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Corin Braga, *Les Antiutopies classiques*. Paris : Classiques Garnier, coll. "Lire le XVIIe siècle" 2012. 350 pp. Bibliography, index, and table of contents; €32 (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-0380-4.

Review by Denis D. Grélé, University of Memphis.

Exploring through literature the desire of Europeans to find Paradise, Corin Braga has authored a series of books to proclaim the impossibility for European travelers to reach the end of their quest, be it a search for immortality, power, knowledge, or the highest goal of all, the Holy Grail. Identifying such failure within the theological structure of Christianity (Paradise has been closed to us forever), Braga examined in his last work, *Du Paradis perdu à l'antiutopie*, how Renaissance thinkers tried to replace God's garden on Earth with the more terrestrial and less divine city of men.[1] Here again, the quest ended in failure.

In *Les Antiutopies classiques*, Braga revisits the concept of utopia and utopianism, but this time in terms of its most inauspicious feature: the destructive side of a literary imaginary society. Organizing his book in two parts ("La Critique rationaliste de la pensée utopique" and "La Critique empirique de la pensée utopique"), he skillfully begins by investigating how utopian authors try unsuccessfully to connect an imaginary mode of thought to the rise of reason as a new method of understanding the world, a method exemplified by Francis Bacon in England or René Descartes in France. This process, the author argues, undermines the "enchanted" vision provided by early utopian writers. For Braga, reason obliterates the notion of an impossible world and disposes of imagination as useless at best and often nefarious. In one chapter of the first part, the author uses the character of the narrator to exemplify his position. If the narrator entering a utopia is enthused at first by what he sees, he often ends up feeling uneasy about the new society he has discovered. Indeed, many such texts end with the departure, under false pretenses, of the narrator unable to live in utopia.

In the second part of the book ("La Critique empirique"), Braga examines utopian narratives and how they relate to the empirical approach defined by John Locke. In order to remain credible—in one chapter Braga investigates the utopian notion of verisimilitude—the creator of utopias takes refuge in various places at the edges of the known world. Organizing this part into two forms of experience—underground cities and the extra terrestrial world—Braga explores how in both cases the empirical approach to utopia is doomed to failure. He concludes, as he ventures into the nineteenth century, that utopian literature can be divided in two modes of thought: one "true" utopian movement that remains within the imaginary realm, and the other which postulates that the search for an ideal in the physical world results in the despotism of human beings unable to create a society of happiness.

On the whole, Braga offers a sensible and convincing argument about utopian literature in general. The author has an extensive knowledge of French and English texts that are traditionally perceived as utopian in nature. His bibliography alone demonstrates his knowledge of the field and his desire to be as extensive as possible. The author knows his texts well and presents them within a philosophical context that is especially enlightening. He shares with critics such as Raymond Trousson or Jean-Michel Racault a clear understanding of the issues at stake at the time they were made public and a large corpus that leads to meaningful conclusions.[2] At the end of the book, the reader is left with a deep

appreciation of utopian literature and a possible answer to the question of why the Western world has had such difficulties imagining a paradise on earth created by human beings for the happiness of all.

On the negative side, I have two main criticisms. First, Braga falls short of accurately and thoroughly defining what he means by anti-utopia, which sometimes makes the reader a little hesitant to accept the argument. More precisely, the author offers a definition of an anti-utopia as the opposite form of a utopia (a society resented as substantially worse than the society of reference) but does not always specify why the texts he chooses later are dystopian in nature. For example, he cannot truly decide if *L'Histoire des Galligènes* is a utopia or a dystopia.[3] In the case of Prévost, with the episode of Nopande, it is unclear if the text could be seen as dystopian in the eyes of one character, but not clearly anti-utopian on the whole.[4] The major issue is that Braga relies too much on the questionable "authorial intentions" (in particular in the chapter "Le narrateur en position dystopique") when he does not have any extra textual evidence to explain what those "authorial intentions" were. This unresolved issue of definition makes for an uneven level of quality in each study of the texts. For example, Braga provides excellent analyses of the work of Defoe, *The Consolidator*, and of the problematic utopia of Gabriel de Foigny, *La Terre australe connue*. [5] The analysis of the utopia of Casanova, *Icosameron*, is less impressive.[6] The Megamicres are presented as a dystopian society, but nothing is said about the new neoliberal order put in place by Edouard and Elisabeth, which has the potential of becoming either a utopia or a dystopia.

My second criticism lies with the organization of the book itself, in particular a heavy philosophical argument at the beginning of each chapter and the lack of chronological rigor, especially at the end of the book. Braga clearly has a deep understanding of the philosophical debates of the time, presenting them with accuracy and clarity. Unfortunately, it is not always obvious how the philosophical debate relates to the utopian or anti-utopian writings of the time. In general, while the philosophical presentation is interesting and useful, it would have benefitted from a clearer connection to the rest of his argumentation. Regarding the chronology, it is difficult to understand why, after stating in the introduction that classical utopias belong to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries while modern utopias are found in the nineteenth and twentieth, the second part of the book spends so much time on Jules Verne. This chronological problem is also noticeable in certain choices of historical events, such as when the author refers to the notion of the "pursuit of happiness" as belonging to the Constitution of the United States when it can be found in the Declaration of Independence. The Founders of the Republic knew better. Despite some minor flaws that have been identified here, this clear and engaging book is nevertheless a must-read for anyone interested in the field of utopian studies.

## NOTES

[1] Corin Braga, *Du Paradis perdu à l'antiutopie* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2010).

[2] Raymond Trousson, *Voyages aux Pays de nulle part. Histoire littéraire de la pensée utopique* (Bruxelles: Université de Bruxelles, 1979); Jean-Michel Racault, *L'Utopie narrative en France et en Angleterre* (Oxford: The Alden Press, 1991).

[3] Charles-François Tiphaine de la Roche, *L'Histoire des Galligènes ou Mémoires de Duncan* (Amsterdam: Chez Arkstée, & Merkus, 1765)

[4] Abbé Prévost, *Le Philosophe anglais ou Histoire de Monsieur Cleveland*, in *Oeuvres* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1977).

[5] Daniel Defoe, *The Consolidator* (New York: AMS Press, 2001); Gabriel de Foigny, *La Terre australe connue* (Paris: Société des Textes Français Modernes, 1990).

[6] Giacomo Casanova, *Icosameron* (Paris: Editions Pigmalion, 1977).

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