fall. It was a kind of test. Giving in to hunger through transgressing food rules, which are understood inherently as rules for social and moral cohesion, lead to sin and depravity. You start by eating whatever comes to hand, unclean animals - toads, snakes, animals associated with foreigners and end up eating each other - cannibalism. Cannibalism, in this schema, is the ultimate act of social disintegration. Cockaigne also has class elements. Medieval texts identified foods that are suitable for the peasants - root vegetables, bread and swills. In Cockaigne, everyone has access to the food of the rich - roasted fowls and beef, wine, and spices above all.

Finally, Cockaigne is aligned with the Free Spirit heresies at the end of the first millennium. Free Spiriters believed in the possibility of attaining perfection on earth. In that state, one was no longer capable of sin and so could do whatever one's nature dictated and one's body desired. For some, the path to perfection was through extreme abstinence. For others, however, it was through total indulgence. For some this extended to sexual freedom. Certainly, for most it meant believing they were above the moral strictures of the established church. Free Spiriters were millenarianists, those who believed in the imminence of Armageddon and the establishment of the 1000 year reign of the Holy Ghost on earth prior to the Day of Judgement. It was a yearning to get back to the earthly paradise, to Eden.

Given all of this, it doesn't come as a surprise that, Cockaigne and variations on it featured at Carnival, the annual festival before Lent during which the rules of society were turned upside down for a short time. Cockaigne, then, is arguably a utopian vision in complex relationships to the real dystopias of agrarian life in the Middle Ages and the moral dystopias against which the medieval church entered into battle.

Utopia

The term utopia comes of course from the title of the book by Thomas More. More's vision of the eponymous country has very strong parallels to Eden, in part arising out of his strong opposition to the enclosure of cultivable land and the turning over of it to sheep and cattle.

Utopia is a country with both cities and rural areas. Each city, indeed, is surrounded by at least twelve miles of farmland which its citizens cultivate and from which it gets all its basic food needs. At 'proper intervals' in the countryside houses are furnished with farming equipment and living quarters. Each of these houses holds an average of forty citizens of all ages and both genders. Each year, twenty citizens from the city and twenty people from the country swap places. The purpose of this is two-fold - so that everyone is skilled in farming and the raising of crops, but also so that the burden of laboring in the field is limited to a period of two years at a time. More apparently thought we got a bad deal out of the expulsion from Eden and didn't want us to have to toil too hard to get our food. Grain that's grown is only used for bread, not for ale or beer. But More is no rechabite; there is wine made from grapes, and there is apple and pear cider, and water flavoured with licorice or honey.

While beasts are slaughtered for meat, it is slaves who have to do it (slaves are permitted, but only those who are captives of war). For free citizens to do it would be to lead them to lose compassion for living creatures and so turn to murder and war. This is an interesting parallel to medieval fear of the consequences of transgressing food rules in the face of hunger, if indeed it is not More's particular extension of that view.

Two other aspects are worth noting. All meals are accompanied by music, incense is burned and perfumed scattered (a pre-figuring of the kinds of meals the Futurists were to champion in the early 20th century in their utopias). Finally, 'no kind of pleasure is forbidden provided no harm comes from it'.

The Edenic elements are clear though not made explicit here as they are in the next texts I want to look at.

Brave New World

Pleasure, music and food, are central themes in Huxley's *Brave New World*. Many elements of his New World are recognizably Edenic or reflect the consequences of the Fall. Others play out twists on these elements, reflecting perhaps Huxley's own ambivalence about the World he created. Huxley was a believer in eugenics, but most modern readers interpret this aspect of his book as part of its dystopic character rather than perhaps the utopic character Huxley may have also meant for it.

In the *Brave New World*, sex has nothing to do with reproduction and everything to do with pleasure/happiness. Monogamy and the nuclear family are seen as dangerous. 'Our Freud had been the first to reveal the appalling dangers of family life. The whole world was full of fathers – was therefore full of misery; full of mothers – therefore of every kind of perversion from sadism to chastity; full of brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts – full of madness and suicide'. In their place are multi-partnering and the crèche. To want to have only one partner is morally and socially repugnant. Erotic play is seen as normal and encouraged from early childhood. It's implicit that some homosexual activity is expected in childhood, as is autoeroticism.

If painful childbearing was Eve's lot for the getting of wisdom, then BNW gets right back to the earthly paradise. Reproduction is via the 'Bokanovsky Process' – the production of whole Castes from a single egg. Pills forestall fertilization as a result of sex, carried around by women in the wonderfully titled Malthusian belts. To want to physically bear children is also socially repugnant.

The place of food is also contradictory. On the one hand there's little natural about it. Most of it has been technologised down to basic vitamins. But Huxley compromises this dystopia by having these vitamins digested in food forms recognizable to the reader - carotene sandwiches, vitamin A pate, surrogate champagne, and even the fetuses in their bottles on the assembly line get fed with blood surrogate. When you want to remember the smell of rawer product, you can catch a performance from the scent organ at the Feelies, perhaps playing 'a delightfully refreshing Herbal Capriccio – rippling arpeggios of thyme and lavender, of rosemary, basil, myrtle, tarragon; a series of daring modulations through the spice keys into ambergris; and a slow return through sandalwood, camphor, cedar and new-mown hay (with occasional subtle touches of discord – a whiff of kidney pudding, the faintest suspicion of pig's dung'.

While in most cases you don't have to bear the post Eden curse of toiling to get your food from an ungrateful earth, some food remains unsynthesised. Huxley was concerned that in the emerging era of technology there would be too much leisure for the labouring classes which he believed would lead to anti-social behaviour. IN his New World the problem is solved by having one third of the population at any one time involved in working the land.

1984

The Party governing Oceania in Orwell's 1984 has found another way to deal with the drudgery of labour, the pain of hunger, the brutality of technologised life, all the consequences of the Fall - thought control. You can't be unhappy if you can't remember that there's anything to be unhappy about. Chocolate ration has to be cut? Easy, re-write every historic record to make it look like what's actually happening is an increase in the ration, then drum it into people at every opportunity. Gather people together every day and give them their chance to express five minutes of hate against whoever is the enemy of the day, and they'll gladly return to the mundanity and drudgery of their day. And after work there's always a public hanging you can attend.

Everyday is a carnival of inversion and double-speak. War is peace; freedom is slavery; and ignorance is strength. Party Girls join the Anti-Sex League – a world of 'hockey-fields and cold baths and community hikes and general clean-mindedness'. At the same time, sex with prostitutes is tolerated for Party men, as long as it is joyless and hurried and with 'proletarian women'. The Party tells you whom to marry, and sex in marriage is rarely pleasurable.

It's a drab world. The book's hero, Winston Smith, is drab. Even its food is drab. In his tiny kitchen he may have a loaf of 'dark-coloured bread' or he can eat his regulation lunch in the canteen of the Ministry of Information in which he works – a metal pannikin of pinkish-grey stew, a hunk of bread, a cube of cheese, a mug of milkless Victory coffee and one saccharine tablet.

Winston is humankind after the fall. When he meets and falls in love with fellow thought criminal Julia, they attempt to create their version of the Garden in a squalid little room above a bookstore. To this room Julia brings precious food she steals from the Party. Real chocolate, 'dark and shiny wrapped in sliver paper', not like the usual stuff available which is dull-brown, crumbly and tastes 'like the smoke of a rubbish fire'. She brings sugar, 'proper white bread', a little pot of jam, a tin of milk and real coffee. 'Dirty of clean' thinks Winston, 'the room was paradise'

But Julia, the woman, has brought knowledge into the Garden. Not only has she confirmed Winston's memory of better times. She has brought make-up to 'paint her face'. And she has brought sex. 'As soon as they arrive they would sprinkle everything with pepper bought on the black market, tear off their clothes, and make love with sweating bodies...'. The inevitable consequences follow. Within the Garden is the animal that will be Winston's ultimate undoing – a rat. And behind the walls of the room Big Brother, God, has always been watching. One day, as they stand naked in each other's arms, God enters the Garden and they are once again expelled.

Soylent Green

The world of *Soylent Green*, the dystopian science fiction film takes us back to the hunger fears of the Middle Ages. The world is in the grip of a year long drought as a result of the greenhouse effect at the same time as its population is spiralling out of control. It's like Calcutta writ large - there's no traffic because it would be ploughing into people who live crowded on the streets, on the stairs, on the footpaths, in the stalled cars. The only tree left in New York is a wretched sapling under a plastic dome in Gramercy Park. (The image of a de-natured Eden is inescapable). And for food there's soylent in its various colours, synthesised from beans. There is a new version, soylent green, that's made from plankton. But the supply of soylent is controlled by ration cards. New batches brought to market inevitable lead to food riots. And food riots lead to street cleaning - garbage trucks edge into the crowds, scooping you up indiscriminately with their front end loaders and dumping you like so much detritus into their skips. If you aren't quick enough, you're as likely to get pancaked as the front end loader clangs down on the street.

That's if you are poor, of course, which most people are. Class rules on food apply in this new feudalism. If you're rich, you get to live in a condominium and get limp vegies and fruit and the occasional piece of beef. Your condominium will be air conditioned, there'll be running water and soap and a fridge. Best of all there'll be furniture - sex workers who come with the apartment and are yours to use and abuse until you move out.

The story revolves around the work of a cop, Thorn, and his 'book' (a sort of researcher), Sol, who set about investigating the murder of a politician. All the 'books' as they are portrayed in the film can be read as Jewish, which gives an added horror to the secret at the heart of *Soylent Green*. The relationship at the heart of the story is between Thorn and Sol. Sol is clearly in love with Thorn, and says so at one stage. Sure, you could read it as mareship, but there is a scene in the film that gives the lie to this, and it centres around food. Thorn nicks fresh food and vegetables from the condo of the murderee. Sol cooks it up for him, serving it up with all the love that Mrs Brady fed her brood. Thorn grins to ear with Sol's treasured set of red formal cutlery while Sol ears his with a plastic spoon. And at the end of the meal, Sol shows Thorn how to eat an apple.

The exposition of the secret and the reason for the murder artfully brings together two of the themes of *Cockaigne*. Sol is so horrified by what he discovers about soylent green that he decides to 'go home', to euthanase. This is now a common practice. People choose to die. They do so at centres that combine the ambience and architecture of hospitals and the churches of new age/ neo Christian cults. You get to die in white robe, sipping poison, while your favourite music is played and you watch wrap around wall screens play images of your dreams or treasured memories. Sol chooses to die in an earthly paradise of sorts. As Beethoven's *Pastorale* pumps out, the screen blossoms with images of fields of flowers, coursing water, leaping deer, birds in flight.

Thorn arrives at this scene distraught after finding a note from Sol, too late to stop Sol but in time to share his vision of Eden. He then sets about following Sol's body as it is bagged and taken from the euthanasia centre. His journey is an expulsion from Eden into the hell of the hungry envisioned in the medieval texts. For the plankton have also now died, and *Soylent green*, Thorn, discovers, is being stamped out on the factory belts of this brave new world from human bodies. The punishment for our sins of pollution

and greed is hunger that leads us to the final act of degradation, cannibalism. And the subtext?

Hippies and Jonestown

Bur enough of these fantasies, what happens when real human beings go out there to create utopias? Nor surprisingly, they set about creating situations that look a whole lot like earthly paradises. For the flower children of the sexual revolution, on the one hand the garden turned out to be a mud-covered hillside on a pig farm in upstate New York and on the other it was cakes melting in the rain of Macarthur Park and electric Kool-Aid acid trips. If you couldn't be with the one you loved then you could love the one you're with. There were geodesic domes, the whole earth catalogue, communes, wholemeal, vegetables and sacred cows. Wage-slavery was out. Self-sufficiency, bartering, community roof raising, dealing were in. Private property was out. Childbirth was back in a big way, unfortunately it still was painful though de-technologized. Joni Mitchell 'came upon a child of god, walking along the road' and asked him where he was going. 'He said, I'm going down to Yasgar's farm, going to join in a rock and roll band, got to get back to the land, and I'm gonna set my soul free. We are stardust, we are golden, we are billion year old carbon, and we've got to get ourselves back to the Garden'. She and half a million others went along with him to 'lose the smog'. They were 'cogs in something turning'. From the stage, Max Yasgar himself exhorted the crowd to remember char the man next to them was their brother. Babies were born in the mud. They chanced away rhe rain, bearing tin cans. And Jimi shredded the Star-Spangled Banner for breakfast. All over the country they packed up and went looking for a cause. Jim Kantner and David Crosby saw chem as survivors of some holocaust eating purple berries and setting sail in 'wooden ships on the water, very free and easy, easy, the way you know it's supposed to be' to where 'silver people on the shoreline let us be'. Neil Young saw silver, too, but for him, after the gold rush were 'silver spaceships flying in the yellow haze of the sun' 'flying Mother Nature's silver seed to a new home in the sun'. And the Jefferson Airplane turned in Jefferson Starship, hijacked a rocket and sent 7000 people, hydroponic gardens and baby trees across the sky to wander through the planets of the universe, talking 'about free minds, free bodies, free dope, free music' The tree of knowledge now had a five f fingered leaf, or blood red flowers. It grew from spores underground or like little buttons on cacti. And the greatest source of all was a fungus char a millennium ago brought visions to the Lenten starving. The road through Yasgar's farm led to places less benign than the vinyl worlds of the San Francisco singer songwriters. The Garden would become the clearing in the Guyanese jungles to which Jim Jones and over 1 000 members of the People Temple would flee as the church's US operations came increasingly under scrutiny by the press, politicians like Leo Ryan and the family and friends of cult members. Jones' church had promised a world where racial boundaries were demolished; where the homeless would find shelter and family; where poverty and hunger would be eliminated through a return self-sufficiency from agrarian effort. Sex was kinda snarly, though. Jones himself was apparently obsessively bisexual bur punished homosexuality among his followers. He boasted of having up to 20 fucks a day bur the sex life of followers was strictly patrolled. There was no private wealth, except for Jones'. By the time the press got onto it, the utopian vision peddled by Jones for his comunards had begun to go sour. The tree of knowledge in this case was growing outside the Garden and starting to attract defectors. Bur god was in no mood to let anyone out of Eden this time. And it was raspberry Kool-Aid mixed with tranquilizers and cyanide that ended it all.

Next time, kids, stick to the apple juice.