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‘The Other Dream’ of *Erewhon*: An Essay on the Machines’ Discreet Rebellion²

Abstract

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of Samuel Butler's seminal work, *Erewhon: or, Over the Range*, and Vladimir Poleganov's contemporary novel, *The Other Dream*. The analysis centers on the discreet influence exerted by technology in the pursuit of territorial survival. The study delves into the catastrophic consequences arising from both the success and failure of this technological endeavour.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; machine rebellion; space and territory

Резюме

„Другият сън“ на „Ереуон“: опит върху дискретния бунт на машините

Статията предлага сравнителен анализ на два романа: „Ереуон“ на Самюъл Бътлър и „Другият сън“ на Владимир Полеганов. Тя се съсредоточава върху „дискретното влияние“, което машините оказват в стремежа си към териториално оцеляване, и взема под внимание катастрофалните последици, произтичащи както от успеха, така и от провала на тяхната стратегия.

Ключови думи: изкуствен интелект; бунт на машините; пространство и територия

All spaces with regular form... geometric imprints of our lives, rather than, as I most often explained to myself about unclean places – reflections of their geometric, mechanical fear with coordinates clear only to them
The Other Dream, 2016

The anniversary of the official beginning of the Anthropocene is celebrated with a lavish festival, and everything on its territory is intended to testify to man's superiority over the domesticated and now completely disempowered environment: "The sands covering the earth were particles of sufficient intelligence that they did not stick to our bodies and tasted pleasant in case they got into our mouths; the rocks jutting out here and there could translate the memory of their ancient originals into a language we could understand, and every time we touched one of them with finger or palm we could

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² A prior version of this paper was published in Bulgarian in the journal *Critique and Humanism* (vol. 59, issue 2/2023).

see in our heads how fossils had become fossils or how earthquakes had rearranged the world. [...] The flames burned quietly, without crackling or popping, their beauty for the eyes alone. Their warmth, too".³ This, at least, is how the world looks through the eyes of an imperfect and defective mind, an incomplete narrator whose ontological status remains unclear. Is he alive, or is he already dead? Is he a man, or a machine? Is he a phantomized subject⁴, or merely an informational echo, a ghost reflected in the unblinking eyes of optical devices?

Vladimir Poleganov's novel *The Other Dream* does not give easy answers, but it does pose interesting questions and draws the reader's attention to some of the long-standing themes of science fiction literature. The depth of the book becomes an invitation to a conversation with the past, the stakes of which are, as is usually the case with such narratives, the future itself. This is also why it is difficult to isolate a particular motif without sacrificing the exemplary ambivalence of the story. Yet the present paper intends to perform just such a maneuver – to narrow the interpretive field and focus on one of the novel's more complex elements in order to bridge the gap between the anxiety of Erewhonian scholarship and the helplessness of Poleganov's fictional character who is no longer able to decipher the boundaries of his own world... or at least of what he perhaps too naively still perceives as 'his' world. Key to the analysis will be the technological possession of human space, the latter being understood as terrain and possibility for independent (unmediated) action, but also as goal, conquest and currency, a barter or ransom for progress; a rather peculiar definition, intending to remain in the realm of literary studies with two works published in the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

When the first edition of *Erewhon, or Over the Range* appeared in 1872, the Victorian community perceived the most thesis-laden part of the novel, inserted under the title *The Book of Machines*, as a mockery of Darwin's theory. Samuel Butler, however, remained perplexed by this reading. After renouncing his anonymity and disclosing himself as the author of the text, he added the following clarification to the preface of his second edition:

I regret that reviewers have in some cases been inclined to treat the chapters on Machines as an attempt to reduce Mr. Darwin's theory to an absurdity. Nothing could be further from my intention, and few things would be more distasteful to me than any attempt to laugh at Mr. Darwin; but I must own that I have myself to thank for the misconception, for I felt sure that my intention would be missed, but preferred not to weaken the chapters by explanation, and knew very well that Mr. Darwin's theory would take no harm. The only question in my mind was how far I could afford to be misrepresented as laughing at that for which I have the most profound admiration.⁵

³ Полеганов, Владимир. *Другият сън*. София, Колибри, 2016, с. 118. [Poleganov, Vladimir. *Drugiyat san*. Sofia, Colibri, 2016, p. 118].

⁴ Phantomatics could be defined as a particular type of digitalization and it's tied to the notion of virtual reality. The concept was proposed by Stanislaw Lem and is discussed in more detail in my monograph *The Virtual Human: An Essay on Phantomatics*.

⁵ Butler, Samuel. *Erewhon, Or Over the Range*. Planet PDF [eBook], 2005, p. 4.

Moreover, on May 11, 1872, the writer sent a letter to the famous naturalist apologizing for the critic's shortsightedness, a gesture that marked the beginning of a brief friendship consisting of annual meetings and conversations about science, literature, and art.⁶ The rift between the two in the 1880s did little to help Butler's aspirations to prove that the potential application of theory, rather than its substance, was the true object of his satire.⁷ And so, initially misunderstood by the general public, by 1901, when the revised edition of *Erewhon* appeared, the author was now quite deliberately prepared to challenge the 'purely mechanistic' understanding of evolution by endorsing Lamarck's teleological thought.⁸ The implications inherent in this philosophy indicated that the machine possesses the capacity to supplant humans. While currently appearing to serve humanity, the trajectory of its development and its inherent potential for self-directed change created conditions for divergence from its creator, akin to the evolutionary divergence observed between animals and plants, albeit at a notably accelerated pace. Such seemed to be the course of nature, and “surely when we reflect upon the manifold phases of life and consciousness which have been evolved already, it would be rash to say that no others can be developed, and that animal life is the end of all things. There was a time when fire was the end of all things: another when rocks and water were so”.⁹

In a sense, a very old motif underlies the history of this debate, the basis of which is the human fear of the creation turning against its master and refusing to obey his commands. Such plots are familiar to us from Antiquity – we can find them in, say, the living statues ('automata') of Daedalus, which their creator had to bind to prevent them from escaping him¹⁰, or in far more recent narratives - such as James Cameron's *Terminator* series, Alex Garland's *Ex Machina: God from the Machine*, and many others. Yet, by being an exemplary example of social critique, *Erewhon* also manages to bring in an additional, particularly pertinent question: is it possible to step back and relinquish technological development, or is it already too late for that?

Liberated from the economic pressures of global competition owing to their geographical isolation, the Erewhonians have responded affirmatively by collectively deciding to halt 271 years of technological advancement. This resolution, however, followed a tumultuous civil war that not only marked a significant historical event but also solidified a prevailing anti-machine sentiment among the

⁶ Turbil, Cristiano. (2019) Memory, Heredity and Machines: From Darwinism to Lamarckism in Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*. *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. XX, № XX, p. 6.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 2. See also Breuer, Hans-Peter. Samuel's Butler "The Book of the Machines" and the Argument from Design. – In: *Modern Philology*, Vol. 72, № 4, 1975, pp. 365 – 383.

⁹ Butler, Samuel. *Erewhon, Or Over the Range*. Planet PDF [eBook], 2005, p. 278.

¹⁰ Kang, Minsoo. *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 20.

populace. The conflict was anticipated but proved unavoidable since “to withdraw steam power suddenly will not have the effect of reducing us to the state in which we were before its introduction; there will be a general break-up and time of anarchy such as has never been known; it will be as though our population were suddenly doubled, with no additional means of feeding the increased number”.¹¹ Nevertheless, people were convinced that “the air we breathe is hardly more necessary for our animal life than the use of any machine, on the strength of which we have increased our numbers, is to our civilisation”.¹² Inaction, therefore, directly conflicts with the instinct for self-preservation, leading to the plea from the *Book of Machines* for humanity to rid itself of material comfort in the name of species preservation. “I shrink with as much horror from believing that my race can ever be superseded or surpassed, as I should do from believing that even at the remotest period my ancestors were other than human beings”, confesses the fictional author of the philosophical treatise, before pronouncing his severe verdict, conveyed to us by the narrator's translation.¹³

The machine mind, to summarize *Erewhon's* version, has already entangled humanity in its tentacles (or perhaps wires, as long as we don't feel too sharp reservations about updating the image) through the use of artifice (in the sense of subterfuge) on which its own survival depended. “The misery is that man has been blind so long already”.¹⁴ And although it is “true, from a low materialistic point of view, it would seem that those thrive best who use machinery wherever its use is possible with profit”¹⁵ it is important to remember that “this is the art of the machines—they serve that they may rule. They bear no malice towards man for destroying a whole race of them provided he creates a better instead”¹⁶.

But will there be room for all species if their numbers continue to grow exponentially? It is as if “man's very soul is due to the machines; it is a machine-made thing: he thinks as he thinks, and feels as he feels, through the work that machines have wrought upon him”¹⁷ and yet in the same time “their [the machines] existence is quite as much a sine qua non for his, as his for theirs”¹⁸. What then would be the fate of the losing side?

One of the more in-depth interpretations of this issue emerged in 2016 – in the aforementioned novel *The Other Dream* by Vladimir Poleganov—where the theme is explored and enriched through a skillful combination of some of the best science fiction practices developed over the years.

¹¹ Butler, Samuel. *Erewhon, Or Over the Range*. Planet PDF [eBook], 2005, p. 312.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 315.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 312.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 290 – 291.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 291.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 290.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

The protagonist of the novel is shown to be confused, frankly disoriented, helpless, demented and depressingly anaemic; charmless and uninitiative, detached and unreliable. His unintentional wandering between two mutually exclusive worlds, between waking and sleeping, between life and death, the real and the phantomatic, the imaginary and the actual, turns out to be a speculative experiment, a "miracle" facilitated by the activity of new technologies and their capacity for error. For error here is productive; it is a glitch that generates otherness (not difference, but otherness) and allows an anthropomorphic consciousness to approach the otherworldly but not to glimpse it. Insight, however, is almost there; it appears in the form of fragmented observations that betray the impenetrability of technically mediated existence, of the technological trap or of the ultimate human defeat that – purely dialectically – has turned into a new possibility for our species:

[...] somewhere something has sprouted – a desire or just an image that you see in your mind as a solitary letter from a completely alien alphabet and you don't know what it means - and it has perhaps taken on a life of its own – like a tumor, but benign, because it has not invaded your body in its incomprehensible march, but has tuned it, prepared it for this moment.¹⁹

The narrator's lack of comprehension has rendered him blind to the subtle machinations of the machines. In this state of non-understanding, he remains oblivious to their discreet campaign against man, their gradual encroachment upon and occupation of the space they claim. These machines systematically seize, process, sanitize, and ultimately strip away the essence of humanity within that space. "Someone is talking, you can't hear, but you know you'll remember what they said"²⁰, declares his wife, who, like him, has delegated much of her memory (and thus herself) to the devices that surround her.

I can only wait and look out the window. When I shared this with my wife, she again explained it with technology. There is not an inch of our home, she told me, that is not populated with technology. Scientists are making them more and more invisible. Sometimes what you think is dust is just a device that monitors your body's needs and, say, turns on the stove just before you feel hungry.²¹

Man's identity, to put it more bluntly, has been violated, and the sanctuary of his home environment – that intimate space fostering self-reflection and interpersonal connections – is under siege, marked by destabilization and insecurity.

¹⁹ Полеганов, Владимир. *Другият сън*. София, Колибри, 2016, с. 44. [Poleganov, Vladimir. *Drugiyat san*. Sofia, Colibri, 2016, p. 44].

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 30.

²¹ Ibidem, pp. 10-11.

To this day, I don't understand why I think our home offers me a kind of security, a security of the senses that seems to be the only thing that keeps me in this world. Maybe it's because technology in our country is convincing enough. Maybe that's why I rarely find myself unable to fall asleep in bed at night, tossing and turning, sweaty and exhausted, thinking a thought a thousand times: surely the particles scientists put in the sheets help my body and mind more easily swim the river between days.²²

Yet to question what is "truly" unfolding in the novel often implies overlooking its enigmatic, multilayered narrative and favoring a singular interpretation, thereby disregarding the diverse perspectives that contribute to the work's inherent fascination. Nevertheless, such decisions are frequently deemed necessary, and the current paper is on the verge of making one.

The Other Dream can be read as an intensification of Butler's already radical assertion that "the very soul of man is due to machines: it is made of machines"²³. It is no longer clear who is the constructor and who is the constructed, for the two are intertwined to the point of unrecognizability. The synthesis, however, is paradoxically too flawless to be deemed perfect; it can only be completed through the rupture of a matrix or the failure of a function: the inverted vacuum cleaner (or, more precisely, the inverted cleaning machine) becomes visible, draws the eye to itself, reminds us of its existence:

When we got home, we found one of the cleaners on its back. It was the smallest one, the one that looks like a spider and can climb on the furniture. That's what made its turning suspicious: it was designed to move at slow and fast speeds upside down wherever its head was: it could swim, unclog drains, it could probably do a thousand other things I didn't suspect. Such machines don't stay on their backs for long.²⁴

Similarly the other world itself, that strange space into which the protagonist often lapses, becomes visible only thanks to cognitive discrepancies, to the discrepancies between human and non-human reason: "If I got used to it, this world and my world would be equal [...] I don't know if I want to get used to it"²⁵, the traveller concludes. But what, after all, is this alternative world? A virtual reality, or more precisely a phantomized fiction that "wants you so much that [...] it transports you into itself whenever it wishes, and then [...] leaves you alone and always before the first step"²⁶? Quite possibly. But why and for what purpose does it exist?

²² Ibidem, p. 11.

²³ Butler, Samuel. *Erewhon, Or Over the Range*. Planet PDF [eBook], 2005, p. 290.

²⁴ Полеганов, Владимир. *Другият сън*. София, Колибри, 2016, с. 31. [Poleganov, Vladimir. *Drugiyat san*. Sofia, Colibri, 2016, p. 31].

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 52.

²⁶ Ibidem.

One of the applicable interpretations²⁷ in this case is that the protagonist's wife makes digital sectors in which she stores the disappearing species, and her husband, who died some time ago, is collected thanks to the "correct forms" that the cleaners' programs ignore:

The place where we found it [the inverted cleaning machine] was a place which was shunned by the machines [...] The line under the cabinet was covered with a very thin but visible layer of dust.²⁸

Then why, I once thought to ask my wife, do we clean? If dust is technology, why are we cleaning? Only some of the dust, she said, the rest is miscellaneous debris from our bodies and objects in the house. Still, I insisted. After all, remember that the machines that clean are technology too. You don't mistake a doll for a person, do you?"²⁹

If one is to accept this interpretation of the text, then one might also agree that the Erewhonian thinker's fears have come to pass in the world of *The Other Dream* and humanity is now enslaved – not destroyed, not forced to perform impossible physical or mental labor, but removed from the equation, disarmed, disempowered, and marginalized on the fringes of the simulation. The intertwined implications and the produced meaning cannot easily be separated from one another, as the anthropocene is necessarily and by default an automatocene. But space is finite, its materiality on the wane, and so phantomatization appears as a natural extension, a digitized container collecting the residual waste of human activity. The process is invisible; it becomes tangible only thanks to the insufficient corporeality, to the disintegrating information that fails to identify the two poles through the illusion of life. Yet technophobia remains alien to the novel, which, instead of following the fiery shadows of the Butlerian Jihad³⁰, reaches for the beauty of the legend of the spaceships buried beneath the sand, destined to take human souls to a better place:

I grabbed the branch and the stone again and went forward. I reached the spot and started digging. First with my hands, but the dirt quickly brought them down. Then with the stone, but it didn't work. Then with the branch, but I didn't have the strength anymore [...] It was stupid to stop trying to drive such a change from here, with these hands. It was also foolish to stop after I had already torn the branch off, after I had heard my wife's last words leak through the sieve that had separated me from her, after Oa's rescue was the only way I could prove to myself that I had stepped from life not to death but simply to the other world. The next world.³¹

²⁷ This line of reflection arose in an informal conversation I had with my colleague Iva Stefanova, and as the laws of good manners dictate, the author neither accepted nor rejected it.

²⁸ Полеганов, Владимир. *Другият сън*. София, Колибри, 2016, с. 31. [Poleganov, Vladimir. *Drugiyat san*. Sofia, Colibri, 2016, p. 31].

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

³⁰ *Erewhon's* influence on other artistic works in the field can easily be recognized in beloved works of fiction such as the *Dune Chronicles*.

³¹ Полеганов, Владимир. *Другият сън*. София, Колибри, 2016, с. 165-166. [Poleganov, Vladimir. *Drugiyat san*. Sofia, Colibri, 2016, pp. 165-166].

It is plausible to assume that the dream of immortality, that lifelong fantasy of the transhumanists, drives the narrative, and that the novel's discrete technological excess is merely a tool for achieving it; after all, the protagonist (or at least his consciousness) has been digitized by a man who is trying to preserve it, even if the attempt to do so has been largely unsuccessful. But in that case we must ask what are the premises that led to this unnatural experiment. To conceive of machines as hostile terminators would be to simplify their presence and ascribe to them a moral responsibility that they could hardly assume on their own. It would be more precise to think of technological "harmfulness" as an expression and trace of the actions of others who use the machines, because the machines must be used so that they can ultimately rule. The very core of this governance, or its stake, is space, and one of the tactics of its absorption is the creation of an artificial environment, directly dependent, that is, maximally controlled, on the activity of the winners. The Erewhonian monarchy is an example of human domination reducing machine presence. *The Other Dream*, conversely, represents a reduction of the human against the background of technology. Both works, however, demonstrate that space, whether material or digital, cannot function fully autonomously due to the symbiosis between man and machine; each party is a tool of the other and as such must find a place for its necessary competitor. Moreover, both versions, which could claim different genre signifiers³², can present a similar signified – a dystopic scenario³³ brought about by some kind of an ecologically-oriented action that disturbs or prolongs the natural order of things. And both iterations manifest a shared resolve to present a distorted reality, displaying a specific structural symmetry. Primarily, it is through this symmetry that the widely acknowledged societal apprehension, particularly the fear of machine rebellion, undergoes rejuvenation, articulating its concerns with renewed vigor, and also it is due to it that the comparative approach establishes its foundational premise.

It can be argued that the comparative reading of the two novels puts the reader in a particular position that allows him to think of the relationship between man and machine tactically – as a doomed struggle for territory³⁴. It is not impossible, however, to imagine a definitive end to it, as Poleganov does:

³² For an intriguing play with Erewhon's genre see Parrinder, Patrick. Entering Dystopia. Entering Erewhon. – In: *Critical Survey*, Vol. 17, № 1. Representations of Dystopia in Literature and Film, pp. 6 – 21. For a debate over the genre of *The Other Dream* see Kyosev, Aleksandar, Miglena Nikolchina. Bavnoto chetene: Vladimir Poleganov, *Drugiyat san*, IK „Kolibri“, S., 2016 g. <https://newspaper.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/26188> (11.02.2024, 21:01).

³³ It should be noted that neither *Erewhon* nor Poleganov's novel could easily be classified as dystopias, and it is not my intention to do so. The link between these two works is too fragile to carry such a generic burden. What I am trying to imply here, however, is that there is a certain dyschronic impulse that fleets between these two texts with the inevitability of a sentence. The notion of dyschronia I discussed in an article published in *Philological Forum* under the title *Between Alternative History and Temporal Utopia: The Uchronic Potential* (issue 1 (17), year 9 (2023)).

³⁴ The motif did not remain foreign to the 20th century, as eminent authors like Stanislaw Lem created truly impressive texts by incorporating it in their work. See Lem, Stanislaw. Two Evolutions. – In: *Summa Technologiae*. Minneapolis,

If technology on Earth, as some scientists claim in the articles my wife has read from time to time, is moving towards some kind of peak already without the crutches of human minds, then it is logical that they will one day wish to leave home. It has been the same with humans, but they have not succeeded. Except that if technology proves to be more successful than us and leaves the planet, we will be left not as part of nature returning to its purity, but as ghosts, remnants of the technological spirit, a residue of the unnatural, so I think. The same, it seems to me, will happen if somehow we humans evolve and leave the world before technology.³⁵

The territorial skirmish, then, turns out to be only a phase of a larger contest that links *Erewhon* and *The Other Dream* even more poignantly to the anxieties (and hopes) of science fiction literature.

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London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, pp. 11 – 40. See Lem, Stanislaw. *The Invincible*. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2020.

³⁵ Полеганов, Владимир. *Другият сън*. София, Колибри, 2016, с. 55. [Poleganov, Vladimir. *Drugiyat san*. Sofia, Colibri, 2016, p. 55].

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