

Charles Simic

Whether Forecast for Utopia and Vicinity

Opening Speech for the 1. international literature festival berlin

June 14th 2001, DB Bank at the Pariser Platz

It's odd enough in this day and age to read about utopia; what's even odder is to be doing so in a city like New York. Here was the Brooklyn Bridge, the Manhattan skyline, the avenues and streets crowded with people and cars, and here were the writings of Thomas More, Campanella, Saint-Simon and Kropotkin with their unfulfilled prophesies. One entire summer wherever I went, I carried a book entitled *Utopian Thought in the Western World*. It was one of those works that by its magnitude gave the impression that a supreme insight lay in wait for the reader at the end of its 814 pages. I'd ride the crowded subway in the morning, sit in a coffee shop over a third cup of coffee, or I'd make myself comfortable on the 19th floor balcony of my son's mid-town apartment surrounded by a cluster of high buildings, and read about the ideas of someone like Robert Owen:

World history past, present, and future was divisible into two segments, one in which irrationality, even insanity, characterized virtually all human relationships, and one whose, moment was just come in which rationality, would predominate. The whole past and most present behavior were blind to reason in action, because men were steeped in error and were bound by false association of ideas. Minor errors of perception and superstitious beliefs were malignant, but one Great Error held mankind in thrall, and this was the religious falsehood that an individual of his own free will could chose to perform acts that were either good or evil. In fact, man had no such liberty. He was born into a specific environment in which evil influences were compelling, he was reared to accept lies, and he lived his life subject to

erroneous ideas. As a consequence, the creature was blindly selfish, cruel, lying, hypocritical, addicted to vices, criminal, generating his own unhappiness. Societies and religions fixed blame upon the individual for his acts, whereas in truth he was blameless, merely a product of circumstances and iniquitous arrangements

Owen's wish to correct all the accumulated errors of our irrational ancestors once and for all may sound laughable today. Not to me. I did not care, of course, for his insistence that my current behavior was predictable, that even my choice in reading him on this beautiful afternoon was not an act of free will, but was always in the cards. Nevertheless, I was curious to find out how our many illusions would be dispelled and our physical, mental and moral maladies cured, perhaps on the very next page, or the next. Unfortunately, I could not pay full attention to what I was reading. One would expect that sitting on the 19th floor sipping wine and reading would be rather peaceful with just the sky, a few seagulls hovering over my head--but no! The sound of traffic was even louder up here. Fire engines, police cars, ambulances rushed by seemingly every few minutes. Park Avenue was so jammed, the vehicles barely moved so they kept honking their horns out of anger and frustration while I sat pondering some further recommendation by Owen or some other seer and grand doctor of the soul. Perhaps, the ideal place to read about utopia would be in the middle of a cornfield in Iowa? The farther from humanity the better. There's nothing like vast empty spaces to give one the illusion that everything is possible. Mulling over utopias in the midst of a city, while being in all likelihood observed by unknown men and women, who happened to look out of their windows, made me feel as if I was on stage. Every thought in the book came back like an echo mixed with the noise of the streets. The high buildings around me were like theatre sets. Their presence and reality were so powerful they verged on unreality. I found myself raising my wineglass and toasting my unseen audience, but I had no idea what play I was in. Was it a tragedy or a low farce? Besides, didn't Owen just tell me that I was a mere puppet being pulled by thousands of invisible strings.

America itself is one of the utopias. Our Pilgrim Fathers set out to find a New Eden in the wilderness and thought that they had found it. To hear our politicians talk, what I'm seeing right now from my son's balcony is the full attainment of that promise. Almost daily, we are admonished in speeches and newspaper columns that we live in the greatest country in the world where things will continue to get better and better till Kingdom come. In other words, our country and its present social arrangements are the only imaginable ones. Only backcountry preachers still shout from their pulpits that we are all going to hell, and they may be right. Aside

from the usual windbags in politics and their flatterers among the intellectuals, there's more anxiety than confidence in the future among the general populace. The old utopian spirit of maintaining a hope that despite continuous setbacks, humanity is moving forward, that sooner than we think we will all get to a better place where a stronger, healthier, saner and kinder human type awaits us, has nearly ceased to be entertained as a serious possibility. I don't mean that people are not dreaming about abolishing some current injustice or other. It's the big, all consuming vision that is in danger of extinction as if it were some rare species of Canadian owls.

It wasn't always like that, of course. In the last two centuries, utopians took the place of astrologers and writers of almanacs who foretold wars, famines, plagues and deaths of kings and princes. They were the ones who now had to figure out what the future holds for us. It seemed that once one understood the few basic laws of human nature or history, it was feasible to predict what the world was coming to and then make adjustments to insure that it turned out well. The long-awaited paradise on earth was just around the corner, and then all of a sudden it wasn't there any more. Even nostalgia and futurism are taking a siesta nowadays. Some of our conservative intellectuals occasionally grow misty eyed recalling family values of long ago—without being specific about the dates--or they praise the miraculous powers of the free market and the sublime virtues of globalization that will usher prosperity for everyone on earth, but these pronouncements are about as convincing as an advertisement for a new, improved toothpaste that will make our smiles even whiter. I suspect the only unwavering and maniacal utopia builders still at large are to be found among nationalists and religious fundamentalists the world over.

Were the cavemen utopians? I wouldn't be surprised if they were. I bet it didn't take long for men to start dreaming of some distant land where there's no violence. The seemingly inexhaustible human capacity for evil was the perennial incentive. Innocents suffer and justice for

The great proliferation of utopias comes in the wake of French and American Revolutions, Rousseau and the Romantics, The Declaration of the Rights of Man. the new models of egalitarian society. Before that utopian writing was not tied to historical events. They were fictional narratives rather than revolutionary pamphlets and manifestos. Explorers, missionaries, curious travelers and shipwrecked sailors—or so the convention went-- discovered or believed they had discovered, in the new countries where they had landed, the ideal republics. Utopias in the 19th century are a different story entirely. They were evolutionary. It was not just that things *should* be different, but that it's inevitable that things *shall* be different. "A man as he ought to be," Nietzsche sneered, "that sounds to us as insipid as a tree as it ought to be." True, the prophecies of these brand new worlds involved a good deal of fake determinism. Previously, it was God who ordained the future, now it was man with his newfound analytic powers. Of course, there was a lot of self-deception in all that. Most of the self-proclaimed prophets assumed that human nature was malleable and the contrary evidence that men become attached to their vices was ignored. The impious, thieving, copulating and murderous humanity, if it was ever taken into account, was to be reeducated in the style of Mao's Cultural Revolution. In any case, the envisioned future was the triumph of reason over the passions. Laziness was prohibited and that for an inveterate idler like myself, was bad news. Utopia was detached from reality in the groundless belief that the tug of war of conflicting desires and their satisfaction can be stamped out. The meaning of life itself was to be fixed permanently and beyond further discussion. Here then was a project for a better future that recognized no human limits.

A utopian rendering of the history of mankind began with an obligatory age of blissful innocence, followed by a long period of decadence, and concluded with a gradual attainment of a state of terrestrial bliss. Since healthy society was assumed to be a return to what is natural, countless thinkers attempted to postulate what that simpler, purer and more loving human being would be like. No aspect of an individual's life no matter how personal was to be left to chance. Everything from sex to diet would be planned down to its minutest detail. Charles Fourier, for example, in the belief that one must spell out what natural drives are being frustrated and curtailed in human beings, wanted every woman to have a husband with whom she could conceive two children; second, a breeder with whom she could have only one child; then a lover and last, "possessors", men at random she could have a quick roll in the hay with. I remember telling that to a couple of women in New York as we sucked freshly shucked oysters in a restaurant. They thought it was the funniest thing they ever heard. Then, after a brief reflection,

they concluded that the debaucheries Fourier promised seemed more trouble than what they were worth.

Does the ideal world require toothpicks? Well, some visionary thinker was sure to determine yes or no. You could take a pick among utopias to suit your most fastidious taste. Do you prefer a life passed sighing at the feet of a pretty shepherdess on some hillside, or would you like to lie on the floor covered in blood in one of Marquis DeSade's sexual torture chambers? Even poets had their own versions of utopia in the last two centuries. On one hand, there was the democratic vision of Emerson and Whitman where every man, woman and child was already a poet and on the other hand, there were the followers of Mallarme, the-art-for-art's-sake types. They scribbled hermetic verses for a few initiates when they were not just staring at the blank page. The premise that "less is more" was taken to an extreme in all the arts. For the painters, it was a white canvas in whose whiteness the sophisticated gallery viewer could recall the entire history of painting. Among the composers there was Alexander Scriabin with his unfinished masterpiece "Mysterium" which was supposed to bring about nothing less than the annihilation of the universe, and our own John Cage who thought that there's nothing more beautiful musically than silence.

Of course, while everybody was concocting their utopias in the 19th century, there were still the so-called savages who already lived in paradise, or complete moral degradation—depending on your view. For instance, visitors to Tahiti spoke of beautiful naked maidens who clambered aboard their ships driving the young sailors mad with lust. The sight of a gentle landscape and the profusion of Venuses, produced a philosophical dilemma. Is the man in the state of nature a brute or the model of a good life we lost when we became civilized? The thinkers who idealized primitive societies remind me of the gullible visitors to the Soviet Union in the days of Stalin who returned extolling the unparalleled freedoms the citizens there enjoyed. Nor was the idyllic picture true of Tahitian society, which was made up of two races, the "great ones" who exercised the powers of life and death over the rest.

Nevertheless, variants of return to nature project continue to this day. There are men and women in U.S. who still imagine we can reclaim the pastoral life, reacquire the wisdom of Native Americans and live happily ever after. It's not clear what will happen to the cities, but they expect them somehow to cease to exist. In 1960's and early 1970's many young people went to live alone or in communes in the boonies and discovered how tough life can be on a cold winter night without electric power and running water. They in turn were the descendents of a long line of utopian communities in the New World. In the 19th century, many followers of Fourier, Owen, or some other secular or religious prophet withdrew into wilderness where they could put their

ideas into practice in peace and quiet. Except for the Mormons, the Amish and a few remaining Shakers, most of these communities did not last for very long. Envy, greed, ambition cropped up in no time, especially among the young. Reformers of humanity remind me of wardens of penal institutions who are convinced that hardened criminals can be reeducated. Personally, I'd sooner believe a tiger could become vegetarian, than masses of human beings turn selfless.

When it comes to utopia, comedy always has the last word. It's a hot and muggy in New York and already past midnight. Bars and restaurants are full. A crowd of young people has spilled into the streets all along Park Avenue South. They are half-naked, glistening with sweat and a little drunk. There's music, laughter, dancing on the sidewalks and even pawing and kissing in public, enough to make every defender of decency tear their hair out. It made me remember something that funny man, Brendan Gill, once wrote somewhere:

Not a shred of evidence exists in favor of the argument that life is serious, though it is often hard and often terrible. And saying that, I'm prompted to add what follows out of it: that since everything ends badly for us, in the inescapable catastrophe of death, it seems obvious that the first rule of life is to have a good time.

These young people knew that. Even the old taking their cooped-up dogs out for a late walk seemed to approve. The city is an anarchist utopia. Every political, philosophical and aesthetic idea is multiplied, continually subverted and revised. Without quite realizing it, everything I saw and heard that summer was commenting on the thinkers in the book of utopias I was reading. There's no general theory of happiness, every face I met announced, and if there is, it is here in this crowd partying late into the night.

There's an important aspect of utopian writing, which I haven't yet mentioned, and it has to do with criticizing the existing order. In the long run that may turn out to be its most important legacy, far more lasting than the purported models of ideal society. Under the pretense of utopia, utopian thinkers proposed the most drastic social reforms—like full equality between sexes--as if they were self-evident truths. Fourier wrote about the dishonesty of business transactions, the tedium and deceit of family life, the hardship of small farmers, the miseries of the poor and near-destitute in great cities, the evils of naked greed, the neglect of genius, the sufferings of children and old people, the stupidity of war, the coercive mechanisms of society disguised as law, duty, morality and the benefits of civilization. One only had to open one's eyes and ears in New York to see that much of it was still true. In the United States, the disparity in incomes between the rich and the rest of us is greater today than it ever was in our

history. What Thomas More said back in 1516 still applies: the existing society was a conspiracy of the rich to defraud the poor.

Reading passages like that, I thought of soapbox orators of my youth both in Chicago and New York. It made one feel good to hear them rant against the system. Now there are no more rabble-rousers. Our intellectuals have become institutionalized. They may still think of themselves as radicals, but that's just empty talk. At the universities where they work, they praise professionalism, specialization, and distrust anyone with an independent mind. They reject any universal ideas and values as merely serving power and oppression and find all truths to be relative. Consequently, they found it difficult to defend Salman Rushdie against the death sentence issued by Iran's leader, Ayatolla Khomeini, since in their view Western standards of personal liberty may be inappropriate elsewhere. What concerns them paradoxically is multiculturalism, except they are not interested in probing deeply into individual cultures or god-forbid passing judgment on them. The hope that America could be a "melting pot" offends them since they long to give voice to separate ethnic identities. One might say that they want Americans to forget why they came here in the first place and embrace the tribalism they left behind. I guess what they are envisioning for us in the future is many little ethnic utopias side by side. If this sounds to you like the Balkans today, you are absolutely right. Bad ideas never seem to go away. In fact, the more foolish they are, the more their historical longevity is guaranteed.

What kept utopian sentiments alive long into the last century is that the world did radically change and kept changing in every possible way. I have in mind the staggering technological innovations we have witnessed in our lifetime. Instead of the Christian view of History, which ends with the return of Christ, we got the idea of endless Progress. Intellectuals for most part have not paid much attention to technology. The real advancement was going to take place in our attitudes toward each other and not in electric toasters. Surely, the new enlightened breed of human beings would pass-up the new inventions and relearn traditional arts and crafts. There was a good reason for this distrust. Side by side, with improvements in comforts of life, great progress was also made in military technology. We are in Berlin and we know what this city looked like at the end of the Second World War. A row upon row of burnt and still smoldering buildings of which only the outside walls remain is one of the most familiar images of that time. Rubble lies in the streets. The sky is black except for dragons of flames and swirling smoke. In all probability there are people buried under the rubble. We can't hear their voices, but we know for certain that they are there. I remember a photo of a small girl running toward a camera in a bombed city somewhere. The lovers of war and destruction, it occurred me, also have their utopias. The nuclear bomb is the product of that absolutist spirit. To have a bomb that would

blow up the whole planet earth—there's ambition for you! I remember asking my students in early 1970's, how many of them thought that we would see nuclear war in our lifetime. Out of a class of eighteen, only two young women felt there would be no war. I must say I was aghast to hear these innocents say with complete conviction that they expect to be annihilated some day soon.

In my early childhood, photographs of Marx, Stalin and Marshal Tito hang over the blackboard in my schoolroom. Our teachers told us daily how fortunate we were to be living in a society that is going to be a model for the rest of humanity for many centuries to come. When I was a little older, living in Paris in early 1950's, a teacher readily enlightened me what a foolish mistake my family made by leaving Yugoslavia where things were going so well for everybody. The belief in the independence of intellectuals is nothing but a fairy tale. It's not much in evidence today nor was it true yesterday. What eggheads everywhere are usually busy doing is making conformism fashionable. The most repellent forms of repression in Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and more recently during the wars in former Yugoslavia had the enthusiastic support of some of the finest minds. The intellectuals and writers who stand-alone and speak truth to power have sadly always been a small minority.

Democracy, too, come to think, is a kind of utopia, the only one that takes the defects of human nature into consideration. As we know, the ideal has been achieved only rarely—if at all. "Never forget that the iron law of oligarchy always obtains; a few people will always run everything, no matter what the institution or what the country," James Madison, one of our Founding Fathers observed. True enough. Still, this ideal is worth struggling for precisely because it is free of the myth of the perfectibility of man. Democracy takes in stride that we are not angels and not liable to turn into them any time soon. It's that rejection of one and only one truth that exasperates priests, intellectuals and generals. Democracy protects our private lives with their idiosyncrasies against various collectivist Shangri-Las, which are never in short supply.

"Poetry dwells in a perpetual utopia of its own," wrote William Hazlitt. This is true also of other literature. The lyric poem, the story and the novel go out into the world and now and then miraculously find their own community of readers. Poetry is the defense of the individual against all generalizations that seek to enclose reality in a single conceptual system. Its core belief is that we can reach truth through the imagination. It has no trust in abstractions, but proceeds empirically by concrete particulars. As a friend of mine once said, "The simplest physical act of opening a bottle of wine has brought more happiness to the human race than all the collective governments in the history of the earth." He may have been exaggerating, but not by much. In literature, we as readers experience the beatitude of presence, someone's consciousness lives

on in us. Its utopian hope is that one will recognize oneself in some stranger's words. It happens, as we know. In some solitary reader, a book from another place and time comes to life. A young man in a small town on Kansas prairie reads an ancient Chinese poet in a book he borrowed from the library and falls in love with a poem, which he reads to himself over and over again as the summer night is falling and the streets are empty and silent. There are countless such cases. "One is changed by what one loves sometimes to the point of losing one's entire identity," Joseph Brodsky writes. For a moment, one steps out of one's cramped self and lives other unfamiliar lives. If literature is not utopia, than I don't know what is?

© Charles Simic / international literature festival berlin