

IMAGES OF THE *PRESENT*: URBAN SILHOUETTES

ROZHEN, NATIONAL ASTRONOMICAL OBSERVATORY

THE CITY OF THE FUTURE IN AGOP MELKONYAN'S *MURDER IN NEW BABYLON*

PART TWO

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Today, after everyone has already been introduced to the events of the novella, I will continue with the analysis of *Murder in New Babylon*, this time focusing on the science fiction parody, the parody of the biblical myth of Babylon, the caricatures of famous historical figures, and the crucial role of metalepsis in the work. As may already be evident from the plot overview we provided in the first part of this discussion, *Murder in New Babylon* is of a genre complex in nature. The novella identifies itself as a “fantastical parody,” and the parody is quite pronounced indeed, perhaps even in the title, which follows the example of Agatha Christie's detective novels. The detective parody as an aspect of the text was already revealed through the recount of the absurd investigation by Legré and the Private in the previous part of the discussion. No less significant and comical is the parody of science fiction and some of the ways through which this genre represents the future. We can take the intelligent machines as an example - whether they are artificial intelligences, robots, or other such beings, these characters are often portrayed as a new kind of living entity with an internal life distinct from humans, whether in a positive or negative way. In his novella *Memory of the World*, Melkonyan offers a serious interpretation of the intelligent machine with a consciousness too much akin to the human one. In *New Babylon*, however, we see a comic version of this type of character:

In that instant, all heads turned four points to the left, where the city's brass band appeared. The instruments marched briskly and festively, grouped around their central

compressor, which faithfully supplied them with the necessary amount of air through tubes. They were playing a march from the opera Aida. When the crowd began applauding enthusiastically, the compressor used the general admiration for personal gain, swiftly pulling out from between its (cooling system) ribs a banner with the inscription: 'They cannot breathe without me!' and in its next hand was already waving a piggy bank. The citizens of New Babylon respected the arts, especially the spiritual ones (those achieved by blowing), and were generous. But just as this touching charity reached its peak, the compressor screamed: 'Only coins, you brute! Keep the buttons to yourself! (Melkonyan 1987: 74, 75).

At first glance, the autonomous robots appear to represent the evolution of the best aspects of humanity, yet in fact, they turn out to behave in a manner as uncivilized as their creators, leaving it unclear how they improve upon or even differ from the coarser aspects of human nature.

One of the most easily discernible examples of parody can be found in some of the intertextual references in *Murder in New Babylon* to Bulgarian and global science fiction writers. Here is another example of intertextual dialogue - in the following quote, the Author (a character) complains about his own heroes:

A hero is a hero when he talks or does some other deed, and doesn't just sit there silently and gape. The young man, for some reason, felt offended and said he had already obeyed the Fifth Law (by Nikola Kesarovski) - he had realized he was a robot, obeyed the Fourth (by Lyuben Dilov) - he had legitimized himself as a robot, and now all that remained was to follow the first three (by Isaac Asimov). Since those require not causing harm to humans, he kept quiet because if he spoke, he might have caused some trouble for the Author - who knows what robotic wisdom he might blurt out (Melkonyan 1987: 99).

Later in *Murder in New Babylon*, Legré adds his own, sixth law of robotics: "Robot for robot, human for human" (Melkonyan 1987:106) - a kind of cast division, but in the style of the future.

The parodic elements in the work are not limited to the superficial layers of the text but can be found in the temporal perspective of the narrative and its characters. Even the title itself

serves as a starting point and an interpretative key to the image of the city. The reference is to the biblical myth of Babylon and the Tower of Babel, and in this way, the name New Babylon is already negatively marked. The city is cursed, just like Babylon in the myth, and its inhabitants are doomed to not understand each other. It is true that in the novella, everyone speaks the same language, but the dialogues are mostly absurd. Lyudmila Stoyanova describes the city as follows:

By combining the incompatible - the Greco-Roman era, the Age of Enlightenment, our present, and a cosmologized future, the writer constructs a kaleidoscopic world that appears ridiculous not because of the Babylonian mixture of people and epochs but due to the absurdities of bureaucratic thinking and legal proceedings, the aggressiveness of the rulers, and the foolishness of the sensation-hungry crowd (Stoyanova 2009: 27, 28).

This interpretation is supported by a second, more direct reference to the biblical myth in the first chapter of the part one. While Blaise and Joasaph get acquainted, a description of the New Babylonian tower is given:

[...] about which nothing is written in history textbooks because it will be built in some future centuries, and textbooks only deal with those in the past. For now, we'll only mention in passing that it resembles a multi-tiered spiral-like cake, that it was begun with great enthusiasm but remained unfinished, just as was written by an anonymous author: 'And they said to each other, let's make bricks and bake them in fire... And they said: let's build a city and a tower, as high as the heavens... Then the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which 82 sons of men were building. And the Lord said: behold, they are one people, and they all have one language, and see what they have started; and they will not give up on what they plan to accomplish' (Melkonyan 1987: 77/78).

We see how, in New Babylon, past and future, fiction and reality intertwine, but it is important not to think of this city as being outside of time, because it is not. It is located in the 23rd century, not in some unidentified time and space. The blend of different historical epochs is coupled with the debasement of historically significant figures, ideas, and personalities often perceived as part of "high" culture. Omar Khayyam and Marcus Aurelius are caricatured and reduced to mere drunkards. A similar case applies to Blaise himself. The great cultural achievements of the past are rendered utterly meaningless and misunderstood in the future. A

prime example is Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*. Here's what the judge says about it at the end of the trial when the work is mentioned:

We also know of your claim that man is a thinking reed, which reduces Homo sapiens to the level of a botanical object; that you are also the founder of computing, public transport, and the author of irresponsible writings like "Provincial Letters" and a whole volume of "Thoughts", which is already too much (Melkonyan 1987: 137, 138).

Pascal's famous thought about man as a reed is simplified, completely misunderstood, and interpreted only at the literal level. Blaise Pascal, along with his "writings," is rather unwelcome in New Babylon, partly because he cannot be understood. In this possible future, the past is tainted and carries the characteristics of poignant moral and cultural decay, though combined with technological progress. Key to the novella and understanding this future is the role of metalepsis in the text and the Author (Agop Melkonyan himself) as a character in the work. The mere presence of Melkonyan's figure in the novella destabilizes the world of New Babylon, because, as Monika Fludernik points out:

In general, metalepsis is a narrative technique in which the ontological assumptions - such as that authors and narrators live in a different world from the characters - are undermined, with the result being the disintegration of the illusion that the depicted world is real (Fludernik 2009: 100).

By moving between self-critique, metafictional, and social commentary through his negative attitude towards the future city and the recognition of the present within it, Melkonyan not only undermines the fictional status of New Babylon but also rejects this vision of the future, not because it is impossible, but because it should not happen. The first major point at which he takes to this direction is the metafictional dialogue between the Author and Omar Khayyam:

Omar returned to the topic of science fiction: 'Forgive me, Author, but do you seriously think that your gibberish is science fiction? First of all, science fiction must depict the future, and only a bright one at that.' The Author replied that the events in New Babylon were from the future, but his opponent said: 'What future? This is certainly the present!' (Melkonyan 1987: 108, 109).

Melkonyan accuses himself of deviating from the norms of science fiction. The question of whose norms these are remains, but they are likely premised on socialist notions of science fiction, supporting the idea that literature should depict a bright communist future. *Murder in New Babylon* comes very close to the genre of anti-utopia, provided we view the anti-utopian through the lens of negation - negation of the utopian, bright, and tranquil future of humanity (promised in many communist and non-communist science fiction novels), where technological progress is combined with moral progress. Omar also accuses the Author of the following:

What's more, continued Omar, in science fiction works, there must be starships, blasters, at least one Commander, at least one space tunnel, at least one bold scientific hypothesis, and there is none of that here. There is so little of it, in fact, that it's downright embarrassing (Melkonyan 1987: 109).

In this case, the accusation is that *Murder in New Babylon* completely diverges from the clichés and typical garnishments of popular science fiction, specifically those characteristic of the Western aesthetic model of the genre. From these commentaries, we can see Melkonyan's opinion of his own novella – it adheres to no conventions of the science fiction genre, does not describe a bright future, and leans more towards an anti-utopian version of it. Through characters like the Private, Legré, the Judge, the Prosecutor, the omnipresent vice, and the common teachings of the city, mentioned in the previous part of this lecture, the novella can easily be linked to the present and, more specifically, to the image of totalitarian Bulgaria.

The second particularly powerful metafictional commentary on the future world appears at the end of the novella, before Joasaph and Blaise are sentenced. The Author directly addresses the jurors and the judge, presenting a written defense of the accused:

Gentlemen of the court and jury!

As arrogant and pompous as it may sound, I am the Author. I wrote this story, and only I can bear the consequences. Not only the shame and disgrace when these pages are published, but also the blame for the incident at Opossum Square in your city.

The Author, gentlemen, has not lived for centuries, is not an encyclopedic thinker, has no halo, so I will not say anything in my defense. Only this: this is not the future! If the future is like this, there's no point in the present.

No, I don't mean to say that the future will be as smart, serious, and cold as science fiction writers describe. Laughter, naivety, and folly are immortal! And in a thousand years, there will be more of them than necessary. But let there also be a bit more justice.

I want to apologize to my characters for not finding a somewhat more dynamic plot and for them and so for making them suffer.

Greet the future!

The Author (Melkonyan 1987: 139)

The Author renounces his vision of the future, though it is more accurate to say that he does not find it acceptable - not because it is a less likely or plausible view of what humanity will be like in the 23rd century, but because whatever progress has taken place in New Babylon, it is not tied to the moral or spiritual development of humanity, which appears to have been left unfulfilled. In his novella, Melkonyan breaks down the boundaries between fiction and reality, past, present, and future, merging dystopia, narrative-warning, parody, and satire into a version of an absurd, yet not entirely impossible future, given that many of its absurdities are present in our world today. However, the Author's renunciation of New Babylon need not be understood as an act of despair or pessimism; rather, it can be read as a call for and a belief in a more just world.

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