

Hermann Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*: at the frontier of a modern utopia

Fernando Ribeiro

CHAM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Universidade dos Açores

f.ribeiro@fcs.unl.pt

Abstract

This paper is divided into 5 parts: 1: Introducing the paradigm of ancient utopia based on More, Campanella and Bacon's models; 2: Ancient utopia paradigmatic principles aiming its fulfilment in future time; its matrix: Plato's *Republic*; 3: Modern utopia paradigm according to fundamental aims such as peculiar regeneration, collective rebuilding, and detached consciousness among individuals looking forward to an open society; 4: Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel* modern utopian model: dynamics inside-outside Kastalia in order to surpass its frontiers with the help of fantasy and creativity while building a community implementing: dignity, humbleness, and freedom in every citizen based on the consolidation of principle-of-responsibility within a present time lapse; 5: Modern literary work of art: dance metaphor. Knecht's wisdom plus Tito's creativity: the basis of consciousness towards a modern utopia.

Keywords: Utopia, Frontier, Modernity, Open-Society, Principle-of-Responsibility

1.

"Discourses of Raphael Hythlodæus of the best state of a commonwealth" so declared Sir Thomas More in *Utopia* frontispiece (1516). Offering a model for production, fair administration, and distribution of goods among all members of a modern community in which they all would live under the principle of happiness respecting either usefulness or rationality within its social, political, and economic organizations. Existing though

in a space and a time to be found - in order to raise its reader's belief in and amazement before the use of rational and spiritual capabilities during leisure time.

Circa a century later, in *La Città del Sole* (1602), Tommaso Campanella praises similar state of government More described in *Utopia* underlying happiness and perfection as major principles to be implemented. According to these, all community's members should live by means of usefulness and rationality to consolidate autarky with the help of goods sharing and law, arts, and crafts reform, in order to implement culture and education among all citizens (CAMPANELLA, pp. 68; 91).

Two decades later Sir Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1627) defends how developing the study of applied and pure sciences college members, serving God and the community, would lead the community to charity and at the same time to longevity and happiness, always respecting usefulness and rationality, while pursuing a scientific method (BACON, pp. 8; 12, 19; 22; 37; 43).

2.

The utopian paradigm underlying such novels is driven by principles such as happiness, perfection, longevity presenting itself as the «fictional ability to re-describe life» (RICOEUR. p. 501). Those play the major role within such a community whose targets are socio-politic (*Utopia*), religious-metaphysic (*Città del Sole*), and social-scientific (*New Atlantis*). They are the means on which every inhabitant is dependent upon the acceptance of himself as a part within the whole and closed system. Herein every community member is not

given any opportunity to accept changes, to develop his emotions since he was not meant to be educated to welcome any external (space) and present (time) influence too (Lapouge, 1990, 213; 223 ; Freyer, 1936, 36).

Space and time become vital factors, enough to the successful interpretation of this paradigm, taken above all as a criticism to western civilization. This aims to draw the attention back to the main targets already present in the *Acts of the Apostles* (17, 28-9) and in *Letter of St. Paul to the Thesalonians* (2nd 3, 10), to the *Romans* (12,4-16), and to the *Corinthians* (1st 13,4-13; 2nd 12, 19). Meanwhile fostering a model in which economic development should support scientific progress within an equivalent socio-political organization, modern enough to share the administration of the whole community with the *bourgeoisie* - a social *stratum* whose key role was becoming crucial to the future of the European culture for goodness' sake praxis ascribed to Christianity (Jaeger, 1961, 88-9).

The utopian model presented along these literary forms might be taken into account - the more the reader detaches himself from the work, the better he will understand its goals - as a narrative strategy to stress the value of humanist principles as essential prerequisites to a universal community balance with its already known asymmetrical developments. One could then analyse more accurately the results put forward inside this utopian lab. They are presented as delayable to a prospective, and real, space-and-time situation as long as happiness, perfection and eternity would be recovered too as goals of better community governed by a philosophic aristocracy, always concerned with an ethical and political development - either collective or individual respectively- just as declared by Plato in his *Republic* (1990, 592 b).

In any of these three utopias, the foreshadowed pattern is recognizable: economy starts by being exclusively agrarian; then based on a commercial and industrial basis, while incorporating the monopoly of war and finance administration handled by noble-warrior

elite (Elias vol. 2, 100.). The exhaustive planning of all functions and its respective fulfilment; caring for mutual relationships between social, political, technical, and scientific spheres; already denotes to what degree the urge for modernity was imposing itself gradually within the limits of a community.

It should be offered a new political and social model to prevent every individual from been the victim of his instincts, taken as a natural cause of social disruption.

Power administration plays a central role in the formation of such an equalitarian-totalitarian model. In order to consolidate an intellectual culture, along with the help of education and training systems, regulation extended even to leisure time.

Central administration was also necessary for the developing of scientific investigation and experiment. Thus, it was possible to reveal how individuals of that epoch were aware of the need of a language, translatable in mathematical-rational code, to make understood the various principles of creation with equivalent *ad aeternum* time and space validity (Hall, 1983, 214-215, 252-3).

3.

Notwithstanding, this utopian paradigm of the three narratives becomes object of accurate lab observation provoking, at the same time, a sudden questioning about such a collective existence. Present time is for instance seen as a timespan that is far away from getting its relevance, as space where all subject's experiences take place (Elias, 1990, 50-52,126).

The individual must live under a utopian welfare state aiming self-regulation wherein mutual interaction between man and his social and natural environment should be deprived of any inventiveness led by imagination, scientific creativity, and free from any fears (Elias, 1989, 180-1).

Shouldn't one therefore ask if constant interacting between the individual and the community wouldn't represent a surplus value either to the individual or

to the community if the subject wouldn't be given the opportunity to cope with the definition not only of future but above all of present day goals?

Should not then so be better strengthened every capacity to resist against contingency and utter strangeness provided by current and strictly detailed regulations?

One wonders if then such a paradigm would not bear in itself the birth of an individual consciousness too, by means of which a crucial detachment would not make the subject feel the need for a regeneration and rebirth of society: a new and *open society* (Elias, 1989 184; Ricoeur, 487-8; Popper, 1972, vol. 2, pp. 201-3).

4.

In *Das Glasperlenspiel*, the longest and best Herman Hesse's novel, the Swiss writer reacts against a dangerous situation Europe was passing through as a result of the totalitarian policy Hitler succeeded to impose in Germany (Hesse, 1973, vol. 1, 60).

This literary work of art deals with a utopian model within the requisites: *Dichtung zur Utopie* followed by Hesse after analysing the path of modernity.

He therefore points out to the urge felt by his fellowmen to create and play a game (glass bead game) through which **contemplation and meditation** (GW IX: 38-9) of cultural masterpieces (literature, music, painting among others), the result of every creator's mind and soul inventiveness, would allow every player to oppose alienation and superficiality promoted in such a «feuilleton» epoch.

Moreover, with the aid of mass culture masterpieces which were very typical of that highly mechanized and industrialized civilization shaped under western culture canon (Hesse, 1970, IX, 38-9; X, .579; IX. 29-31; IX. 12; 13; 14-15; 17; 19; 44).

According to the narrator's point of view an elite formed by proficient and responsible inventors was improving the standard of the glass bead game and

striving towards an abstract and philosophical language to achieve a mutual-relational synthesis (*Kunst-Wissenschaft*) which was carried out by applied individual skills such as imagination and inventiveness.

The complete perfection and happiness already attained by his pedagogical province in a bygone age are put into question, in fact, since the reader is acquainted with the game consequences, the hero and elite member lived through during his lifetime experiments.

Das Glasperlenspiel deepens the meaning of Modernity while representing the interaction between *diegesis* and *addressee*; the way how the game and its elite evolves is also shown therein while one is told about the hero's, *Joseph Knecht*, evolution through the words of the novel narrator: his biographer and historian.

The reader is therefore given the chance to: judge the fact the sublime game player, and *Magister Ludi* lived his life in leisure too along; and to appreciate the value of such game that was created and played within and for Europe *grosso modo* before and after the 20th century.

Its aim was to foster happiness, perfection and equanimity supported by functionality and rationality implemented by an elite focused on the preservation of the community's social welfare.

In it, every individual ought to care about his own transformation as well as the transformation of the mass culture community he serves without despising his intellectual and mental skills (Hesse, 1970, IX, 7; 32-3, 23, 31).

Hesse makes the readers face up their historical reality while leading them from a defined spatial area, the pedagogical province of *Kastalia* (similar to every utopian space), to a psychical and singular space, from which everyone is invited to depart to reach society.

Time will be defined, in turn, as an inter-relational unity driven by an individual rhythm, which is then presented to be understood as a way to apprehend aesthetically and emotionally reality during present time individual experience. Making use of imagination in

form of concrete objects, aiming to enforce a process resisting every attempt of ideology and to strengthen individual consciousness on present day and personal capability to change the course of history. Moreover, *The Glass Bead Game* shows literally a new kind of utopian model whose importance lies on the social and historical dynamics literature is able to propose aiming a vital change within nowadays society where modern and mass culture prevails (Hesse, H., 1977, vol. 2, 905; 885-6, 868-9; Hesse, 1970 GW. X, 585, 583,580).

Joseph Knecht, the modern hero in this fictional universe, will be a full member of the pedagogical province of *Kastalia* whose self-segregated geniuses are forever faithful to the cult of intellect and culture as represented by Fritz Tegularius.

As modern hero he will succeed in occupying in proper (and before due) time the highest level of the Province Hierarchy and become utmost defendant of Glass Bead Game under the form of true combination of disciplines like poetry, music, and algebra.

These are the essential requirements, in his point of view, for a language applicable to a «space» where social and historical reality play a role, though chaotic and contingent, good and evil: the effective one. This is his strategy shown above all as needed to reform a community life within *Kastalia* ancient utopian paradigm understood as cause of a *non-open* society.

Knecht embodies then the attempt to reform the ancient utopian model according to which community lives peacefully and happily in an enclosed space to escape present day singularities under the paradigm of such a community that is always longing for a better and in future time postponed life.

That is why Hesse turns his hero into a traveller. Constantly on the frontier of reality between the models personified by the *älterer Bruder* and his secular friend and counterpart *Plinio Designori* (Hesse, 1970, GW IX, 294-5, 303-5, 239-40, 259, 179-180-1; 142, 352-3, 111-2.). Thus, he makes readers able to understand the rich dynamics brought by

a comprehensive understanding of history in the figure of Pater Jakobus; and underlines Knecht's urge to commit himself to the secular society as he decides to be a schoolmaster.

Reality gains then its proper sense as a space where «something magical» coming from the individual's soul takes place: his deepest and emerging sensibility, which ought to result from the cult of fantasy and creativity. This is the very counterpoint to the cult of rationality by means of which the world was explained intellectually and systematically in *Kastalia*.

The hero becomes space of freedom and serenity, of translation, i.e. space for an individual dynamical and real commitment within an *open society*. In it, the subject achieves his consciousness through a contemplative acting with the help of a culture always willing to interpret reality and to seek constantly truth and beauty.

Knecht, in so doing, remains at the frontier zone where he can overcome every contradiction reflected upon the object every time he invents a game summoning elements out of community life and at the same time creating/making art-meaning/sense perceptively felt.

An interpretation of reality, not a sense derived from high culture, e.g. high spirituality but from every subject's life experiment (Hesse, 1970, GW. IX, 178, 259, 205, 311, 84, 238-40, 85, 347-8, 239, 440-41, 418-9). This kind of modern hero becomes an acting subject: a space-platform of a brand new modern Utopia, which paradigm lies on the subject's development since the individual unfolds himself while serving secular society by educating a young and rebel of its members.

Thus representing *in actu* the magnitude of emotionality born of a handed out culture - not of a self-segregating and philistine one but out of a promoting humbleness one - whose influence over every member of society will make him give up his *status quo* for the sake of present day generation.

Tito - ready to be part of a brand new utopian model - acts/dances presenting

simultaneously during a moment-in-time - symbolically summoned - a new paradigm. He does not speak; he dances/acts hearing a silent melody showing how able he is to refuse a speech built on a principle of causality preferring instead being driven by the principle of synchronicity.

He then personifies a dialectical sensibility constantly moving between rationality and emotionality aware of a *continuum* of facts and experiments whose relationships are to be practiced by every subject who understands himself as the proper space of an autonomous interiority, free from space and time stereotypes boundaries: personifying a brand new utopia paradigm for an *open society*.

Hesse drives his literary strategy towards Modernity creating a masterpiece - example of a «superior piece of art» wherein a utopian paradigm emerges out of a unique experiment by expressing a correspondence between reason (*Ratio*) and imagination (*Magie*).

At the same time, by refuting a «dogmatic program» by which every reader could be persuaded to accept how achievable a «platonic idea» within his diegesis could be, no matter what contradictions it might be made of.

On the other hand, Herman Hesse cannot help «showing» a new utopian model by refusing it as a space for evasion. Moreover, he does not deny the strong influence imagination plays proving how every fiction turns every diegesis the more resilient, the more magical. Thus caring about the way an «Idea» might be put into practice in a near and prospective future, reinforced by his putative reader.

This is Hesse's peculiarity while giving birth to a modern literary masterpiece: the more influent the less abstract (Hesse 1973, vol. 1, 301, 98, 57, 301, 189-190, 241, 93; Hesse, 1982, vol. 3, 223-4, 232-5, 165; Hesse, GW. X, 579); the more supported by historical facts the hero's existence will be, the more persuasive a modern literary work of art will also be whenever its hero's peculiar reality is thoroughly and pertinently depicted.

The more every glass bead game

creator/educator will be able to summon ludically facts of a social and individual living with the help of his creative imagination, the more, under the influence of interrogation, hope, under the dynamic stimulus of culture in progress; will manage to put an end to the absurdity of existence by overcoming it.

Such a narrative will express then the intensification characteristic of the way individual experiments might build the very matrix of utopia. A true reality aware of its contingency but without any kind of space for «simplifiers» - felt as a surplus value to reinforce a main ideology/culture as long as it will incorporate the sage saint (*Heiliger*) profile as paradigm of an elite member who cannot help learning wisdom out of universal culture and history prospectively for the sake of the preservation of human culture (Hesse, 1982, vol. 3, 218, 51, 107-8, 252, 334, 476, 45; Hesse, 1970, GW. X, 90, 436, 438-9; GW. XI, 90; Hesse, 1973, vol. 1, 232, 293).

Hesse depicts not only what in fact happened but also what might happen if such a model would be put into practice again. He makes then the narrator stimulate the addressee's imagination to be more practically engaged in his present time. In so doing he manages to provoke a dialogue between the narrator and the addressee about changes they might begin to feel vital to their community.

This novel presents then an approach to the modern novel paradigms aiming to deal with a utopian model by starting making the reader follow an «individual-subject» who tells shows and reflects upon a civilization model. Moreover, under every narrator's speech, directs one's attention to the main actions-documents perpetuated by a hero-Knecht who dared to propose changes in his present time epoch: applicable to the one during which the addressee lives (Ziolkowski, 2003, 53, 71, 41).

Inside the narrative hero J. Knecht lies the foundations upon which a modern and *open society* may grow up as long as at the basis of a modern utopia stands - not like a work of philistine art and

culture promoted by an elite such as *Kastalia's* paradigm of an ancient utopia.

A culture promoted by such elite's paradigm - and expected to be later applied by the best society's political administration -, as happened with *Designori*, didn't succeed: *Designori* and his son *Tito* didn't get along well with one another. The addressee understands immediately the new function culture is given when he sees Knecht assessing and judging - keeping in mind at the same time every effect it would have inside society - while watching deeply impressed the beautiful dance ritual performed by *Tito* amidst real nature impressive scenery.

Inside *Kastalia*, culture played a functional role for the sake of the community's welfare, in the form of glass bead games. Instead, *Tito's* art expresses for the sake of its own being simultaneously a projection of Knecht's feelings who gives in to his pupil's *Weltanschauung*.

The hero hands over his legacy to *Tito*; he refuses his self-segregationist cultural model, thus crossing the frontier and accepting the new paradigms according to which culture includes interaction with everyday real time and space in order to get freedom out of its achievements endowed with social skills to preserve community's welfare. The more reality will be reflected back into art the more «taste» will stimulate social, political, and historical dynamics; as *Magister Ludi* J. Knecht ends by rejecting every authority awarded by culture since he understands himself as a humanity's servant responsible for balanced co-existence.

Every work of modern art exhibits its alternative against absolute and infallible values in either science and philosophy or art, offering instead a platform for subtle and constructive criticism.

Das Glasperlenspiel is a true example of this, since its «publication» expresses the humbleness, through which work and narrator's dialog constantly with the Other (reader-addressee) upgrading the natural and necessary common sense every «town square» desperately longs

for (Arendt, 1972, 286-8, 283).

Every work of modern art recovers even amidst a mass culture and society its rebel role because like every cultural good it still keeps its resilience against every social *modus vivendi*. Every «market» sometime unable to appreciate prospective wealth of emotionality, sensibility and creative imagination a work of modern art may pass on - even under every present day mass dynamics because only used to detect functional, commercial, exchangeable surplus value attested by its cultural players - won't remain the same.

Therefore, *Tito's* choreography «puts an end» to the high consideration institutionalized and philistine *kastalian* culture enjoyed - as it is symbolized by *Magister Ludi's* death. The narrator instead «updates» humankind's goodness through «emotionality-by-the-moment» dance scene he makes *Tito* arouse by the end of the «Lebensbeschreibung»-narrative (Arendt, 1972, 260-1, 264, 256-7, 266).

The Glass Bead Game gives literary shape to the existing frontier between Ancient and Modern Utopia assigning every community's individual a mission according to which he has to develop himself respecting his authenticity.

Just like a modern human being's paradigm also one should keep up with: 1- dignity, as long as he/she doesn't care only about rationality; 2 - humbleness, as long as he/she does not get satisfaction only out of progress and technological achievements; 3 - freedom, as long as he/she does not deprive himself of living in present time, postponing instead opportunities to a hopeful future already ontologically formatted.

One should develop one incomplete nature because every human acting lies on an absolute present time dimension (Jonas, 1979, 410,409). Then people start to recognize their own predisposition for a perfect and new tenure, dependent of their historical consciousness while feeling every moment as unique with the help of any work of art expressiveness and its exclusive ability to stand for a paradigm worthy of re-shaping reality. Dance stands for an individual and

collective singular *replica* (it cannot be postponed) while giving expression to immediate and interactive bio-psychical density in present time, symbolizing the urge of one's natural sensibility, and above all historical consciousness every individual expresses whenever assimilates the principle-of-responsibility (Jonas, 1979, 412, 418-9, 420-1),

It is the case of Tito after receiving the baton from the hands of ancient *kastalian* utopia reformer: J. Knecht. Hesse stresses the importance of studying every masterpiece culture has brought to us though by means of explaining/understanding every method behind its form-structure: its strategies. Only then could culture be piece of an engaged act-of-transforming/«serving» humanity (Unsel, 2003, 187-8).

5.

What better than a ritual dance amidst natural scenery performance - against the clock - so that addressee and reader might understand time vigorous dynamics? The same Tito is dealing with, in order to continue shaping Knecht's wisdom, according to which only out of organic growth - contemplating an actualized and spoken dialog between logical-deductive intelligence and active and applied imagination - can the social utopian building towards a plural (Human) Being emerge.

To help reinforcing literary fragment shape - amidst a work of modern art - to foster a social-political configuration led by modern time-moment dynamics; finally to reinforce - during the «last» scene of Knecht's life - contingency's strength «shown» by a modern work of art aiming to keep the literary addressee in silence, once dazzled by the dance metaphor as a secular *replica* to the polysemy meanings of music enhanced in *Kastalia*.

All of this simply by suggesting choreographically what words would not be able to achieve even through the boldest metaphor (Steiner, 2012, 30, 24-5, 77, 16, 13-4).

The Glass Bead Game makes us shift

value and culture centre from learning and intellectual competences to the space of nature in which dynamical centre stands individual paradigm whose competences become greater: the more one plays with the four elemental *space-nature*, the more wealthier the community gets.

Commitment is therefore the adequate concept not only to characterize the hero, Knecht, but also *mutatis mutandis* the whole narrative as a modern utopia paradigm (Ziolkowski, 2003, 72; Swales, 2003, 150). Both prove how important is to start learning from every *infinitesimal* piece of reality, obeying the principle-of-responsibility.

This narrative upgrades thereby our attention to how capital modern art can be as long as it will not let itself be deprived from tradition, and will not reject any fantastic dimension of the real while upraising its addressee's attention to every normal contradiction a utopian model contains, by making him/her keeping their eyes wide open on how to see and to overcome every western *weltanschauung's* contradiction (Rancière, 2011, 34).

Bibliography

- . *Biblia*, Lisboa: Difusora Bíblica, s/d, 1692.
- BACON, F. *New Atlantis*, London: University Tutorial Press, s/d.
- CAMPANELLA. *La Città del Sole*, (tradutor Alvaro Ribeiro) *A Cidade do Sol*. Lisboa: Guimarães, 1990.
- HESSE, H. *Das Glasperlenspiel*, G W IX, F/M: Suhrkamp, 1970.
- . *Gesammelte Briefe (1936-48)*, vol. 3, F/M: Suhrkamp, 1982.
- . *Gesammelte Werke*, 12 vols. F/M: Suhrkamp, 1970.
- . *Materialien zu H.Hesses Das Glasperlenspiel 2* vols. F./M: Suhrkamp, 1973.
- . "Politik des Gewissens"-*Die Politische Schriften*, 2 vols. F/M: Suhrkamp, 1977.
- MORE, Th. *Utopia*, Cambridge: CUP, 1989.
- PLATÃO. *A República*, (translator M-H. Rocha Pereira) Lisboa; FCG, 1990.
- Secondary Sources:**
- AA VV, *Utopien; Die Möglichkeit des Unmöglichen*, Zürich: Verlag der Fachvereine, 1989.
- ARENDET, Hanna. *Between Past and Future*, (translator Patrick Lévy) Paris: Gallimard, 1972.
- BLOOM, H. (ed.) *Hermann Hesse*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.
- ELIAS, N. *Der Zivilisationsprozess*, (translator: Lídia Rodrigues) Lisboa, D. Quixote, 1990.
- . *Über die Zeit*, F/M, Suhrkamp, 1990, pp. 196.

- . «Thomas Morus und die Utopie» in AA VV, *Utopien- Die Möglichkeit des Unmöglichen*, Zürich: Verlag der Fachvereine, 1989.
- FREYER, H. *Die politische Insel: eine Geschichte des Utopien von Platon bis zur Gegenwart*, Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut A.G., 1936.
- HALL, A. Rupert, *A Revolução na Ciência 1500-1750* (translator: Teresa Perez). Lisboa: Edições 70, 1988.
- JAEGER, W. *Paideia* (translator: Artur Mourão.). Lisboa: Ed. 70, 1961.
- JONAS, H. *Le Principe Responsabilité* (translator: J. Greisch), Paris: Flammarion, 1979.
- LAPOUGE, G. *Utopie et Civilizations*, Paris: A. Michel, 1990.
- POPPER, K. *La Société Ouverte et ses Enemiers* (translator: J. Bernard; Ph. Monod). Paris: Seuil, 1972, 2 vols.
- RANCIÈRE, J. *The Politics of Aesthetics -The Distribution of the Sensible* (translator: G. Rockhill). London/N.Y: Continuum International Publishing, 2011. available from: <https://selforganizedseminar.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/rancic3a8re-jacques-politics-aesthetics-distribution-sensible-new-scan.pdf>.
- RICOEUR, P. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, (translator: Teresa Perez), Lisboa: Ed. 70, 1991.
- STEINER, G. *A Poesia do Pensamento: Do Helenismo a Celan*, (translator: Serras Pereira, M.)^{1ª} edição, Lisboa, Relógio d'Água, 2012.
- SWALES, M. «Hesse: The Glass Bead Game (1943)» in BLOOM (ed.), *Hermann Hesse*. (Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2003).
- UNSELD, S. «Hermann Hesse's Influence: Ethics or Esthetics?» in BLOOM (ed.), *Hermann Hesse*. (Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2003, pp. 177-193).
- ZIOLKOWSKI, Th. «The Glass Bead Game: Beyond Castalia» in BLOOM (ed.), *Hermann Hesse*. (Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2003, pp. 39-77).