

Exploring the Utopian Body and Self in Contemporary Lyrical Poetry

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Abstract

Because of issues such as the economic, climate, and social crisis – along with the issue of austere regimes – a tendency to reach for utopia is also common. Starting with Plato’s Republic, human’s strive for the ideal became prominent in literature with Thomas Moore’s Utopia. Utopia could be ideal, idyllic, philosophical, or fictional, yet the shifts in of approach in philosophy and literature, along with other social sciences, the concept of utopia is still prevailing and universal. While some people prefer to tackle the hard situations through philosophical debates, some dwell on the human imagination and creativity. Lyrical poetry alters its addresses and form along with the other literary genres throughout the literary history. Expressing one’s feelings and ideas can be carried out through various means, but this chapter will be investigating how lyrical poetry serves as a ground for poetic expression and somatic behaviour are transitive. So, it is my aim to approach some contemporary examples of lyric poetry from the perspective of the corporeal body and well-being relation. This study will explore the concept of utopian body in the poems of George Oppen, Louise Glück, Gregory Orr, Ersan Yaşar Gürçan, and Ada Limón, and attempt to analyse how these poets refer to the utopia in their poems. My examination suggests that while utopia as an environment can be experienced physically through the body, the mental perception is also bound to this experience, thereby creating two planes that are intertwined, which I refer to as ‘somatopia’. The organic plane of consciousness – the body – is bound to undertake relations with the outer world, yet it also has the opportunity to turn into the utopic plane to take refuge and find peace on a plane of consciousness.

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Introduction

The body is a refuge from the outer world which has become, as many would assert, a dystopia. With a collapsing social sphere, economic hardships, ecological ruin that humanity contributed a lot to, the immediate circle of existence has become a burden for the individual. It's only normal and acceptable for a human to turn an inward eye and attempt to find peace of mind and well-being in their own body.

The crude introductory statement, however, should not be taken as an overgeneralized dreadful statement which sounds like an alarm bell but rather as a signal to the widespread theme that has been ruling over the various realms of the media and literature. From steampunk bildungsroman dystopias to teen rebellion oriented postapocalyptic dystopias, the theme has caught the attention and admiration of many. Indeed, with issues such as the economic, climate, and social crisis – along with the issue of austere regimes – a tendency to reach for utopia is also common. Starting with Plato's *Republic*, human's strive for the ideal became prominent in literature with Thomas Moore's *Utopia*. However much Plato only drew the outlines of what an ideal society should be maintained, Moore sent his characters to Utopia to observe the setting. Utopia could be ideal, idyllic, philosophical, or fictional, yet the shifts in of approach in philosophy and literature, along with other social sciences, the concept of utopia is still prevailing and universal.

Apart from human imagination, what paves the way to creating utopias? Human imagination, need, desire, want, some subconscious strata, what we see around, where we live, who we live with? Or is it a permutation of sorts? At the times of crisis which implies a dystopic setting, where do we seek refuge? In our mind, in our souls, body? Or do we opt for creating an abstract plane of utopia to escape the horrors of everyday life? While some prefer to tackle the hard situations through philosophical debates, some dwell on the human imagination and creativity. Expressing one's feelings and ideas can be carried out through various means, but this chapter will be investigating how lyrical poetry serves as a ground for poetic expression and somatic behaviour are transitive. As Culler (2015) states "one of the major tasks of a poetics of the lyric is the identification of different structures deployed in addressing and illuminating the world". Lyrical poetry alters its addresses and form along with the other literary genres. So, it is my aim to approach some contemporary examples of lyric poetry from the perspective of the corporeal body and well-being relation. This study will explore the concept of utopian body in the poems of George Oppen, Louise Glück,

Gregory Orr, Ersan Yaşar Gürcan, and Ada Limón, and attempt to analyse how these poets refer to the utopia in their poems.

On Utopias

As mentioned before, literature on utopia has included a long list of works. Thomas Moore's work certainly cemented the place of this kind in the literary canon; however, there emerged another issue relating -and at the same time not relating - to utopic thinking: dystopia. Ehre (1991) asserts that utopia and dystopia designate the human dream of happiness and the human nightmare of despair when these are assigned a place (topos) in space or time. "In utopian literature idyll (or panegyric) blends with satire, as praise of the ideal alternates with, or at least implies, criticism of the real." (Ehre, 1991) While utopias may bring about criticism of the reality just as Jonathan Swift introduced in his novel *Gulliver's Travels*, the word alone has come to adopt the meaning of a purely idyllic place.

Through time and philosophical debate as well as literary representations, the concept of utopia also underwent changes and gained aspects. Recent concern about the subject is navigated through different kinds of utopia: political utopia which is deemed parallel to Ehre's linking utopia to socio-political criticism and philosophical utopia which prescribes a desirable environment for people. We need to distinguish between "political utopia (which entails a political project)" and the "philosophical utopia (which implies a utopian attitude) (Vicira, 2017, qtd in Sergent, 2021). Utopic thinking is often perceived as a reflection of philosophical utopia since a similar prescribing and defining processes are at work. In this study, I prefer to approach this philosophical utopia by tying it to a rather 'earthly' notion: the body.

While utopia is widely applied to vast spaces and address large numbers of people, I prefer to distil the concept into the singular, insular human body. In other words, I opt to see the body as a space, therefore choose to centre my approach around the notion "somatopia" as proposed by Marc Chrysanthou (2002). Nonetheless, Shusterman's notion "somaesthetics" would be a more prudent starting stone. Shusterman (2000) defines somaesthetics as "a discipline that puts the body's experience and artful refashioning back into the heart of philosophy as an art of living" and continues as "since we live, think, and act through our bodies, their study, care, and improvement should be at the core of philosophy, especially when philosophy is conceived (as it used to be) as a special way of life, a critical, disciplined care of the self." However, Shusterman does not only dwell on the somatic experiences

and/or exercises one can make, but he also incorporates “spiritual exercise” into the care of the self. Mind and body, although mostly perceived as two distinct notions, merge and abolish the duality of their existence. Mansbach (2016) explains as “the mind and the body are not two different entities or substances but rather as an indissoluble unity that defines human beings and governs all of their functions”.

The cognitive properties are not separate from somatic activities. Therefore, if the mind strives to establish or reach to a personal utopia, the soma – body – will accompany. That is why, the body, which has its own aesthetic concern, evolves into a somatopia.

The Body

The aesthetics of the body has been gathering attention in philosophical studies. As Nicholas Rose (2001) puts it, “selfhood has become intrinsically somatic – ethical practices increasingly take the body as a key site of work on the self. From official discourses of health promotion through narratives of the experience of disease and suffering in the mass media, to popular discourses on dieting and exercise, we see an increasing stress on personal reconstruction through acting on the body in the name of fitness that is simultaneously corporeal and psychological.” The somatic properties of the individual do not remain on the care of the corporeal body, but they are accompanied by psychological well-being. In the same vein, Heyes (2018) states that “practices transform our experience of ourselves in ways that reading theory cannot, but that different practices have different effects”. A healing process that only dwells on contemplative processes does not fully help the corporeal healing; the body requires somatic activity at the same.

The human body has been and is still seen as not only belonging to a specific person but also deemed as a component of a greater body that is often political, thereby making it a political corporeality. “How the body is both shaped by power and employed as an instrument to maintain it, how bodily norms of health and beauty, and even the most basic categories of sex and gender, are constructed to reflect and sustain social forces.” (Shusterman, 2000) This is a reference to how people’s bodies were perceived biopolitically as part of a greater body that is usually called population. While biopolitics as a discipline embraced the idea to urge individuals’ life into a what seems to be a decent life in itself, the individual is still perceived as unit in the greater body. However, what I choose to bring into the spotlight is that the encapsulating notion of biopolitics, while it somehow proposes a utopia, is an enabling ground for personal utopia to be accomplished. Therefore, it is

safe to say that somatopia suggests a direction from biopolitical existence to a more individualistic somatopic understanding. Similarly, Heyes (2007) asserts that “[sovereign power] operates on the population and on the body, fostering techniques of control, intervention, and regulation often presented as working to mutual benefit. Disciplinary power is constitutive of the subject rather than external to it; it creates – rather than being imposed upon – types of individual”. Since each individual is unique, the somatic experience and perception of the world are also unique. “Our bodies are the medium through which we engage the world and are recognized by others as subjects, and in this respect embodiment is central to our human experiences.” (Heyes, 2007)

My concern in this chapter is to focus on the relationship between the soma and the soul, thereby crystallizing the immediate relationship between the corporeal and the conscious to pave the way to individual utopias. While Richard Shusterman focuses on the concept of somaesthetic to refer to this relationship, I would rather work through the term somatopia to have a more precise reference to the contact and exchange between the body and what seems to be a more philosophical notion that is utopia. The starting point of this exchange is the bodily experience which builds up to the emotional state of the individual. However, external factors are the triggers in this chain reaction. “[To understand] how multiple factors come together to form experience, be it emotion, bodily activity, or global stock markets” one has to engage in several kinds of spheres. “Thinking about relations rather than substances is a subtle yet important shift in analysis. Power can then be thought of as firstly, a product of localised bodily activity, and secondly, as a relational force.” (Tucker, 2011)

Plethora of body wellness activities are focusing on the carnal welfare and security of the body. Chrysanthou (2002) writes that “it seems fitting to designate this individualized quest for the perfected or immortal body as a distorted expression of the utopian impulse under conditions inimical to utopian thinking”. In this context, it can be said that somatic activity becomes a component of and complement to the utopian mindset, constituting a somatopia for the individual.

Somatopia in Contemporary Poetry

From the aspect of cultural investigations Joranger (2024) summarizes Foucault’s views on poetry as “poetry is the genre that can best express the anthropology of human imagination. He believes that great poetry refuses to reduce its expressions to standardize images, such as medical concepts and

models. Great poets will never be able to fulfil their desire to express human life using static images of reality, because the freedom of imagination imposes itself on him/her, as a calling. In its true poetic function, the performance mediates on identity, that is, who one is and who one wants to become.” Lyrical poetry harbours the skills to reveal the imaginative properties of the individual, which, in case coupled with somatic engagement, contributes to the idealized and unspoiled ontology. The aesthetic body in the form of somaesthetics “should endorse and explore also gentler, less scandalous somatic practices for philosophy’s art of living” (Shusterman, 2024).

Creative writing, poetry writing are also cognitive and to a certain degree somatic exercises. So, the individual ventures into a state of well-being through these practices. The body and the mind, writing about the body, addressing the body are also important. Creating literary texts is a deliberate action, the state of acting – to do something – is not only literary but also philosophical and corporeal.

“Çay demledim yine, sen
Varmışsın gibi.
Oturdum laflıyorum karşımdaki
Hayalinle.
Arada bir karalıyorum defterime
Bir şeyler.
Sonra yudumluyorum çayımdan,
Oh, yine yüreğime sağlık.” (Gürcan, 2015)

“I brewed tea again, as if
You’re here.
I sat down and chatting with
Your dream in front of me.
Sometimes I scribble things
In my notebook.
Then I take a sip from my tea,

Oh, God bless my heart.”²

Gürcan’s untitled poem visualizes a series of actions: brewing tea, sitting down to scribble in the notebook, drinking the tea, and thinking of the bellowed along with a sense of appreciation of the self. All corporeal behaviours are in fact accompanied by a gratified and satisfied mood which implies “homogenisation of consciousness and formation of ‘behavioral stereotypes’ (Sinha and Roy, 2022). It is appropriate to make a cultural remark at this point: brewing tea is quite a common practice in Turkish culture, and the poet’s appreciation of such a mundane activity reflects the comfort and construction of a utopia out of a daily activity. Such physical activities – pouring tea, boiling water, taking the pen – requires physical space to be carried out. As the individual uses this space – somewhere interior of a building – incorporates the space and the individual, thereby cementing the “spacialisation of individual time” (Sinha and Roy, 2022). Here, the individual extends their existence into the space around, claiming an ontological stance morphing into actual space.

Even an activity like brewing and drinking tea is a representative of an external activity. One must use gestures and movements along with conscious decision-making processes to carry out this activity. And yet the impact of this activity – the aftermath of brewing and drinking – leaves both a somatic and an emotional effect on the person. Here, we encounter the crossing of the exterior and the interior which brings about the question ‘how do we internalise the exterior through certain activities/technics?’ since any bodily activity is deemed as an external activity, but the feelings, emotions, and thoughts of the poet signify the interior. Therefore, Gürcan fuses the exterior to the interior, thereby creating an individual utopia out of the content created by a series of actions.

THE GOOD WAVE

A bat cracks in the flickering background
 and we’re dead tired from the horse track,
 all those losing bets stuck crumpled up
 in our cheap fedoras, but no one, not even
 the dog, is unhappy. Baseball announcers
 are trying to be funny about nothing, crowds
 cheer on the momentum of the home team

2 Translation belongs to me.

and it's not too early for pj's, or promises,
 or some low-sung lullaby that salutes
 the original songs on the inside. I decide,
 someday, to name a kid Levon, and you
 agree, and outside the dark traffic groans by
 on our curving country road making a sound
 like the slow roar of applause when
 the home team's tide unexpectedly turns. (Limón, 2015)

Ada Limón's 2015 collection of poems *Bright Dead Things* introduce a fruitful insight into the poet's imagination. Of this collection, the poem titled *The Good Wave* opens with the poet describing a pleasant, what seems to be a summer day. Among the activities the poet and their companions are walking in nature and watching a sports game. In the meantime, the reader encounters the poet's state of mind which can be expressed as content, cozy, and intimate enough to express a futuristic possible scenario to have children.

Just as in Gürcan's poem, Limón also describes a series of scenes in which individuals are gathering to share time together, create memories, remember memories, that is, to be part of a social circle. Yet the poet's literary production inevitably drifts into a social insularity since their feelings are specific to the person. What Limón experiences with other people are again exterior somatic activities, yet the feelings they create in the poet are peculiarly individual. So, here we encounter the merge between the somatic experience and the emotional sphere. The border between watching the game and walking on the road is ambiguously transient; yet, in between, we witness that the poet has already decided on the name of a baby: "I decide, someday, to name a kid Levon, and you agree". Such a deep emotional declaration echoes the utopic state of the sense of being a mother and sharing this with the partner is a complementary action to include that person in one's utopia. This bundle of intimate relations with the partner and sharing activities is a reflection of the poet's desire to establish a utopic state: daily chores, access to social sphere may not be high end activities, but including another person to one's utopic sphere shows the attempt to establish a virtuous life.

It would be prudent to state that a virtuous life does not necessarily echo a life dedicated to theological dedication but a vigorous attempt to be in a

better state of well-being. "Pursuit of virtue and self-mastery is traditionally integrated into ethics' quest for better living." (Shusterman, 2000) This reference can be seen as a direct reference to the individual's attain to a utopic state of mind and body through the reproduction of cognitive and somatic animation.

OF ROOTS & ROAMERS

Have you ever noticed how the trees
change from state to state? Not all
at once, of course, more like a weaver
gradually weaving in another color
until the old trees become scarce

and new trees offer a shaded kingdom
all their own. Before I knew the names
of towns or roads, I could recognize
places by the trees: Northern California's
smooth-skinned madrone, looming eucalyptus,
fuzzy fragrant flowers of the acacia. So
much of America belongs to the trees.
Even when we can't agree on much,
there's still the man returning from his
late shift at the local bar, who takes
a long look at the bird's nest in the maple,
pats the trunk like a friend's forearm,
mumbles something about staying safe,
and returns home. And the girl whose
slapdash tree fort we can see from our blurry
window, how she stands there to wave
at a world she does not even know
the half of yet. My grandmother once

complained she couldn't see much
of America on her cross-country trip because
it was all just trees. Ask her, she'll laugh as she
tells you. Still, without the bother of licenses
or attention to a state line, a border, they
just grow where they've grown all their lives:
there, a small stand of white pine arrives,
there, a redwood begins to show itself along
the coastline, water oaks in the south, willows.
Their power is in not moving, so we must
move to them. (Limón, 2018)

Another Limón poem titled *Of Roots & Roamers* is from her 2018 collection *The Carrying*. The poet laureate touches upon two forces: staying still and being mobile. The stability of the many kinds of trees refers to the former force while the mobility of the humans is a reference to the latter. As people travel between the states, they witness the changing flora along with the climate and come to realize the adaptability of each species in a specific region. However, this change in the flora – the poet particularly addresses trees as the largest representative of the region – naturally does not happen all at once, as if they are separated by physical border. Instead, the transition is conjunct and porous. The imagery in the poem is observed through the person's mobility – yet another somatic experience – and the sight of the flora. It is apparent that observation and appreciation of such a majestic natural setting evokes a euphoric feeling of power. The physical height and majestic stance of the various species of trees is a germinating feeling of power since the poet writes “their power is in not moving”, almost creating the allusion of a stoic stance.

As Limón incorporates the somatic activity of mobility and observation into a mode of power, she invents a utopic plane of might. The last line of the poem “so we must move them” can be examined as the human's desire to overpower and overtake the might of the nature. As Tucker (2011) remarks “power consequently becomes an inventive force formed through the production of forces working towards developing new models of life”. The desire to become more powerful by integrating the power of the nature into the human can be seen on two levels: on the one hand, the physical challenge to push and try to move a rooted tree constitute the somatic action;

on the other hand, accumulation of the feeling of power brings about the belief that human is stronger than nature, thereby forming a new plane of utopia for the individual.

9

‘Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases, one’s distance
from Them, the people, does not also increase’

I know, of course I know, I can enter no other place

Yet I am one of those who from nothing but man’s way of
thought and one of his dialects and what has happened

to me

Have made poetry

To dream of that beach

For the sake of an instant in the eyes,

The absolute singular

The unearthly bonds

Of the singular

Which is the bright light of shipwreck” (Oppen, 1968)

Not named but numbered as “9”, George Oppen’s poem describes a series of pictures composed to oscillate between a dreamy state of mind and the physical objects he occasionally sees around him. The third line of the poem, as he writes “I can enter no other place”, it could be interpreted as Oppen mentioning the inaccessible nature of other people’s way of thinking. Observation – the somatic activity of looking, staring, gazing – is portrayed as an external activity to one’s body that is as external as other people. However, even the observation skills of the poet are germinating enough for him to compose poetry. The poet is looking at other people; he is listening to them; he is drawing conclusions from their actions and language, all of

which are integral parts of a conversation. Still, the poet is able to compose a poem out of the impressions he received from his environment. Once more, common activities such as interacting with other people forms a foundation to excel at composing poems, which in turn enables him to reach a higher utopic plane.

Oppen's description and journey through his utopia becomes philosophical as he dreams himself in a beach which is illuminated by "the bright light of a shipwreck". The scene can be interpreted as an optimistic topos of a serene beach or a gloomy setting that includes the carcass of a ship. Nevertheless, the scene inevitably harbours light which rapturous state of mind; the poet is experiencing the utopic plane while dreaming in his body.

Lingering over it,
Wanting to make it last
Longer.
Still,
It ends.

No joy
That doesn't cease.
No life that goes on
Forever.

The poet writes
Then puts down
His pen.

The singer comes
To the end
Of her song.

Autumn now:
The leaves falling.

Beautiful world
 That persists
 When words stop.

Beautiful words
 That lift the world
 In a song of praise
 That drifts
 Like a leaf in a breeze. (Orr, 2009)

Gregory Orr's poetry collection *How Beautiful the Beloved*, published in 2009, consists of untitled poems. The poem above is listed in the content section with its first line as *Lingering over it* and just as Oppen's poem houses the action of writing a poem. A poet composing a poem about writing a poem might sound like an irony which in fact overlaps with how the original idea of utopia functioned: to satirize. Even so, Orr is including the action of writing which is a somatic endeavour to express the imagination. He also includes fragments of sound imagery as he listens to a singer singing as well as embodying the singer as a 'her' simultaneously likening the end of her song to the coming of autumn, creating a sense of ending. Likewise, the ending of both the song and the year are parallel to the ending of the poem.

In any case, the action of moving forward, both physically and emotionally, encapsulates and insulates the poet in a state of utopic sphere: he is neither afraid, nor sad. As Yasuo (1993) remarks "as the cultivator continues this bodily movement, the mind will gradually cease to respond to outside stimuli, and will concentrate only on the mental image". At the point where the body stops and starts to smelt into the euphoric state can be seen as the manifestation of somatopia.

RETREATING LIGHT

You were like very young children,
 always waiting for a story.
 And I'd been through it all too many
 times; I was tired of telling stories.

So I gave you the pencil and paper.
I gave you pens made of reeds
I had gathered myself, afternoons in the dense meadows.
I told you, write your own story.

After all those years of listening
I thought you'd know
what a story was.

All you could do was weep.
You wanted everything told to you
and nothing thought through yourselves.

Then I realized you couldn't think
with any real boldness or passion;
you hadn't had your own lives yet,
your own tragedies.
So I gave you lives, I gave you tragedies,
because apparently tools alone weren't enough.

You will never know how deeply
it pleases me to see you sitting there
like independent beings,
to see you dreaming by the open window,
holding the pencils I gave you
until the summer morning disappears into writing.

Creation has brought you
great excitement, as I knew it would,

as it does in the beginning.

And I am free to do as I please now,
to attend to other things, in confidence
you have no need of me anymore. (Glück, 1992)

What is witnessed in Louise Glück's poem *Retreating Light* is a relationship and what can be interpreted as a clash between two individuals. As the poet addresses her partner – a husband, maybe a child or multiple persons – the impatience of levelling with the other person can be read. As she writes “You wanted everything told to you and nothing thought through yourselves” it can be understood that the relationship, the struggle that is oftentimes somatic have been challenging situations. Since this phase is shaped by the inclusion of at least two people, the act of speaking, conversing, and engaging with the other person constitutes a social sphere. “Not only is the body shaped by the social, it contributes to the social. We can share our bodies and bodily pleasures as much as we share our minds, and they can be as public as our thoughts.” (Shusterman, 1992)

After a certain amount of time of struggle to establish a relationship with the other person, it can be seen that the poet is finally content since she expresses that she does not have to spend her time to regulate or navigate her relationship with the other person, nor does she have to worry about the safety and well-being of the other person. After all the somatic endeavour and psychological labour, the poet is content in the end, having reached a somatopic existence as she writes “you have no need of me anymore”.

Conclusion

Somatechnical alterations and various processes are maybe easier to follow through constructed narratives like novels or short stories, but what is the case then in lyrical poetry? Since lyrical poetry per se is a direct reflection of the psyche, emotions, and feelings, it can be suggested that reading somatopia in lyrical poetry is more straightforward.

So far, upon examining the selected poems of Gürcan, Glück, Orr, Limón, and Oppen, we were able to follow the transient relationship between the soma and the mind. What was evaluated as any exterior activity and engaging in it are similarly defined by Stigler as ‘exosomatisation’. “The ‘exosomatisation’ (Stiegler, 2019, qtd. in Singa and Roy, 2022) of the cognitive processes of memory and desire through tools, language, artifacts and technical memory banks has resulted in the formation of hybrid milieus of cognition arising out of an enjambment of soma, that is the body with

its neural circuits, and external technics or prostheses that are designed to augment neural receptivity through an amplification of sensory-motor experiences.” (Sinha and Roy, 2022) The organic plane of consciousness – the body – is bound to undertake relations with the outer world, yet it also has the opportunity to turn into the utopic plane to take refuge and find peace.

In a world in which “post-industrialised era has been increasingly proletarianized and subjugated to a machinic index that drains its ‘intellectual, affective and aesthetic capacities” (Sinha and Roy, 2022), the individual’s return to an abstract level of existence may seem futile. At this point, it would be prudent to question the effectiveness and sufficiency of such capacities without any intervention and contribution from the philosophical plane which, I argue, harbours utopic existence. Therefore, a body and mind working in harmony helps the individual to step into a somatopia, where one reaches the feeling of completion.

Organic plane of consciousness and cognitive plane of consciousness: they may look separate or at least perceived as separate; however, somatopia is a conjoining process for both planes. Somatopia is unifying, assembling, comprehensive, and holistic.

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