

A Weary Man's Utopia

He called it "Utopia," a Greek word which means "there is no such place."

Quevedo

No two mountain peaks are alike, but anywhere on earth the plains are one and the same. I was riding down a road across the plains. I asked myself without much curiosity whether I was in Oklahoma or Texas or the region that literary men call "the pampas." There was not a fence to left or right. As on other occasions, I slowly murmured these lines, more or less from Emilio Oribe:

Riding through the ongoing, ongoing and interminable
Terrifying plains, near the frontier of Brazil . . .

The road was rutted and uneven. Rain began to fall. Some two or three hundred yards down the road, I saw the light of a house. It was squat and rectangular and surrounded by trees. The door was opened by a man so tall it almost frightened me. He was dressed in gray. I sensed that he was waiting for someone. There was no latch or lock on the door.

We went inside, into a long room with walls of exposed wood. From the ceiling hung a lamp that gave a yellowish light. The table seemed odd, somehow. There was a water clock on the table, the first I'd ever seen, save for the occasional steel engraving in dictionaries and encyclopedias. The man motioned me to one of the chairs.

I tried several languages, but we couldn't make ourselves understood to each other. When he spoke, it was in Latin. I gathered my recollections of my distant student days and girded myself for conversation.

"By your clothing," he said, "I can see that you have come from another time. The diversity of languages encouraged the diversity of nations, and even encouraged war; the earth has returned to Latin. There are those who fear that it will degenerate into French, Limousine, or Papiamento, but the

danger is not imminent. And in any case, neither that which has been nor that which is to be holds any interest for me."

I said nothing; the man went on.

"If it does not repulse you to see another person eat, would you like to join me?"

I realized that he had seen that I was at an utter loss, so I said I would.

We went down a corridor with several doors leading off it and came into a small kitchen in which everything was made of metal. We returned to the first room with our dinner on a tray: bowls of cornflakes, a bunch of grapes, a fruit that was unknown to me but whose taste was something like a fig, and a large pitcher of water. I don't believe there was any bread. My host's features were sharp, and there was something peculiar about his eyes. I shall never forget that stern, pale face that I shall never see again. He did not gesture with his hands when he talked.

I was a bit tongue-tied by having to speak Latin, but at last I said:

"You are not astounded by my sudden appearance here?"

"No," he replied, "every century or so we receive these visits. They do not last long; you will be back home by tomorrow, at the latest."

The certainty in his voice relieved me. I thought it proper to introduce myself:

"I am Eudoro Acevedo. I was born in 1897 in the city of Buenos Aires. I am now seventy years old, a professor of English and American literature and a writer of tales of fantasy."

"I remember having read without displeasure," he said, "two tales of fantasy—the *Travels of Captain Lemuel Gulliver*, which many people believe to have really taken place, and the *Summa Theologica*. But let us not talk of facts. No one cares about facts anymore. They are mere points of departure for speculation and exercises in creativity. In school we are taught Doubt, and the Art of Forgetting—especially forgetting all that is personal and local. We live in time, which is successive, but we try to live *sub specie aeternitatis*. There are a few names from the past that are still with us, though the language tends to forget them. We avoid pointless precision. There is no chronology or history; no statistics, either. You told me your name is Eudoro; I cannot tell you mine, because everyone calls me 'somebody' or 'you.'"

"But what was your father's name?"

"He had none."

On one of the walls I noticed a bookshelf. I opened a volume at random; the letters were clear and indecipherable and written by hand. Their angular lines reminded me of the runic alphabet, though it had been used

only for inscriptions. It occurred to me that the people of the future were not only taller, they were more skilled as well. I instinctively looked at the man's long elegant fingers.

"Now," he said to me, "you are going to see something you have never seen before."

He carefully handed me a copy of More's *Utopia*, the volume printed in Basel in 1518; some pages and illustrations were missing.

It was not without some smugness that I replied:

"It is a printed book. I have more than two thousand at home, though they are not as old or as valuable."

I read the title aloud.

The man laughed.

"No one can read two thousand books. In the four hundred years I have lived, I've not read more than half a dozen. And in any case, it is not the reading that matters, but the rereading. Printing, which is now forbidden, was one of the worst evils of mankind, for it tended to multiply unnecessary texts to a dizzying degree."

"In that strange yesterday from which I have come," I replied, "there prevailed the superstition that between one evening and the next morning, events occur that it would be shameful to have no knowledge of. The planet was peopled by spectral collectives—Canada, Brazil, the Swiss Congo, the Common Market. Almost no one knew the prior history of those Platonic entities, yet everyone was informed of the most trivial details of the latest conference of pedagogues or the imminent breaking off of relations between one of these entities and another and the messages that their presidents sent back and forth—composed by a secretary to the secretary, and in the prudent vagueness that the form requires.

"All this was no sooner read than forgotten, for within a few hours it would be blotted out by new trivialities. Of all functions, that of the politician was without doubt the most public. An ambassador or a minister was a sort of cripple who had to be transported in long, noisy vehicles surrounded by motorcyclists and grenadiers and stalked by eager photographers. One would have thought their feet had been cut off, my mother used to say. Images and the printed word were more real than things. People believed only what they could read on the printed page. The principle, means, and end of our singular conception of the world was *esse est percipi*—'to be is to be portrayed.' In the past I lived in, people were credulous; they believed that a piece of merchandise was good because the manufacturer of

that piece of merchandise said it was. Robbery was also a frequent occurrence, though everyone knew that the possession of money brings with it neither greater happiness nor greater peace of mind."

"Money?" my host repeated. "No one any longer suffers poverty, which must have been unbearable—nor suffers wealth, for that matter, which must have been the most uncomfortable form of vulgarity. Every person now has a job to perform."

"Like rabbis," I said.

He seemed not to understand; he continued on.

"There are no cities, either. To judge by the ruins of Bahía Blanca,* which curiosity once led me to explore, it's no great loss. Since there are no possessions, there is no inheritance. When a man reaches a hundred years of age, he is ready to confront himself and his solitude. He will have engendered one child."

"One child?" I asked.

"Yes. One. It is not advisable that the human race be too much encouraged. There are those who think that awareness of the universe is a faculty that comes from the deity, yet no one knows for a certainty whether this deity exists. I believe that what is being discussed now is the advantages and disadvantages of the gradual or simultaneous suicide of every person on earth. But let us return to the matter at hand."

I nodded.

"When the individual has reached a hundred years of age, he is able to do without love and friendship. Illness and inadvertent death are not things to be feared. He practices one of the arts, or philosophy or mathematics, or plays a game of one-handed chess. When he wishes, he kills himself. When a man is the master of own life, he is also the master of his death."

"Is that a quotation?" I asked.

"Of course. There is nothing but quotations left for us. Our language is a system of quotations."

"What about the great adventure of my times—space travel?" I asked.

"It's been hundreds of years since we have done any of that traveling about—though it was undoubtedly admirable. We found we could never escape the here and now."

Then, with a smile he added:

"And besides, every journey is a journey through space. Going from one planet to another is much like going to the farm across the way. When you stepped into this room, you were engaging in space travel."

"That's true," I replied. "There was also much talk of 'chemical substances' and 'zoological animals.'"

The man now turned his back to me and looked out the windows. Outside, the plains were white with silent snow and moonlight.

I emboldened myself to ask:

"Are there still museums and libraries?"

"No. We want to forget the past, save for the composition of elegies. There are no commemorations or anniversaries or portraits of dead men. Each person must produce on his own the arts and sciences that he has need for."

"In that case, every man must be his own Bernard Shaw, his own Jesus Christ, and his own Archimedes."

He nodded wordlessly.

"What happened to the governments?" I inquired.

"It is said that they gradually fell into disuse. Elections were called, wars were declared, taxes were levied, fortunes were confiscated, arrests were ordered, and attempts were made at imposing censorship—but no one on the planet paid any attention. The press stopped publishing pieces by those it called its 'contributors,' and also publishing their obituaries. Politicians had to find honest work; some became comedians, some witch doctors—some excelled at those occupations. The reality was no doubt more complex than this summary."

Then his tone changed, and he said:

"I have built this house, which is like all other houses. I have built these furnishings and made these household goods. I have worked in the fields, though other men, whose faces I have not seen, may well have worked them better. I can show you some things."

I followed him into an adjoining room. He lighted a lamp, which also hung from the ceiling. In one corner I saw a harp; it had very few strings. On the walls hung rectangular paintings in which the color yellow predominated. They did not look as if the same hand had painted them all.

"This is my work," he said.

I examined the paintings, and I stopped before the smallest of them, which portrayed, or suggested, a sunset, though there was something of the infinite about it.

"If you like it, you may take it back with you, as a souvenir of a future friend," he said serenely.

I thanked him, but the other canvases disturbed me. I will not say that they were blank, but they were almost blank.

"They are painted with colors that your ancient eyes cannot see."

His delicate hands plucked the strings of the harp and I could hear faint occasional notes.

It was then that the banging began.

A tall woman and three or four men came into the house. One would have said they were brothers and sister, or that time had made them resemble one another. My host spoke first to the woman:

"I knew you would not fail to come tonight. Have you seen Nils?"

"Every few evenings. He is still mad about painting."

"Let us hope he has better luck at it than his father had."

Manuscripts, paintings, furniture, household goods—we left nothing in the house.

The woman worked as hard as the men. I felt embarrassed at my own weakness, which kept me from being much help to them. No one closed the door as, loaded down with our burden, we left. I noticed that the house had a peaked roof.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, we turned toward the left. In the distance I saw a kind of tower, crowned with a dome.

"It is the crematory," someone said. "The death chamber is inside. They say it was invented by a philanthropist whose name, I believe, was Adolf Hitler."

The caretaker, whose height did not take me aback, opened the gate to us.

My host whispered a few words. Before going in, he waved good-bye.

"There'll be more snow," the woman announced.

In my study on Calle México still hangs the canvas that someone will paint, thousands of years from now, with substances that are now scattered across the planet.