The Library in Utopia [1]

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Abstract: Borges's Library is "The universe". A universe of books that holds a "promise of infinite". But Borges's Library is also a utopia, a place nowhere to be found where a commonwealth of people (librarians) dwell. Joining these two elements I propose to investigate the relations, sometimes dubious, others of open conflict, between some organized utopian societies and the activity of reading that implies both the existence of libraries and the freedom of the imagination (which belongs to the sphere of the individual). Since Plato, the conflict between individual freedom and collective interest tends to be solved in favour of the second: every utopia is, first of all, a commonwealth. Therefore, to avoid a conflict of interests, in utopia books, when they exist at all, tend to be judged for their usefulness, being selected accordingly. The humanist Thomas More does not refer explicitly the existence of libraries in Utopia, but the activity of reading is referred several times as a means of intellectual improvement in which every utopian indulges. But here, pleasure is understood as merely an intellectual one. In *Christianopolis*, a very rich library offers the visitor a myriad of books, but the inhabitants seem to have no use for them, preferring a limited number of educational texts.

So, in utopias, the pure pleasure of literature is thus usually banished, ridiculed or silenced. However, their authors never feel quite at ease with these solutions. In Mercier's *L'an 2440*, the library undergoes an auto-de-fé. In 1954, Ray Bradbury makes the issue of literature in a utopian society the central theme of his work - *Fahrenheit 451* as does Ursula Le Guin in *The Telling*. In *Brave New World*, Huxley uses the Great Administrator to verbalize the main reason why literature is a menace to an organized society, and in *1984* the libraries only have pornographic literature.

In Utopias and dystopias alike imaginative literature is seen as a threat to the established collective order. Apparently contemporary open (or ambiguous) utopias have solved this problem that resides precisely in the lack of individual freedom. In so far as some degree of freedom is allotted to the citizen, the conflict between legislator and artist is solved and the utopian library may aspire, in fact, to be a universe in (controlled) expansion, as tend to be the libraries in Pina Martin's *Utopia III*, or in Le Guin's *The*

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Telling.
Texts to be compared: *Utopia* (1516) [2], *Christianopolis* (1619) [3] *L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante* (1771) [4] *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) [5], *Utopia III* (1998) [6], and *The Telling* (2000) [7];

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> El Universo (que otros llaman la Biblioteca) se compone de un número indefinido, y tal vez infinito, de galerías hexagonales... [8]

INTRODUCTION: THE INFINITE LIBRARY

In the tale "A Biblioteca de Babel", Jorge-Luis Borges addresses his reader directing him to the symbolic meaning of the word «*book*». The book (*liber/biblion*) is a symbol of the universe: the *liber mundi* and the *liber vita*. The library/bibliothèque is an assemblage of books. Therefore, as a symbol, it will share the same meaning in an amplified way. Borges explores this augmented meaning when he states that the universe/library is either indefinite or infinite. However, at the same time, he strongly corroborates the notion that the universe, though infinite, is not chaotic but has a rational, balanced, and regular structure: *un número indefinido, y tal vez infinito, de galerías hexagonales*.

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[2] Thomas More, *Utopia*, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. Edward Surtz, S.J., and J. H. Hexter, vol. 4, New haven, Yale University Press, 1993 (1963).

[3] Johann Valentin Andreae, *Christianopolis*, introd and trans. By Edward H. Thompson, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.

[4] Mercier, [*L'*]*an deux mille quatre cent quarante* [Document électronique]: *rêve s'il en fût jamais.* (http://visualiseur.bnf.fr/CadresFenetre?O=NUMM-89043&M=pageseule&Y=Texte)

[5] Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, (1954) Londres, Flamingo, 1993.

[6] J. de Pina Martins, *Utopia III*, Lisboa, Editorial Verbo, 1998.

[7] Ursula Le Guin, *The Telling*, London, Harcourt Inc., 2000.

[8] Jorge Luis Borges, "La Biblioteca de Babel" in *Ficciones*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2003, p. 86.

Inevitably, the reader has to agree with the narrator: what is said is reasonable and, more than that, it is also imaginable. When I (and maybe many of you) imagine a library, the picture that assumes form in my brain is that of a building (i.e. a solid structure rationally planned from bottom to top) that fulfils two major functions: to guard knowledge in the form of records (be it books, papers, cds, DVDs or whatever means technology will provide) and to make that knowledge available to the public. Consequently, the building will be inhabited simultaneously by words, kept in kilometres of shelves, and by people reading silently, or eventually, listening to someone reading aloud.

However, this rationally conceived building has, in my imagination, some peculiar characteristics. For one, I do expect to find in it all the knowledge gathered through the centuries that mediate from the beginning of writing to the present; and also all the books yet to be written. My imaginary library has, for sure, at least one copy of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and it will store up all the manuscripts of all the poets yet unborn.

Though indefinite and maybe infinite - or *ilimitada y periódica* - the borgian Library is a static universe. There, everything exists in its wholeness for eternity, and the only finite element is the librarians/humanity.

> Quizá me engañen la vejez e el temor, pero sospecho que la especie humana – la única – está por extinguirse y que la Biblioteca perdurará: iluminada, solitaria, infinita, perfectamente inmóvil, armada de volúmenes preciosos, inútil, incorruptible, secreta. (A Biblioteca de Babel, 98)

My imagined library is a Universe in expansion because it guards, protects and disseminates the intellectual achievements of the human race, whose evolution is still an ongoing process. While the borgian librarians hunt for the ultimate book, the book of books, in my imagined ever-growing library I search the past and look for the knowledge, the poem, the thought that one day will come into existence through the words written and read or heard.

This library of mine, and probably of many, is not just a rational and organized thought, a sign with a form and a referent. It is a symbol. Moreover, the description that best suits my image of books and libraries is the one used by Le Guin in *The Telling* [9]: books are *Arbores*. But they are trees planted by human hands; therefore, we will not find the Arbor of Knowledge God planted in the middle of the Garden of Eden. Arbores produced by humans will never be the ultimate book the Borgian librarian spends his life seeking out. Human *arbores/books* grow in the telling; every time a book is read (silently or aloud) it is recreated, reinvented, commented, corrected, altered by the reader/listener and this process produces new *arbores* that grow to become the millenary, endless forests/libraries of reason and imagination.

> The jungle was endless, and it was not one jungle but endless jungles, all burning with bright tigers of meaning, endless tigers... (*The Telling*, 111)

1 – THE LIBRARY: DIALECTICAL FUNCTIONS

Such a library, then, exists only in the dialectical process of protecting and sharing. A book without readers is seriously handicapped, its message is a forgotten thought, and it is a tree deprived of its nutrition. To prevail, the forest needs the interplay with other trees, with the beings that inhabit it, the interchange with the water, the soil, the air, and the minerals. It is a net of dependencies. The book is a combination of inter and intratexts, activated in a different way every time a reader journeys through the words and establishes fresh connections in each new re-reading.

The library can only fully perform its function – to protect and disseminate the products of reasoning and imagination - if the reader is a free being. Reading is an act of individual and ultimate freedom. When the reader goes through a book, looking for knowledge, aesthetic pleasure, pain or mere information, he is free to decide what to do with the words he is scrutinizing: he can incorporate them in his own thinking; he can chose to ignore part, or the whole information; he can even dispute and comment it - if

[9] Ursula Le Guin, *The Telling*, London, Harcourt Inc., 2000.

not to others, at least to himself. Reading is an act of absolute, indisputably creative freedom that, when shared, thrusts forward humanity on the route of knowledge.

Throughout world history, there have been countless attempts to coerce the complex freedom concerning human speech, thought, and feeling, the factors which differentiate us from the brutes, as utters one character in *The Telling*:

> We have to talk about how to go and what to do, think about it, study it, learn. […] If nobody teaches us the words, the thoughts, we stay ignorant. […] So without the telling, the rocks and plants and animals go all right. But the people don't. People wander about. They don't know a mountain from its reflection in a puddle. They don't know a path from a cliff. […] They neglect things. Crops don't get planted. Too many crops get planted. […] all we know is how to learn. How to study, how to listen, how to talk, how to tell. If we don't tell the world, we don't know the world. We're lost in it and we die. (*The Telling*, 144-45)

The burning of libraries during disputes for territorial domination, the burning of Confucian books in China, in 213 BC, as a strategy to impose a new dynastic power, the *Index librorum prohibitorum* published from 1557 to 1966, the burning of books in 1933 by the Nazis, and so forth. These acts are assaults; they are severe attacks on both individual and collective intellectual freedom.

Now, the question I will try to answer in this paper is the following:

"If the act of reading is an act of absolute, individual freedom, as the theories of intertextuality have shown, a freedom that can and should be shared through speech or given a visual and practical form as in the hypertext, how will a Utopia, conceived as the best possible society, deal with books and libraries?"

Reason, commonsense and scientific practice advice a first preparatory step prior to any study and conclusion: that of establishing a «corpus». Utopia started as a literary genre in the beginning of the sixteenth century. A quick look at any reference book on the subject will testify to the enormous amount of known utopias written since 1516. And there is still a strong chance of many more being discovered in the next decades. Furthermore, caution and the history of literature advise prudence when it comes to

setting limits or decreeing the death of a genre. Human mind and imagination have a high degree of unpredictability that tends to contradict final statements. Therefore, I will not commit the imprudence of considering utopia a dead genre. It is my firm belief that utopia has evolved from a closed perfect and immutable society (like the Borgian Library) to its dark, negative claustrophobic counterpart, the dystopian text, to re-emerge in the second half of the 20th century as an open society, an almost utopia, a utopia in progress, or an "ambiguous utopia", to apply a term coined by Le Guin and used by Peter Ruppert in his *Reader in a Strange Land* [10].

Having this genealogy in mind, I will try to investigate the libraries in the following «corpus»:

three utopias: Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Johann Valentin Andreae's *Christianopolis* (1619), and Mercier's *L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante* (1771);

one central dystopia in what concerns the use and misuse of books: Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and

two "ambiguous" Utopias: Pina Martins's *Utopia III* (1998), and Ursula Le Guin's *The Telling* (2000);

thus coming to the beginning of the second millennium.

2 – LIBRARIES IN UTOPIA: COMPARATIVE STUDY.

In the entry "Libraries" - in the *Dictionary of Literary Utopias* [11] - Raymond Trousson states that, in utopias, the libraries are described in two ways: they either collect imaginary books, or they collect real books commented for visitors. And, says Trousson, "rather than laying down principles, writers [of Utopias] more often spent time condemning or appreciating ancient and modern authors. (*DLU*, 352-53).

Being this a fact, we have to consider that the writers of Utopias committed themselves to rationally planning a society in all its elements - from family units to

[10] Ruppert, Peter. *Reader in a Strange Land; The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias*. Athens (Georgia): The University of Georgia Press, 1986.

[11] Fortunati, Vita and Raymond Trousson, *Dictionary of Literary Utopias*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000, pp: 352-354,

political organization; from labour structures to educational systems; from productive planning to consumer regulations. However, when it comes to libraries, the vast majority simply ignores their use. In these circumstances, what interests me more is to try to find out why a minority of utopians wasted time condemning or expurgating the content of the ideal library.

Plato opened the path to this cleansing exercise when he expelled the poet - that producer of illusions and emotions - from his ideal city. Thomas More, the founder of the literary genre, followed a different path. Though he never mentions the existence of libraries in Utopia, he affirms that reading was a major activity among utopians, favoured by the state as the ideal method to educate and regulate people's activities. Then, we have the right to assume that some kind of facility to keep books in did exist in the cities of Utopia, for the communion of possession and the elimination of private property were that society milestones. Besides, where did utopians store the works they themselves printed of philosophers as Plato and Aristotle, of botanists as Theophrastus, of grammarians as Lascaris, of physicians as Galen, or of poets and writers as Homer, Plutarch or the much enjoyed Lucian for "his wit and pleasantry" [12], the one who stated in his *True History*:

> I see no reason for resigning my right to that inventive freedom which others enjoy; and, as I have no truth to put on record, [...] I fall back on falsehood — but falsehood of a more consistent variety; for I now make the only true statement you are to expect — that I am a liar. This confession is, I consider, a full defence against all imputations. My subject is, then, what I have neither seen, experienced, nor been told, what neither exists nor could conceivably do so. (Trans H. W. Fowler *et al*, http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/lcns210.txt)

In More's *Utopia* the reference to classical texts has an obvious explanation: being a Christian humanist, writing in 1516, More instilled his utopians with his own ideal of education and knowledge; and such an ideal can only survive if there are books, and if there is a place to host them as well as their readers. However, and in what

[12] Thomas More, *Utopia*, pp: 181-183.

concerns literature, the utopians are more of a receptive than a creative character, and no information is given as to what they produced in result of their reading.

Being a perfect and stable society, Utopia is, like the borgian library, framed in time. Thomas More cannot conceive a perfect society without education and knowledge and even amusement. But all this serves one purpose only: to keep the utopians in moral and intellectual equilibrium within the humanist aesthetic canon.

Written a century latter, *Christianopolis* is another utopia also framed in time. Johann Valentin Andreae did build a library in his perfect city, but his chosen course comes closer to Plato's than to More's. His citizens are beyond necessity in what concerns the word. Even so, they had

> A most extensive library [that] was kept in the first room [of the citadel], the offspring of infinite great minds arranged in categories and according to subject matter. (*Christianopolis*, 203)

In a square room of 10x10 meters and 3,5 meters high:

> There were nearly everything that is … believed to have been lost. There is no language on earth that has not contributed something of itself. Yet it seemed […] that the people of Christianopolis do not make great use of the library, and are content with a relatively small number of books, albeit powerful ones. (*Christianopolis*, 203)

In *Christianopolis*, books are not banished; they are a treasure, but a useless one. The Word of God is all the citizens need, and may enjoy. One society, one book, one word. Such bliss immediately brings to mind Robert Elliott's statement in *The Shape of Utopia*: "one man's utopia is another man's […] nightmare" [13]. Without words to tell the diversity of life, the citizens of Christianopolis are at the brink of destruction, just like Borges's librarians. The limited freedom enjoyed by More's utopians receives a deadly blow in Andreae's *Christianopolis*. Freedom, diversity and evolution are nonexistent words in the lexicon of Christianopolis's citizens. Though there are books,

[13] Robert Elliott, *The Shape of Utopia; Studies in a Literary Genre*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 87.

exceptional masterpieces, such works are dead repositories of words, since there are no willing readers to bring them to life.

In the 18th century, Mercier, the founder of a new kind of utopia - the uchronia, or "the utopia that takes place in time" (*DLU*, 44) - imagines Paris in the year 2440. Paris - that now has a modern building to lodge the French national library, and so many others disseminated throughout the city - has, in Mercier's dream, one and only library: *la bibliothèque du roi*.[14]

> Au lieu de ces quatre salles d'une longueur immense et qui renfermoient des milliers de volumes, je ne découvris qu'un petit cabinet où étoient plusieurs livres qui ne me parurent rien moins que volumineux. Surpris d'un si grand changement, je n'osois demander si un incendie fatal n'avoit pas dévoré cette riche collection ? - oui, me répondit-on, c'est un incendie mais ce sont nos mains qui l'ont allumé volontairement. (L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante, p. 187)

These are the words that describe the future Paris library: a small cabinet was enough to guard the few volumes that had survived a vast *auto-de-fé*. Premeditatedly, the citizens had burned the records of human history, philosophy, poetry, science, etc. The image of the renowned Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris on fire, brings instantly to mind the legendary episode of the burning of the Library of Alexandria, according to some, in the first century BC by Caesar (a matter of dispute).

We would all mourn such a loss and immediately hope that at least some complete masterpieces might yet inhabit the small cabinet walls. However, Mercier's dream, or rather this nightmare in what concerns the library, is not over yet. What remains in the cabinet are not complete masterpieces but expurgated or censured works, partial knowledge. Very few works survived in its wholeness [15]. Why, we wonder. The librarian, a *vraie homme de lettres* explains:

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[14] For a more thorough analysis of the libraries in 18th century utopias, including Mercier's, please read Raymond Trousson essay: «Les Bibliothèques de l'Utopie aux XVIII Siècle» in *D'Utopie et d'Utopistes*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 1998, pp 103-114.

[15] For an analysis of the content of Mercier's utopian library see: R. Godenne, «La Bibliothèque de l'an 2440 selon L.-S. Mercier», *The French Review*, 45, 1972. pp. 571-579.

> Convaincus par les observations les plus exactes, que l'entendement s'embarasse de lui-même dans mille difficultés étrangeres, nous avons découvert qu'une bibliotheque nombreuse étoit le rendez-vous des plus grandes extravagances et des plus folles chimères. [...] mais nous n'avons fait qu'écarter les inutilités qui nous cachoient le vrai point de vue. [...] En effet que contenoit cette multitude de volumes ? Ils étoient pour la plupart des répétitions continuelles de la même chose. [...] nous avons rassemblé dans une vaste plaine tous les livres que nous avons jugé ou frivoles ou inutiles ou dangereux ; nous en avons formé une pyramide qui ressembloit en hauteur et en grosseur à une tour énorme : c'étoit assurément une nouvelle tour de Babel. [...] Nous avons mis le feu à cette masse épouvantable, comme un sacrifice expiatoire offert à la vérité, au bon sens, au vrai goût. (p. 189-190)

Here we have it: the extermination of human reasoning and creativity in the name of truth, the common sense and the true taste.

With the partial exception of More's *Utopia*, in the literary utopias I have chosen, books and libraries are understood as incompatible with the perfect society because they demand a freedom that none of these rational legislators seems willing to accept.

Rummaging for libraries and books, Mercier's text provides me with the necessary link to jump from utopia to dystopia. Krishan Kumar, in his *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, states that

> utopia and anti-utopia are antithetical but yet interdependent. They are 'contrast concepts', getting theirs meaning and significance from their mutual differences. But the relationship is not symmetrical or equal. The anti-utopia is formed by utopia, and feeds parasitically on it.[16]

From the perfect Parisian society of the future that incinerates centuries of texts and records, to the dystopian society in the future - that uses firemen to burn the remnants of a literate society - the jump is quite small. In *Fahrenheit 451*, we discover a somewhat schizophrenic society where people no longer read. There, everything is organized in such a way that people can feel happy and amused all the time, thought the

[16] Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 100.

rate of suicide increases every year (p. 23). To eliminate stress, the citizens either go to a park to smash windows or get in the car and drive at insane speed through the long avenues, overrunning anything that gets in the way.

The firemen patrol commander, Beatty, explains why books started to be burnt:

> Once, books appealed to a few people here, there, everywhere. They could afford to be different. The world was roomy. But then the world got full of arms and elbows and mouths. Double, triple, quadruple population. Films, radios, magazines, books levelled down to a sort of paste pudding norm. […] Books cut shorter. Condensations. Digests, Tabloids. Everything boils down to the gag, the snap ending. (p. 61)

> It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation and minority pressure carried the trick, thanks God. Today, thanks to them, we can stay happy all the time… (p. 65)

Here, it was not done in the name of Truth, commonsense or good taste, as in Mercier's future Paris. Here, books are forbidden in the name of happiness, lightness of spirit, amusement. Thinking is hard, sometimes painful. The intelligent species does not need that — "They just wanna have fun" — as the song goes.

And in order to have fun, Beatty explains:

> We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone *made* equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against. So! A Book is a loaded gun in the house next door. (p. 65)

What is the difference between Beatty and Mercier's real *homme-de-lettres?* Not much. While one does not want people to waste time with slightly different versions of the same though or feeling, or with contradictory opinions, the fire-fighter does not want to think at all, fears competition, fears comparisons, resents being forced to face his own limitations. He wants to be drugged out of rationality.

But while in Mercier's utopia, people lived happily with the cleansing of ideas and feelings in the name of progress and evolution, some inhabitants of Bradbury's

dystopian America managed to get out of the system and turned themselves into walking books, masterpieces memorized awaiting silently for humanity to touch the bottom of degradation and start climbing up again the ladder of rationality. Then, like the phoenix, knowledge, feelings, reason and pain would relive.

Comparing *Fahrenheit* with the two previous utopias we are confronted with a paradox: in what concerns books and libraries, or said in another way, human intellectual abilities and creations, Bradbury's dystopia offers more hope than Andreae's or Mercier's perfect societies.

On the other hand, comparing the three utopias and the dystopia, we have to conclude that, in these texts, the problem surrounding libraries and its content derives mainly from the fact that a rationally planned society faces difficult problems whenever the question of individual freedom arises. Reading and thinking are two sides of the same coin, that of reason, and if legislators of closed social and political systems want to keep control of their creations they have to control people's thoughts and feelings – their mind -, and always subject them to the interests of the collective.

This kind of behaviour, on the other hand, contradicts the way western society evolved from the 11th century onward, according to Colin Morris [17].

The question is, then, how is it possible to have a rationally organized society and, at the same time, let the individual enjoy his freedom and his personal rhythms of evolution without compromising the whole scheme? It is a difficult question of balance that requires concessions from both parties: the collective interests cannot annihilate the sphere of the individual, and the latter cannot ignore a set of rules equal to all. But if equilibrium is attained, then utopia cannot be a perfect society, as no evolution is needed in perfection. What is perfect is just. So, it has to become an ambiguous utopia, a process – a work in progress.

Pina Martins, in an extrapolation exercise, tries to answer the following question: if More's Utopia had survived *incognito* to the end of the 20th century, what would it be

[17] Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual*, University of Toronto Press, 1987.

like? Would it still be exactly the same perfect, closed, humanist society, or would it have changed?

A descendant of Raphael Hythlodeu, Miguel, a utopian ambassador to the outer word, asks the scholar Pina Martins, a specialist in humanism, to write the history of present day Utopia, and brings about the answers.

At Pina Martins' hands, More's Utopia suffers several transformations: geographical, political as well as cultural. Summing up some of the majors changes: due to seismic activity, the island splits into three, forming an archipelago; a violent earthquake destroyed all the houses but preserved the monuments; private property is brought in and each citizen learns one trade; slavery and death penalty were abolished; communal meals are maintained only in festive occasions.

But in what concerns libraries and books, in *Utopia III* there are three major libraries, one in each island, being the Amarauto's the richest one. It is a library designed to store the rarest books (*cimelia*), utopian and non-utopian. It has 27 thousand different books that amount to 33.333 volumes (*Utopia III*, 373). Among the books collected by modern utopians, one can find manuscripts from 12th century up to 19th century of philosophical and scientific texts, mostly western books, all perfectly catalogued.

The library of the Amórnova island is intended exclusively to humanist and scientific books, while the library of Laisínova, the third Island, is dedicated to history and culture. In this library, there is a special room available for important conferences on utopia, poetry, philosophy, politics, and so forth (*Utopia III*, 389). This means that ideas and books were probably discussed, shared, commented.

It is precisely while talking about this last library that Miguel Hythlodeu makes the following statement:

> A literatura é muito mais interessante do que erudição. (Literature is much more interesting than erudition) (p. 391)

Apart from these three major thematic libraries where antique books are preserved

and studied, the new Utopia has 333 public libraries, from which 33 are scholarly and 300 popular. Miguel, an enthusiast for accurate information, tells us that there is a library for each 99 inhabitants. It is in these popular libraries that the reader can find:

> Milhares de livros históricos, literários, lendários ou de ficção, de prosa moral, de poesia, de jogos e muitos outros. [Thousands of books, historical, literary, fictional, didactic, of poetry, games, and many others]

From the extensive dialogue between Pina Martins and Miguel Hythlodeu, the reader retains this fundamental information: Utopia III is still a rationally organized society; it tries to keep a balance between public and private spheres of action; it strongly defends humanist values, now associated with ecological concerns; it preserves its identity; and recognizes that humans are both reasonable and sensitive beings. Therefore, we cannot be surprised to hear Miguel say to Pina Martins, in their final meeting:

> Vou sentir muitas saudades suas e deste poluído, corrupto e poluente país, contaminado e desordenado espaço onde nasceu o meu antepassado Rafael. […] Como homens somos todos imperfeitos, embora sejamos talhados para a suprema perfeição. (*Utopia III*, 565)
>
> [I will be missing you very much, as well as this polluted, corrupt and pollutant country, this contaminated and disorganized space where my ancestor Raphael was born. […] As men, we are all imperfect, although we are all intended to attain supreme perfection.]

It is this assumption of the human imperfection, and therefore of his creations, that opens this Utopia to the future, to evolution, to a dream replacing nightmare.

In Le Guin's novel, *The Telling*, the reader enters the planet Aka at a critical historical moment. A new egalitarian society, based on technology, rational organization and control, tries to annihilate the ancient, conventional, chaotic way of living, based on the word read and shared aloud. The new way of life, imported from others worlds, tries to deprive life of all emotional links, while the more traditional structures, surviving underground, try desperately to preserve the old ways. Its defenders consider the egalitarian society as the only possible course to evolution,

blaming the traditional way of living for intellectual and technological stagnation. The two opposite ways of life need to achieve a compromise. The uniqueness of Aka, resides not in the egalitarian state, equal to so many throughout human history, but in that culture that is based on the acceptance of difference and evolved for many centuries. The Telling is a millenary ensemble of thoughts, feelings, experiences, knowledge, philosophy, poetry, religion profoundly intertwined in peoples daily lives; a system of though that uses people's memory, but also records, paintings, books and professional tellers that contribute to the preservation of the Telling by sharing theirs stories with the listeners who feed the system with their particular interpretations, comments, reactions, etc.

Most of ancient libraries in Aka were destroyed, just as in *Fahrenheit 451*, but instead of burning the places down, the books and documents were smashed to be used as insulating material in buildings.

The only library that survived faces two problems. First, it is an illegal structure surviving in secrecy, hidden in caves in the mountains. Second, that library where the still existent written texts of the Telling are kept has no catalogues. Everything is hidden in the mazy round caves, randomly.

> Books, thousands of books, in leather and cloth and wooden and paper bindings, unbound manuscripts in carved and painted boxes and jewelled caskets, fragments of ancient writing blazing with gold leaf, scrolls in tubes and boxes or tie with a tape, books of vellum, parchment, rag paper, pulp paper, handwritten, printed, books on the floors, in boxes, in small crates, on rickety low shelves made of scrap wood from the crates. (The Telling, 195-96)

A library without a rationally organized catalogue is little more than useless. In fact, it is not even a library, but a warehouse where things are stuffed. A proto-library, silent, where words get lost in themselves.

The solution is brought about by ambassadors from a technologically more advanced alliance committed to the preservation of what is unique in each culture and to the sharing of those specific abilities with other human societies.

A compromise is attempted: Aka will preserve and share its traditional way of life and thought with the rest of the universe, and aliens will share their technological and scientific knowledge that will be used, not to suffocate the traditional way of living, but to feed it with new practical and useful ideas.

CONCLUSION

Libraries are structures developed by intelligent beings for safekeeping that which is specific of the species: its intelligence, a complex combination of reason and emotions. That preservation is only effective if freely shared between humans and if they are allowed to contribute with their own personal ideas, interpretations, comments, refutations, and emotions. The library has to go along with evolution, has to be able to develop. However, the marks of that evolution are imprinted in people's minds. To ignore or destroy the past held in reserve in libraries is to amputate humanity of its intellectual growth, is to compromise the future.

Eventually, Utopias and dystopias alike will exterminate the human being that has created them. Ambiguous utopias, almost perfect societies based on the sharing of knowledge produce guides, and:

Where my guides lead me in kindness
I follow, follow lightly,
And there are no footprints
In the dust behind us.
(The Telling, 77)

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http://www.fcsh.unl.pt/docentes/rmonteiro/Edicoes_online/Library_RMonteiro.pdf