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Longing for the South: Camus, Relative Utopia, and the Logic of Abstraction

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Abstract. Under conditions of generalized reified abstraction – a historically sedimented condition in which mediating forms forget they are mediating and present themselves as reality itself – utopia has lost its critical function and become indistinguishable from ideology. Where Paul Ricoeur argued that the tension between ideology and utopia is unsurpassable, this essay contends that the tension has already collapsed. Utopia has been absorbed into ideology rather than correcting it, leaving what Marx called 'the language of real life' without a foothold. Against this diagnosis, the essay proposes Albert Camus's notion of 'relative utopia' as a specifically adequate response to the conditions of reified abstraction, one that builds the critique of abstraction into its own structure by refusing the consolation of any ground, including the ground of hope itself. Reading Camus alongside the nineteenth-century Balkan poet Konstantin Miladinov and his poem 'T'ga za jug' (Longing for the South), the essay argues that relative utopia is not a chastened utopianism but a form of first praxis, an orientation without innocence: limit, doubt, and attachment to the other and to a world accepted as flawed and yet worth the effort.

Key Words: relative utopia, abstraction, Albert Camus, Konstantin Miladinov, praxis

Tožba za jugom: Camus, relativna utopija in logika abstrakcije

Povzetek. Pričujoči esej trdi, da današnje ponovno oživljanje utopičnega diskurza ni znak obnovljene politične možnosti, temveč simptom njegove izčrpanosti. V razmerah splošne reificirane abstrakcije – zgodovinsko utrjenega stanja, v katerem posredniške oblike pozabijo, da posredujejo, in se predstavljajo kot sama realnost – je utopija izgubila svojo kritično funkcijo in postala neprepoznavna glede na ideologijo.

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Medtem ko je Paul Ricoeur trdil, da je napetost med ideologijo in utopijo nepremostljiva, naš esej trdi, da se je ta napetost že zrušila. Utopija je bila vključena v ideologijo, namesto da bi jo popravila, s čimer je tisto, kar je Marx imenoval »jezik resničnega življenja«, ostalo brez opore. V nasprotju s to diagnozo esej predlaga Albert Camusov pojem »relativna utopija« kot posebej ustrezen odgovor na pogoje reificirane abstrakcije, odgovor, ki kritiko abstrakcije vgradi v lastno strukturo s tem, da zavrača tolažbo kakršne koli podlage, vključno s podlago upanja samega. Esej, ki Camusa bere skupaj z balkanskim pesnikom iz 19. stoletja Konstantinom Miladinovom in njegovo pesmijo »T'ga za jug« (Tožba za jugom), trdi, da relativna utopija ni skromnejši utopizem, ampak oblika prve prakse, usmerjenost brez nedolžnosti: omejitev, dvom in navezanost na drugega ter na svet, ki je sprejet kot pomanjkljiv, a kljub temu vreden truda.

Ključne besede: relativna utopija, abstrakcija, Albert Camus, Konstantin Miladinov, praksa

Introduction

If we are once again asked to think about utopia, then there is something in our historical moment that makes it possible to do so. When does utopian thinking arise? Amidst crises or on the eve of revolutions, when everything seems possible? When the present becomes so absurd and suffocating that only imagining a radical elsewhere seems capable of redeeming it? Or, to ask it with Ricoeur (1976), is utopia emerging because the political order has lost so much credibility that ideology can no longer bridge the gap between authority's claim and the belief it requires, leaving utopia to provide the suspension of disbelief that makes the existing order livable?[1] If for Fredric Jameson (1971, 111) '[t]he Utopian idea [...] keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is,' in this essay I argue for a more unsettling diagnosis. Namely, that the resurgence of utopian discourse today[2] is a symptom of a deeper capitulation to ex-

[1] My sincere thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments, which helped sharpen the argument and conclusion, and for prompting me to engage with Ricoeur's thought.

[2] I am referring to a utopian discourse that has returned without calling itself explicitly utopian, and that is visible, for example, in techno-policy imaginaries (innovation, disruption, alignment, ESG, AI-for-good); in platform-mediated promises of personalization, optimization, and change by aggregation of clicks; in crisis governance framed

isting conditions.[3] A return to utopia is a sign of the present in which effective agency has become so implausible – absorbed by platforms and apparatuses that monetize its image – that change can only be fathomed in its most unrealizable, abstract form, and is therefore no change at all.

Slavoj Žižek correctly identifies this impasse: 'true utopia,' he says in a much-circulated talk, 'is when the situation is so without issue, without the way to resolve it within the coordinates of the possible that out of the pure urge of survival you have to invent a new space. Utopia is not a kind of free imagination; utopia is a matter of innermost urgency – you are forced to imagine it, it is the only way out, and this is what we need today' (MacLean 2009). But Žižek does not cross the threshold to critique, for he frames utopia as a necessity instead of interrogating it as a form that may remain fully compatible with the coordinates of capitalism. The claim that I am making here is precisely that, when utopia presents itself as an urgent necessity, it does not necessarily indicate resistance to resignation but rather the exhaustion of agency. In this scenario, the only imaginable alternative to the present appears in the form of radical unreality whose pursuit is taken up by technical and policy apparatuses. In this sense, utopia, in its dominant modern political form, is neither a critique nor a horizon of change, but a symptom. It does not register the opening of possibility but its suppression, an abstract substitute for the inability to think and enact change within the constraints of the present.

Moreover, far from offering a way out of this condition, utopia today increasingly describes the structure we already inhabit. This is not because we live in a perfect, just, and harmonious world, but because, *pace* Bauman and Ashcroft, utopia has lost its critical thrust.[4] It has become indistinguishable from ideology,[5] channelling imagination in self-referential, non-transformative ways. Jameson's (1971, 111) 'stubborn negation of all

as mitigation and risk management; and in contemporary literary and cinematic forms (speculative fiction, cli-fi, dystopian film).

[3] For utopia as a symptom of civilizational crisis, see Sokolova (2019).

[4] For Bill Ashcroft, 'all utopias are critical. The distinguishing feature of all utopian visions is critique of those present conditions that make utopia necessary' (Ashcroft 2007, 419). Similarly, for Zygmunt Bauman (1976, 47), '[a]ny utopianism worth the name must engage in a significant polemic with the dominant culture.'

[5] Ricoeur (1976, 27) argued that 'the tension between ideology and utopia is insurpassable. It is even often impossible to tell whether this or that mode of thought is ideological or utopian.' For him, utopia's subversive and ideology's integrative function require each other as corrective. Thereby, utopia serves as the critical counterpart that exposes ideology's legitimating fictions. I do not refute this claim but historicize it, for the question

that is' has been realized, but not in the way he imagined. The negation of all that is has hardened into an abstracted world that can never become anything else than an image of what it denies. This abstracted world does not figure as a realm of possibility, hope, and change (even if it is aggressively marketed as such)[6] but as its commodification: accumulable, exchangeable, measurable, controllable, and incapable of circling back into real-world transformation. All that is solid melts not into liquidity but into commodified air.[7]

In digital environments, for instance, where potential futures are constantly imagined and performed, utopia does not orient transformation but substitutes for it precisely because it allows for the difficult, situated work of collective change to be deferred or made unnecessary. Such a condition signals what I see as the deep logic of our present: In the age of generalized reified abstraction in which we live, not only labour, value, social relations, and culture are abstracted and commodified, but also the very capacity to imagine change itself. By 'reified abstraction' I mean a historically sedimented condition produced by ongoing processes of metric rationality. It is 'generalized' in the sense that it increasingly extends across all realms of life. However, it is important to note that abstraction itself

here is not how utopia functions as a mode of imagination in general but what its return means as a symptom to be read rather than a structure to be described. What I am arguing, then, is that a specific historical development, generalized reified abstraction, has broken Ricoeur's ideology-utopia dialectic in one direction and that utopia has been absorbed into ideology. Today, we genuinely cannot tell ideology and utopia apart, not because they are in a fruitful tension but because the distinction has collapsed.

[6] See, for example, the rhetoric of self-realization and creative fulfilment circulating in contemporary AI and startup culture. At the first ever GenAI conference, hosted by Jasper (San Francisco, February 14, 2023), the following slogans were prominently displayed and repeated: 'Write the books you want to read,' 'draw the art you want to see,' 'play the music you want to hear,' 'build the product you want to use,' 'start the business you want to run,' 'do the work you want to see done.' Comparable promises structure the mission statements of major technology platforms, which similarly frame technical infrastructures as vehicles of fulfilment and collective good. For instance, Microsoft declares its aim to be '[t]o enable people and businesses throughout the world to realize their full potential'; Google promises '[t]o organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful'; Amazon stages itself as 'the Earth's most customer-centric company'; and Airbnb advances the slogan 'belong anywhere'; while Facebook promises to 'give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.'

[7] Mark Fisher similarly diagnosed this obstruction as atmospheric. In his view, capitalist realism operates as 'a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action' (Fisher 2009, 16).

is unavoidable simply because thinking, judging, imagining, and creating all depend on mediating forms (such as utopia) through which humans orient themselves in the world. Abstraction, in other words, shapes how the world becomes intelligible and actionable.

Now, difficulties arise when abstraction forgets its mediating character and begins to present itself as reality. In that moment, abstraction no longer guides experience but governs it, appearing as necessity. It therefore becomes essential to distinguish between forms of abstraction that remain self-aware and provisional, orienting humans in the world (what I call *reflexive abstraction*) – utopia among them – and those in which what used to be instrumental operations become ends that substitute for the world by imposing their own form as inescapable (*reified abstraction*) – the form ideology takes.[8] If reified abstraction is the condition in which mediating forms forget they are mediating and present themselves as reality itself, then reflexive abstraction is simply the refusal of that forgetting, the capacity to use abstractions while remaining aware that they are abstractions. This is what utopia was always supposed to do: cast a glance from nowhere at the here and now, defamiliarize the given, keep open the gap between what is and what could be. Ideology, by contrast, closes that gap by naturalizing the given.

But, today, the 'nowhere' has been colonized. Ricoeur's ideology-utopia dialectic presupposes that imagination retains some capacity for the 'nowhere,' the eccentric glance from no-place that defamiliarizes the given. I argue that this capacity has been captured. The 'nowhere' is now a platform, the eccentric glance is monetized, and the clearing where Levinas says man is revealed has become a content feed (Ricoeur 1976, 27). If, as Gil Scott-Heron once insisted, the revolution would not be televised, today the danger is different: it is continuously streamed, excerpted, and rendered performative. Praxis has turned into hyperactivity without transformation, for what circulates is not collective change but its image, detached from duration, risk, and consequence. When change turns into an image, it is abstracted from lived reality and becomes commodifiable, so that utopia itself appears less as a project of transformation or critique than as a consumable form.

Now, when utopia returns as public discourse, it tends to do so first

[8] I have begun elsewhere to develop the distinction between reflexive and reified abstraction as well as the idea that reified abstraction is the defining condition of contemporary life (Ilievska 2026).

in its most abstract and idealized form precisely because this is the form most legible to institutions, policy, and tech governance. Therefore, it is particularly vulnerable to the mechanisms of abstraction for several reasons. First, because, as a non-place and an ideal form, it is already abstraction. Second, because it lacks constraint. And third, because it operates at the level of representation rather than the here and now. As Laurence Davis (2021, 565) shows, theorists of utopia such as Ernst Bloch, Gustav Landauer, and Walter Benjamin had already attempted to 'save' utopia from its abstracted forms by producing

> alternative, grounded utopian conceptions of time intended to open the historical process – 'grounded' in the sense that, whereas the dominant form of abstract utopianism depicts or conceptualizes an immobilized vision of society detached from time and habitable place [...], they instead theorize utopia as an integral part of the historical process that ensures that the past never assumes a final shape and the future never shuts its doors.

In this paper, however, the form of abstraction I am warning against is not the same countered by Bloch, William Morris, Ursula Le Guin, and Laurence Davis in the effort to resist abstract ideals of perfection and embed utopian thinking in historical processes and lived practices. What concerns me instead is reified abstraction in which utopia becomes operative and commodifiable, absorbed as it is into technical scenario-thinking, platform logics, and design solutionism that saturate the present while cutting it off from practice (Lukács 1923; Kinzel 2026). Social transformation is imagined here as a technical problem that is to be managed. In other words, utopia transforms from a question of imagining a different, better world to *optimizing* the present one. Bloch's horizon of hope (1959) is thereby commodified and attached to innovation and disruption, from Silicon Valley's civilizational mottos of 'organizing the world's information' (Google) to platform liberalism, policy inevitabilism, and NGO-ized activism. that translate political conflict into metrics, dashboards, and symbolic alignment with a moralized horizon of being 'on the right side of history.' On the academic side, utopia risks becoming another research project that may be pursued if it secures recognition and funding through grant schemes.

The question then does not concern measuring utopia's pulse in our times and whether it can jolt us out of the present. For, if hope has been hollowed out by commodification, it is not about how to restore utopia,

but how to think and live without false promises when even the horizon comes with a like button and cannot be trusted. Ultimately, beyond the recovery of hope for another world, I am interested in a form of critical attachment to this one, an *amor mundi* stripped of consolation and teleological promise. Herein lies the greatest challenge.

Camus and Relative Utopia

It is against this backdrop that I turn to Albert Camus's notion of 'relative utopia.' I do this not as a renewed investment in utopian thinking, but as a way of curbing it and situating it within the above-mentioned wider concerns. As Camus famously wrote, the fundamental philosophical question is ultimately 'whether life is or is not worth living' (Camus 2018, 3). Anyone who has ever confronted this question knows that it does not arise in the abstract, but as a limit, a wall, articulated in the simple, exhausted claim: *I cannot go on like this anymore*. The deictic 'this' does not point elsewhere, toward another world or another life, but to *this* one, to the inescapable facticity of a life that ultimately must be lived *here,* under given conditions, and without appeal. But it is precisely in this simple claim that another one emerges: *Is there anything I can do to change this?* Utopia is one of those ideas that has often served this question like a crutch, allowing one to provisionally endure the present by imagining another world or another life. Now, for Camus (2018, 6), the experience of the absurd admits of no prosthesis, precisely because it deprives us 'of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land' producing a 'divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting.' But if neither origin nor redemption can be trusted, then why would any form of utopia be legitimate and can it be reconceived at all? It is at this point that Camus introduces the idea of a relative utopia as an orientation constrained by limits and responsibility within the world as it is, translating the logic of the absurd from an existential register into a political and ethical one.[9]

Although formulated as a response to a very different historical moment and context, Camus's reflections on utopia and, indeed, abstraction

[9] This transition from the individual to the political has been well noted by Camus scholarship, most recently by Rémi Laroue (2024, 94; trans. mine): 'Très tôt dans son parcours, Camus a perçu l'importance de réfléchir à des principes fondateurs d'une conduit dans un premier temps individuelle mais que pourrait être élargie ensuite au reste du groupe.' ['Very early in his intellectual trajectory, Camus perceived the importance of reflecting on foundational principles for a conduct, at first individual, that could later be extended to a wider group.']

are strikingly pertinent to our times. What Camus identifies as the moral danger of abstraction in the mid-twentieth century has been the point of departure of my own analysis that shows how this abstraction has since become generalized, institutionalized, and internalized as the very condition of contemporary political and imaginative life. In 'Ni victimes ni bourreaux' (2002; first published in *Combat,* the daily newspaper of the French Resistance, in November 1946) writing in the aftermath of total war and ideological violence, Camus diagnosed a world in which human beings no longer addressed one another in the language of humanity, but as abstractions that cannot be persuaded: 'We have witnessed lying, humiliation, killing, deportation, and torture, and in each instance it was impossible to persuade the people who were doing these things not to do them, because they were sure of themselves and because there is no way of persuading an abstraction' (Camus 2006, 258). In such a world, utopia does not disappear, but becomes dangerous. The alternative then becomes what he denounced as 'anachronistic thinking' or political realism tied to governments and the nation state. The question therefore is not whether utopia should be abandoned, but how it must be disciplined, precisely 'because we live in a world of abstraction, a world of bureaucracy and machinery, of absolute ideas and of messianism without subtlety' (p. 259). Camus asked: what are we willing to do to human beings and concrete lives in order to realize any form of utopia? This is why, in his view, utopia could no longer be judged by its promises, but only by its costs. Camus then proposes a modest political philosophy that refuses to legitimize murder, rejects abstraction as moral alibi, and defines utopia not as fulfilment, but as a measured orientation constrained by limits: 'The goal, in short, will be to define the conditions for a modest political philosophy, that is, a philosophy free of all messianic elements and devoid of any nostalgia for an earthly paradise' (p. 261).

One concrete expression of this orientation is articulated in Camus's reflections on international democracy. Writing in the context of post-war geopolitics, Camus argued that what passed for 'international law' was in fact a form of international dictatorship, since it remained subordinated to executive powers, i.e. governments, rather than placed above them. A genuinely democratic international order (unlike the one adopted by the UN), he suggested, would require law to stand above governments, articulated by a representative global parliament constituted through worldwide elections. In the absence of such conditions, Camus insists that the only legitimate response is not resignation or revolutionary violence, but

international resistance conducted through means consistent with the ends sought. He imagines a bottom-up, transnational form of political action grounded in cooperative communities, free contracts, and shared principles of justice.[10] Through these, individuals would not seek 'to elaborate a new ideology' but 'simply to search for a new way of life' (Camus 2006, 273) and 'save the bodies' (p. 261) within the existing order while refusing violence, ideology, and domination.

Here, Camus articulates what scholarship has variously described as his modest utopia, ethical-political realism, Mediterraneism, utopianism, idealism, and even libertarianism. Independently of the labels, what matters is that Camus thought about what a new definition of action would entail that does not take utopia lightly nor refuses it. As Ronald Aronson writes (2004, 208), '[h]e insisted on *creating* alternatives, no matter how few people supported them at first.'[11] The new definition of action, for him, hinges on relative utopia: 'I have come to the conclusion that those who want to change the world effectively today have to choose among carnage, the impossible dream of bringing history to an abrupt halt, or the acceptance of a relative utopia that leaves some chance of human action' (Camus 2006, 266). Therefore, the term 'relative utopia' here does not mean a rescue of utopian thinking nor an acceptance of resignation. It is a deliberate disciplining of the term that retains it only to name a minimal orientation towards change that allows meaningful human action to re-enter the political horizon. Camus is not interested in revolutionizing the economy, but, as Michel Onfray (2012, 283) writes, in the obverse: 'on change l'homme pour qu'il révolutionne ensuite l'économie et la mette non plus au service du capital, des propriétaires, des possédants, mais du people.' ['one changes humans so that they may revolutionize the economy and place it no longer in the service of capital, owners, and propertied classes, but of the people.']

[10] For a detailed discussion of Camus's argument and its critiques, see John Foley (2008) and Tommaso Visone (2024).

[11] Aronson (2004, 108; italics in the original) continues: '[U]nlike Sartre, [Camus] was not trying to be realistic in the sense of gearing himself to observable tendencies with a demonstrable prospect of success. […] Camus's friends saw him as naively encouraging a crackpot scheme that had no chance of success. […] Camus was certainly an idealist. […] The 'utopian' dimension would express itself again and again, right down to his proposal for a civilian truce during the Algerian War. To disparage him for such a proposal, as Beauvoir did in 1963, was to ignore the strength of Camus's approach. He insisted on *creating* alternatives, no matter how few people supported them at first.'

Camus's proposals may be naïve to some, and ill-informed to others; in a third respect, they are impossible to disentangle from his contested *pied-noir* position from which he wrote on Algeria, and some suggest they should therefore be forgotten (Gloag 2023, prefaced by none other than Fredric Jameson). And yet they bring into focus something that remains crucial for our times: the question of praxis under conditions that actively disable action. If relative utopia is constrained by limits and responsibility, its force does not lie in institutional design but in its insistence that change must begin through embodied, collective practices aligned with humane ends. Today, however, the conditions for such praxis have shifted profoundly. Action is increasingly displaced onto screens (Schwendener 2026), participation reduced to expression, and the collective is being hollowed out by platforms that monetize attention while absorbing dissent.[12] In this sense, Zygmunt Bauman (2003, 19) was not wrong when he wrote that it would be a waste of time to focus 'hopes and efforts on the extant, hopelessly local tools of joint action' and that one should 'better follo[w] action to the place to which it has moved. The name of this place is no-place, no-land, no-territory.' What Bauman could not have anticipated is that, now that we have arrived in this place, we find only simulacra of action.[13]

Under conditions of generalized abstraction, the problem is no longer merely how to act without illusion, but *how to act at all* – how to recover forms of agency, relationality, and resistance that are not imme-

[12] There is broad scholarly agreement on this point. For a representative discussion, see Jodi Dean (2005; 2009).

[13] Bauman (2003, 19) continues: 'Unlike that orthodox space sliced into sovereign, border-poles erecting and border-passages guarding nation-states, the new trans-national and trans-state global space is (at least for the time being) "whole and uniform", unmarked by legible signs and full of unanchored, floating meanings, vainly seeking (or keenly avoiding?) fixed locations. It is in such a space that the new powers reside.' Written in 2003, before the consolidation of *onlife* and the rise of social media and generative AI, this characterization now appears untenable, and Bauman was careful enough to signal it by adding a 'for the time being.' Today, far from being 'unmarked by legible signs,' the digital spaces in which social, political, and economic life increasingly unfolds are among the most densely marked and documented environments ever produced. What Bauman figures as floating meanings in a uniform space are, under conditions of platformization and generative AI, continuously logged, indexed, measured, and rendered available for extraction and sale; see Maurizio Ferraris (2022). Indeed, the digital realm itself is now a 'space,' forming 'digital territories that, like physical spaces, have the propensity to become sites of extraction and exploitation, and the sites of digital-territorial coloniality' (Mohamed et al. 2020, 665).

diately defused by abstraction. Even more fundamentally still, the question is whether we can be brought to look again at *this* world, *this* life, indeed even look at the face of the other and assume responsibility for the relation, rather than retreating into the horizons of digital dystopias or utopias produced by reified abstraction that reorganize perception and increasingly make it difficult to relate to anything offline. Davis (2021, 572) proposes a 'grounded utopia' that is historically open, materially embedded, 'rooted in deep respect for the experiences and perspectives of ordinary people' and '[e]pitomized by the grassroots struggles of the dispossessed' (p. 573). Even Kristen Ghodsee's (2023) account of 'everyday utopia,' which relocates it to the scale of everyday practices and communities, still risks presupposing forms of sociality that can be stabilized and recognized as such. Under conditions of generalized abstraction, however, even these practices are immediately absorbed, mediated, or rendered as content: the Danish cohousing community becomes an Airbnb listing; ecovillages become a lifestyle brand.

In this constellation, relative utopia introduces limit, measure, refusal of extremes, and, as its qualifier 'relative' suggests, an *orientation without innocence*. This is not a rejection of grounded or everyday utopia, but a correction through limit. It is a tragic (but not resigned) recognition that even the ground is not pure, the soil itself is never uncompromised, that humans are both victims and executioners, and that staying often is not redemptive but *necessary*. Indeed, we should push this reasoning to the limit and acknowledge that the very reified abstraction which today commodifies 'the ground' and 'the community' is not imposed from elsewhere but produced through human practices themselves.[14] Unless we are speaking of communities entirely insulated from technological and global entanglement, there are no innocents in the ordinary gestures of scrolling, clicking, liking, swiping, tagging, following, and posting that are the lifeline of reified abstraction.

It is here that reflexive abstraction becomes decisive as an orientation that permits temporary withdrawal without exit, moving dialectically between critique of, and attachment to, *this* world. It is not incidental that some of the most enduring articulations of utopian orientation, especially in its relative, non-programmatic sense, have taken literary form.[15]

[14] Elsewhere I have referred to the human as an 'abstraction-making animal' (Ilievska 2026, 16).

[15] Bloch (1989) as quoted in Ashcroft (2007, 418): 'Literature, according to Bloch, is in-

A poem is itself an act of reflexive abstraction; it mediates experience while remaining aware that it is mediating, which is precisely the cognitive mode that reified abstraction destroys and that relative utopia requires. In what follows, I approach this measured orientation through Konstantin Miladinov's 'T'ga za jug' (usually translated as Longing for the South). This move is not intended as an aesthetic supplement to theory but as a necessary pause, as an instance of slow, reflexive abstraction that remains aware of its own mediation and limits, at a moment when hope itself has become structurally compromised under the conditions of reified abstraction. Miladinov's poem is chosen not only for its biographical and geographical proximity to Camus's Mediterraneism; but because its formal structure – the conditional doubt of the second stanza, the refusal to absolutize return – enacts precisely the logic of relative utopia in a way that a poem of pure longing could not.

A Doubtful Longing

While the Balkans were still under Ottoman rule, Konstantin Miladinov, a nineteenth-century poet and intellectual from Struga (today in North Macedonia), emerged as one of the region's most educated as well as culturally and politically engaged figures. After completing his studies in Greek philology in Athens, Miladinov travelled to Odessa, Kiev, and Smolensk in support of a broader national awakening of Slavic populations under Ottoman rule, before enrolling at Moscow University in Slavic philology. It was there that he wrote 'T'ga za jug', published in 1861.[16] Translated into more than 60 languages, the poem has nevertheless received remarkably little international scholarly attention. Today, it

herently utopian because its *raison d'ĕtre* is the imaging of a different world.' See also Fredric Jameson (2005) and Ruth Levitas (2013, xiv): 'The boundaries of literary genres are porous, and literature, poetry and song are, like art and music, amenable to exploration through the hermeneutic utopian method.' For Miguel Abensour (2017), too, literature is a site that stages utopia as critique and horizon that exposes the failures of current society. Literature's capacity to estrange perception, disclose the world without totalization, and sustain judgment through narrative rather than prescriptive models has been widely noted. Here I limit myself to two poignant formulations: see Hannah Arendt (1961), especially 'The Crisis in Culture,' where literature and narrative are understood as sites of judgment, appearance, and world-disclosure distinct from doctrine or instrumental reason; and Darko Suvin (1979), who introduces the concept of 'cognitive estrangement' as a mode of perceiving the world otherwise without totalization.

[16] For the historical context, the poem's place in the canon, and Miladinov's life, see Milne Holton (1982).

is deeply ingrained in North Macedonia's cultural memory, circulating in popular culture, giving its name to a well-known red wine, and opening the annual Struga Poetry Evenings, one of the oldest and most significant international poetry festivals (Simoska 2008).

Already the title of the poem poses some difficulties for translators, for *t'ga* or, in contemporary Macedonian, *taga,* is not quite or primarily 'longing.' Its meaning is 'sadness,' perhaps 'sorrow' and even 'grief.' In some ways, it is the Balkan counterpart of the Portuguese *saudade* for it implies a state that does not require fulfilment, an attachment to something that may never return. One can live with *t'ga* and *saudade* indefinitely. However, the title entails a further element, and this is where the poem breaks both with *saudade* and the German *Sehnsucht* and receives, retrospectively, the translation as 'longing.' For there is in 'T'ga za jug' an object of longing: the South (*jug,* as in *Jugoslavia,* 'land of the South Slavs'), rendering Miladinov's 't'ga' earthbound, place specific, and exposed to disappointment. But let us turn to the poem itself. The first stanza is as follows:

> The wings of an eagle let me borrow and soar
> fly down South to our ancient shore
> to cross path with our fair southern land
> to see Kukuš once more, Stambol again
> to see whether the sun there too is as faded
> as my dim days here dreadfully fated.[17]

In its object-directed longing for a concrete homeland, the emotion articulated in the title 'T'ga za jug' comes close to the German *Heimweh,* for it has specific geographical coordinates. The speaker writes from a distance, from a cold, sunless Moscow that remains unnamed, and is longing to see the South and cities like Kukuš (Kilkis in Macedonia, Greece) and Stambol (Istanbul, the Ottoman Empire's capital), places that he associates with collective belonging, signalled by the use of the first-person plural possessive in 'our ancient shore' and 'our fair southern land.'[18] But the poem immediately complicates the longing of the first four verses by subjecting it to doubt. The speaker is not just unreflectively longing to

[17] Translated by the author; adapted from Michael Sporer's rendition of the poem in Konstantin Miladinov (1994, 18–19). Adaptations were made for reasons of rhythm and emphasis, so as to bring the rendition closer to the poem's affective and tonal texture.

[18] For reasons of rhyme, the translation overstates. The original, by contrast, simply says 'v nashi str'ni' ('to our parts') and 'na nashi mesta' ('to our places'), which signal identification without qualifying modifiers such as 'ancient' or 'fair southern.'

return home but wants 'to see *whether* the sun there too is as faded' (emphasis added), as if a return would not guarantee warmth and redemption. The 'whether' ('ako') signals epistemic uncertainty, while the desire 'to see' ('da vidam') points to the need of verification rather than conviction. Even the scorching sun of the South is framed as potentially shining gloomily ('mračno ugrevjat'), signalling a loss of meaning, promise, and warmth. This return is not a return to Ithaca – an unambiguously desirable, restorative, and redeeming home – but a reflective longing for a home that is not what one would like it to be. Odysseus does not fear that Ithaca might disappoint; Miladinov does. His doubt intensifies in the following stanza to the point of making the return conditional:

> And if the sun there too rises dimly
> and if the sun there too greets me grimly,
> I'll make ready for the rough road once more
> I'll make haste for some unfathomable shore
> where the sun's favourable rays forever shine
> and the pitch-black heavens with stars are lined.

For a poem titled 'Longing for the South,' the conditional 'ifs' of the second stanza come as a surprise. The speaker's desire to return is not absolute, but subject to verification and capable of being reoriented should the South fail to fulfil its promise. This is longing without hope, orientation without guarantees, desire without redemption. The speaker refuses to absolutize home and is ready to soar to other faraway places ('unfathomable shore' is merely 'v'drugi str'ni' or 'to different parts' in the original) not because he would abandon the problematic South lightly but because he wants to limit its effect on him, call to mind the negative aspects as well. If home cannot redeem, there will be neither collapse nor despair. The turn toward the 'unfathomable shore / where the sun's favourable rays forever shine' undeniably invokes utopian imagery. Yet this gesture emerges only after both home and return have been subjected to doubt, and it remains deliberately indeterminate, for the poem does not settle in utopia – there is no programme, no arrival plan. Rather, it reaches toward it as a way of refusing capitulation to disappointment without transforming it into a destination or a horizon of fulfilment. But the poem does not end here.

In the next stanza and a half, the speaker returns to his present reality, to the 'grim winter' and the 'piercing winds' of the unnamed Moscow where 'darkness and frost and fog rage around [him],' filling his breast with dark

thoughts. This return to the northern present rekindles and intensifies the longing for the South of the first stanza that culminates in an extended celebration of the region and its natural plenitude:

> give me the wings of an eagle, oh, let me soar
> speed homeward to the lush land I adore
> to cross path with our fair southern land
> to see Ohrid, oh Lord, look at Struga again.
>
> There the rose-fingered dawn brightens my soul
> there the sunset keeps wooded hills aglow
> there a mighty force a great bounty has spread
> over fields of harvest of wine and of bread
> and the clear lake shimmers, widens the view
> darkened by the wind, it turns hues of blue
> look upon these mountains, behold these plains
> everywhere God's beauty this land contains.
>
> There to play the kaval to my heart's content
> ah! let the sun set, let this life end.

After the moment of conditional doubt, the poem returns insistently to the South – but not as a social or political utopia. What follows instead is a dense evocation of sensory and elemental plenitude, the 'suchness' of place: light, harvest, water, landscape, atmosphere, and music.[19] Set against the suffocating cold, the darkness, and the psychic depletion of the speaker's northern sojourn, the South appears as a space of measure, rhythm, and embodied life. This return does not undo the earlier doubt, nor does it resolve it through a promise of redemption. Rather, it reframes the choice at stake. The speaker would rather endure finitude – and even political chaos – within a world that sustains life's basic rhythms than persist in a climate that extinguishes them. Even the poem's final gesture – 'let this life end' – is not nihilistic, but names a refusal to live without warmth, measure, and beauty.

Rather than a retreat into illusion, what emerges here is a dialectical holding-together of doubt and attachment, lucidity and fidelity. The South is neither idealized nor abandoned but chosen under conditions

[19] Davis (2021, 567) employs '"suchness" and particularity of place' in his reading of Ursula Le Guin to name her emphasis on the concrete, sensuous, and irreducible particularity of place within what he calls grounded or non-ideal utopian thinking.

of uncertainty and imperfection. In this sense, Miladinov's longing anticipates what Camus would later describe as an ethics of measure and attachment, a form of *amor mundi* that does not deny imperfection, suffering or injustice but at the same time refuses to withdraw from the world on their account. Hope here is not consolation, but commitment without guarantees to a world accepted as flawed and yet *worth the effort*. Moreover, for Miladinov, this orientation was not merely poetic. For his cultural and political commitment to the region that he refused to abandon, he died in 1862, only one year after the publication of the poem, in a prison in Istanbul, the very city he so doubtfully longed for (Holton 1982, 161). Of course, Miladinov's 'T'ga za jug' does not respond to reified abstraction, nor could it. Written before the historical conditions that render orientation itself abstract and consumable, the poem nevertheless articulates a mode of attachment that becomes newly legible under those conditions: a way of remaining bound to place, climate, rhythm, and finitude without projecting redemption or transformation as a future state. Change appears neither as programme nor promise, but as the decision to stay within the world's constraints without surrendering to them.

If grounded utopia, as articulated by Davis, stresses historical openness, material embeddedness, and the perspectives of ordinary people, relative utopia, as formulated here through Camus and Miladinov, marks an internal limit to that project: measure, refusal of extremes, and an orientation without innocence. In this sense, I do not oppose 'grounding' but correct it by acknowledging that the ground is never pure, that attachment does not redeem, and that human beings are always implicated in the worlds they inhabit and reproduce, *including* the abstractions that render those worlds illegible and commodified. Miladinov's own fate underscores this point with tragic clarity: he did not perish elsewhere or in exile but died within the very South to which his doubtful longing was bound, a reminder that this soil has long been lethal to its own inhabitants, let alone to those who attempt to cross it without protection or permission.

Conclusion

Relative utopia should not be understood merely as a modest or chastened utopianism. It is specifically adequate to the conditions of reified abstraction because it builds the critique of abstraction into its own structure. Unlike grounded utopia, which can still be absorbed into platform logics and design solutionism as long as it retains an image of 'the ground,'

relative utopia introduces limit where expansion is demanded, and refuses the consolation of any ground, including the ground of hope itself. Unlike Ricoeur's dialectic of ideology and utopia, which assumes the two can be kept in productive tension, relative utopia proceeds from the recognition that under generalized reified abstraction that tension has already collapsed. Utopia has been absorbed into ideology rather than correcting it. What remains is not a restored dialectic but something more modest, the decision to stay within measure in a world accepted as flawed and yet worth the effort, without the consolation of transcendence or the alibi of resignation. It is, perhaps, the last available form of what Marx called 'the language of real life,' thinking and living that have not yet entirely come apart (Ricoeur 1976, 17).

The question of whether life is or is not worth living thus returns under the conditions of reified abstraction, not only as the question of how much suffering one can endure, but also as the more elusive question of how one can act at all when agency is dispersed, relation is flattened into content, and responsibility is deferred to authority and law. If there are no innocents here, it is because this abstraction is not imposed from the outside, but sustained through ordinary, repetitive gestures that render the world intelligible while quietly dulling our capacity to respond to it. The problem, then, is not how to imagine another world but how to remain present to this one without resignation or extremism in a kind of *emblematic longing for the south*.

Where would such an education in doubtful longing begin when we are at ground zero of political action, when the very conditions for collective action such as shared spaces, durable institutions, publics capable of sustained attention, have themselves been dismantled? There is no ground to stand on; we must make one, in the *here* and *now*. If we do not begin to build it, large-scale narratives of coherence and salvation will inevitably reoccupy this vacuum, offering a substitute ground that risks repeating the catastrophes of previous centuries on an even more intensified planetary scale. But the starting point cannot be in the realm of the social nor the political and not even the private. The starting point is prior to them all: the pre-institutional encounter with another person before they become a category, a demographic, a content. In this sense, if for Camus the political project of relative utopia involved supra-governmental structures built from below, today the task of relative utopia is even more modest and therefore infinitely more difficult because, before collective action can be reconstructed, *human encounters themselves must be*. This is not

existentialism, but something closer to a Levinasian ethics as first philosophy, a *first praxis,* rooted in the recognition that the encounter with the other precedes every political form, and that when that encounter is colonized by abstraction, politics has already lost its ground. The very condition for political action is to first encounter the other beyond familial, clan, religious, ethnic, racial, party, and national structures. Only then can political action become meaningful. Yugoslav Marxist Humanism, among other traditions of praxis philosophy, already attempted to think this passage from the reconstruction of the human to the renewal of collective praxis in conditions of alienation and political dogmatism. But this is the subject of another paper.

For present purposes, the road toward praxis as the political project of a relative utopia begins at the smallest, ordinary scale. This is not because it is politically negligible, but because it is precisely there that abstraction is reproduced and its reified form can be interrupted, in the ways we attend, encounter, and rebel. To meet the face of the other and take responsibility for it, to sustain an attachment without converting it into capital, content, or cause, now these are not moral gestures, but what one might call minimal acts of de-reification. In this way, action becomes thinkable again beyond the monetized infrastructures that currently absorb it. For, if grand narratives are resurfacing, it means that we have unlearned how to hold attachment on the most granular, organic level. And if we cannot refuse, in these ordinary ways, to abandon the other in the first place, how, then, are we supposed to save bodies?

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