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Résumé de l'article

This essay sets itself two objectives. The first objective is to call attention to how Calvino looks at the visual style of Charles Fourier’s writings as a model of utopianism that aspires to achieve a maximum degree of ekphrastic effect and vision. To this model, as it is shown, Calvino opposes a perspective consisting of envisioning utopia not in the form of fullness and plenitude (the fullness and plenitude of a perspicuous and complete picture) but in the form of glimpses and fragments. The second objective is to bring into focus the restrained ekphrastic force of Calvino’s utopia that emerges, most prominently in Le città invisibili. As it is argued, this restrained ekphrasis generates a utopianism without utopia, the author’s response to the crisis of contemporary utopian imagination.

Utopia and Ekphrasis: Italo Calvino's View

Luca Pocci

Abstract: This essay sets itself two objectives. The first objective is to call attention to how Calvino looks at the visual style of Charles Fourier's writings as a model of utopianism that aspires to achieve a maximum degree of ekphrastic effect and vision. To this model, as it is shown, Calvino opposes a perspective consisting of envisioning utopia not in the form of fullness and plenitude (the fullness and plenitude of a perspicuous and complete picture) but in the form of glimpses and fragments. The second objective is to bring into focus the restrained ekphrastic force of Calvino's utopia that emerges, most prominently in *Le città invisibili.* As it is argued, this restrained ekphrasis generates a utopianism without utopia, the author's response to the crisis of contemporary utopian imagination.

Introduction: Seeing through words or the ekphrastic tendency of utopian writing

In what follows, I bring together an author, Italo Calvino, and a topic, utopia. More specifically, in exploring Calvino's reflection on the question of utopia, my goal is to foreground aspects of this reflection that have not received the critical attention they deserve. It would be tempting to say that my focus is on Calvino's utopian vision, but I will not say that for one simple reason: the main argument I will develop is that Calvino's reflection does not generate a full-blown utopian vision; rather, it results in the tentative sketch of a tenuous, though not imaginatively negligible, utopian outlook. In fact, I will argue that the absence of a vision is intentional—if vision is understood as the vivid representation of a clear and coherent big picture. In other words, my contention is that this absence is not the result of a failure to think utopia in the form of a definite and complete structure. It is the consequence of a choice; the choice of envisioning utopia in the form of glimpses and partial or incomplete images.

To start with, Calvino's approach to utopia should be discussed in conjunction with a characteristic of his intellectual mindset that has been highlighted by a number of scholars. I refer to Calvino's interest in the relationship between the textual and the visual, an interest that lies at the very heart of the "imago-centric program," to borrow Franco Ricci's expression, of Calvino's writing and mode of thinking (17). This "imago-centric program," a creative process triggered by the generative force of visual images,[1] is, in turn, the source of what I would define as verbal pictorialism, by which I mean a use of the written word that aims at moulding the reader's imagi(ni)ng activity through a "painterly" style. I must clarify that I take the term pictorialism from W. J. T. Mitchell, author of several seminal works in the cross-disciplinary field of visual theory, for example *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986) and *Picture Theory* (1994), to name the most influential of all. Ricci himself, who also draws on Mitchell's theory, provides an effectively succinct description of Calvino's verbal pictorialism, which he calls "visual writing style": "It has been acknowledged that Calvino's narrative is subtended by a visual writing style that is primarily descriptive in nature. His discourse proceeds by a series of synecdochic or metonymic details which stand, as it were, for the totality of items being represented" (17).

It is important to stress that the roots of the notion of pictorialism can be traced back to classical rhetoric, in particular to the Greek term *enárgeia* (whose Latin equivalent is *evidentia*, and whose most common synonym is *hypotyposis*),[2] which denotes a vivid description, the kind of verbal vividness that conveys to readers the impression of seeing the described contents. In the vocabulary of ancient rhetoric, *enárgeia* is a technique or principle that calls to mind the category known as ekphrasis whose semantic evolution is worth mentioning. In modern literary criticism, ekphrasis designates the verbal description of a visual object or

[1] Along with Ricci's study, for an in-depth discussion of the interplay between the textual and the visual in Calvino's oeuvre, see Marco Belpoliti, the volumes by Mario Barenghi and colleagues, and the volume by Birgitte Grundtvig and colleagues.

[2] Bice Mortara Garavelli defines *enárgeia* or *hypotyposis* as follows: "È il 'porre davanti agli occhi', in evidenza, appunto, l'oggetto della comunicazione, mettendone in luce particolari caratterizzanti, per concentrare su di esso l'immaginazione (*phantasía*, in greco; *visio*, in latino) dell'ascoltatore, la sua capacità di raffigurarsi nella mente ciò di cui si parla, di tradurre le parole in immagini" ("It is highlighting and 'bringing before the reader's eyes' the subject matter of communication, by placing emphasis on its characterizing details. In this way, the listener's imagination (*phantasía*, in Greek; *visio* in Latin), their capacity to picture and translate words into mental images can focus on what is being said"; 238).

work of art, either real (for instance, Moreau's paintings in J. K. Huysmans's *A Rebours*) or fictional (the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*). However, in late antiquity, ekphrasis carried a broader meaning that coincided essentially with the meaning of *enárgeia*. Ekphrasis was the art of combining words by means of *enárgeia* so as to create a vividly visual style.[3] The very same style, I would like to suggest, that in Thomas More's *Utopia* is attributed to the author, to More himself. In one of the prefatory letters included in the paratext, Peter Giles maintains that More's achievement consists in having given a written account of the island of Utopia even more vivid than the oral account offered by the traveler Raphael Hythloday, who has seen the island with his own eyes. This is what Giles says about the model island and its description: "[A] man of great eloquence has represented, painted, and set it before our eyes in such a way that, as often as I read it, I think I see far more than when, being as much a part of the effective conversation as More himself, I heard Raphael Hythloday's own words sounding in my ears" (qtd. in More 151). And a few lines later, after observing that Raphael Hythloday had a "special skill of his own in unfolding his narrative," Giles concludes: "Nevertheless, when I contemplate the same picture as painted by More's brush, I am as affected as though I were sometimes actually living in Utopia itself" (151).

Peter Giles's words deserve to be highlighted as they draw our attention to the close link that connects the act of writing about the ideal no-place with the search for an ekphrastic effect to be obtained through literary pictorialism. That this close link is not a negligible detail but a significant circumstance is confirmed by Carlo Ginzburg, for whom More's account, in light of Peter Giles's letter, *wants* to be a description of the ideal no-place "that gives one the feeling of being there" (3). Hence, what Ginzburg contends is that writing about the subject of utopia means, in More's text, crafting a depiction rather than a description; a depiction, we could add, that aspires to be verbally vivid by presenting itself as an example

[3] The difference between the modern meaning of ekphrasis and its meaning in antiquity has been underscored by Hans Lund, among others: "In the rhetorical tradition of antiquity ekphrasis is connected with *enargeia*, that is the art of describing in such a way that it seems to the beholder that he observes the verbally described objects vividly before his eyes. In modern literary criticism the term ekphrasis has acquired a more restricted meaning: 'the poet-reader-viewer's reaction to actual or imagined works of art' (Amy Golahny) or 'verbal representation of visual representation' (Heffernan)'" (256). It is worth mentioning that since the 1950s there has been a resurgence of interest in the long history of ekphrasis and on its transformation, as a minor genre, over time. This has been possible especially thanks to the influence exerted by Murray Krieger and James A. W. Heffernan, the most prominent experts in the field.

of ekphrasis as *enárgeia*. Interestingly, the close link between writing about utopia and ekphrasis is not an exclusive characteristic of More's book—to which we famously owe the term utopia itself, with its playful double meaning: no-place (*ou-topos*) and good place (*eu-topos*). It is a link that can be identified in subsequent classics of the Western utopian tradition, including the writings of Charles Fourier (1772–1837), author of *Théorie des quatre mouvements* and *Le Nouveau monde amoureux*. The French social theorist merits particular attention not so much because he is one of the key figures in post-Enlightenment utopian thought, but because he is the utopianist that attracted Calvino the most.

Calvino became interested in Fourier in 1968, at a time when Europe and the Western world were swept by a pervasive wave of utopianism in the field of political action. During that eventful year, Calvino was living in Paris where he witnessed firsthand the vigorous energy of this utopian wave, with thousands of students taking to the streets to demand *l'imagination au pouvoir*. Naturally, the historical context acts as a catalyst prompting Calvino to turn to the works of the one utopian thinker, Fourier, who had anticipated, arguably better than anybody else, the desire to transform *le pouvoir* into the (utopian) site of the free play of political imagination. And, more importantly, Calvino does not limit himself to reading Fourier to simply satisfy a temporary intellectual curiosity for a bizarrely original social theorist. On the contrary, it is the method that feeds the extravagant Fourierian imagination that appeals to him. Giovanna Rizzarelli has pointed out that Calvino is drawn to this method for its blending of "spirito visionario e rigore geometrico" ("visionary spirit and geometrical rigour"; 219),[4] while Letizia Modena has shown that it is one of the key sources of Calvino's understanding of utopia as "something to think *with* not just something to think *about*" (48–49). In view of the above, there is no surprise in the fact that Calvino's encounter with the "Ariosto degli utopisti"[5] results in his publishing three essays in the aftermath of the 1968 students' revolt: "Per Fourier 1. La società amorosa" (1971), "Per Fourier 2. L'ordinatore dei desideri" (1971),[6] and "Per Fourier 3. Commiato. L'utopia pulviscolare" (1974). In all three essays (which, retrospectively, can be regarded as a

[4] All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

[5] As Calvino notes, the label "Ariosto degli utopisti" was attached to Fourier by some of his early readers ("Per Fourier 1. La società amorosa," 274).

[6] This essay serves as the introduction to an Einaudi anthology of Fourier's writings selected by Calvino. See Fourier, *Teoria dei quattro movimenti*.

trilogy), the focus is less on the "'what" than on the "how" of Fourier's utopia, less on "what" is said than on "how" it is said. It is the style rather than the themes or contents that interests Calvino, a style in which Calvino detects a pronounced pictorialism and a strong ekphrastic intention.

In "La società amorosa," Fourier is praised for his "facoltà di *vedere* un mondo completamente diverso, di descriverlo nei più minuti particolari, di analizzarlo nel meccanismo delle sue motivazioni" ("ability to *see* a completely different world, to describe it in the most minute detail, and to analyze the mechanism of its motivations"; 275; Creagh, "On Fourier, I" 214). Likewise, in "L'utopia pulviscolare" Calvino contends that "[*V*]*edere* un possibile mondo diverso come già compiuto e operante è ben una presa di forza contro il mondo ingiusto, è negare la sua necessità esclusiva" ("Actually to *see* a possible different world that is already made and in operation is to be filled with indignation against a world that is unjust and to reject the idea that it is the only possible one"; 309; Creagh, "On Fourier, III" 248). In both cases, Fourier's imaginative process is grasped in explicitly visual terms. What is suggested is that this process consists firstly in mentally "visualizing" an inherently invisible object such as a utopian society, and secondly in transposing that literal invisibility into the metaphorical visibility resulting from an admirably pictorialist writing style. According to Calvino, then, Fourier gives us a vivid picture of the things that his imagination *sees*. He shows a remarkable ability to depict, rather than just describe, with words, thus prodding readers to contemplate what his visionary mind is able to picture. We could therefore argue that Peter Giles's words are echoed in Calvino's analysis of Fourier's utopian world; similarly to Thomas More, Calvino's Fourier relies on ekphrastic eloquence as a means to set his ideal society before the readers' eyes.

The crisis of utopian imagination

I will come back to Calvino's perspective on the interplay between constructing utopian worlds and writing as depicting. For the time being, I need to put this aside in order to address a more general question regarding his reflection on utopia. We can split the question in two: How does such reflection relate to the debate over the crisis of the utopian spirit in our time? What does it add to said debate? For the sake of clarity, a caveat is in order: the ongoing crisis of utopia and the debate it has generated in the past few decades are complex issues and would require an in-depth discussion which cannot be undertaken within the limits of this essay. Hence, I will restrict myself to the more modest task of providing a

panoramic overview of some of the most representative positions and principal concerns that have characterized the debate. However, before giving an overview of the debate on the crisis of utopia and Calvino's contribution to it, a preliminary problem must first be considered: What is the function of utopian thought? This is a fundamental problem, and overlooking it altogether would be a wrong option, given that its main implication is the cognitive value to be granted to thinking ideal no-places—blueprints for the perfect society—into fictional existence.

We can begin by noting that the works of Thomas More and Charles Fourier (and, to be sure, all the many other works whose subject matter is the ideal commonwealth, from Plato's *Republic* to Tommaso Campanella's *La città del sole*, from Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* to William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, to only name a few cases in point) confirm that utopia is always, *in primis*, an affirmation of the primacy of the possible over the actual or real. In this sense, the term utopia may be taken less as the label applied to a diverse and heterogeneous constellation of texts than as the designation of a form of thinking. More precisely, it may be understood as an eccentric, contrarian, and, in its best expressions, forceful form of critical thinking cast in a variety of modes and discourses (narrative, dialogic, speculative modes) frequently coexisting in one and the same text. If we take this view, we can argue that utopia's most valuable benefit, throughout history, has consisted in creating models of alternative social worlds, models whose function has been/is to critique an existing order of things by exposing its latent possibilities—the Blochian "not yet" present *in potentia* in that very order.[7] In critiquing the actual state of things from the standpoint of a realm of the possible oftentimes coloured with playfully absurdist elements (Fourier's ludic fantasy comes immediately to mind), utopianists bring to light ways of (re)making social and political reality which, in their absence, would remain unthought. As a result, we can say that the classics produced by the best utopian imagination perform an invaluable function not so much as experiments concerning unreal social orders, but, rather, as fictions (whether speculative or narrative) that submit the real, and its perceived familiarity and "naturalness," to a defamiliarizing treatment. In the space of utopia, the real, that which is the case, is transformed by deploying the corrective force of the possible, of that which may or may not/never be the case.

This defamiliarizing treatment is what Darko Suvin has termed "cognitive estrangement" (61), clearly in reference to Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*

[7] For a comprehensive discussion of Ernst Bloch's idea of "not yet" and his utopianism in general, see Daniel and Moylan.

(defamiliarization English).[8] Suvin contends that utopia is a sub-genre of a macro-genre, that of science fiction, and on the basis of such an intriguing (though not necessarily persuasive) thesis, proceeds to delimit the specific domain of the alleged sub-genre to texts that offer imaginary socio-economic alternatives. If we reason along these lines, the conclusion we come to is that cognitive estrangement achieved through the fiction of possible (and alternative) social orders is the common denominator of works belonging to the multifaceted realm of utopia. However, since utopian thought and its prime movers (utopian desire, imagination, and hope) exist across different discursive fields (philosophy, literature, political and social theory), utopia can be viewed, in contrast to Suvin's thesis, as a hybrid and loosely defined textual realm rather than as a subset of a particular genre. There is one advantage in adopting this position: we avoid the narrowness and rigidity of strict genre distinctions and lay emphasis on the idea that the realm of utopia is a *terra communis* of thought, a space characterized by the reciprocal cross-fertilization of different discourses and different genres.

Turning to the debate on the crisis of utopia and Calvino's role within such debate, it should be noted, right at the outset, that its focal point is the place that utopian thought occupies in today's political culture and praxis. That it has been, since 1945, a patently unimportant and peripheral place is hardly disputable. The reason usually adduced is the long and tragic shadow cast by the rise of totalitarian systems, by the devastating effects of two world wars, and by the horror of the Holocaust and the other genocides perpetrated over the course of the twentieth century. At the end of the day, it is owing to the burdensome memory of this bleak past if utopianism and utopia are not among the cool words or cool pastimes of our time. Even the few recent exceptions that we could mention—chief among them, the anti-globalization movement and the proliferation of intentional communities especially in North America—are, in fact, only exceptions to the norm

[8] Interestingly, a comment in the 1971 essay "Per Fourier 2. L'ordinatore dei desideri" shows that Calvino had called attention to the connection between utopian thought and cognitive estrangement (at least in reference to Fourier) earlier than Suvin, whose 1979 book on science fiction and utopia appeared in Italian translation only in 1985 (see Suvin, *Le metamorfosi della fantascienza*). Here is Calvino's comment: "[L]e prime operazioni che [Fourier] chiede a chi l'ascolta sono il *doute absolu* e l'*écart absolu*, cioè di mettere in discussione e allontanare da sé tutto ciò che è stato detto e pensato fin qui in fatto di filosofia e soprattutto di morale" ("The first things he asks of those who will listen to him are *doute absolu* and *écart absolui*—that is, that one should question and put aside everything that has been said and thought until now in terms of philosophy and above all of morality"; 281; Creagh, "On Fourier, II" 221).

or, to put it otherwise, deviations from the dominant *Zeitgeist*. It is safe to maintain that the 1960s is the only time period since the end of the Second World War during which a robust outburst of utopianism actually penetrated into society at large (at least in Europe and North America), feeding politically radical projects and sparking new types of militant activism.

This is the scenario of crisis that has prompted a vast array of prominent voices from a range of disciplines (philosophy, sociology, political science) to pronounce unmistakably pessimistic verdicts. Here are some illustrative examples. In short, for Russell Jacoby the poverty of our present is signalled by the dominance of socio-political nearsightedness at the expense of farsighted or telescopic vistas, the result being the deterioration of utopia into myopia (101–24). By the same token, Jürgen Habermas has talked of "the desert of banality and bewilderment" produced by the drying-up of "utopian oases" (68), while the gist of Zygmunt Bauman's dense analysis is that "liquid modernity" (his label for the current historical epoch) has liquidated utopia by liquefying utopia's core substance, its forward looking impulse, and substituting this impulse with "retrotopia," a nostalgic desire for idealized pasts. In line with Bauman, Ruth Levitas has focused her criticism on the anemic constitution of contemporary utopian thought, a condition that she attributes to a lack of progressive orientation and transformative intent. Drawing on Ernst Bloch's distinction between abstract utopia (which is inherently compensatory) and concrete utopia (which is about changing a social and political reality), Levitas laments the disappearance of the latter and of its healthy "capacity to inspire the pursuit of a world transformed, to embody hope rather than simply desire" (28).

To conclude this rapid survey of unfavourable diagnoses, we could add the skeptical, if not pessimistic, voices of two influential literary critics, Fredric Jameson and Chris Ferns. Briefly put, Jameson has insisted that nowadays, more than ever, utopian thought and its constructs can only perform a negative rather than affirmative task, for all they are able to do is "bring home in local and determinate ways, and with a fullness of concrete detail, our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself" (147–48). As for Ferns, he claims that the truth about utopia, today, is simple: a certain degree of attention to its meaning and fate can indeed be found in academic circles, but this is hardly a sign of the current vitality of utopia itself, given that, in his words, "the academy is where ideas end up when they have nowhere else to go" (1).

There is no doubt that Calvino perceived the crisis of utopia as early as during the aftermath of 1968, when the utopian fervour that had spread through

most of the Western world was beginning to evaporate, eventually leaving room, a few years down the road (mainly in countries like Italy and the former Federal Republic of Germany), to the dystopian violence of revolutionary *lotta armata* ("armed struggle"). But, having said that, where and how can Calvino fit into the debate that I have quickly sketched? In answering this question, I want to premise that there exists a relation between Calvino's interest in utopia and his concern with the weakening, and even loss, of what he defines as a basic human faculty. What is this basic human faculty? In the essay on visibility included in *Lezioni americane*, he describes it as "il potere di mettere a fuoco visioni a occhi chiusi, di far scaturire colori e forme dall'allineamento di caratteri alfabetici neri su una pagina bianca, di *pensare* per immagini" (707; "the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters on a white page, and in fact of *thinking* in terms of images"; Creagh, *Six Memos* 92). Calvino believed that "il potere di mettere a fuoco visioni a occhi chiusi […] di *pensare* per immagini" was an endangered faculty that risked disappearing within our civilization, the "civiltà dell'immagine" ("civilization of images"; 707; Creagh, *Six Memos* 92). In sum, what he feared was nothing less than an ongoing process of anthropological impoverishment:

> Il potere di evocare immagini *in assenza* continuerà a svilupparsi in un'umanità sempre più inondata dal diluvio delle immagini prefabbricate? […] Oggi siamo bombardati da una tale quantità d'immagini da non saper più distinguere l'esperienza diretta da ciò che abbiamo visto per pochi secondi alla televisione. La memoria è ricoperta da strati di frantumi d'immagini come un deposito di spazzatura, dove è sempre più difficile che una figura fra le tante riesca ad acquistare rilievo. (707)

> Will the power of evoking images of things that are *not there* continue to develop in a human race increasingly inundated by a flood of prefabricated images? […] We are bombarded today by such a quantity of images that we can no longer distinguish direct experience from what we have seen for a few seconds on television. The memory is littered with bits and pieces of images, like a rubbish dump, and it is more and more unlikely that any one form among so many will succeed in standing out. (Creagh, *Six Memos* 91–92)

The endangered faculty, according to Calvino, is something that has to do with what we could term imaginative literacy. It is the capacity to bring into view things that are not visible, to catch sight of that which can only be pictured by means of our imagination. The implicit reference is to the classic distinction between two ways of looking/seeing: the way of looking belonging to an intelligent eye engaged in *intelligere* (from the Latin *intus legere*)—in reading through and within the outer appearance of phenomena—and the mental seeing deriving from an inner eye capable of reaching beyond the immediacy of sense experience and the here and now.

In Calvino's oeuvre, the first of these ways of looking/seeing is associated, in particular, with the eponymous protagonist of *Palomar*, while the second is epitomized, without any doubt, by Marco Polo in *Le città invisibili*. If imaginative literacy, for Calvino, means not just "*pensare* per immagini" but "evocare immagini *in assenza*," then it is legitimate to suggest that Signor Palomar's vision is, by itself, inescapably incomplete and insufficient. It is limited to and by the visible and, as such, it needs to be supplemented with the seeing beyond—with the *visione dell'invisibile*,[9] to cite the felicitous title of a collection of essays on Calvino—exemplified by the fictional counterpart of the Venetian merchant. As a result, a broad field of vision seems to obtain, in a Calvinian sense, if Signor Palomar's intelligent eye meets the enhancing potential of Marco Polo's imaginative eye. It is fitting to recall that in a letter to François Wahl written two decades before the publication of the essay on visibility, Calvino maintained that the only thing he wished to teach was "un modo di guardare, cioè di essere in mezzo al mondo. In fondo la letteratura non può insegnare altro" ("a way of looking, that is to say, of being in the midst of the world. After all, literature cannot teach anything else"; "Lettera a François Wahl" 669). This way of seeing and of being in the midst of the world, which is mentioned without any explanation or clarification, may be the combination of the different ways of looking/seeing of the protagonists of *Palomar* and *Le città invisibili*.[10]

[9] See note 1.

[10] That Calvino's characters are prone to encounter the world principally through vision (so that "I" and "eye" come to almost coincide) is a well-established fact among critics. With regard to the protagonists of *Le città invisibili* and *Palomar*, in particular, Grundtvig talks of a "cartographic eye" bent on mapping both the visible and the invisible. Also, an interesting point she makes is that *Palomar* shows a problematizing representation of the cognitive force of this

What is more important for our purposes is that Calvino's concern with the weakening of the ability to evoke "immagini in assenza" implies a concern with utopian imagination as well, with thinking in the sense of envisioning utopia(s). After all, utopian thinking is an expression of imaginative literacy. Thus, a discussion of Calvino's reflection on utopia—a reflection, as we know, that takes place, explicitly and primarily, in the trilogy of essays devoted to Fourier–must consider and include the essay on visibility. This move is advantageous for two reasons: on the one hand, it helps us gain a (more) thorough understanding of Calvino's approach to utopia; on the other, it allows us to situate Calvino's approach within the contemporary debate on the crisis of utopian thinking.

Against the crisis of utopian imagination: Calvino's *utopia pulviscolare* or utopianism without utopia

We, then, have to return to Calvino's trilogy of essays on Fourier and highlight again one key common point: a keen appreciation for the ekphrastic force of Fourier's language and for his ability to depict a utopian totality, an alternative social world complete in all its features and details. It is worth mentioning, even just in passing, how, in the same years in which Calvino was writing about Fourier's verbal pictorialism, Roland Barthes was also placing that very style under scrutiny in what would eventually become one of the chapters of *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*.[11] Interestingly, Barthes's contention that "the imagination of detail is what defines Utopia" (105) seems to be an indirect acknowledgment of the ekphrastic purpose that distinguishes utopianists (including Fourier, of course) in their use of language. However, Barthes's real interest in Fourier lies elsewhere. It lies not in the way in which the post-Enlightenment social theorist *shapes language to talk about utopia* but, rather, in the fact that, as a "logothete," he (allegedly) *invents his own language for utopia*. This is a language that combines together the extremes of taxonomic enthusiasm (a strong eagerness to organize the subject matter by classifying and enumerating everything) and lighthearted, gleeful fantasy.

"cartographic eye," a problematizing representation that confirms the decline of the primacy of vision in Calvino's late works (172–74 and 178–82).

[11] *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (a trilogy of essays, each dedicated to the "logothete" or founder of a different language: respectively, the language of erotic pleasure, the language of social happiness, the language of divine address) and two of Calvino's writings on Fourier ("La società amorosa" and "L'ordinatore dei desideri") were all first published in 1971.

It is, therefore, in Calvino's analysis, not in Barthes's study, that a manifest emphasis on the pictorialist thrust of Fourier's writing takes centre stage. And precisely in light of this distinctive aspect of Calvino's analysis, one concluding observation would seem to (naturally) arise. We could phrase it as follows: Calvino's fascination with the flamboyantly ekphrastic quality of Fourier's utopian edifice is proof that the function the Italian writer assigns to utopia in the present is (or, better yet, continues to be) the verbal depiction of complete (and determinate in all of their parts) alternative worlds. In line with this, Fourier's pictorialist writing, his capacity to set before the readers' eyes a utopian totality, would be for Calvino the model to advocate and imitate. However, the problem with such an inference is its being not only hasty but wrong. Calvino himself helps us refute it. In one of the essays of his trilogy, "Per Fourier 3. Commiato. L'utopia pulviscolare" (the third and last in order of publication), he writes: "[O]ggi l'utopia che cerco non è più solida di quanto non sia gassosa: è un'utopia polverizzata, corpuscolare, sospesa" ("The utopia I am looking for today is less solid than gaseous: it is a utopia of fine dust, corpuscular, and in suspension"; 314; Creagh, "On Fourier, III" 255). According to Kerstin Pilz, the adjectives "polverizzata," "corpuscolare," and "sospesa," along with "pulviscolare" which features in the title of the essay, allude to the "Lucretian physics of turbulence and fluidity," an allusion that would signal "Calvino's move towards an alternative epistemology, which hails the recognition of disorder and randomness, as a return of physics to nature" (136). Pilz's insightful comment is doubtless supported by Calvino's insistence in one of his most oft-quoted critical pieces, "Cibernetica e fantasmi,"[12] on a sort of shift of

[12] This is what Calvino writes in "Cibernetica e fantasmi": "Nel modo in cui la cultura d'oggi vede il mondo, c'è una tendenza che affiora contemporaneamente da varie parti: il mondo nei suoi vari aspetti viene visto sempre più come *discreto* e non come *continuo*. Impiego il termine 'discreto' nel senso che ha in matematica: quantità 'discreta' cioè che si compone di parti separate. Il pensiero, che fino a ieri ci appariva come qualcosa di fluido, evocava in noi immagini lineari come un fiume che scorre o un filo che si sdipana, oppure immagini gassose, come una specie di nuvola, tant'è vero che veniva spesso chiamato 'lo spirito',-oggi tendiamo a vederlo come una serie di stati discontinui, di combinazioni di impulsi su un numero finito (un numero enorme ma finito) di organi sensori e di controllo" ("In the particular way today's culture looks at the world, one tendency is emerging from several directions at once. The world in its various aspects is increasingly looked upon as *discrete* rather than *continuous*. I am using the term 'discrete' in the sense it bears in mathematics, a 'discrete' quantity being one made up of separate parts. Thought, which until the other day appeared to us as something fluid, evoking linear images such as a flowing river or an unwinding thread, or else gaseous images such as a kind of vaporous cloud—to the point where it was sometimes called 'spirit' (in the

paradigm that would have recently come to pass, first and foremost in science, but in the humanities and literature as well. This is the shift from a conception of thinking and reality as unities of continuous processes to a conception based on the mathematical notion of the discrete, whereby thinking and reality tend to be seen, more and more, as multiplicities of discontinuous states.

The portrait of a "Lucretian" Calvino painted by Pilz is particularly notable and relevant for its epistemic focal point. But the adjectives Calvino employs to describe the utopia he is seeking also hint at a poietic concern, and as a result they can be interpreted as metaphors for the epistemic hope and the poietic scope that he attributes to utopianism in the present. Epistemic hope and poietic scope refer, respectively, to the level of cognitive gain that utopian thought is expected to afford, and to the mode and extent in which such cognitive gain may be effectively disclosed or brought into view. Of course, in order to grasp these two interlaced dimensions of Calvino's idea of utopia in their specificity, we have to dwell on the adjectives "polverizzata," "corpuscolare," and "sospesa," each of which, on close inspection, presents itself as a variation on the theme or quality expressed by the term "pulviscolare." Each adjective relates to this quality by conveying the meanings of division, fragmentation, haziness, and indistinctness. It is, therefore, apparent that what Calvino wants to do is bring into play all the semantic nuances of "pulviscolare." The utopia he appeals to is "pulviscolare" in that it is composed of single bits and particles, and at the same time in the sense that it does not aim at resolving itself into a clearly distinguishable whole, a perspicuous totality. It is a piecemeal utopia that stays thin, undefined and volatile exactly like fine dust. As such it can be anything except a vision of Fourierian proportions, in terms of both poietic scope and epistemic hope.

The irony, then, is that Calvino admires Fourier, and yet when it comes to propose an idea of utopia for the present, he does not hesitate to dispose altogether of the French theorist's model. It is as though Fourier's model served not as a base or springboard for the utopian method that one must continue to cultivate but, rather, as the example of *that* method which is no longer viable and suitable today. As noted, through the terms "pulviscolare," "polverizzata," "corpuscolare," and "sospesa," Calvino gestures towards a fragmentary utopia made of single particulars with no unifying whole. This suggests that any aspiration to imagine an

sense of 'breath')—we now tend to think of as a series of discontinuous states, of combinations of impulses acting on a finite (though enormous) number of sensory and motor organs"; 209; Creagh, "Cybernetics and Ghosts" 7–8).

ideal totality complete in all its parts is relinquished in favour of a disposition to scan the present in search of utopian traces. We are now able to argue that Calvino sketches the contours of a solution to the problem of reimagining and rethinking utopia. The sketched solution consists in "seeing" or thinking utopia through images which, instead of converging into the detailed vision of a future *summum bonum*, yield discrete glimpses of possible (better) alternatives to the existing state of things within the present.[13]

What emerges quite clearly is that Calvino is interested not so much in utopia as in utopianism, not so much, that is, in the object or destination to which envisioning other forms of living is directed as in the envisioning process itself. It is, thus, no exaggeration to say that Calvino's solution entails the divorce of utopianism from utopia and, consequently, the affirmation of a conceptual stance that we can call utopianism without utopia. This is an open process to be promoted and sustained for its own sake and in the absence of any final picture functioning as a guiding ideal. From the perspective of utopianism without utopia, the place of utopia is literally and programmatically nowhere—neither elsewhere in space, as in ancient and Renaissance utopia, nor elsewhere in time, as in the future oriented post-Enlightenment *uchronia*. Bringing a whole vision into focus and anchoring the full picture of its otherness to an anticipated time to come and a reimagined social space is not the option Calvino is willing to endorse. It is the utopian glimmerings offered by the present that he prioritizes, thereby implicitly valorizing the presentness of the future rather than the futurity of the future itself. In this way, Calvino invites us to recognize the utopian possibilities woven, more or less latently, into the fabric of the present, to attend to their "presence," and to embrace them as glimpses of a desirable "not yet."

Having reviewed the main features of Calvino's "utopia pulviscolare" it is its value that remains to be discussed; what should we make of Calvino's proposal? Can we consider it a satisfactory answer to the crisis that is still plaguing the utopian imagination? In an insightful essay devoted to the originality of the notion of "utopia pulviscolare," Francesco Muzzioli argues that Calvino's goal is to place

[13] According to Domenico Scarpa, "tra gli aspetti di Marx più apprezzati dal giovane Calvino c'è proprio la sua riluttanza a fornire un'immagine dettagliata della futura società comunista" ("one of the aspects of Marx's thought that Calvino appreciated the most is precisely Marx's reluctance to provide a detailed image of the future communist society"; 252). Based on Scarpa's remark, it might be argued that the mature Calvino's refusal to "see" the function of utopia as the complete vision of a redeemed world represents an echo of the young Calvino's reading of Marx.

emphasis on "quei particolari appena visibili, eppure capillarmente proliferanti, che stimolano l'immaginazione a porre in questione l'esistente" ("those hardly visible, yet widely proliferating, details that stimulate the imagination into questioning the existing state of things"; 155). The protagonist of *Palomar* is, for Muzzioli, the fictional spokesperson for this uncommon model of utopia. In his own words, Signor Palomar is "il rigoroso antieroe di questa utopia 'polverizzata', che è, come giusto, un'utopia antiutopica: se ormai l'altrove viene situato all'interno del luogo più consueto e familiare" ("the rigorous antihero of this utopia of 'fine dust' which is, as it should be, an anti-utopian utopia, if the elsewhere has come to be situated within the most familiar and habitual place"; 155). Muzzioli's remark implies two consequences. First, the barely discernible particulars that serve to call "l'esistente" into question are conceivable as visible parts of a utopian whole destined to remain invisible, that is to say unthought and unimagined. Second, the utopianism that Calvino advocates appears to be inspired by a desire that is neither predictive nor compensatory; it is a desire that is best defined as exploratory. Muzzioli's analysis confirms that in Calvino's utopianism we do not detect any concern with an ultimate, static image of the future to be pursued in its fullness; instead, we detect an intention to explore the present in search of partial possibilities beckoning to a better picture of the world. Accordingly, the value of this model would lie in the pragmatic, anti-idealistic privileging of the *hic et nunc* as the truly and only meaningful horizon or chronotope for an effective engagement with utopianism.

Muzzioli dubs Calvino's model an anti-utopian utopia ("un'utopia antiutopica"), but in so doing he seems to contradict himself as his oxymoronic formula ends up twisting Calvino's disenchanted anti-idealism into jaded disillusionment. That is why the definition proposed here, utopianism without utopia, is perhaps more fitting in capturing the Calvinian spirit, which is pro- and not anti-utopian, although in an understated and small-scale fashion. Additionally, our definition can claim to be more fitting not only because it circumvents any self-contradictory (if not self-denying) signification but also because its reference to a process with no final goal "in sight" explicitly acknowledges that the utopian spirit in question is one that champions openness and contingency over closure and necessity. Precisely this valuing of openness and contingency is the other benefit attributable to Calvino's utopianism without utopia, besides the already mentioned anti-idealism that denotes the privileging of the here and now as pragmatic horizon of regenerative interventions. It should not go unnoticed that the three adjectives that are jointly deployed to imply the quality of "pulviscolarità" may also be taken as metaphorical allusions to the concept of contingency. In effect, "polverizzata,"

"corpuscolare," and "sospesa" evoke, with subtle suggestiveness, connotations belonging to the meaning of contingency, such as precariousness, provisionality, singularity, uncertainty, and unpredictability.

This is further evidence that Calvino's project is intriguingly unconventional for it incorporates the purpose typically associated with anti-utopia without ceasing to be utopian in the understated, and somewhat minimalist, way that we have observed.[14] Gary Saul Morson's distinction between the defining purposes of utopia and anti-utopia is worth quoting: "whereas utopias describe an escape from history […] anti-utopias describe an escape, or attempted escape, to history, which is to say, to the world of contingency, conflict and uncertainty" (128). Based on Morson's distinction, we can argue that Calvino adheres to the principle of "escap(ing) to history"—the principle of anti-utopia with its commitment to contingency—in order to oppose the desire of "escap(ing) from history" lying at the heart of classical utopia. Ultimately, the rather paradoxical unconventionality of Calvino's project resides in its intent of breathing new life into utopianism by drawing on the critical resources of utopianism's counterpole, anti-utopia.[15]

Conclusion: The restrained ekphrastic force of Calvino's utopia of fine dust

To recap, the semantic suggestiveness of an imagery centred on metaphors such as "pulviscolare," "polverizzata," "corpuscolare," and "sospesa" indicates that Calvino looks at utopianism as a means to explore the present and experiment with its contingency, not as an instrument to pre-figure and foretell a future order of things to be taken as the blueprint for a redeemed world. His tacit assumption is that all forms of totalizing utopian visions should be rejected due to their reifying effect,

[14] This aspect of Calvino's utopian spirit is captured by Daniele Fioretti: "Calvino does not doubt the importance of the utopian project; the problem is to move beyond the stalemate of the classical utopias thus reaching utopia through what is *not* utopia" (116).

[15] The term anti-utopia is frequently conflated with dystopia. Let us mention, *en passant*, that the counterpole of the pair utopia/utopianism is anti-utopia/anti-utopianism, since both pairs refer, in general, to two opposing tendencies: one which sees the desire/hope for utopia as a human aspiration and a value, and one which looks at utopia as a disvalue and even a threat for humanity. In contrast, dystopia and dystopian have a narrower scope. They relate to a specific fictional genre whose characterizing feature is a narrative about an imaginary, nightmarish world. The nightmarish worlds of dystopian fiction (e.g., Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Zamyatin's *We*) are supposed to function as warnings against certain negative realities of our own actual world.

their tendency to hypostatize an image of the future by reducing the future's openness and provisional unreality to a foreknown and necessarily desirable reality. This, however, does not mean that utopianism should refrain from pursuing an imagistic mode of thinking and an ekphrastic style of writing. It means that utopianism is seen as conception and depiction of partial visions displaying a dust-like weightlessness and fragmentariness.[16]

If we bring into play, again, the posthumous *Lezioni americane*, we are able to observe that, in Calvino's approach to utopia, one can discern not just some of the contents and concerns expressed in the essay on visibility but also echoes of the essay titled "Leggerezza." The intimate relation between "visibilità" and "leggerezza" (each possessing a literary and an ethical compass like the other "valori" included in *Lezioni*) has been probed by several critics, though it is to Modena that we owe the most in-depth and engaging study. The gist of her argument is that Calvino became convinced early on (much before his Parisian period) of the necessity to resist the petrifying (Medusa-like) heaviness of ossified perception and conventional representation "in order to devise and visualize images according to the value of *lightness*" (18).[17] Let us also recall that when it comes, specifically, to "leggerezza," a long-standing devotion to it is confirmed by Calvino himself in the opening essay of *Lezioni americane* dedicated to this "memo/valore." The essay contains an exercise in self-reflection in which the author identifies the quest for lightness as a recurring trait of his writing process:

> Dopo quarant'anni che scrivo fiction, dopo aver esplorato varie strade e compiuto esperimenti diversi, è venuta l'ora che io cerchi una definizione complessiva per il mio lavoro; proporrei questa: la mia operazione è stata il più delle volte una sottrazione di peso; ho cercato di togliere peso ora alle figure umane, ora ai corpi celesti, ora alle città;

[16] This is what Modena has called "the dustlike, or infinitesimal, and noncanonical character of Calvino's utopia" (2).

[17] With respect to "lightness," in particular, Modena's analysis is very detailed and insightful, especially in tracing a genealogy of the two modalities that it assumes in Calvino's work. She defines one of these modalities "ascending lightness" (the lightness of a perspective and language capable of rising above the "magma" of the visible) and the other "Lucretian lightness" (the lightness associated with an atomistic attention to the minuscule components of reality) (20–33).

> soprattutto ho cercato di togliere peso alla struttura del racconto e al linguaggio. (631)
>
> After forty years of writing fiction, after exploring various roads and making diverse experiments, the time has come for me to look for an overall definition of my work. I would suggest this: my working method has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language. (Creagh, *Six Memos* 3)

Besides stating that lightness is the outcome of an operation aimed at removing weight, Calvino enumerates various cases that illustrate such operation; significantly, cities is one of them and, of course, the main reference is plainly to *Le città invisibili*. In retrospect, it appears clear that this 1971 anti-novel is the text in which the themes of "leggerezza" and "visibilità," later included as topics and headings in *Lezioni americane*, are first explored and given pre-eminence jointly, through a language which is both translucent and elusive, fictional and metafictional. Also, and most important, *Le città invisibili* features a character, Marco Polo, who can be said to act as spokesperson for Calvino's "utopia pulviscolare" to a more meaningful and deeper degree than the protagonist of *Palomar*, whose role as authorial proxy is discussed by Muzzioli.[18] In the concluding dialogue with his interlocutor, emperor Kublai Khan, Calvino's Marco Polo affirms the indissoluble link between the space of the city and the no-place called utopia—a link so indissoluble that "ideal city" commonly serves as metonymic designation of a utopian realm—while, at the same time, describing his own desired *Città* in this way: "Se ti dico che la città cui tende il mio viaggio è discontinua nello spazio e nel tempo, ora più rada ora più densa, tu non devi credere che si possa smettere di cercarla. Forse mentre noi parliamo sta affiorando sparsa entro i confini del tuo impero; puoi rintracciarla, ma a quel modo che t'ho detto" ("If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered,

[18] Peter Kuon has also discussed *Le città invisibili* as the text in which Calvino articulates his "utopia pulviscolare." However, Kuon's specific goal is to shed light on Calvino's "neo umanesimo" by tracing the many aspects which connect *Le città invisibili* with the tradition of classical utopia inaugurated by Thomas More. See Kuon, esp. 27.

now more condensed, you must not believe the search for it can stop. Perhaps while we speak, it is rising, scattered, within the confines of your empire; you can hunt for it, but only in the way I have said"; 169; Weaver 164). It is noteworthy that "discontinua," "rada," and "densa," together make up a metaphorical variant of the triad "polverizzata," "corpuscolare," and "sospesa," thus serving as another way to suggest the same, all-encompassing attribute, that of "pulviscolare." By resonating with one of the essays on Fourier (incidentally published only two years after *Le città invisibili*), Marco Polo's words read as an unmistakable statement in support of a utopianism that is expected to consist in fragments, affording a mutable measure of clarity, now a lesser ("rada"), now a greater ("densa") clarity.[19] The discontinuous thickness/thinness of this fragmentary clarity implies that the weight, in fact the burden, of traditional utopianism, which is to say the task of conceiving the complete vision and picture of a redeemed world, is lightened, if not removed, through the choice of focusing on intermittent and icastically incomplete vistas. Thus, while *Le città invisibili* may very well be "notwithstanding its title, the most visible of Calvino's texts," to borrow Lene Waage Petersen's words (95), it should be stressed that the visibility in question is a blinking and flickering visibility, not a continuous and consistent one.

What is more, the position entrusted to the fictional voice of Marco Polo returns us to Calvino's view on the correlation between utopian writing and verbal pictorialism, a correlation that has been outlined at the outset of the present work with the aid of the notion of ekphrasis as *enárgeia*. Through their oftentimes quasi-epigrammatic brevity and whimsical "visuality"—a whimsical visuality resulting from the author's recourse, as noted by Rizzarelli, to rhetorical devices such as catalogue and enumeration[20]—the Venetian's fifty-five descriptions of cities display the status of imaginary, fanciful postcards depicting strange and estranging no-places. They are epiphanies of cities of the mind, which, in addition to populate the fictional world of Calvino's text and to emanate a mood of elusive giddiness, also assume a meta-utopian and meta-ekphrastic function. Each of them functions as a piece or fragment of a never-ending discourse on the relation

[19] In "Per Fourier 3. Commiato. L'utopia pulviscolare," this utopianism consisting in mutable and partial visions is described as a discontinuous flow of "campi d'energia utopica" ("utopian fields of energy"; 308; Creagh, "On Fourier, III" 246).

[20] See Rizzarelli 230. Another interesting point in Rizzarelli's analysis is her suggestion that the visual strength of the fifty-five invisible cities also derives from Calvino's recourse to synaesthesia techniques.

between utopia and ekphrasis, between elaborating utopian contents and picturing them through language. Overall, Marco Polo's dazzlingly baffling descriptions suggest that there is a limit to the ekphrastic force that may be ascribed to the exercise of calling a picture of utopia into verbal existence. This limit depends, first and foremost, on a semiotic fact that Mitchell has captured with sharp concision: "Words can 'cite,' but never 'sight' their objects" (*Picture Theory* 152). However, it also rests on a more significant element: Calvino's approach to utopianism. As it has been argued here, the proposed approach opposes and rejects the myth of thinking utopia in the form of a big picture aimed at making us 'see' an ideal whole in its fullness and completeness.

In the final analysis, an "utopia pulviscolare" which promises partial images/visions and, consequently, a restrained ekphrastic force, can be a response to a risk that Ferns has pointed out: "[W]hile utopian fiction may have the potential to open up wider horizons, to suggest the sheer extent of the possible, its *effect* is often impoverishing rather than enriching: instead of opening up space for the imagination, the utopian vision fills it with a construct, to use Ernst Bloch's phrase, 'made banal by the fulfillment'" (4). The strength of Calvino's model is that it represents a radical solution against the tendency towards closure and static fulfillment that characterizes utopian writing in general, not only utopian fiction. To keep the horizon of utopianism truly open one might want to follow this model and refrain from closing "the space for the imagination" with the rigid finality of a picture-perfect vision of completion projected in a time to come. Marco Polo's closing lines in *Le città invisibili* sum up perfectly Calvino's proposal, a proposal that blends together disenchantment and hope. If "l'inferno dei viventi non è qualcosa che sarà" ("the inferno of the living is not something that will be"), if it is "quello che è già qui, l'inferno che abitiamo tutti i giorni, che formiamo stando insieme" ("what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together"), then the challenge we are faced with is "cercare e saper riconoscere chi e cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio" ("seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space"; 170; Weaver 165).

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