

Marcuse has remarked that our present “capacity to turn the world into hell” and our power to turn the world into the opposite both spell the end of utopic thinking.⁸ In either direction, the voice of utopia as social critique is squelched, with utopia’s function as a condemnation of where we are heading silenced. Utopias and anti-utopias trip cultural alarms, broadcasting warning signals announcing that culture is degrading—or about to be rescued, redeemed. It is arguable, indeed demonstrable, that our world is fast becoming a hell (it is, scientists tell us, getting warmer), and what utopias then signify is nothing more than what Toynbee once called a “pegging” of the social order, an artificial arresting of its downward movement: “To arrest a downward movement is the utmost to which Utopias can aspire, since Utopias seldom begin to be written in any society until after its members have lost the expectation of further progress.”⁹ While utopias tend to recycle the past, anti-utopias recycle the future, and in some sense they both temporarily arrest social movement. This is not to say that we could survive without them or the rest they provide. When I read that veteran British code-breakers are attempting to determine if the ten-letter inscription—DOUOSVAVVM—carved into a garden monument of the Shugborough Estate in Staffordshire reveals, as legend has it, the location of the Holy Grail, I am reminded of how important utopia is as a stay against cynicism and a register of inexhaustible human will.¹⁰ Around another holy relic, the Turin Shroud, circulates a utopian vision familiar to the readers of this book: Pierre Krijbolder’s recent revelation that the cloth image is not Christ but Prester John.¹¹

In this book, I have wanted to suggest that somehow our most hopeful impulses fuel beliefs such as these. As absolutely unhistorical as it may be that Prester John’s visage marks the Turin Shroud, the shaping of history, and our ability to understand it, depend upon our never relinquishing such a way of thinking. To jettison even politically retrograde utopias is to risk suffocating our ideals, while criticizing them most assuredly does not.

APPENDIX: TRANSLATION OF THE ORIGINAL LATIN LETTER OF PRESTER JOHN¹

1. Prester John, by the power and virtue of God and our lord Jesus Christ, lord of lords, to Emmanuel, governor of the Romans, wishing him health and the extended enjoyment of divine favor. 2. It has been reported to our majesty that you esteem our excellency and that mention [knowledge] of our High One has reached you. And we have learned through our delegate that you should wish to send us some entertainments and trifles [*ludicra et iocunda*], which would satisfy our righteousness. 3. Of course we are only human and take it in good faith, and through our delegate we transmit to you some things, for we wish and long to know if, as with us, you hold the true faith and if you, through all things, believe our lord Jesus Christ. 4. While we know ourselves to be mortal, the little Greeks regard you as a god, while we know that you are mortal and subject to human infirmities. 5. Because of the usual munificence of our liberality, if there is anything you should desire for your pleasure, make it known to us through our delegate through a small note of your esteem, and you shall have it for the asking. 6. Receive the hawkweed in our own name and use it for your own sake, because we gladly use your jar of unguent in order that we mutually strengthen and corroborate our bodily strength. And, on account of (our) art, respect and consider our gift. 7. If you should desire to come to our kingdom, we will place you in the greatest and most dignified place in our house, and you will be able to enjoy our abundance, from that which overflows with us, and if you should wish to return, you will return possessing riches. 8. Remember your end and you will not sin forever. 9. If you truly wish to know the magnitude and excellence of our Highness and over what lands our power dominates, then know and believe without hesitation that I, Prester John, am lord of lords and surpass, in all riches which are under the heaven, in virtue and in power, all the kings of the wide world. Seventy-two kings are tributaries to us. 10. I am a devout Christian, and everywhere do we defend poor Christians, whom the empire of our clemency rules, and we sustain them with alms. 11. We have vowed to visit the Sepulcher of the Lord with the greatest army, just as it is befitting the glory of our majesty, in order to humble and defeat the enemies of the cross of Christ and to exalt his blessed name. 12. Our magnificence dominates the three Indias, and our land extends from farthest India, where the body of St. Thomas the Apostle rests, to the place where the sun rises, and returns by slopes to the Babylonian desert near the tower of Babel. 13. Seventy-two provinces serve us, of which a few are

Christian, and each one of them has its own king, who all are our tributaries. 14. In our country are born and raised elephants, dromedaries, camels, hippopotami, crocodiles, *methagallinarii*, *cametheternis*, *thinsiretae*, panthers, aurochs, white and red lions, white bears, white merlins, silent cicadas, griffins, tigers, lamias, hyenas, wild oxen, archers, wild men, horned men, fauns, satyrs and women of the same kind, pigmies, dog-headed men, giants whose height is forty cubits, one-eyed men, cyclopes, and a bird, which is called the phoenix, and almost all kinds of animals that are under heaven. 21. Our land flows with honey and abounds with milk. In a particular part of our country no poisons harm nor noisy frog croaks, there is no scorpion there, nor serpent creeping in the grass. Venomous animals are not able to live in that place nor harm anyone. 22. Amid the pagans and through one of our provinces flows a river which is called Ydonus. This river, flowing out of Paradise, extends its windings by various courses throughout the entire province, and in it are found natural gems, emeralds, sapphires, carbuncles, topazes, chrysolites, onyx, beryls, amethysts, sardonyxes, and many other precious gems. 23. In the same place a plant grows which is called *assidios*, the root of which, if someone carries it upon his person, he puts to flight the unclean spirit and causes it to announce who and from where it may be, and its name. And so unclean spirits never dare to invade anyone in that land. 24. In another province of ours whole pepper—which is exchanged for wheat, grain, leather, and bread—grows and is gathered. 25. That land is also woody, like a forest of willows fully permeated with serpents. But when the pepper ripens, the forest is set on fire, and the fleeing serpents enter their holes, and then the pepper from the shrubbery is dried and cooked, but how it is cooked, no stranger is permitted to know. 27. This grove is situated at the foot of Mount Olympus, from where a clear spring issues, containing all kinds of pleasant tastes. The taste however varies each hour of the day and night, and flows out by a waterway for three days, not far from Paradise, from where Adam was expelled. 28. If someone who has fasted for three days tastes of this spring, he will suffer no infirmity from that day on, and will always be as if he were thirty-two years old, however long he may live. 29. There are small gems there, which are called *midrosi*, and which eagles are often accustomed to bring to our country, by which they rejuvenate and restore their sight. 30. If someone should wear one on his finger, his sight would not fail, and if his sight diminishes, it is restored, and the more he uses his eyes, the sharper his sight becomes. Blessed by the proper charm, it renders a man invisible, banishes hatred, forges friendship, and drives away envy. 31. Among the other things which marvelously happen in our kingdom, there is the sandy sea without water. Indeed the sand moves and swells up in waves just like all other seas, and is never still. This sea can be crossed neither by ship or by any other means, and for this reason, what type of land may lie beyond is not able to be known. And although it is completely devoid of water, nevertheless diverse kinds of fish are found near the shore on our side which are the most palatable and tasty to eat and which are seen nowhere else. 32. Three day's distance from this sea are some mountains, from which descends a river of stones, in the same condition (as the sea), without water, and it flows through our kingdom all the way to the sea of sand. 33. It flows for three days a week, and small and large stones flow by and carry with them pieces of woods all the way to the sea of sand, and after the river has entered the sea, the stones and

wood vanish and do not appear again. As long as it does not flow, anyone is able to cross it. On the other four days, it is accessible to crossing. 38. Near the desert between the uninhabited mountains a certain rivulet flows beneath the earth, the entrance to which is not accessible except by chance. Indeed sometimes the ground opens up, and if someone at that moment crosses over from there, he is able to enter; but he must quickly get out, if by any chance the ground may close up. And whatever he snatches up from the sand is precious stones and gems, for the sand and gravel are nothing but precious stones and gems. 39. And that rivulet flows into another river of greater size, which the men of our kingdom enter and carry from there the greatest abundance of precious stones; nor do they dare to sell them unless they first show them to our excellency. And if we wish to keep them in our treasury or for the payment of our force (army), we receive them given to us at half price; otherwise they are able to sell them freely. 40. The children in that land are raised in water, so that, in order to find stones, they may live sometimes for three or four months entirely under water. 41. Beyond the stone river are the ten tribes of the Jews, who though they imagine they have kings of their own, are nevertheless our servants and tributaries to our excellency. 42. In certain other provinces near the torrid zone there are serpents who in our language are called salamanders. Those serpents are only able to live in fire, and they produce a certain little membrane around them, just as other worms do, which makes silk. 43. This little membrane is carefully fashioned by the ladies of our palace, and from this we have garments and cloths for the full use of our excellency. Those cloths are washed only in a strong fire. 44. Our Serenity abounds in gold and silver and precious stones, elephants, dromedaries, camels, and dogs. 45. Our gentle hospitality receives all travelers from abroad and pilgrims. There are no poor among us. 46. Neither thief nor plunderer is found among us, nor does a flatterer have a place there, nor does avarice. There is no division among us. Our people abound in all kinds of wealth. We have few horses and wretched ones. We believe that no people is equal to us in riches or in number of men. 47. When we proceed to war against our enemies, we have carried before our front line, in separate wagons, thirteen great and very tall crosses made of gold and precious stones in place of banners, and each one of these is followed by ten thousand mounted soldiers and 100 thousand foot soldiers, besides those who are assigned to the packs and the cart-loads and the bringing in of the food of the army. 48. Indeed when we ride out unarmed, a wooden cross, ornamented with neither paint, gold, nor gems, proceeds before our majesty, so that we may always be mindful of the passion of our lord Jesus Christ, and [so does] a golden vase, full of earth, in order that we may know that our body will return to its proper origin, the earth. 49. And another silver vase, full of gold, is carried before us in order that all may understand that we are lord of lords. 50. In all the riches which are in the world, our magnificence exceeds in abundance and surpasses. 51. There is not a liar among us, nor is anyone able to lie. And if someone there should begin to lie, he immediately dies, that is, he would be considered just as dead man among us, nor would any mention of him be made among us, that is, he would receive no further honor among us. 52. We all follow truth and we love one another. There is no adulterer among us. No vice rules among us. 53. Every year we visit the body of the holy prophet Daniel with a large army in the Babylonian desert, and we are all armed on

account of the wild beasts and other serpents, which are called frightful. **54.** Among us fish are caught, by whose blood purple things are dyed. **55.** We have many fortifications, and the strongest men and men of various form. We rule over the Amazons and even the Bragmani. **56.** Indeed the palace in which our Sublimity dwells, is in the image and likeness of the palace which the apostle Thomas planned for Gondoforus, king of the Indians, and the out buildings and other buildings are similar in all ways to that palace. **57.** The paneled ceilings, beams, and *epistilia* are made of acacia. The roof of the same palace is of ebony, so that by any circumstance it is not able to be burned. Indeed at either end of the palace, above the roof-ridge, are two golden apples, and in each of these are two carbuncles, so that the gold shines in the day and the carbuncles sparkle at night. **58.** The larger gates of the palace are of sardonyx inlaid with serpent's horn, so that no one is able to enter secretly with poison; the others are of ebony, and the windows are of crystal. **59.** Some of the tables, on which our court eats, are of gold and others are of amethyst, and the columns which support the tables are of ebony. **60.** Before our palace is a certain street in which our Justice is accustomed to watch those triumphant in battle. The pavement is of onyx and the walls inlaid with onyx, so that by the power of the stone the courage of the warriors grows. **61.** In our aforementioned palace no torch burns at night except that which is fed by balsam. **62.** The chamber, in which our Sublimity sleeps, is marvelously gilded and ornamented with all kinds of stones. If indeed wherever onyx should be used for adornment, then around it would be four cornelians of the same size, in order that by their virtue, the irregularity of the onyx may be regulated. **63.** In the same chamber balsam always burns. Our bed is of sapphire, on account of the stone's virtue in chastity. **64.** We have the most beautiful women, but they do not come to us except four times a year for the purpose of procreating children, and thus sanctified by us, as Bethsheba by David, each one returns to her place. **65.** Once a day our court dines. At our table every day, thirty thousand eat besides those who enter and leave. And all these receive provisions each day from our treasury, such as horses and other expenses. **66.** This table is of precious emerald, and two columns of amethyst support it. The power of this stone allows no one sitting at the table to become inebriated. **67.** Before the doors of our palace, near the place where the fighters struggle in battle, is a mirror of very great size, to which one climbs by one hundred twenty five steps. **68.** Indeed the steps of the lower one-third are of porphyry, and partly of serpentine and alabaster. From this point to the upper one-third the steps are of crystal stone and sardonyx. Indeed the upper one-third are of amethyst, amber, jasper, and sapphire. **69.** Indeed the mirror is supported by a single column. Above this column is set a base, upon the base are two columns, above which is another base, upon which are four columns, above which is another base and upon which are eight columns, above which is another base and upon which are sixteen columns, above which is another base, upon which are thirty-two columns, above which is another base and upon which are sixty-four columns, above which is another base, upon which are also sixty-four columns, above which is another base and upon which are thirty-two columns. And so in descending the columns diminish in number, just as ascending they increase in number, to one. **70.** Moreover, the columns and the bases are of the same kinds of stones as the steps by which one

ascends to them. **71.** Indeed at the top of the uppermost column there is a mirror, consecrated by such art that all machinations and all things which happen for and against us in the adjacent provinces subject to us are most clearly seen and known by the onlookers. **72.** Moreover it is guarded by twelve thousand soldiers in the daytime just as at night, so that it may not be by some chance or accident broken or thrown down. **73.** Every month seven kings serve us, with each one of them in order, as well as sixty-two dukes, three hundred sixty-five counts at our table, in addition to those who are charged with various duties at our court. **74.** At our table every day twelve archbishops eat close by our side on the right, on the left eat twenty bishops, in addition to the Patriarch of St. Thomas and the Bishop [*Protopapaten*] of Samarkind, and the Archbishop [*Archiprotapapaten*] of Susa, where the throne and the dominion of our glory reside, and the imperial palace. Every month each one of them returns, in turn, to his own home. The others never depart from our side. **75.** Indeed abbots serve us in our chapel according to the number of days in the year and every month they return to their own homes, and the same number of others return to the same service in our chapel every calends. **76B.** We have another palace, not of greater length but of greater height and beauty, which was built according to a vision that, before we were born, appeared to our father, who, on account of the holiness and justice which marvelously flourished in him, was called Quasideus [God-like]. **77B.** For it was said to him in a dream: "Build a palace for your son, who is to born of you, and who will be king of the worldly kings and lord of the lords of the entire earth. **78B.** And that palace will have such a grace conferred to it by God that there no one will ever be hungry, no one will be sick, nor will anyone, being inside, die on that on which he has entered. And if anyone has the strongest hunger and is sick to the point of death, if he enters the palace and stays there for some time, he will leave satisfied, as if he might have eaten one hundred courses of food, and as healthy as if he might have suffered no infirmities in his lifetime. **85B.** On the next morning Quasideus, my father, terrified by the entire vision, got up and [C] after he had thought and was greatly disturbed, he heard a sublime voice, and which all who were with him heard pronounced: [**86C.**] "O Quasideus, do what you have been ordered to, do not hesitate by any means, for all will be just as it has been predicted to you." **87C.** By this voice, certainly, my father was completely comforted and immediately [B] he ordered the palace to be built, in the construction of which only precious stones and the best melted gold was used for cement. **88B.** Its heaven, that is its roof, is of the clearest sapphire, and the brightest topazes were set here and there in between them, so that the sapphires, like the purest heaven, and topazes, in the manner of stars, illuminate the palace. **89B.** Indeed the floor is of large crystal flagstones. There is no chamber or other kind of division in the palace. Fifty columns of the purest gold, formed like needles, are set in the palace near the walls. **90B.** In each corner is one column, the rest are set between them. The height of one column is sixty cubits, its circumference is such that two men are able to encompass it with their arms, and each one has at its top a carbuncle of such size as a large amphora, by which the palace is illuminated as the world is illuminated by the sun. **91.** [C] If you ask [B] Why are the columns sharpened to a point just as needles? The cause is evidently this: because, if they were as wide at the top as at the bottom, the floor and the whole palace would not be so

greatly illuminated by the brightness of the carbuncles. **92.** [C] And likewise if you ask whether either of the two are bright there, [B] So great is the brightness there that nothing can be imagined so small or so fine, if it is on the floor, that it is not able to be seen by anyone. **93B.** There is no window or other opening there, so that the brightness of the carbuncles and other stones cannot be eclipsed by the brightness of the most serene heaven and sun. **96.** On the day of our birth and whenever we are coronated, we enter that palace and remain inside as long as we might have stayed there to have eaten, and we leave there satisfied, as if we were filled with all kinds of food. **97C.** If again you ask why, since the creator of all will have made us the most powerful and the most glorious over all mortals, [O] (why) our sublimity does not permit itself to be called by a more noble name than presbyter, your prudence ought not to be surprised. **98.** For we have in our court many officials, who are more deserving of title and office, as far as ecclesiastical honor is concerned, and they are provided with divine service even greater than ours. In fact our steward is a primate and king, our cup-bearer an archbishop and king, our marshal a king and archimandrite, and our chief cook a king and abbot. And on that account our Highness has not allowed himself to be called by the same names or distinguished by the same ranks, of which our court seems to be full, and therefore he chooses preferably to be called by a lesser name or inferior rank on account of his humility. **99C.** We cannot at present tell you enough about our glory and power. But when you come to us, you will say, that we are truly the lord of lords of the whole earth. In the meantime you should know this trifling fact, that [B] our country extends in breadth for four months in one direction, indeed in the other direction no one knows how far our kingdom extends. **100.** If you can count the stars in heaven and the sand of the sea, then you can calculate the extent of our kingdom and our power.

NOTES

Introduction

- * C. G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 52.
1. The psychoanalytic dimension of this interchange is discussed in Paul Schilder, "The Libidinous Structure of the Body-Image," in his *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body* (New York: International Universities Press, 1950), pp. 119-212.
 2. Louise O. Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament: Arts of Rule in Late Medieval Scotland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 249.
 3. See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in his *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3-25, and *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
 4. L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
 5. Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), p. 405 [402-408].
 6. A. David Napier, *Foreign Bodies: Performance, Art, and Symbolic Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 139-40.
 7. Napier, *Foreign Bodies*, p. 156.
 8. On this issue, see Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism," in his *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 66-84. Bhabha shows how stereotyping is based at once upon "daemonic repetition" and absolute rigidity, such that stereotyping's apparent fixity, as sign of difference, is paradoxical. Stereotyping thus carries within it the force of ambivalence, a force that is, e.g., largely ignored, as Bhabha points out, by critics and readers of orientalism, Said included. What is called for is interrogation of the political effects of discourse, produced by representation, which reflect both history and fantasy (as the scene of desire). For an approach to this last point, see my "Re-Orienting Desire: Writing on Gender Trouble in Fourteenth-Century Egypt," *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 230-57.