

Yehuda Emmanuel Safran
The City and the Dream

Abstract

The essay is articulated into a long story that begins with a collection of clues about the origin and functioning of our imagination. Where do the images that have shaped the great urban utopias reside? What relationship exists between invention and entropy (including the “Bataillan” variant of the *dépanse*), what space do free will and technical-scientific determinism have in the project of present and future society?

The essay accompanies us in the impossible search for an answer, advancing through the folds of philosophy, art and literature. In other words, it is a story about the limits of reason and the axiomatic nature of knowledge.

Keywords

City — Utopia — Art — Dream

In the Palazzo Comunale (Town Hall) of Siena there are two painted allegories, by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1339), depicting Buon and Mal Governo (Good and Bad Government). They stand opposite each other, these two antithetical images of just and unjust polities, that have haunted our urban imaginary ever since. Outside the pictorial window of the frescoes one can observe the city and the landscape of the surrounding territory receding in the distance. This singular image one of the earliest, and at the same time, most ambitious representations of landscape in Western art, which simultaneously shows the city in terms of a complex interdependence with its surrounding territory, prompts a series of reflections. If we wish and desire a just city it is not because we believe we will succeed in our life time, but we feel obliged by our in born, inalienable, desire for a just world. It is born of time immemorial, of Utopian vision as we read in William Morris', *News from Nowhere*, Thomas Moore's, *Utopia*, Campanella's *The City of the Sun* and Plato's *Republic*. Such desires are inspired by dreams with which cities are built.

As Ludwig Binswanger taught us in his seminal text, *Dream and Existence*, in dreaming there is an absolute freedom without which our desires would have not come about. Nor are they merely wish fulfillment. W. E. Yeats proclaimed (soon to be followed by Delmore Schwartz): “In dreams begin responsibilities.”

In the early 1970s Italo Calvino published a pathbreaking fiction, *Invisible Cities*, in which he provided us with a whole imaginary realm of cities that have never existed but which, for all we know, could have been built. With cities, Calvino believed,



Figg. 1-2
Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegoria ed effetti del Buono e del Cattivo Governo* [Allegory of Good and Bad Government], cycle of frescoes, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena 1338-39.

«it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.» p.44

The book was and remains a tour de force of the imagination. Most likely, we will never be able to fathom the origin of such visions. Are they part of the universal archetypal imagery? Are we able to conjure it out of thin air? Who will be able to fathom such a mystery? Indeed, years later Calvino addressed precisely this question in *Six Memos for the New Millennium*, in the chapter on “Visibilità”. Does the anima of the world itself provide us with these imagined cities? Would we ever be able to fathom this mystery? Wolfgang Pauli, in his correspondence with Carl Jung shows above all Pauli’s debt to his own dreams, in his scientific theoretical work.

To elucidate this conundrum, it is still possible to believe in the a priori of the subject. Deep subjectivity takes in every given fact in order to reconstitute it. Without repeating life in the imagination you can never be fully alive. Without imagining your act in advance, how could you act? It is commonly said that reality is that which exists, or that only what exists is real. In fact, precisely the contrary is the case: true reality is that which we really know, and which has never existed. The ideal is the only thing we know with any certainty, and it surely has never existed. It is only thanks to the ideal that we can know anything at all; and that is why the ideal alone

can guide us in our lives either individually or collectively as in the lives of a City. “Philosophers and philologists”, wrote Vico,

«should be concerned in the first place with a new discipline that could be called poetic metaphysics; that is, the science that looks for proof not in the external world, but in the very modifications of the mind that meditates on it. Since men made the world of nations, it is inside their minds that its principles should be sought.» (Scienza Nuova, 1744).

At one time or another, every small child has had the dream of building a ‘Perpetuum Mobile’, the desire for a Machine capable of moving endlessly. Alfred Jarry created his version in the *Surmâle*, a portrait of the ultimate cyclists, and Marcel Duchamp repeated it in his bicycle wheel mounted on a chair: A bicyclist with four legs. If the world, says Nietzsche in the *Gay Science*, “may be thought of as a certain definite number of centers of force. And every other representation remains indefinite and therefore useless, it follows that in the great dice game of existence, it must pass through calculable number of combinations. In infinite time, every possible combination would at some time or another be realized; more: it would be realized an infinite number of times. And since between every combination and its next recurrence all other possible combinations would have to take place, and each of these combinations conditions the entire sequence of combinations in the same series, a circular movement of absolutely identical series is thus demonstrated: the world as a circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely often and plays its game in infinitum.” If the Eternal Return is the essence of life, a diminished repetition? Is it perhaps a more accurate description of our more limited terrestrial existence?

Leading an endless line of other bicyclists, scaling another mountain, remains the stuff of which dreams are made of. “Spending, spending, spending” was the motto of Georges Bataille. This is symmetrically in opposition to the myth of Sisyphus, so dear to the existentialists. Rolling a stone to the top of a mountain, just to see it rolling down again is an adult view of life. The Tower of Babel was exactly such an enterprise; it bound architecture to language. As there is nothing we are capable of which is not first rehearsed in the cavity of our mouth, it was precisely the inability to speak a common tongue that was designed to prevent this archaic desire from being realized. The Adamic universal language clearly would have allowed mankind to build a tower to reach heaven.

The confusion of tongues (“*bilbul*”, in Hebrew) meant that chaos interrupted the enterprise, never to be resumed again; or perhaps, yes, only now it has resumed. These days, reading of a million-letter genetic code imprinted in a newly minted fungus, life, as we know it can no longer remain the same.

At the top of the heap. At the top of the leap. Is the bicycle dead? In a world without certainties, there are few things that are fundamental. The certainty of our death, above all, is among those certainties. In our time, more than in any other time in history, human inquiry has turned again to the study of ever more imperiled nature; philosophy has turned to the study of external Nature, rather than to the study of man and of the purposes of humane action in society. But, of course, the study of nature itself is bound by analogies constructed on the way we live humanely and, subsequently, projected on the world outside.

It was Karl Marx who responded to Darwin's hypothesis by commenting, «How far this man, Charles Darwin, had to travel to discover the laws of his own society?» Indeed, as children we were told how Monet changed the course of painting by turning to the open-air landscape, outside his studio, and developed plein air painting. But only a little later we discovered that these paintings painted in the open air were much more similar to the Japanese prints in his collection than the natural scene facing him. As soon as he could afford it, Monet invited a Japanese gardener to create a Japanese garden outside his studio and the circle was closed. What he now observed so carefully outside was nothing less than what his gardeners had laid out before him.

Indeed, Plato, in the *Republic*, established the most important analogy in architecture theory when he argued that the well-measured and well-proportioned city would, by analogy will prompt the citizens to be more just. Elaine Scarry in her study *On Beauty* has repeated this argument, without referring explicitly to Plato, and without any difficulties, that is to say, as if there are no instances in which the well ordered city produced tyrannies and other aberrations. There is no element more fundamental to our construction of reality than a measure of paranoia, its need and inspiration to invent a causality all of its own. Joseph Agassiz and Yehuda Fried in *Paranoia: A Study in Diagnosis* have written an entire book arguing this thesis. In fact, *Anything Goes* was the title of Paul Feyerabend's final lectures. Salvador Dali called this singular faculty "Critical Paranoia." And since Reason is contaminated by social and cultural constraints, its use requires devices which allow it the relative autonomy which will release it in its full protean actuality, permitting invention and celebrating the god-like potential of creating a world.

As is well-known, the idea of entropy attracted a great many writers; painters and sculptors only a generation ago because it corresponded so convincingly to their own despair at being at the top of the heap and having to leap, to commit them to a "salto mortale". Among the novelists of the 1960s and 1970s, Thomas Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* and Donald Barthelme in *The Explanation*, certainly experienced moments of what one can rightly call delirious entropy. In these moments the hero is aware that an increase in paranoia generates meaning as much as the luck of convincing paranoia generates a meaningless chaotic environment. The earthworks of the same period, above all those by Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson, desired to reverse entropy, investing a moving earth with cosmic significance.

In the Architectural Association in the eighties, Gordon Pask, a Canadian mathematician with a cool passion for what he named the Second Cybernetic, he taught the New Cybernetic. He generated calculations which could describe accurately the effect on the inside of the adjacent interior of the accumulation of rubbish outside of a building, as well as the effect on the dynamic of human interaction. He contributed the infinity of circulation paths to Cedric Price's Fun Palace. Our cities have not even begun to benefit from these numerical speculations.

But what are we to say of today and tomorrow?

In the 2009's Biennale of Art in Venice, my friend Michelangelo Pistoletto hung his Hall of Mirrors, which he cracked with a large wooden hammer on the day of the opening. To a questioning lady about the destruction of the mirrors, Pistoletto replied, "I am just making more mirrors".



Figg. 3-4

Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Twenty-two Less Two*, performance, Corderie dell'Arsenale, 53. Biennale d'Arte di Venezia, 2009.

Bottom:

Earthquake in Lisbon, Archives of Art and History, Berlin.

Here entropy and visibility multiply and intertwine.

In 1647, an earthquake destroyed the city of Santiago in Chile. Nearly a hundred years later, in 1755, five years before the birth of Heinrich von Kleist, an equally terrible earthquake leveled the larger part of Lisbon.

It was soon to be rebuilt by the Enlightened urban planner Marquis de Pombal. These events shook the belief in the Christian world. Providence could not be trusted. The Western world was shocked and dismayed. The belief in the benevolence of God was shattered.

Every morning, I start the day with a *macchinetta*. I unscrew the top from the bottom, clean out the leftovers of the last round of the previous night, fill the lower half with water and fill the sieve with fresh grounds coffee, screw the top, light a match and turn the small gas burner on.

I watch the *macchinetta* heating up and spouting warm aromatic liquid, wars, revolutions and strikes I read about in the morning newspaper. I pour the brew into my cup; add a teaspoon of sugar and stir; after some minutes calmly the liquid rests in my cup. The affairs of the world are mingled with the baroque fountain nearby in Piazza Farnese. Yes, in our everyday life we rehearse every conceivable process and event near and far in time and place.

In dreams we are able to respond to our deepest desires. In the early days of the Spanish Civil War, Andalusian villages, having chased out the authorities, set out to create the anarchist Eden. Quite deliberately, they aimed at the simplification even of the poor life that had been theirs in the un-





Fig. 5
Thomas More, *L'Utopia*, 1516.



Fig. 6
William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 1890, Frontispice.

regenerate past, closing the cantinas and, in their plans for exchange with neighboring communes, deciding that they had no further need even for such innocent luxuries as coffee.

In *La Guerre et La Paix*, Proudhon drew a distinction between pauperism and poverty. Pauperism is destitution, while poverty is the state in which a man gains by his work enough for his needs, and this condition Proudhon praises in lyrical terms as the ideal human state, in which we are most free, in which, being masters of our senses and our appetites, we are best able to give spiritual substance and grounding to our lives.

This approach of Proudhon is a different sort of Utopian idea than the ones we are used to as readers of More or Plato, who are usually seen as apologists of a rather stable hierarchical order in the ideal polities. Yet Proudhon's vision has other implications that have offended those who support no such order in the state.

In fact, the very idea of Utopia repels most anarchists, because it is a rigid mental construction. Utopia is conceived of as a perfect society, and anything perfect has automatically ceased growing; even William Godwin qualified his rash claims for the perfectibility of man by protesting that he did not mean men could be perfect, but that they were capable of indefinite improvement, an idea which, he remarked, «not only does not imply the capacity for being brought to perfection, but stands in express opposition to it.»

The general distaste for the rigidity of Utopian thinking has not prevented the anarchists from adopting some ideas contained within Utopias. Anarchists-communists echoed the suggestions on economic distribution put forward by Thomas More in the original Utopia, while certain of Charles Fourier's ideas on how to induce men to work for passion rather than profit have entered deeply into anarchists' discussions. Indeed, Le Corbusier in the Marseille Unite de Habitation programmed for 1620 persons following Fourier Phalanx as an ideal number in which all desire imaginable could be satisfied in different combinations and conjugations.

But the only complete Utopian vision that has ever appealed generally to anarchists is *News From Nowhere*, in which William Morris who came close to Prince Peter Kropotkin's Mutual Aid, presented a vision of the world of the kind that might appear if all the anarchist dreams of building



Fig. 7
Proudhon, *Posthumous Portrait*,
Gustave Courbet. Petit Palais,
Paris.

harmony on the ruins of authority had a chance to come true.

The idea of progress as a necessary good has vanished, and everything happens, not in the harsh white light of perfection or heat of whirring machines, which Morris denies, but in the mellow stillness of a long summer afternoon which ends for the unfortunate visitor to the future, who has to return to city life in London or New York, Berlin or Paris and to the acrimonious debates that are wrecking any collective vision.

The golden sunlight of that long summer afternoon when time paused on the edge of eternity haunted the anarchists too. «My conscience is mine, my justice is mine, and my freedom is a sovereign freedom,» said Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. “Such men” said his friend Alexander Herten, «stand much too firmly on their own feet to be dominated by anything or to allow themselves to be caught in any net.»

The complexity of Proudhon’s personality and outlook, and his vigorous prose, tempted Sainte-Beuve to write his first biography, and turned the painter Gustave Courbet into his enthusiastic and lifelong disciple. He inspired Tolstoy not merely to borrow the title of his greatest novel from Proudhon’s *La Guerre et la Paix*, but also to incorporate in *War and Peace* many Proudhonian views on the nature of war and history.

Yet that is not the only unexpected filiation that we have to discuss in order to clarify the shifting contours of utopian urban thought over the course of the “long nineteenth century”.

Following the publication of his *System of Economic Contradictions: or, The Philosophy of Poverty* (1846), Marx chose this occasion for a complete reversal of his past attitude to Proudhon by publishing *The Poverty of Philosophy*, which showed a complete failure to understand the originality and plasticity of thought underlying the apparent disorder of Proudhon’s argument. Proudhon was seeking a kind of equilibrium in which economic contradictions would not be eliminated – for they cannot be – but brought into a dynamic equation. This dynamic equation he found in mutualism, a concept that includes other elements, such as the dissolution of government, the equalization of property, and the freedom of credit.

He examined the idea of Providence and came to the conclusion that, far from the state of the world confirming the existence of a benevolent deity;

it led one irresistibly to the conclusion embodied in the aphorism: “God is Evil.”

Political government was understood already by William Godwin, originally trained as an architect, to be “that brute engine which has been the only perennial cause of the vices of mankind, and which has mischief of various sorts incorporated within its substance, and cannot otherwise be removed than by its utter annihilation!”

If Locke’s definition of freedom as determination by the “last result of our minds” has its logical difficulty of a “free but determined will”, then in Godwin’s scheme he is eager to construct an exact science of morality, based on the predictability of behavior, the discovery of general principles, and the control of process. It leads him towards the more empirical form of free will, in which the distinction between involuntary behavior and voluntary actions suggests that involuntary behavior exhibits one sort of necessity, which is dictated by past experience, while voluntary actions are always determined by a judgment, and proceed “upon the apprehended truth of some propositions”. This second type of determinism, rational and teleological, is hard to distinguish from what is usually considered free will, or the Thomist doctrine of free will, where the will is determined solely by the superior goodness of the alternative chosen. Men’s actions, Godwin wrote in “Thought on Man” (1831), the last volume of essays published during his lifetime, are indeed involved in necessary chains of cause and effect, but the human will is emergent from this process and, in turn, takes its place in a series of causes; man’s actions become voluntary – and by implication free – in so far as he can alter the direction of the chain, even if he can never break it asunder. Will and confidence in its efficiency “travel through, not quit us till we die. It is this which inspires us with invincible perseverance and heroic energies, while without it we would be the most inert and soulless of blocks, the shadows history records and poetry immortalizes, and not men. We shall view with pity, even with sympathy, the men whose frailties we behold, or by whom crimes are perpetrated, satisfied that they are parts of one great machine, and, like ourselves, are driven forward by impulses over which they have no control”. In other words, he grants the contradiction between a universe dominated by immutable law and man’s sense of his own freedom, and he pragmatically welcomes the contradiction, thus creating one of those states of equilibrium between opposing conditions or ideas that delighted many of his libertine successors, particularly, of course, Proudhon.

Shelley’s elopement with Godwin’s daughter is perhaps better known than his intellectual debt to the philosopher, or Godwin’s financial debt to the poet. But the irony of the Godwinian Utopia and “Prometheus Unbound” is compounded by the literary work of Godwin’s daughter, Mary Godwin Shelley: “Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus” (1817).

It is the story of a scientist who constructs an artificial man through the transformations of parts from dead bodies. The monster, conscious of the fear he inspires and his need for love – sentiments he cannot overcome – and condemned to solitude, turns against the human race and his inventor, Dr. Frankenstein and his ill-starred family.

Inspired by the Romantic preoccupation in its structure, but above all a painful response to the Utopian thinking of her father, she found little in the man-machine dialectic of the modern era that did not partake in the adventure of this creature.

Heinrich von Kleist, seven years earlier, inspired by a misunderstanding of



Fig. 8
Theodor Von Holst, *Frankenstein*, 1831.

Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason", concluded with men's tragic incapacity to perceive truth, and the vain pursuit of knowledge and a just world. Humanity was condemned to torture and useless gesticulation, with conscience forever divorced from the natural world. Feminine fidelity appeared to him as the only absolute. His

reflection on the theater of marionettes was written after he was engaged to Adolfine Vogel, a young woman suffering from incurable cancer, with whom he would commit suicide by the end of the year on the shore of Lake Wannsee in Berlin. Kleist's reflection is a precise pre-figuration of that very same horror.

Only a marionette, a mechanical contraption, can be conceived as having the advantage of being anti-gravitational. Yet, it could make us believe that there is more grace in the mechanics of a mannequin than in the structure of a human body. The original fall of man from grace

is translated into a mechanical device of wire and string, attached to weights, which precipitates a second fall, eating once more of the tree of knowledge and thus falling back into innocence.

Do we confront, then, in Kleist, the lineaments of a new chapter in the history of the world? In his novella "The Earthquake in Santiago de Chile" Kleist's young man, at midday when the earthquake struck, finds himself free from the prison he was condemned to as a punishment for a forbidden love of a woman who was to be executed at that very moment. He starts his search for her and the child, the fruit of their forbidden love. Finally, in the afternoon light, he discovers them beside a river outside of the town. To celebrate their happiness, they turn to the only church still surviving. There, the congregation realizes who the young couple with a child are. Thinking of the couple as the sinners who brought about the calamity in Santiago de Chile, they execute the young man and the woman, and spare the child. Indeed, in Giorgione: *The Tempest*, hanging in the Academia Museum in Venice, we see the same picture as in Kleist's story. On the right, the young woman with a child and, on the left, the young man with his staff at some-degree diagonal. In the background, the City is burning, if there is a moment of happiness, it is just after a terrible disaster and just before another calamity.

In Laplacian determinism, God, having created his universe, has now screwed the cap on his pen, put his feet on the mantelpiece and left the work to get on with itself. Machines, and people acting like machines, replaced a good deal of human thought, judgment and recognition.

Few know how this or that system works, and for anyone, let alone the inventor, it is often a mystic oracle, producing an unpredictable judgment. Mechanical, determinate processes produce clever, astonishing decisions.

A "definite method"

for living, playing (playing chess) – a mechanical method, in fact – does not necessarily mean the construction of a physical machine, but only a book of rules that can be followed by a mindless player. Modernity, in whatever age it

appears, cannot exist without shattering belief and without the discovery of the "luck of reality", together with the invention of other realities.

The power to speak of our inhumanity, benevolent or Mephistophelean, is often granted through the mechanical contraption. The inner consciousness of time subverts the possibility of transparent and communicable experience. On the contrary, that which is communicable is based on the incommunicable.



Fig. 9
Señor de Mayo, *Earthquake in Santiago de Chile*, 1647.

In the next page:

Fig. 10
Giorgione, *The Tempest*, 1508.
Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.



In order to stop the Golem of Prague in its ruinous activity, it was sufficient to remove the first letter, Aleph, inscribed on its forehead. The deletion converted the other two letters, Mem and Thet, into the word Meth, meaning Death as oppose to AMT (amet), which was originally inscribed, three letters forming the word for “truth” in Hebrew. In a history which was conceived as a ruined text, language itself mediated as a spectrum connecting the two extremes: the sublime and the monstrous.

Each and every machine verges on this dialectic; it gives rise to new spectacular laws, which are then inscribed in our flesh.

If Max Weber believed that we are no more than spiders caught in a web of assumptions that we ourselves have spun. Our tale is a tale of the limits of reason and the axiomatic nature of human knowledge. Episteme seems to hinge on our human intersubjective relationship, on our ability to dream.

In the course of forming our human, all too human, relations, we are bound to project on the universe. Since Immanuel Kant’s *Critic of Pure Reason* and the second Copernican revolution of *Der Ding un Sich*, the noumenon or “the thing itself”, is unknown, forever unknowable, and we are condemned to drift in the hall of mirrors. Our capacity to imagine and to dream, not only of the City, but ‘tout court’, encourages us to think that in this spirit we could wish for our capacity and courage to open a new vista, to paint the yet unpainted, with the full knowledge that it is like the horizon itself, forever deluding us. If knowing thy self is the greatest task then we could only concur with Edmund Husserl’s wish to be forever the “absolute beginner”.

For those of you who still wonder how could a discussion of that which does not exist could possibly effect what does exist I would reply that things that exist in our mind and no where else determine more profoundly what does exist for us, than anything outside our mind.

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