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An Introduction to H.P. Lovecraft's "The Quest of Iranon"

By **Emmanuel Koukios**, Professor of Organic Technologies at the National Technical University of Athens, Greece. His research interests focus on the emergence of bio-economy/bio-society, approached from technological and managerial points of view.

"Caminante no hay camino" ("Cantares..." by Antonio Machado)

In a few months, those of us who observe and try to understand socio-technical change should celebrate the 500-year anniversary of one of our strangest concepts, i.e., that of utopia. Indeed, in 1516 Thomas More (1478-1535) published his famous book, titled "De optimo statu reipublicae deque nova insula Utopia", where he describes - in latin - the island of Utopia, a word he tailored from two genuine Greek elements, the negative prefix "u-", meaning "no" (spelled "ou" in Greek), and the noun "topos," meaning place or location. More's intention in making this word was to describe a place that does not exist, but already in his synthesis we can see some problems, to start with the correct Greek language version, which would have been "a-topos", a term already used in logic and mathematics to signify the proof of a wrong hypothesis.

The confusion gets worse, if we consider the proper Greek terms describing a good place, i.e.,

eutopia

("eu" meaning good, nice or happy in Greek), and a bad place, i.e.,

dystopia

("dys-" being a Greek prefix denoting bad, sad or ugly matters). So, a (non-existing) utopia can be either or none, depending of the case, but at the same time some eutopias and dystopias can exist in reality, thus not being true utopias...

To cut a long story short, as our object here is not a treatise on utopias, we can characterize

the concept of utopia as **wicked**, a term used by the American philosopher C. West Churchman in 1967 to describe problems difficult to solve, due to hidden factors, complex interrelationships and other analytical obstacles. On the other hand, dealing with wicked problems or through wicked concepts could reveal such hidden aspects.

Despite its wickedness, or perhaps because of that, the concept of utopia has survived the life span of the original book by Thomas More, and has accompanied the intellectual developments of the human world since the Renaissance, with many examples to be found in literature, ideology, art, social science and politics. We will mention just one that links Thomas More to Mark Twain (author of the previous short story published in this journal): Jonathan Swift's ***Gulliver Travels***

, according to a comment by Isaac Asimov in his preface to an annotated edition of the famous book (Potter, New York, 1980).

The author of the story we introduce is Howard Phillips Lovecraft, known as **H.P. Lovecraft** (1890-1937), a great American writer. Lovecraft was a master of the short story, posthumously recognized for his work, especially his Chthulu mythology, a cycle of horror stories, bridging poetry to science fiction in a terror atmosphere. The short story

The Quest of Iranon

that Lovecraft wrote in February 1921, and published several years later, forms part of his other stories, where poetry dominates and poetic language creates unique new worlds, full with strong - not always pleasant - images.

I suggest that this Lovecraft story is about utopias, eutopias and dystopias in a creative way that makes possible to the wicked concept to help the reader "see more" (**Rosana Agudo**, ["Developing the capacity to 'See More' is the great adventure of our time"](#)

, Club of Amsterdam J., Issue 172, January 2015). In particular, Iranon - the traveling singer and hero of the short story - in his quest for a eutopia, Aira, the city of beauty and dreams, he visits two dystopias, Teloth, a city of stern people and granite buildings, and Oonai, a city of endless partying and shallow feelings.

For the detailed presentation of those three worlds, as well as for the description of the travels and trajectories from city to city, and especially for tragic outcome of Iranon's quest, where utopia finally appears, you have to read and enjoy the whole story. But as an appetizer, in the following three sections we have attempted to use material from Lovecraft's own pen for a glimpse of those three archetypical cities.

THE EUTOPIA OF AIRA, CITY OF MARBLE AND BERYL

Aira, the city of marble and beryl, is full of beauties. The morning sun shines bright above the many-coloured hills in summer, and the city smells with the sweetness of flowers borne on the south wind that makes the trees sing.

Two rivers flow through the verdant Aira valley: the glassy Nithra, with its warm and fragrant groves, and the little Kra, with its picturesque falls. In that beautiful valley, the children wave wreaths for one another, and at night the curving waters reflect a ribbon of stars.

In the city, there are palaces of veined and tinted marble, with golden domes and painted walls, and green gardens with cerulean pools and crystal fountains. At sunset, one could climb the long hilly street to the citadel and the open place, and look down upon Aira, the magic city of marble and beryl, splendid in its robe of golden flame.

The memories of those born in Aira are of the twilight, the moon, the soft songs, and the window where babies were rocked to sleep; and, through the window, of the street where the golden lights came, and where the shadows danced on the houses of marble. The memory of that square of moonlight on the floor, not like any other light, it is full of visions that dance in the moonbeams while mothers sing to their babies.

The hero of the story, Iranon, was born in Aira, which he recalls only dimly but seeks to find again. He is a singer of songs that he learned in that far city, and his calling is to make beauty with the things remembered of his childhood. His wealth is in little memories and dreams, and in hopes that he will sing again in the Aira gardens, when the moon is tender and the west wind stirs the lotos-buds.

Aira's beauty is past imagining, and none can tell of it without rapture...

THE DYSTOPIA OF TELOTH, THE GRANITE CITY

In the granite city of Teloth there is no laughter or song. Nothing there is green, for all is of stone. The people are dark and stern, dwell in square houses, and show frowns on their faces.

When the singer arrived, they did not like the colour of his robe, nor the myrrh in his hair, nor his chaplet of vine-leaves, nor the youth in his golden voice, but they let him sing once. While he sang, an old man prayed and a blind man said he saw a nimbus over the singer's head. But most of the people of Teloth yawned, some laughed and some went away to sleep; for the artist told them nothing useful, singing only his memories, his dreams, and his hopes.

The first night, the people of Teloth lodged the visitor in a stable; in the morning an official came to him and told him to go and work in the cobbler's shop, and become his apprentice. "All in Teloth must toil," explained the official, "for that is the law." When the singer complained, the official remained sullen, and rebuked the visitor in the following words:

"You are a strange youth, and I do not like your face or your voice. The words you speak are blasphemy, because the gods of Teloth have said that toil is good. Our gods have promised us a haven of light beyond death, where there shall be rest without end. So, just go to the cobbler's shop or leave our city by sunset. Here we must all serve. Singing is folly."

Iranon refused and left Teloth...

THE DYSTOPIA OF OONAI, CITY OF LUTES AND DANCING

Beyond the Karthian hills lies Oonai, the city of lutes and dancing, of which camel-drivers whisper leeringly, and find it both lovely and terrible. At night, it has a myriad of lights, but they are harsh and glaring, not shining softly and magically. In a city of lutes and dancing, the visiting singer could easily find people to whom songs and dreams bring pleasure. Rose-wreathed revellers, bound from house to house and leaning from windows and balconies, listened to the songs of the artist, tossing him flowers and applauding when he was done.

Under the morning light, the domes of Oonai looked not golden in the sun, but grey and dismal. And the people of Oonai were not radiant, but pale with revelling and dull with wine.

In this city, the artist lived a luxurious life. They took away the singer's tattered purple robe, and clothed him in satin and cloth-of-gold, with rings of green jade and bracelets of tinted ivory. They lodged him in a gilded and tapestried chamber on a bed of sweet carved wood with canopies and coverlets of flower-embroidered silk.

But one day the King brought to the palace some wild whirling dancers from the desert, and dusky flute-players from the East, and after that the revellers threw their roses only to the dancers and the flute-players.

So, the singer put aside his silks and gauds and went out of Oonai the city of lutes and dancing, clad only in the ragged purple robe, in which he had come, and garlanded only with fresh vines from the mountains. The quest goes on...

Wishing you an enjoyable reading!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prof. Emmanuel Koukios

Is it possible to present Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in a single biographical note? Since this is the case of the author of this introduction, let us just say that his Dr. Jekyll side includes activities in engineering, chemistry, biotechnology, management and economics, whereas his Mr. Hyde side combines social and ecological sustainability studies, film critique, foresight and policy issues. The two sides have agreed to meet from time to time at his Organic Tech Lab at the Technical University of Athens in Greece. The rest of time, Emmanuel, in either of his personalities, has worked in more than 10 other places in Europe and North America, and travelled in more than 40 countries in 5 continents, in his quest for his Aira.