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# THE WASTELAND OF NATURE. HUMAN EXISTENCE BETWEEN JUNK AND UTOPIAS OF REINTEGRATION<sup>1</sup>

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*To live in today's disfigured landscape – where nature is but a fragment of an ancient beauty and richness – means entering the era of allegory tout court, within which human existence is forced to dwell in a lunar landscape remindful of those described by P. K. Dick, the locus of rotting refuse, where everything is swiftly reduced to “kipple” and “gubble.” Yet, despite being a mere fragment, an allegory of its former self, nature still retains a historical dimension: that dimension of time which the social universe – turned into an obtuse self-perpetuating myth – has given up in the name of the “always identical and always new” and of the irrevocability of a particular historical-contingent outcome. Yet, even a disfigured nature can be the source of a concrete utopia of reintegration, by virtue of its historical dimension. In other words, neither the wasteland of nature nor our dreams of salvation are exempt from an otherwise unsuspected mutual solidarity: being interconnected, they push imagination into remote and long forgotten lands where a happiness dwells, whose name – now unsayable in history – is Paradise regained.*

*Keywords: nature, consumerism, residuality, utopias of reintegration.*

In the era of the “techno-economic unification of the planet” (Morin 2011: 16), it becomes more and more evident that there is a close relationship between the consumer society, the end/distortion of utopian desire, the erosion of the natural conditions of living and the growth of residuality – namely, the unwanted legacy of our failed civilizational project.

Among the abovementioned concepts, residuality is certainly the least philosophically obvious. What does it mean? Residuality refers to the remains, the trash, the waste of the production process, the filthy

rubbish that makes up the essential counterpart of our production of glittering goods and amazing gadgets. Those are the bearers of today's technological indulgences, whose imaginal offshoot radiates in the media (commercials, advertising, consumerist narratives etc.), in this magical mystery world of TINA: Thatcher's acronym for “there is no alternative.” This nursery rhyme is nothing but the last great ideological narrative stemming from the school of Ananke: *de facto* it enchants us with its obsessive litany, apologetic of the status quo, shielding with inevitability our disposable economy – even though the systemic waste and the irrationality of a production process that produces non-disposable dross has now reached a dramatic point of no return. Consume and

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die: this is the dictate of our culture. And it all ends up in trash. “We make stupendous amounts of garbage, then we react to it, not only technologically, but in our hearts and the minds. We let it shape us. We let it control our thinking” (DeLillo 2011: 288).

The production of waste therefore constitutes a negative feedback that, as noted by James Lovelock, alters the balance system of Planet Earth, damaging the conditions that make life possible. Health, rationality and the “biotic” quality of the technological and industrial development of *homo oeconomicus*, in other words, can be deduced by the type of waste produced. Waste production is necessary for our ordering project, and is even part of the life cycle; on the other hand, though, “the dynamic organization of a living system can only function through the excretion of low-grade products and low-grade energy to the environment” (Lovelock 1979: 27).

On the contrary, in today’s economy, life is “under the spell of obtrusive monetary circumstances,” “the earth [...] shrinks to an almost-nothing, until nothing remains of its royal extension but a worn-out logo” (Sloterdijk 2013: 13): in its place, there is a filthy shroud of waste, “encased in spotless plastic bags” (Calvino 2008: 113) rising to the sky, as in the pestilential Leonia described by Italo Calvino; it seems to visibly grow on its ruins, arousing the entropic question asked by the profane oracle of consumption – “Tell me what you throw away and I’ll tell you who you are!” (Baudrillard 1998: 42).

This mythical necessity, which loudly laments the absence of credible alternatives and transforms politics into a mere *ancilla oeconomiae*, engenders a new form

of acedia, “a profound unwillingness to act or speak” (Arikha 2008: 115): the mass fatalism that leads to “collective depression and the loss of true shared desires” (Zoja 2013: 8), replaced by a false, selfish lust for objects that we’ll forget the very next day; while nature, turned into an economic resource, shrinks, gradually turning into a frightening wasteland, whose last inhabitants will be rats and beggars. To make a tangible example, in Europe, this slothful syndrome has led to the almost absolute supremacy of the “financial Trimurti”: the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund – a new edition of *amor fati* that is the focus of Lars Von Trier’s ideological and overly-aestheticized *Melancholia* (2012). If it were for me – seems to say the protagonist Justine (alias Kirsten Dunst), I’d procrastinate action until the end of time; in the meantime, I’ll get by dragging my gray wool threads (“It’s clinging to my legs. It’s really heavy to drag along”) – ivy and roots, in fact, hold us down to the soil of a languid and sad nature, soaked in entropy and dissipation. In this vegetable punishment, only the collision between a bleak wandering planet, dazzling with black invisibility and the defenseless Earth can end this “dialectic at a standstill” (Benjamin 2002: 10), in which nothing can change. What matters is that the collapse is general, involving all of humanity and, above all, that it is nice to see: this, it seems, is how many Europeans think – even with regards to the feared ecological collapse.

I really have nothing against the melancholic *Stimmung*, given its wealth of philosophical implications. However, it must be stressed that any naturalistic interpretation of melancholy is absolutely

illegitimate: thus understood, it does not lead to anything better than an unbearable condition of psychastenia, an emotional paralysis that is the consequence of the present-made “mythical” by the slothful spirit – indeed, the end of all longing for the elsewhere. Only by igniting its temporal index can melancholy appear as the inside of the utopian “elastic” band: the gravitational principle of reality (“before hoping you have to carefully scrutinize your surroundings, you are not a worldless languished consciousness”), which must accompany any commitment to the improvement of our reality: a sort of motion “from the circumference to the center,” as observed Marsilio Ficino, remaining firmly within the reflection of the principle of world gravitation, as is typical of the “Earth itself” (Ficino 1998: I 4, 113). This is in line with a “never-been-like-this-before” that warms the heart, with that impression of having lost “an unnamable, supreme good of something unrepresentable” that, yet, we perceive as our own (Kristeva 1989: 13). This ineffable something, a paradise lost that was never given in history, “would be previous to de detectable ‘object’: the secret and unreachable horizon of our loves and desires, it assumes, for the imagination, the consistency of an archaic mother, which, however, no precise image manages to encompass” (Kristeva 1989: 145).

In this respect I cannot help recalling what Benjamin wrote in his “VII Thesis” in the *Philosophy of History*, according to which the greatest political crime that can be committed in history, which is made of loss and abuse, is indeed the

Indolence of the heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine

historical image as it flares up briefly. Among Medieval theologians it was regarded as the root cause of sadness. [...] The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor (Benjamin 1999: 248).

However, I also wish to speak of waste in a temporal sense – hence the closeness of this discourse to the theme of a utopian alternative, which today we need more than ever. Nevertheless, what I have in mind is a “realist utopia,” meaning “the beginning of the construction of another future – but not elsewhere, here and now. If it is true that utopias have their time, our time is precisely the right time for realist utopias” (de Sousa Santos 2013: 212).

The challenge, then, is to bring together the thought of a utopian alternative and the (melancholic?) reflection on waste – the traces of reality produced by a productive process detached from the context of life. I would call this Residue Utopia – as if there were no way to change the world other than to think of waste and ruins, those desperate fragments that risk turning our historical-natural landscape into the wasteland/land-fill of creation. In this world, as prefigured by Philip K. Dick’s dystopian novels in the 1950s, one can already feel the icy wind blow on a landscape that is more and more like the moon’s: an “arid, barren expanse of waste,” reduced to a “skull of stone.” The skin and flesh of this cold and desperate terrestrial valley seem to have been “eroded away by millenniums of ruthless abrasion. Only the skull was left, vacant eye-sockets and gaping mouth” (Dick 1955: 149–150).

The problem is that today, in the name of a mistaken utopia, we tend to barter

the true utopian ideality at the cost of its historical realization – spurious and counterfeit – in many disposable heterotopies prepared by the consumer society. Here is just one example. Industrial ice cream, rather than showing itself for what it is – a calorie-nutrient surplus demanding to be gobbled up as quickly as possible – could be presented as a veritable utopian surrogate, igniting the human soul with exotic images coming directly from the country of Nowhere. I am referring to the advertisement of a well-known multinational – and no name seems to grasp its infinite and ubiquitous essence, above any name and concept (as Pseudo-Dionysius might have said after studying Marx). In a Portuguese cafe, just below an affogato with the (still plausible) name of Poesia de Café, I read in horror an advertising “legend,” titled “Utopia de Milkshake.” This may be a trivial example, but it is telling, as it shows what I would call a consumer utopia realized (in a distorted way) in the *hic et nunc*.

The nameless country, the libidinal-soteriological North of the existential compass guiding the human desire for happiness, can be easily reached – and consumed – at a seaside cafe. What travels across the world, instead, are the ingredients of our food, refined and duly dehydrated, which come from “everywhere and nowhere”: condensed milk of cows who left no trace, hydrogenated oils extracted from unidentified palms, sugars derived from unspecified fruit or “nameless faceless” vegetables, thickeners and artificial coloring with mysterious names... all at the huge cost of polluting means of transportation crossing the planet to give consistency to our food utopias. It is a form of welfare – albeit

superfluous and ephemeral – that cannot be negotiated.

Of course, in the realm of ready-made utopias, dystopia is always in sight: in this case, it’s called a weight loss diet – a pseudo-Lenten time of sacrifices awaiting us after our (lipidic, if not utopian) vacation in Cockaigne. Bulimia and anorexia, on the other hand, are the two faces of a single ontological disease that dominates our present, corresponding respectively to redundancy (of material desire) and poverty (both in terms of satisfaction and in terms of available resources). But at the end of this omnivorous process, the only abundance will be that of the waste regurgitated and expelled from our compulsive hunger for resources. Poros and Penia, in consumer society, easily turn into each other: the misery of gratification is measured by the abundance of waste produced.

Given this perverted longing for an elsewhere, an essential aspect of the recovery of an authentic utopian dimension must refer to ecosophy. If it wants to win against capitalism, alternative thinking must be guided by a new philosophy of nature. In paraphrasing Benjamin on the theological puppet of “Thesis I,” ecosophy “is wizened and has to keep out of sight” (Benjamin 1999: 245).

In other words, there is a residual nature that disturbs man’s subconscious in the form of fear of waste (which often turns into the horror of our activities that brutally rape any form of natural life and beauty). Ecosophy, today’s indispensable critical philosophy of nature, stripped of any neoromantic reminiscence, seems to me to offer the datum of reality, which itself has an essentially utopian meaning: nowadays,

rather than being experienced, nature seems to inhabit man's deepest dreams, guiding him toward the realization of an ancient promise of happiness. It's a new Eden, writes Philip K. Dick, which is to live out "Your childhood days again. Where you can take off your shoes and wriggle your toes" (Dick 2012: 72). James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) is the very poor copy of this dreamt-of *restitutio in integrum*: a pathetic attempt to pass nostalgia off as a lost Edenic state, lost at the paradoxical price of environmental destruction – a paradise "recovered for all by means of the consumer society and put at the service of mass tourism" (Duque 2008: 12), with its aftermath of carefree devastation and remains/waste of ubiquitous branded gadgets. Indeed, the nostalgic reconstruction of an Edenic dimension of nature, one that is both touristic and digital, goes hand in hand with the complete transformation of the landscape, obscenely exploited to the point of exhaustion and swept away by the waste of the production process. So, behind this fictitious revival of a whole and harmonious world-environment, the nature we live in becomes more and more like a "graveyard of used-up, repudiated and abandoned lodes and shafts. [It] is inconceivable without waste" (Bauman 2003: 25).

Nature, *de facto*, is the point of maximum proximity between utopia and realism: on this dream of restoring a lost condition depends the very survival of humans *in hoc saeculo*. It is therefore necessary to rearrange our common home, the world-environment, by being firmly realistic. There is not much time left. And space, clogged with our waste, is already compromised...

To tackle the issue of objectual waste invading nature – Bauman's "ogre of chaos" of trash – I will use two quotations that are like the Scylla and the Charybdis of the considerations that follow. One is by Serge Latouche, the second is by the already cited Philip K. Dick. The first goes like this:

[We] have so far chosen to ignore it: the decline of natural resources. [...] Our generation will likely see [people] dig mine tunnels in old rubbish piles to retrieve old rusted cans (Latouche 2012: 116).

The second, instead, is the following:

the true God mimics the universe, the very region he has invaded: he takes on the likeness of sticks and trees and beer cans in gutters – he presumes to being trash discarded debris no longer noticed. Lurking the true God literally ambushes reality and us as well. God, in very truth, literally attacks and ambushes us in his role as antidote. [...] like a seed [he] lies concealed within the irrational bulk (Dick 2011: 74).

The two quoted passages stress different and complementary aspects, but both give some value to the productive process. Latouche describes a very near future, a disastrous world not unlike the one recently predicted by two films – Pixar's *Wall-E* (2008) and *Elysium* (2013). Indeed, such a serious matter was unfortunately dealt with by animation pictures. They describe dystopian worlds that have collapsed on themselves due to senseless resource waste, overpopulation and irreparable pollution of air and soil. The only available resource is waste itself, whether buried or abandoned under the sky, making up the new mines with which to face a fate of confinement and stent. Incidentally, these conclusions

had already been reached in 1972 by Aurelio Peccei, founder of the Club of Rome, publisher of the prophetic *The Limits to Growth*, a text that sums up a research on the environmental sustainability of the current economic model commissioned to the MIT (Meadows, Randers and Behrens 1972).

This proto-apocalyptic situation, in fact, already concerns our present. It suffices to refer to the open landfills of the so-called e-waste – electronic waste illegally sent to many African states. As put by journalist Ilaria Sesana, winner of the RAEEporter Social 2013 award, in Ghana, there are

Tons of refrigerators, personal computers, thin plasma screens and old TVs with cathode ray tubes. Or else ovens, washing machines, cell phones. They are accumulated and meticulously dissected to extract all the raw materials that can be recovered and sold: copper, aluminum, iron and steel. This work is done by hand, without the use of gloves, glasses, or other safety devices. The goal is to get the greatest economical advantage with the least cost. And those who desperately need one or two dollars a day to survive and support their family do not care about breathing dioxin: the risk of starving in a few weeks is more concrete than the chance of getting cancer in twenty years [...] Combustion of copper cables releases dioxin and furans (carcinogens) into the air, while the dismantling of old refrigerators results in the release of CFC, an ozone-depleting gas. The soil is also impregnated with toxic substances: waste oil, battery acid, lead and mercury. Emaciated cows and small sheep herds walk around the garbage, grazing the rare clumps of grass growing at the edge of the Korle Lagoon and drinking from puddles filled with black and oily water. The poisons thus pass from ground to meat, to milk and again to man (Sesana 2013).

This is the consequence of our ecstatic procession to all the stores around the world, mesmerized by the repeated technology announcement of “the new model,” on and on until the end of the world. Often the new model is just a gadget like the previous one, but occasionally followed by the well-known multiplier 2x, 3x, 4x... *De facto*, “every advertisement is an appeal to destruction” (Anders 2002: 41).

And the situation doesn't just apply to countries far away: similar considerations were made in a passionate reportage by Beppe Sebaste in the Neapolitan countryside, titled *Spazzatour: reportage dall'olocausto bianco dei rifiuti* (*Spazzatour: Reportage from the White Waste Holocaust*) (2010): “A black prostitute comes out of the heaps of rubbish and debris on the roadside,” Sebaste writes. “She's almost a child” – a postmodern avatar of the stroller described by Baudelaire – “an object among objects, a disillusioned life, like the groups of Africans stagnating in wait for a job (maybe in the polluted fields of tomatoes), a picture of a different prostitution” (Sebaste 2010).

The visionary writer Dick, for his part, proposes a metaphysical vision of the forgotten and removed world of garbage, collapsing the principle of utopia/redemption, the insatiable world of the alternative, capable of defatalizing, in the Blochian sense (Bloch 1995: 237), the “Realm of Necessity” of global capitalism, today turned into the “planetary palace of consumption” (Sloterdijk 2013: 12) and the world saturated with non-disposable waste. The thick layer of rubbish – the tomb of the unfinished, our failed longing for happiness – weighs like a boulder on the dream of well-being that has been

guiding today's civilization project. But, Dick seems to say, not everything is lost: waste, in a sense, is essentially eccentric and anarchic, *refusing its status of waste*. In this condition of "transcendental waste," it acts as a true Trojan horse, capable of crushing the society of garbage: Terzigno's rubbish-filled battles are an anticipation of this unpredictable dynamic, and represent "the most concrete emblem of every economic cycle" seen in its blatant irrationality and immorality (Saviano 2011: 282). And yet one reads about good willing citizens who return the unwanted bulky packaging of their consumer goods, which – irony of fate – they have to pay twice: for their production cost and for their disposal.

According to Dick, following Benjamin (perhaps he knew an anthology of the latter's writings in the English translation called *Illuminations*, released in 1969 and edited by Hannah Arendt), it is as if abandoned and rejected objects were entrusted with a principle of hope still valid for the whole humanity. These residual objects, finally freed from *réclames* and the false promises of happiness that accompany every commercial message, would remind humans – in their very betrayal of every expectation of well-being – that true happiness is still possible. The only problem is that it can only be reached beyond the current production of goods and their hypnotic media apparatus – products disguised as divinities, yet ephemeral and quickly destined for the landfill. In the very heart of waste, one can thus see the emergence of an anarchist and messianic form of controversy capable of releasing man from his slavery to rather inconsistent consumer goods, made for early disposal, sudden dismantling and

hasty replacement with other objects – the new fashionable stars of shop windows and department stores. On and on, until the end of time. There are more and more abandoned goods, which can never offer the Edenic land they keep on promising to the man-consumer, with media gimmicks of all kinds.

To describe this utopian strategy, which relates to residuality, I cannot help referring to a recent literary image. The protagonist of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) is crossing the deserted plain of a devastated world in the company of his son. After wandering in the midst of rubbish and rubble – a real "sea of waste" – he finds an abandoned supermarket: a temple of the commodified capital now in disuse. At its entrance, there is a vending machine: opened with a prybar and tilted over to the ground, among its gears it still hides a cold metal cylinder. It's a can of some carbonated beverage, the last remain of a sparkling world reduced to a "feverland," dimmed by a dark cloud that looks like "some cold glaucoma" (McCarthy 2009: 1–28).

This might be the only moving scene of the entire novel: it gives life to a glimmer of hope by appealing to a dormant desire for happiness – even in the face of the impending *finis mundi*. The child, who has never seen anything like it, seems enchanted by that unusual object: his father tears the aluminum tab and hands the can to his son as a precious gift. A light sizzle, made of penetrating aromas and tiny bubbles, emanates from the metallic container as a compressed, miniature world – effervescence capable of delivering ancient fantasies and expectations of well-being betrayed by the collapse of the consumer society,

which, in a residual form, still appeal to our unfulfilled desire for happiness. It is a salvific microcosm that persists in spite of the catastrophe precisely because it has never existed; its secret heart is made of promises and desires that, despite being strategically associated with the products of the market of the past, have been constantly betrayed and disregarded. Consumer products, with their amazing messages alluding to a paradise of the senses and of affections, free of sales strategies and of the phantasmagoric promotions of department stores, become a symbol of a failure that – in the depths of what is left – is still capable of alluding to a possible fulfilment of desire. The defunctionalized object, reduced to rubbish, becomes the true and nonconformist utopian image, capable of converting the betrayal of the consumer society into a new promise of happiness. After all, as Hannah Arendt would put it, the point is to free objects from their “drudgery of usefulness,” which has to be added to that of humans in a complementary fashion (Arendt 1981: 47). Now deprived of their function, things “are presented as a huge mass of waste material on which to exercise one’s virtuosity” (Viale 2000: 90).

It is well-known that this novel, in 2010, was made into the homonymous film, directed by John Hillcoat. Nothing strange about that: apocalyptic films, as is apparent from my short overview, are very popular – they seem to even have an apotropaic function, which exorcises the ecological catastrophe and the reduction of nature to a shady repository of the remains of our consumer activities. However, it is striking how the scene in question, in the United States, became a sketched Coca-

Cola commercial, then discarded because it was judged too lenient and in contrast to the joyous image of the product. Viggo Mortensen, after offering the can to the boy (played by Kodi Smit-McPhee) and listening with satisfaction to his liberating regurgitation of carbon dioxide – the delicacy of McCarthy’s writing is reduced to a burp! – also takes a sip of the Prodigious drink. Immediately – and here is where the consumerism of the sequence begins – music pervades the scene, giving it a fairy-like and improbable tone; at the same time, the ugly derelict reality dissolves and magically gives way to the comic-like image of the well-known bottle saying Open Happiness.

In the final scene, the child (a pathetic antithesis of Benjamin’s boy) kicks the empty can after running up to it, as if to kick a ball. Which is almost to say: forget the threat of a world of waste and open the magic casket of the world of desire. This is the exact opposite of the attitude that I have proposed here: an archaeology of garbage in search of the unaccomplished, beyond the media symbols hailing consumerism, perpetuating the irresponsible erosion of nature. According to the commercial, overturning the meaning of the novel, the fiction lies in the apocalyptic representation, while the world of consumerism is still durable and unavoidable; in my opinion, very differently, the fiction lies entirely in the promise of happiness of which the goods are the coryphaeus, while the ecologic catastrophe is very concrete indeed. So, to reconceive the world, we can only start from its waste, obliterating the media layer that covers reality turning it into a dreamlike image...

The overturning we see in the *réclame* actually corresponds to an even deeper re-

versal, typical of our uprooted and worldless civilization: that of the relationship between history and nature. In fact, while today's historical era, despite its contingency, is made into the lapidary expression of fate and destiny, nature – once seen as *physis* and *natura naturans*, a divine being able to reproduce eternally according to its cyclical and unalterable laws – is revealed by our practice in its absolute contingency and vulnerability, as a mere resource left to man's mercy. This myth of a naturalized history, moreover, has several corollaries:

The belief that resources are unlimited; the idea that exhaustible ones are replaceable; confidence that environmental issues can be solved by technology; the belief in the intensive production of goods and the increase in consumption as the only (strictly quantitative) criteria to measure well-being (Bartolommei 1995: 46).

Consequently – this is how we delude ourselves – we can easily get rid of nature, as it is a nothing but dead weight getting in our way; while our lifestyle, which is absolutely contingent, does not seem negotiable anymore: the waste must go on, until the end of the world.

From a temporal perspective, one could also observe that the historical dynamic is essentially constituted by the *proiectus-reiectus* dialectic, a double step related to waste production and the reduction of nature to a fragment/remain of the ancient *natura naturans*: designing something, giving shape to a certain intended meaning, has the relapse effect of producing unwanted waste – even just from the perspective of the rejected and removed possibilities of existence. After all, the self itself is always

the result of choices that, whether aware or not, leave behind a *reiectus*, other omitted selves that will never come to light; there is no project that, so to speak, does not produce as a consequence a rejection of meaning, an unwanted legacy pushed back into non-visibility, which accompanies any sense project as a halo of possibilities won and overcome. As Siegfried Kracauer put it, the self is like a monogram that “condenses the name into a single graphic figure that is meaningful as an ornament”; it is a “liberated consciousness” free from the indistinct margin of potentialities, “opaque like frosted glass that hardly a ray of light can penetrate” (Kracauer 1993: 426); a definitive mnemonic image in which, at the cost of many renunciations and removals, the traits of a coherent story take shape.

This, on the other hand, also takes place in literary production, as illustrated by Italo Calvino in *La poubelle agréée*. Taking leave is part of our sense construction: by separating myself from discarded spoils, I confirm my self-appropriation: a “rite of purification” by which I separate myself from a part of myself (from what I have decided not to be, a repudiated alter ego now reduced to “irreducible extraneity”). Throwing away thus becomes an inaugural gesture, the “want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” (Kristeva 1982: 5), through which the human being is fixated in his own self; indeed, after all, “you are what you don't throw away” – you are what is left after a process of implacable and methodical amputation. It is as if a shadow accompanied me: my alternative and repudiated biography, that of my other self (my double), in whose presence “I am suddenly brought painfully against the things that

might have been" (Wells 1905: 39) – my "I-trash," the "Alter-Remain" of me.

While writing, therefore, "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling" (Kristeva 1982: 3). The paper trash can be next to the desk at the end of this painful selection/amputation process – in which the narrator appears as the survivor, the one who has made it out of all the others that have been alienated – becomes the place of the discarded stories, of the unpublished tales, of the words never spoken. In other words, the bin becomes here a repository of the imaginative projections of a self that, as the writer's rejected alter ego, has never been revealed as such, yet is still endowed with the charisma of a possible reality.

In accordance with the principle of garbage-in garbage-out, outlined by John Scanlan – according to which our self is constructed through an alchemical process by which something raw is taken into our ordering design to be cleaned, tidied and ordered, while something else, inevitably, is expelled as totally unattainable waste, rubbish, and nonsense (cfr. Scanlan 2005: 98) – Calvino writes:

The important thing is that in this daily gesture [of throwing away] I confirm the need to separate myself from part of what was my own, the corpse or chrysalis or squeezed out lemon of life, so that I may remain its substance, so that tomorrow I may identify myself as complete (with no residue) in what I am and I have. Only by throwing away can I assure myself that something of me has

not been thrown away yet and maybe must not or will not be thrown away (Calvino 1980: 276).

In the light of this theory of action, any historical event brings with it a halo of regret, discarded and rejected alternatives that make up the dark side of history understood as coherent and triumphant progress, aimed to the worldly realization of our "magnificent and progressive fate," to quote Leopardi's *La Ginestra*: it's the "graveyard of [...] unfulfilled possibilities" (Bauman 2007: 33). As Benjamin wrote to Adorno, in this sense utopia might have the great task of making "the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts" (Benjamin 2002: 471).

An example of this crossing of qualitative alternatives, which has been loosened in the recent past in a way that is far from rational, favoring questionable choices that can still be revoked today (Benjamin would say "in the now-time" [*Jetztzeit*], in the decisive moment of "historical legibility") refers to the invention of the bicycle – a locomotive tool that, despite its apparent frugality, is a true core of sustainable technology. No one thinks about it anymore, but the bicycle was invented at the same time as the car, the cause of an infinite number of problems – from traffic to atmospheric pollution, from just wars (black gold is always what mobilizes armies in the Middle East) to the "incontinent" tankers that leap through the oceans leaving behind oily and deadly

trails, from the scary and useless deaths by road accidents (whose morbid and brilliant narrator was James G. Ballard, see Ballard 1983) to the issues of oil extraction (depletion of oil fields, fracking etc.).

The velocipede and the famous Bicyclo, the forerunners of today's bicycle, were born between 1855 and 1869, the year in which Eugene Meyer invented the spoked wheel; instead, the first internal combustion engine was invented by the Swiss Isaac de Rivaz in 1802 and completed only in 1876, eleven years before the first real cars were presented at the London Universal Exposition in the railway section. Therefore, two solutions were found to the problem of mobility, each implying a profoundly different interpretation of the relationship between energy, speed of movement, fairness (in acquiring the resources needed to move) and actual satisfaction of travelers – which is more than just the time needed to reach the destination: it is necessary to distinguish between mere *euphoria* for a promise of speed that will never be kept in today's traffic conditions and the true *happiness* of traveling, which is motivated by more external data such as safety, comfort, driving stress, environmental costs etc. These are all unquestionable data of our reality, which is “perfectly indifferent to our theoretical wranglings, but sensitive to global warming” (Ferraris 2012: 80).

Indeed, as Ivan Illich puts it, “equity and energy can grow concurrently only to a point”: the ongoing effort of industries to force-feed society with ever increasing amounts of energy degrade, deprive and ultimately frustrate the majority of the population, choked by waste (smog, particulate matter, CO<sub>2</sub>, carcasses of cars

growing like rusty metal forests in urban peripheries), paralyzed by the clogging of transit routes and estranged by the obscene metamorphosis of urban space due to the new requirements of the road network, which “transforms geography into a pyramid of circuits sealed off from one another” (Illich 1974: 4, 68). Illich ultimately aims to “argue here that technocracy must prevail as soon as the ration of mechanical power and metabolic energy oversteps a definite identifiable threshold” (Illich 1974: 7). Therefore, shouldn't we think about how to undo an ancient knot, now that we know that most of us “bigger slice of their existence on unwanted trips,” prey to a “distortion of human space” (Illich 1974: 9, 18) with purely economic finalities? Indeed, referring to real data, “man's speed remained unchanged from the Age of Cyrus” (Illich 1974: 31).

A similar example could be made about photovoltaic and nuclear technology. Here, indeed, the chronological proximity of the two discoveries/inventions touches on the ties of consanguinity among the inventors concerned:

The photovoltaic effect, the creation of electric potential under the effect of sunlight, was discovered in 1839 by Alexandre-Edmond Becquerel, who was the father of the same Henry Becquerel who later discovered radioactivity. Thus, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there were people who tried to manufacture solar cells with the idea of producing energy, even though no one knew how they would work (Bardi 2011: 177).

In this regard, the same considerations could be made on the rate of pollution, functionality and democracy offered by the

two alternatives, proposed in the history of applied sciences; it is once more a matter of choosing between a dirty solution (liberation of the opulence of non-renewable energy) and a clean one (liberation from shortage).

In the light of what has been said, history is made by overcoming highly significant ideal-real bifurcations, hiding the possibility of repentance and the (melancholic) return to what has been, in view of a completely new (utopian) solution, compatible with the residual world in which we live. At the heart of this archaeology of the possibilities that were removed and discarded in the name of mythical coherence, the theme of the recovery of waste becomes a new possibility for Utopia: indeed, as Latouche writes, “a decent society [...] is a society that does not humiliate its members. It is a society that does not produce waste” (Latouche 2010: 199).

Wall-E, the little robot who piles up waste into dizzying skyscrapers of rubbish in an uninhabited world, is the symbol of this saving opportunity. Having completed its vertical removal/compaction work, Wall-E collects curious objects in its hangar: a collection of obsolete objects including an eyeglass case, a rubber ball, used-up spray cans, a piggy bank called Pig (Hamm from

the *Toy Story* movie) and so on. They are all testimonies of the ancient civilization of man, a man who has abandoned a land made inhospitable because its atmosphere was irretrievably compromised by pollution. These are objects that still speak of man's hopes in progress and technology, hopes now vanished in the face of a ruined world submerged with waste. It is no coincidence that Wall-E looks at them with melancholy, with eyes full of regret for what has been (or, better, for what has never been – the much-expected happiness). Those residual objects, in fact, testify to the failure of our hopes. The metallic look of the robot, in the face of these broken allegories of human aspirations, suddenly becomes humane and compassionate, as if it wanted to redeem, reconstruct those shattered historical wrecks that are the last testimony of a bygone civilization – Wall-E is ultimately *the postmodern and technological version of Benjamin's angel of history*.

Will we still have time to exert this ragman's virtuosity, seeking salvation (of the human species and of nature) in a world of waste and scrap of what has been? There is no other way to conceive of salvation, even in ecological terms. We are in a fully allegorical age – the whole is broken and redemption is an occupation left to sad overthinkers, collectors and junk dealers.

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Gianluca Cuzzo

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