IOANA PÂRVULESCU'S CHOICE OF UTOPIAS

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***Abstract**: The classical dystopias by Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell inspired numerous works of basically the same type. This is to say that the model was assumed in a progressively free manner, which even made possible the reactivation of features specific to Renaissance and/or Enlightenment utopia. Quite often, these works have housed the meeting of the three main forms of utopian fiction and have thus substantially contributed to the success of the dystopian configuration. As a matter of fact, dystopia has known a huge success since its very emergence in the first decades of the 20th century and irrespective of the exemplary or non-exemplary aspect of its illustrations. To consider only the historical events, it is not difficult to understand why it was and still is preferred to 'optimistic' utopia. Yet some authors do have the aesthetic courage to take the latter as a model and their performance should be praised all the more. Such is the case with Ioana Pârvulescu and her Life Begins on Friday. The novel is largely a utopia of the old type, but what's really interesting is, on the one hand, that the action is set in a past time and in a familiar world, on the other hand, that a past real world may serve as the utopian counterpart of the present one.*

***Key words**: utopia, dystopia, novel.*

A survey of the 20th century literary utopia is likely to let one note the writers' preference for the latest – namely the dystopian – configuration. Moreover, one may observe that this preference has already been extending to the 21st century and recent history stands at least as one of the reasons, if not the main one, for this situation. Utopias that re-iterate the Renaissance model have been quite rare, but otherwise elements or features typical of the initial configuration do appear in a dystopian frame, since to house the meeting of the three main forms of utopian fiction proves to be one of dystopia's many performances.

Taking into consideration at least these few aspects, we believe that the aesthetic courage of writing a utopia of the 'old' type should all the more be praised. While during the past century authors still found their way to it, nowadays such a case represents an exception, even though the book may be a success. One small sign of the age the utopian genre has reached is still to be found in Ioana Pârvulescu's *Life Begins on Friday*, namely the discreet, slight combination of the classical configurations. The novel has two compartments, an extended, respectively a small one, to which correspond the utopian, respectively the dystopian vision and realm. Apart from this obvious partition and specialization, the book may be considered a utopia with a view to dystopia, but mention should be made that this view itself is to be censored by an inhabitant of the utopian world.

The story seems to be set against nearly the whole of world literary heritage. Utopias and works that prefigurate the literature of the absurd are only some of the patterns tackled by the author. Briefly, a journalist from the 21st century Bucharest wakes up in the same city more than one hundred years before. It takes him a while to understand this and much more to accept that it may be for good. However, during the last days of 1897, his strange exile slowly turns into the experience of a world which

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seems utopian when compared to the provenance one and which overcomes even the fictitious utopias circulating at that time.

The compartments we referred to, the specificity of the two worlds and the relation of one to another are subtly indicated in the making use of the same *incipit* in both 'books' of the novel, yet with the substitution of one key-element for its opposite. Out of the several narrators from the frame-story, the only one who's not a character begins his discourse with the following record: "The people in Bucharest were having a fine day. It had been snowing, there were 12 days left till the end of the year, 12 hours left till the end of the day." (PÂRVULESCU, 2009: 13) (my trans.) The last subchapter from the last chapter represents the first pages from the book written by a character named Pavel Mirto, and its very beginning echoes the one we have just quoted: "The people in Bucharest were having a bad day. It had been snowing, there were 12 days left till the end of the year, 12 hours left till the end of the day." (Pârvulescu, 2009: 286) (my trans.) In other words, the difference between the 19th century, on the one hand, and the second half of the 20th century-the beginning of the 21st, on the other hand, is here presented as the one between utopia and dystopia or is even underlined through the opposition good/bad.

Before disclosing the traveller's identity, let us mention that the age the genre has reached allows for works which differ in intention and message to be alike when it comes to conventions. Christophe Dufossé, D. B. C. Pierre, Vladimir Sorokin and many others set the action of their novels in the familiar area. What is really surprising in the one written by Ioana Pârvulescu (largely a utopia, just as the ones we've just referred to are largely dystopias) is that the action is also set in a familiar time, but in a past one, not in the present. Thus the novel turns to be a look backward, one that is even more authentic than that announced in the title of Edward Bellamy's famous utopia. There, the writer made the future accessible to his character so that, on his return, he could show the way leading to what he had witnessed. Here, on the contrary, it is not a return from the future and which reveals the way to follow, but a return into a beneficial past, one which heals serious injuries caused by the present. It's not some future that becomes a target, but it's the past that becomes a model. Without being a perfect world, that into which the character travels is better than the one he comes from, but then it's also true that it had long died out at the time when the 21st century journalist begins his journey into it, (closely) followed by the reader of the novel.

Obviously, what he/they grow familiar with is not really the historical Bucharest from the end of the 19th century. As always, fiction creates its own referent and the pretext world is re-created by means typical of fiction. Specific of this case is that the writer is also the author of a highly sensitive monograph on the Romanian 19th century and that a reader familiar with both works, the non-fictional and the fictional, may observe that some aspects and observations in the former are customized and given life in the latter. As a matter of fact, the writer deliberately brings closer the two referents and this is clear especially in the foreword and epilogue.

The foreword represents an introduction to fiction and works as a time machine. All the necessary coordinates are given here – references to the specific of that world, but also to the work's genre, theme and principle of construction included. A highly interesting effect is generated by the convention of setting the action in a world that lives with an enthusiastic curiosity in the future the reader looks back from. At the other extremity of the text, the *excipit* will not suspend the fictional regime, on the contrary, the mixture of imagination and history is intentional there, too.

The descent is marked by the very spirit of the time chosen by the author. As

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regards the writing of utopias, towards the end of the 19th century the satirical configuration is progressively abandoned in favour of one preoccupied with the development of evil aspects of the present. Yet, dystopia is only prefigurated and utopia still has the power to picture the better. From that moment on, projecting the future becomes a convention common to 'optimistic' utopia and proto-dystopia (it is to be found, for instance, in F. M. Dostoevsky's Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and *When the Sleeper Wakes* and so on). Ioana Pârvulescu herself makes use of it, but two ways: a positive, hopeful one, involving the novel's characters who are natives of the 19th century, respectively a negative one, involving the character Pavel Mirto, author of the novel within the novel.

Some of the characters' parts are common to the two worlds and are played by the same type of people, but the only one to live in immmediate succession and with perfect awareness the experience of different centuries is Dan Creţu. A journalist in both wolds, he has the same colleagues, but each time they live only the given century. Unlike them, Dan has the memory of long past experiences, though it's not properly an active, but an involuntary memory: it drops anchors, but is unable to fix them (such is the *déjà-vu*). As for the fact that he and not somebody else was distributed this part, the author gives a sparing explanation: he had a great share of suffering and as he's ill with the time – not with the place – he was given, the medication he's on starting from the very beginning of the book is his being transferred into a particular past epoch.

This way it turns out that, while utopian realms are protected against the evil typical of real history, imaginary events set in a past century can be the treatment for the contemporary distortion of human condition. One may speak of/write about a transcending, but this follows the traditional line: the traveller is in no control of it and cannot but accept his new situation (and the story itself). The author is perfectly familiar with the genre she's tackling, a proof in regard to this being the numerous conventions she uses – either as such or, on the contrary, in an original (modifying) manner. To analyse them is the task we set ourselves and we shall do so obeying the order in which the various utopian configuration are activated in the novel.

The initial (Renaissance) one is being observed in that the better world is (/was) not perfect; its superiority may be stated at a holistic approach; the image of the better integrates a great deal of details: the foreigner is a visitor to that particular world; the events he gets involved in and his efforts to orient himself to the new course of action and to survive constitute the pretext for the fictional (re)construction of that world's identity; things are touchingly situated on a line of confidence, hope, willingness; there may be traces of humour and auctorial irony against some of the characters, but never detachment, distance.

Yet the model is also betrayed. Firstly, Dan Creţu travels into the past of his world. His travel does not assume a displacement (he himself confesses that he comes from another world, though not from another country). It's a time-portation significantly different from that imagined by Wells, whose time traveller was probing into the ever more distant future of humanity and the planet. Secondly, the 19th century Bucharest is inhabited by a race that may be considered utopian both because it is superior to the present one and because it doesn't exist (anylonger). This, however, doesn't prevent us from noticing that this play with utopia's conventions leads to (at least) Dan Creţu's utopian descending.

Typical of this fiction, the course of events is not the most important thing. The author avoids the well-known and well-worn clichés when it comes to plot as well as to denouement. Many of the facts that seem to help the clarifying of perhaps only two

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major situations actually complicate them even more, contributing extra enigmas that eventually do not get solved, but become evanescent. Dan Crețu's arrival mixes with a local theft and murder puzzle that turns out to be unsolvable. As for himself, he's a traveller of no intention (and this makes him highly confused) or maybe of half an intention, for he had desired a change of place (and not of time). Not only the means, but also the purpose of the travel are unknown to him. He's not spared the inhabitants' reactions in the world he enters 'accidentally'. And if it used to be the visitor's eye the one to spot and linger over the differences, the people the journalist gets in contact with are intrigued by the difference he himself embodies. They try to figure him out, point at the signs of his strangeness and even demand an immediate explanation from him. This, however, is not easy to offer: besides everything, he has difficulty finding his way in a city he knows only from more than a century later, he notices that somebody (else) is living in his house etc. Naturally, there's no way he can guess if and how things will work out. He's seemingly abandoned in the 'new' world, but then he earns there a new life, undoubtedly superior to the one he had before. The abandonment of the character in a different world dates back to Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes*: there, it favoured the world to be discovered, here – the character to discover it.

It also happens that one convention is in turns observed and broken. At first sight, the 19th century Bucharest makes a great impression on the traveller, then he suspects everything may be just a dream and, in search of an answer, the character gives himself several counter-arguments. Since he insists that the world he woke up in truely exists, *eutopia* ceases to be a *outopia*. Moreover, since he practically does not change the city, the 19th century one looks familiar to him and even makes him think that somehow he had returned home (PÂRVULESCU, 2009: 39).

He looks strange to a greater extent than the world he enters seems strange to him. His appearance and behaviour put pressure on the very limits of the possible. All opinions of him share the idea that he doesn't belong to the place and time. He's thought to be rude, odd, insane or only confused, a pauper, a lunatic asylum escapee – once an educated person, perhaps one who has gone mad particularly because of too hard learning –, a clown, a counterfeiter, a man fallen from Mars or from the Moon, an extravagant cheat, a stylished jewellery thief who has come from faraway places but appears to have also gone mad, a man who wants his fellows to lose track of him, a man who's had an affair of life and death and is being chased by the cuckolded husband, a tramp who's also bad luck. Everyone he has contact with tries to figure him out and these exercises speak not only about their profession, but about their expectations and imagination as well. What is also interesting is that, despite his strangeness, most of them feel that he's a good person. Above all, they can't help noticing that a smile on his face makes such difference that one may think of a metamorphosis. In such instances, he is taken to be 10 years younger, which is very much the difference between the age he had declared and the one the others assume he's at.

In fact, it's the questions he asks himself and the very context of the 20th and 21st centuries that have aged him. No doubt, the new situation perplexes him, too, yet he raises issues while the others make inquiries. The question whether he suffers from tuberculosis annoys him. His first impression is that nothing fits, but – despite of this – he is continuosly and perfectly aware that he comes from some other time. He has no idea where he got to and by what means, he doesn't understand a thing, he's afraid of the people of the world he entered as well as of himself and even of the one who's in control of all these, he feels oppressed, excluded and terribly lonely. After he thinks he's truely going mad and realizes he has to cope with the new reality, Dan can only

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assume that one may live successively in several worlds or, more precisely, in different epochs. He makes efforts to adapt to the new life and it's significant that he compares himself with baby animals: everything must be learnt from the very beginning, nothing is easy and yet it all looks like a game. Moreover, the conscious adaptation seems to awaken unknown skills and this is again very intelligent of the writer: the (new) things the character gets familiar with actually belong to the past.

While assuming, but hardly knowing the final truth about his situation, he can't help noticing the care these people offer him. Gradually, he grows fond of their world which – in effect – becomes also his, for New Year's Eve finds him completely naturalized. Mention should be made about the fact that the experience he undergoes and the story as a whole is by far less sensational than *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (explicitly referred to in the novel). Nevertheless and perhaps consequently, too, *Life Begins on Friday* challenges the 21st century elite reader. The 'utopian book' ends with an original game played at the New Year's Eve party: all participants make predictions about the future and it's equally interesting to see what 19th century natives may think of and the choice a 21st century man has in this context (on the one hand, he comes from a future his hosts and friends try to forsee, on the other hand, his past is in the future).

As regards the 'dystopian book', it's the work of the character named Pavel Mirto, a man famous for his original and sombre ideas (which prove right, just as his fiction depicts a future reality). It's (seemingly) a science fiction novel he's writing and while he carries this through he nearly deserts the present. The coarsening of life's forms and contents which makes his work a dystopia is the very reason for its being refused for publication. One may then notice that while Ioana Pârvulescu's novel – whose action is mainly set in the 19th century – got into print, the one of her character, about the 21st century, is rejected. Similarly, one may guess that nothing really bothered her editor, while mention is made in the book about Socec-the son having been irritated by absolutely everything he read in Pavel Mirto's manuscript. By rejecting it, the fictional editor prevents the readers from entering a world resembling the real one from the 20th and 21st centuries. These are rejected both in fiction and as fiction. In other words, the world Dan came from and his identity there remain an uninteresting fiction. Ioana Pârvulescu's evaluation of the epochs is implicit in the recreation of the old one and the eluding of the present. She indirectly rejects the century in which her book came out.

As for the traveller, in the beginning of Pavel Mirto's book he's presented as tired, blasé and especially in need of time. Yet, behind all devices, it is of course Ioana Pârvulescu the one who invokes as 'mitigating' circumstance for the dislocation of his life the fact that in the 21st century "it was the most tormenting time of the year, when time itself became the only joy to offer." (PÂRVULESCU, 2009: 288) (my trans.) Consequently, she gives him a century – not an extra, but a better one – as a gift. This way, she fully justifies her choosing the most beautiful of utopias, that which she had mentioned in the foreword: playing with time.

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