**utopian texting!**

or: an undertaking to untangle a utopian text

Learning to write (more effectively) means learning to read (more effectively). Both are acts of imagination and communication. Because we are mostly tourists in this class, we often find ourselves floating on the surface of the texts we read, lacking the time appropriate for diving deeper into details to bring back rich, insightful analysis. However, today is your lucky day, because here’s a golden opportunity to live the dream, to do the impossible, to engage and analyze a text in depth.

**The assignment, in a nutshell: identify a text on, about, or from a utopian perspective; read it carefully, collecting evidence of its position; uncover the fundamental nature(s) of its world view; make your own argument about this text, its meaning(s), and/or its possible use(s); write this in a clear format in about 5 to 7 pages; revise it; submit the final version by the 16th of March. That’s it. Easy as pie!**

What does that all mean? Let’s take each piece separately…

1) *identify a utopian text:* So far in our class, we’ve come into contact with various sorts of utopian texts – fictional travel diaries, political theorizing, explorations of utopian experiments. That’s a wide range of possibilities, but it merely scratches the surface. Sure, we could still focus on looking at how utopias and utopianisms might sprout up in the real world. However, we can extend our perspective, focusing also on efforts to build a (part of the) world based on a conception of some form of perfection. This opens up the playing field immensely. Nearly everywhere we look we might find utopian undercurrents, whether in recent State of the Union addresses or in advertisements for Carnival Cruises. (Speaking of Carnival Cruises, if you are feeling more darkly inclined, feel free to consider the dystopian path less traveled as you weigh your decision.) “Identify” is doing dual work here – it means not only to locate, but also to define and justify your text as having utopian elements. Some will lend themselves more easily (or at least more obviously) to this process, although that does not necessarily mean they are always the better options. Please note that not all texts are written. If you have questions, feel free to talk to me (or to others). (This last bit of advice holds true for all subsequent stages.)

2) *read carefully*: Good reading is important to good writing. You should approach the text at multiple levels. Of course, you want to get a sense of the vision/description of the world established in the work. That is, you should understand the “big picture” of the argument. At least as important, however, is to observe the process through which this “big picture” is constructed. While sometimes authors make this explicit, often they bury it underneath details and images. In fact, clever and skilled writers may render invisible some of the central mechanisms and assumptions that provide the scaffolding for their bigger picture (sloppy writers do this, too, but for other reasons!) – they make their conclusions seem “natural” and “obvious.” But it is exactly when things fit together so smoothly, when they appear as if guided by the hands of angels, that you need to be the most critical in interrogating the text. Pay attention not only to what gets included, but also to that which is unspoken (not to mention that which is whispered between trusted intimates). The text is both a whole and a bunch of smaller parts. While they probably fit together, one should not assume this just because the author would prefer that you did. And, just like with the Ikea furniture littering dorm rooms across the country, there’s often at least one piece left over. This could be important.

3) *uncover main point(s*): Having thoroughly dissected the text, now it’s time to figure out what it all means. Here you want to consider not just the text itself, but also its context, which includes the audience, the intention, the historical moment. What is the text (and its author) hoping to accomplish? How do the possible and impossible work together? What kinds of theories about how society does, could, and should work are on display in this piece? How do these tie to what is expected to happen with this text? How can other class readings support your interpretation?

4) *make your argument*: It’s great that you have been able to figure out what the authors were trying to do and how they were trying to do it. That’s certainly important whenever you approach a text. But so far, you have been busy describing someone else’s argument. Wonderful, but I am more interested in your own treatment of these ideas. That is, now that you have figured how what they have to say, why does it matter to know this? What can this tell us? Or help us do? Or counsel us to avoid? What do we learn about utopias, about society, about (ugh…) “human nature”? This is the most important thing in the entire list. You can do all the other parts well, but if you don’t take a position (and draw on the details you brought to the surface in steps 2 & 3), and create some significance, then it will all be for naught. Sad.

5) *write*: You should already be writing by now. Writing will help you think through many of the tasks and challenges you confront in the previous steps. You can never start writing too early, because it will force you (or, if you prefer, encourage you) to make hard choices, to sharpen squishy thinking, to sort out how you stand in relation to your text and your audience. None of this is easy, nor is it obvious. You are smart, which means you have likely been able to get through life without making this difficult process manifest and concrete. If so, kudos to you! But don’t let your intelligence make you complacent. It probably won’t work forever. It takes time to do this write (!), so please give yourself that time. Write now, right now!

6) *rewrite*: Somewhere along the line, you should produce something that you (and preferably others, too) identify as an early draft. Get other people to read and respond to your writing. There are people trained and paid to do this (me! julia! rachel!), but there are plenty of eager and willing “amateurs” within arm’s reach. This is important, since you are trying to communicate your ideas to other people. You need to make your audience real. Otherwise, you run the risk of talking too much to yourself, and you are likely to be a pushover for your own brilliant insights. Checking in with others to ensure your argument works for them is critical to producing effective writing. Don’t forget to give yourself ample time for this process, as it is generally more involved than proofreading and dotting i's and crossing t’s. To encourage you to start early, you should have a draft done by Friday the 9th, which you can email to me. Also, be sure to set up an appointment with our writing mentors as you work on your early draft.

7) *turn it all in*: The assignment is due Friday, March 16, 2018. We will decide as a class the exact time and place for the official submission.

8) *have a nice day*: Your weekend starts now (in the future). Enjoy being done. You earned it.

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