

Concept of Dis/harmony between the Natural and Human Worlds in Literature: A Call for Restraint

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Abstract

Four writings on a just city, a utopia, technology-dependence, and nature are discussed in this article: Plato's *Republic* (380 BCE), Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909), and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). What do they tell us about the concept of harmony/disharmony between the human world and the natural world? In this essay, I will attempt to show the commonalities among these four literary pieces. Each author, writing across vast disparities in time and place, has a specific message about how mankind not only *must* live in harmony with nature, but its very survival as a civilization depends on maintaining that harmony. Harmony/disharmony means reversing decades of practice of fighting war to satisfy more consumption, of equating luxuries with needs, and of equating greater and greater reliance on technological devices as a sign of progress.

Keywords: Nature, Dis/harmony, Plato, More, Forster

In 1845, Henry David Thoreau went to the woods near Concord, Massachusetts, because he “wished to live life deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life...” More than 300 years earlier, Sir Thomas More wrote his famous satire *Utopia* (1516) in which he urged the pursuit of agriculture and the common distribution of property so that “Though no man has anything, yet all are rich.” Certainly, More was influenced by Plato's *Republic* (380 BCE), which, in seeking the definition of justice through the voice of Socrates, lays down the foundation of a just city. In part, argues Plato, a just city is one where each person practices a craft that contributes to the common good, and follows a lifestyle based on satisfying needs, not luxuries. Heedless of Plato's advice, man has, more than 2,300 years later, become dependent on superfluous goods brought by the advances of modern technology. In E.M. Forster's prescient novella, *The Machine Stops* (1909), he precisely warns his readers of the fate in store for humans due to their obsequious reliance on the Machine (technology).

What do these four writings on a just city, a utopia, technology-dependence, and nature share in common? More specifically, what do they tell us about the concept of harmony/disharmony between the human world and the natural world? In this essay, I will attempt to show the commonalities among four literary pieces. Each author, writing across vast disparities in time and place, has a specific message about how mankind not only *must* live in harmony with nature, but its very survival as a civilization depends on maintaining that harmony. Harmony/disharmony is not merely following Thoreau's call, “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!”, but it means reversing decades of practice of fighting war to satisfy more consumption, of equating luxuries with needs, and of equating greater and greater reliance on technological devices as a sign of progress.

Plato wrote the *Republic* in 380 BCE in the aftermath of Athens' devastating loss to Sparta in the Peloponnesian War; not only had this once proud city-state just suffered through starvation, disease, and death, but its sense as a model of democratic government was severely undermined. Plato was seeking to define, then, what exactly was a just city. What is justice? How does one find this? Using the voice of Socrates, his teacher and mentor—dead now by choosing to drink poison hemlock rather than recant his crime of “corrupting the youth”—Plato begins the *Republic* by establishing the foundations of a just city. Obviously, the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter must be met, but one must not think of meeting only one's individual needs since “a city comes to exist...because none of us is individually self-sufficient...we gather many into a single settlement as partners and helpers” (Plato 47). To meet these needs, each person takes on a craft to which he is best suited because “each of us is different somewhat in nature from the others...” (48). It is in describing the lifestyle that Plato begins to show how injustice can creep in, creating not only disharmony among the citizens, but disharmony in nature. Plato advocates a lifestyle of extreme simplicity (even, some would disagreeably murmur, extreme Spartanism):

In the summer, they will work mostly naked and barefoot, but in the winter they will wear adequate clothing and shoes. For nourishment, they will provide themselves with barley meal and wheat flour, which they will knead and bake into noble cakes and loaves and serve up on a reed or on clean leaves. They will recline on couches strewn with yew and myrtle and feast with their children, drink their wine, and, crowned with wreaths, hymn the gods. They will enjoy having sex with one another, but they will produce no more children than their resources allow, lest they fall into either poverty or war (50-51).

Plato's interlocutors in the *Republic* are several—it is written using the Socratic method. In addition to Socrates, one of these is Glaucon. He strenuously objects to this lifestyle as asking people to feast without relishes, and when Socrates complies and adds salt, olives, cheese, boiled roots and vegetables, figs, chickpeas and beans, Glaucon is still not satisfied: “If you were founding a city of pigs, Socrates, isn't that just what you would provide to fatten *them*?” (51). Socrates agrees, for in doing so, he will reveal the source of injustice: Couches, tables and other furniture will have to be added; incense, perfume, prostitutes, and pastries; painting and embroidery; gold and ivory; hunters; poets and choral dancers; beauticians and barbers; relish and meat cooks; and people to farm pigs will all have to be added.

As a result, explains Socrates, the existing land will be inadequate to provide for the growing needs and people, and neighbors' land will have to be seized. The city's residents have abandoned themselves to “the endless acquisition of money and overstepped the limits of their necessary desires” (52). “And the next step will be war, Glaucon, don't you agree?” asks Socrates (52). Glaucon, seeing Socrates' point at last, agrees.

It is Plato's argument here that injustice stems from the superfluous acquisition of needs that are, in fact, luxuries. Such a city will inevitably have to engage in warfare in order to sustain the growing needs of a growing population. Disharmony has replaced harmony.

Plato certainly had his critics. Ask man to live without art and poetry? Have him live like Spartans? No thanks. Mankind in the West moved forward, selling and buying goods on a scale never imaged by Plato, disharmony radiating as if that was the price to be paid.

Until Thomas More wrote *Utopia* in 1516, the term “utopia” didn’t exist except as a concept embodied in the lost Garden of Eden. More coined the word “eutopia,” “eu” meaning *no* and “topia” meaning *place*—no place—satirically. The book of that name was written as a satire on the state of life of the common man in England at the time. For a man of More’s stature—he was Lord Chancellor to King Henry VIII—a satire was the safest way to criticize what he saw as the gross inequities of a country still in the hold of its feudal past. Influenced by Plato, for More had certainly read the *Republic*, he sets out to create a “perfect” society—a classless society that would ensure economic and social equality. Agriculture is the one pursuit common to all, and like Plato, each person is taught one particular craft as his own. For men and women alike, there are only six hours of work in the day. The time left after work, sleep, and food “are left to every man’s discretion, not to waste in revelry or idleness, but to devote....to intellectual pursuits” (More 70) After supper, the Utopians play music, converse, and spend time in the gardens in the summer or in common meal halls in the winter. “Dice and that kind of foolish and ruinous game they are not familiar with,” adds More (71). The upkeep of buildings requires little labor for buildings are promptly repaired—“a new home...is a rare event” (74)—and clothes are simple and unpretentious. Leather “lasts for seven years. When they go out in public, they put on a cape to hide their comparatively rough working clothes. This garment is of one color....In Utopia, man is content with a single cape...” (74). To prevent the city from growing beyond its natural boundaries (Utopia is an island), More requires that each household have between 10-16 adults (children not counted), with a total of 6,000 such households in each city. When this quota is exceeded, extra persons are relocated to other under-populated cities.

Unlike Plato, however, More believes that residents of his ideal city should have music, dessert, spices, and perfume, “and omit nothing that may cheer the company....no kind of pleasure is forbidden, provided no harm comes of it” (81).

In general, however, More, like Plato, is concerned with harmonious relations between the citizens, and with the natural environment from which resources to support the city must be extracted. The less one consumes, the less strain on natural resources. The lifestyle espoused by both is not based on consumption; man’s daily pleasure is not derived from acquiring greater and more luxurious goods, but from being satisfied with one’s work, and with knowing that one is contributing to the *common* good rather than satisfying individual vanities. In fact, More ensures that the desire for gold and jewels is eliminated by the simple act of making their use “a mark of ill fame” (86). How? Gold and silver are used to make “chamber pots and all the humblest vessels for use everywhere....they employ the same metals to make the chains and solid fetters” used by slaves and criminals (86). (My American university student when I have them read *Utopia* always take this as a sign that aha, see, utopia is not possible!)

In short, in More’s *Utopia*, he has created a communal-based society where there is no poor man and no beggar. Everything belongs to everybody: “Though no man has anything, yet all are rich” (147). He reserves his strongest disdain for those who

“attain a life of luxury and grandeur on the basis of his idleness and his nonessential work” (147), as well as for those who are puffed up with pride in their riches, pride being “a serpent from hell [that] entwines itself around the hearts of men and acts like a suckfish in preventing...them from entering on a better way of life” (150).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the profound impact that More’s book had in the literary field, for once the term “utopia” was created, it was to develop over time into a literary genre of its own. Many other utopias have been created since More’s time, such as *Looking Backward* (1888) by Edward Bellamy, *News From Nowhere* (1890) by William Morris, and *Herland* (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Like More, these utopias created a society where some aspect of society’s disharmony was set straight. It wasn’t until post-World War I, however, when a sharper edge was needed to cut through what many writers felt were possibly catastrophic ends if current trends were to continue: It was the birth of the “dystopia.” This literary genre was not utopia’s opposite—the depiction of an imperfect society. These novels were stark warnings: If current trends continue in our own society, we will become a dystopia like those depicted in the writers’ works—a society nearly completely divorced from nature, a society where war is an on-going subtext of daily life, a society where mankind has been robbed of its humanness and humaneness.

Of these dystopias—such as *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) by George Orwell, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) by Margaret Atwood—there is one that was unusually prescient. It was written in 1909 in the form of a novella by E.M. Forster, usually not given to writing what might be called “science fiction.” Called “The Machine Stops,” Forster depicts a society that lives under the earth’s surface, each individual confined to a small, hexagonally-shaped room, like a huge underground beehive. The earth’s surface is no longer inhabitable. One of the two main characters sits all day in an armchair, “a swaddled lump of flesh—a woman, about five feet high, with a face as white as fungus” (115). Her name is Vashti. All her needs are met with the push of a button of a machine:

There were buttons and switches everywhere—buttons to call for food, for music, for clothing. There was the hot-bath button, by pressure of which a basin of (imitation) marble rose out of the floor, filled to the brim with a warm deodorized liquid. There was the cold-bath button. There was a button that produced literature. And there was of course the buttons by which she communicated with her friends (Forster 119).

Forster calls this vast network of buttons and switches not just a machine—it is the Machine. Vashti is separated from her son Kuno, the only other main character, by vast distances underground, but at the press of button, she can speak to him. In fact, at the press of a button, virtually *all* her needs are met. There is no need for travel, for cars, for offices, for schools, for homes, or for family because the rooms, though they contain nothing, are in touch with all that is necessary. There are only two relics from the former age: the Book, which contains instructions for every possible contingency, and the airships, which carry travelers above the earth’s surface. Few traveled, however, in these days, for “thanks to the advance of science, the earth was the same the world over...” (Forster 124).

The profound separation from nature is manifested in both Vashti and Kuno, the two protagonists. Vashti, against her will, must take an airship to visit her son on the other side of the earth because he wants to see her face-to-face, rather than through the Machine, to tell her of his hopes. Kuno, in fact, desires to go to the earth's surface. The surface of the earth "is only dust and mud, no life remains on it" (118) and yet Kuno wants to see the stars. The name of the constellation has long been forgotten, but Kuno knows that "The four big stars are the man's shoulders and his knees. The three stars in the middle are like the belts that men wore once, and the three stars hanging are like a sword" (118).

But of the airship, Vashti was afraid. For after so many years of living under the earth, Vashti no longer knew night from day, no longer knew the concepts of "far" and "near," no longer even cared to know. Why should she, or anyone else in the tiers upon tiers of corridors reaching far into the earth with a single human being in each room, care about the sun, the stars, the seas, the mountains? They were rendered irrelevant by the Machine. Even parenting was no longer a duty, since, according to the Book, "Parents, duties of...cease at the moment of birth. P. 422327483" (Forster 123). Vashti caressed the Book in her hand as she set forth on her journey, for, certainly, the Book would give her comfort from the terror of leaving her cell. Almost at once, Vashti's cabin on the airship was invaded by a rosy finger of light from the blinds. To her horror, "...she saw through the skylight small pink clouds, swaying against a background of blue, and as the sun crept higher, its radiance entered direct, brimming down the wall, like a golden sea....she rang for the attendant...." and changed cabins (128). Only the attendant knows the names of the places they are flying over:

'Where are we now?' asked Vashti haughtily.

'We are over Asia,' said the attendant, anxious to be polite.

'Asia?' [...]

'And that white stuff, in the cracks?—what is it?'

'I have forgotten its name.'

'Cover the window, please. These mountains give me no ideas.' (129)

In the evening, Vashti looked again out her window. They were crossing a golden sea, with many small islands and one peninsula. Vashti repeated, "No ideas here,' and hid Greece behind a metal blind" (Forster 131).

Only Kuno holds out hope that mankind will not worship the Machine as Vashti does, for he alone questions the Machine as progress. Kuno laments to Vashti upon her arrival, "Cannot you see...that it is we who are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine? We created the Machine to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now" (Forster 140). Indeed, the master brains had long ago

perished and “in all the world there was not one who understood the monster as a whole” (148). When the Machine begins to stop, there is no one who can mend it, not even the Committee of the Mending Apparatus.

In the end, the Machine collapses, and “beautiful naked man was dying, strangled by the garments that he had woven. Century after century had he toiled, and here was his reward” (Forster 157). Not only had the Machine (technology) made mankind its servant, it had robbed mankind of its humanness: meaningful work, the society of friends and family, all art, all literature, all music, and all contact with the natural world that man needs to be truly human. With the Machine in total control, man’s lack of harmony with nature was complete.

Is it too late to reverse the direction that Forster is warning us about?

Maybe we should put down the Book of the Machine, and take up the book that Henry David Thoreau published in 1854, *Walden*. One of the great classics of American literature, the book was, ironically, not a commercial success when it was first published; it sold only two thousand copies in five years. A journal, an extended essay, a treatise, the book is a call to arms: “Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one...and reduce other things in proportion” (Thoreau 70). Thoreau saw man’s life as frittered away by detail and unnecessary luxury. “Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind” (13). Internal improvements, i.e., progress, were, in fact, only external and superficial, leading the mass of men to live lives of “quiet desperation” (6). These observations Thoreau made during the nearly two years he lived at Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts, which today is a still a place of refuge and a pilgrimage: Where his simple hand-built wood cabin once stood is a large pile of stones and pebbles, gathered piece by piece from the woods and pond by visitors as tokens of respect. Thoreau advises that the way out of the desperate city and desperate country is, quite simply, Nature: “Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito’s wing that falls on the rails. Let us rise early and fast, or breakfast, gently and without perturbation...” (76).

And, in what may be Thoreau’s most famous words:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived....I wanted to live deep and suck out the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner...(68-69).

Maybe, just maybe, there is hope that we will live life in harmony with nature so that we are not among those mass of men and women who live lives of quiet desperation. Maybe there is hope that we will not be servants to the monster we have created, as Frankenstein was. But the changes needed are fundamental. The type of societies envisioned by Plato and More were more than just unreachable utopias; they

were based on the principles of living within one's means, of putting the common good above individual gain, of meaningful work, of harmony with the environment. As long as man equates happiness with getting and spending, as long as man's needs mean depleting the Earth of its finite resources, we will be servants to a technological Leviathan, and the creators of our own dystopia. More's Utopians were happy, not with material goods, not in the "uncertain sparkle of a tiny jewel or precious stone", (88) but with the stars and the sun itself. Plato's gold was not human, but "a divine sort" in the soul that was a "permanent gift from the gods..." (102).

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