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The death of utopian politics in mid-nineteenth-century France or what the Icarians can tell us about QAnon, conspiracy, and our political moment

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Notre âme est un trois-mâts cherchant son Icarie.

– Charles Baudelaire, “Le Voyage” (1975, 1:33)

In an era of retweeted conspiracy theories and “fake news,” how, or perhaps why, are we surprised (if not always sufficiently outraged) by the cynical creativity of our political actors? I often wonder if today’s politics are troublesome because we feel that they are somehow transgressive of unspoken categories of discourse and, in this, that they reveal something about who we have become as consumers of politics. Although we might instinctively resist understanding political narrative in the same way we would a Zola novel or a *Squid Game*, we must admit that the difference between Netflix and news cycle is often hard to distinguish. In the end, the embrace of fantasy through “alternative facts,” conspiracy, or simply the echo chamber of our curated online lives might leave us with the nagging feeling that what is really at stake is the way our engagement with politics has become deeply shameful and anxiety-producing. For those that identify with this sentiment, politics and its fictions have come to enthrall us in ways that we are often unable to acknowledge because to do so would make us coconspirators in the complicity suggested by our acquiescence to entertainment.

But before surrendering to the despair of our wanton cravenness, it is worth reminding ourselves that these are relatively new expectations, that, in fact, political life and fictional narrative have existed in long-standing symbiosis, namely in the form utopian thought. As Ernst Bloch (1988) famously asserts, utopias have been, for millennia, a useful form of “structured anticipatory illumination” (42). For Louis Marin (1973) the true signified of the utopian text is not the ideal society it proposes to reveal but rather the ironic possibilities of discourse vis-à-vis our own social and political institutions (84). That is to say, utopias seek to unmask the conventions and political ideologies that structure our own existence or they present an alluring dream-image of untapped social possibilities. Indeed, Marin suggests that utopia’s “spatial-play” can be read as an attempt to unravel the contradictions (and ideologies) of capitalistic society (249).

So in this era of Pizzagate, QAnon, and “Stop the Steal,” where has utopian thinking gone? The historical analysis that I propose to undertake here will suggest that our

current situation (and its concomitant anxieties) are, at least in part, an outgrowth of the fact that utopia and its anticipatory fictions have been mostly driven from the political arena. In their place, there has emerged a dark ecosystem of dystopias wrought of conspiracy – stories posing as anti-fictions that function by instrumentalizing the ambiguities of the past to weave a nightmarish version of our “real reality.”

To understand how dystopia and its narrative forms have come to permeate the political arena, we might return to mid-nineteenth-century France where a comparable climate existed that can serve as a sounding board for our times. During this period there emerged a movement that so thoroughly enmeshed its political aspirations with fictional praxis that the two became wholly indistinguishable. They were the Icarians and their fantasy, long before QAnon and 8kun, consisted of espousing a political, economic, and affective system that they had drawn from a work of pure fantasy. In doing so, they embraced a fictional world whose functions, structures, and *rappports de force* speak clearly to our political modernity – with the intriguing caveat that the Icarians believed that they had engineered a perfect society, while many of today’s adherents of conspiracy are convinced that they must violently dismantle a dystopia imposed by nefarious forces intent on stealing their freedom. To borrow a term from Anthony Stephens (1987), today’s “shadowlike” (16) visions, as they have migrated from obscure online message boards to mainstream political discourse, might, I believe, be read as the afterlives of the utopian discourses that marked the golden age of republicanism.¹

In what follows, it is not my intention to dismiss contemporary conspiracy and its adherents out of hand; rather this work seeks to situate the narrative functions of conspiracy as a form of contestatory discourse, one that dovetails neatly with dystopian thought in their shared attack on the status quo. While applicable to movements across the political spectrum, I am working toward a way of understanding how the dystopias of the Alt-Right lend themselves to comparison with nineteenth-century utopianism by examining the structuring discourses of these fantasies. The Icarians, like many nineteenth-century utopian groups, thought literally about spatial arrangements as a means of solving the dilemmas of capitalism and the libidinal economies that undergird our systems of social exchange.² Like the Owenists, Fourierists, and Saint-Simonians, the Icarians imagined the spaces of the New World as ideal settings to build prototypes of their model societies. Although attempts were made elsewhere, notably in Europe and South America, a large portion of these budding communities were located on the American frontier. In New Harmony, Indiana, at Corning, Iowa, on the banks of the Mississippi river at Nauvoo, Illinois, and in countless other rural locales, the utopian imagination set in motion a vast, if uncoordinated, experiment in social organization and political arrangement.³

In launching their program on the eve of the 1848 revolution and pursuing it after the establishment of the Second Republic, the Icarians’ precipitous exodus to America reveals many curious facets of mid-nineteenth-century politics. It asks what types of intellectual and affective transpositions must have occurred for a relatively prosperous group of skilled workers to quit the urban centers of France for the wilderness of the American frontier. The cultural war the movement fueled compels us to explore what the vehement reaction to the Icarian project says about the state of mid-century, European socialism and its dream of shared historical action. In turn, this line of questioning allows us to ask how the forms taken on by the resistance to the Icarian project point to a larger

shift in political thinking and praxis. And finally, I would argue, the Icarians' puzzling embrace of a utopian novel can provide clues to the complex dispositions of our own political imagination.

As I have begun to suggest, one indication of the importance of the Icarian's embrace of politics-as-fiction in the years surrounding the Second Republic can be found in the large number of anti-Icarian works that emerged to contest, mock, or simply profit from the vogue of utopian sentiment that reigned in the period surrounding the 1848 revolution. At the height of utopian fervor, Etienne Cabet's movement inspired a corpus of anti-Icarian art that surpasses in volume (and in vehemence) the output of the group.⁴ Alongside political detractors and rival systems-makers, many prominent artists retroactively attempted to historicize (and often parody) the utopian movements of mid-nineteenth-century France. Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) proposes a detailed historical account of social utopianism; Gustave Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* (*Sentimental Education*, 1869) reprises the utopian fervor of February 1848, whereas Emile Zola's *Le Ventre de Paris* (*The Belly of Paris*, 1873) fictionalizes the utopian movements that resisted Louis-Napoléon's ascension to power. Yet in the deluge of anti-Icarian art that followed the group's rise to prominence, one name stands out: Charles Baudelaire. Poet, art critic, and social commentator, Baudelaire is one of the best-known cultural figures of nineteenth-century France and a figure whose own utopian entanglements are emblematic of his generation.⁵ After having embraced the systems of utopian social philosophers in the years surrounding the Second Republic, the profound deception brought on by Louis-Napoléon's coup d'état would lead the one-time utopian to bitterly recall the pervasive influence of these "entrepreneurs of public happiness" (Baudelaire 1975, 357).⁶

To compare pro- and anti-Icarian narratives side by side suggests an additional way in which the state of utopian politics in mid-nineteenth-century France might help to frame our own dystopian political moment. The Icarians and their detractors share this commonality with today's fiction-laden political theories: both historical moments point to the process by which political discourse abandons the pretense of a shared reality in favor of schismatic, sect-like configurations that willfully embrace falsehoods to further their cause. In the end, the supposed existence of a pedophile cabal operating out of a Washington D.C. pizza parlor in our day is a reality-negating narrative similar in intent and form to the assertion that the fictional Icaria, in its completeness, might actually exist as "an abridged version of the terrestrial universe" (Cabet 2006, 21).⁷ This is why it is significant that most anti-Icarian works do not rebut Cabet's group with rational arguments or detailed counter-proposals, as had been the well-established practice of nineteenth-century utopian social philosophers, famous for methodically dismantling their rivals' elaborate systems. Rather, anti-Icarianism follows the precedent established by Cabet's group as it takes up the anachronistic occupation of utopian fiction-making. Indeed, anti-Icarianism becomes an art form just as social utopianism had developed its own set of aesthetic principals and literary conventions. This outpouring of pro- and anti-Icarian art is astounding, for it was as if the literary imagination had become the battleground upon which was to be played out the direction, fate, and, ultimately, the historical legacy of the scientific socialism of the 1830s and 1840s.

The Icarian revolution

Since 1789 at least, France had been engaged in an unprecedented cultural war, the sustained violence of which is unknown to most Western democracies, but whose object lessons still have a familiar ring today. Trapped in a cycle of revolutionary upheaval, France oscillated for decades between republics (egalitarian and liberal), empire, and monarchy. By mid-century, the political field had polarized into progressive and conservative camps. Both sides were fed up with the wishy-washy *juste milieu* of Louis-Philippe's Bourgeois Monarchy whose tepid embrace of the republican values of the Revolution had naively sought to satisfy all, and, in doing so, had satisfied none. France, it seemed, was poised to implode under the weight of two radically distinct destinies. Either it would become a socialist utopia, a worker's paradise of cooperatives and state-held property, or it would fall into the embrace of an authoritarian strongman whose consolidation of power would be built around consumerism and entertainment politics. (As it turns out, France would be successively both and ultimately neither.) It was at this perilous juncture that the Icarians stepped forward to present a quixotic and controversial solution to France's decades-long crisis. But the drumbeat of civil unrest had already begun, and so came the Revolution of 1848, its short-lived socialist Republic, its coup d'état. Waged by a failed businessman and self-proclaimed "outsider," a one-time leftist campaigner who had inherited his wealth and his name, Louis-Napoléon's ascension to power put an end to the idealistic projects that had set the tone for the Second Republic.

1848 was a conflagration whose ashen remains can only partially conceal the golden talisman of its genesis: social utopianism. The Icarians were only one of the dozens of utopian groups that were active in France in the decade before the fall of Louis-Philippe, but they were certainly among the best organized and most influential. Indeed, in 1840s France, the Icarian movement could claim as many as 100,000 followers, many of them drawn from the ranks of skilled artisans and educated functionaries, a key mid-ground demographic in the divided world of capitalistic struggle.⁸ What distinguishes the Icarians from other utopian groups was their fanatical and irrational embrace of utopian fiction and a way of life modeled on its narrative process.⁹ Indeed, the Icarians took their name and their identity from Etienne Cabet's utopian novel, *Voyage en Icarie* (Travels to Icaria, 1840), whose communistic principles they aspired to emulate and whose scenes of passionate intrigue they dreamed of experiencing for themselves. They met in taverns and in workshops, in back rooms and in drawing rooms to share news, to discuss Cabet's novel, and, significantly, to exchange and perform original works of art. Their poems, plays, and especially songs glorified Icaria and its way of life.

The novel's romanticized narrative of life on the imaginary island nation of Icaria was so moving, in fact, that a group of dedicated followers set out for America in early February 1848 to begin work on their own Icarian society (see [Figure 1](#)). Paradoxically, Cabet's *Premier avant-garde* sails from Le Havre only weeks before the Provisional Government would declare a workers' republic in France. In their departure, the Icarians had, in effect, abandoned the path of political protest and reform, leaving the work of opposition to a middle class incensed over the Guizot government's attempts to reduce voting roles. Guizot's gambit, which would have excluded large swatches of previously enfranchised bourgeois (including many Icarians) marked the inevitable descent into



Figure 1. G. Julien, *Départ pour Icarie* (1848). “And on 3 February 1848, the First Avant-Garde left France and set sail for the United States” (Paris: Derveaux, 1883). Courtesy of La Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

revolution.¹⁰ During a few heady months bookended by the plucking of *la Poire* and the barricade-busting June Days, Lamartine, the Romantic poet turned politician, thought to put into practice many of the experimental systems touted by utopian social philosophers, from the promise of universal employment guaranteed through government-sponsored National Workshops to universal male suffrage. In *L'Education sentimentale*, Flaubert ironically recalls the high expectations placed on the Provisional Government: “Each profession, each industry awaited from the Government the radical end of its misery” (2002, 438).¹¹ But as Jeremy Popkin notes, “The February Revolution suddenly threw the whole future of liberal, bourgeois society into question” (2006, 116). For the artisans and petit bourgeois that filled the roles of Icaria, the “radical” phase of the

revolution might have been met with a similar mixture of hope and apprehension. On one hand, the precipitous collapse of the Bourgeois Monarchy must have recalled the fictional events of Cabet's novel in which the secretive "Gunpowder Conspiracy" leads to the deposal of the tyrannical Prime Minister, Lixdox, and Queen, Cloramide. On the other hand, social programs tilted heavily in favor of poor, unskilled workers might have made many Icarians feel as if they were being pulled down into the ranks of the proletariat. From this perspective, it is easy to see how the group was willing to trade an uncertain future in France for the promise of a society modeled on the fictional universe that their fandom had scaffolded around Cabet's novel.

Imagining Icaria, colonizing desire

In confounding Cabet's fictional account with their own visions of Icaria, his disciples expanded its boundaries, adding depth, detail, and, most importantly, personal dimension. In doing so, the Icarians did away with the doctrinal struggle and mechanistic detail that had been the hallmarks of the "scientific" treatises that marked the works of utopia's spiritual leaders. In this very real sense, then, the imaginary island of Icaria had already migrated to the distant geography of America well before the first wave of settlers departed, as it was first colonized in the collective imagination of Cabet's followers. Take for example L.-G. Alexandre's book of five *Chansons Icariennes* (Icarian songs, 1847), which demonstrates the extent to which members of the group were attracted by the prospect of freedom, passionate love, intrigue, and reversals of fortune, as they are depicted in *Voyage en Icarie*. Here the libidinal elements that underpin the Icarian literary project are clear. "Le Rêve d'une Icarienne" (The Dream of an Icarian) recounts the story of the young Marie who pines for what she believes to be the impossible dream of a multifaceted love. In the final stanza of the song, Marie's lover awakens her from her reverie to announce that her fantasy has become a reality:

Ainsi rêvait la charmante Marie,
 Quand son ami, par un tendre baiser,
 La réveilla pour lui dire: Icarie
 N'est plus un rêve qu'un réveil doit briser.
 Notre vaisseau déjà s'élance,
 Fuyons ce pays pour toujours,
 Icarie est notre espérance,
 Là le bonheur! et les amours!
 Les amours pour toujours. (Alexandre 1847, 12)¹²

[And so dreamed the charming Marie,
 When her friend, with a tender kiss,
 Woke her to say: Icaria

Is no longer a dream that waking up must shatter.
 Our ship embarks already,
 Let's flee this country forever,
 Icaria is our hope,
 There is happiness! and there many loves!
 Many loves forever.]

The author's promotion of this novelistic idyll had a practical objective, which was to sway potential female Icarians who hesitated to undertake the arduous journey and hardship of frontier life in America.¹³ For our purposes, however, it also serves to demonstrate how, in the years preceding the 1848 revolution, the applied systems of nineteenth-century utopian architects had become more unabashedly re-entangled with the tropes of the genre's literary past.

Drawing their cues from the novel's topsy-turvy plotline, Icarians like Alexandre multiply the story's cast of intrepid voyagers and love-struck maidens by projecting their fictional surrogates into its world.¹⁴ Accordingly, Marie's dream is not of a well-balanced social economy or a workers' paradise but a state of relentless desire, where love is expressed in the plural. What distinguishes Icarian desire is that it does not represent some *vague des passions* in the mode of a Chateaubriand, twice marooned in solipsistic intention by unknowability and objectlessness. Rather, the Icarians' self-projection into the New World expunges from its pristine landscapes the figure of the melancholic loner in favor of a dynamic of cooperative discovery and shared hopefulness in which a group of individuals chart and negotiate the geography of their confederated desires.¹⁵

From systems to stories: how social science was eclipsed by fiction

From a contemporary perspective, the light-hearted fantasizing expressed in Alexandre's song might seem innocuous and certainly a far cry from the dystopian narratives that are woven into today's online conspiracies, from rigged voting machines to The Great Replacement. Yet in Icarian art we can see the ways in which the movement can elucidate elements of our current political climate when we ask how these forms of literary fantasy came to dominate the rational discourses of nineteenth-century social utopianism. As I have previously related in a book on the subject, it was only a generation earlier that society had broadly rejected the tradition of tales recounting far-off civilizations discovered in a perpetual state of happiness.¹⁶ Literary utopias, it is clear, had been dismissed as escapist fantasies or, at best, viewed as anticipatory premonitions that still lacked scientific methods and empirical remedies. Buoyed by theories of progress and perfectibility inherited from the Enlightenment, ambitious designers such as Charles Fourier and Henri de Saint-Simon had been quick to point out that fictional accounts of utopia were unrelated to the incremental progress of humanity.

The rise of scientific utopianism portends an ideological struggle that reaches its zenith in 1840s France, embroiling Cabet, his fandom, and their detractors. As the frustrations caused by the stagnated political climate of the July Monarchy spiraled toward revolution, charges of utopianism rang out on all sides. The concept of utopia, it

seems, became more stridently pejorative as the ideas it conveyed became increasingly politicized and action oriented. One common thread that runs through the factious groups who hoped to see their social projects put into practice was to suggest that this or that colleague or rival cénacle had unwittingly produced a work of pure fiction. For example, Marx and Engels' 1848 *Manifesto*, written with the French context in mind, demarcates its "scientific" proposals by clearly defining "utopian socialism" as a *literary form* whose usefulness to the feudal society from which it emerged was too crude for modern, industrial times (1999, 55). Elsewhere, Engels (1910) would call such conceptions "utopian pictures" in order to draw attention to the hopelessly aesthetic and thus dream-like quality of these representations (51).¹⁷ Writing in 1846, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon ([1846] 1923) likewise rejects all previous attempts at proposing models of ideal societies as self-contradictory and hackneyed: "All social utopias from Plato's *Atlantis* to Cabet's *Icaria*, pressed in their meaning, are reduced to the substitution of one antinomy for another. The inventive merit of them all is nil" (251).

In signaling Cabet's *Icarie*, Proudhon is perhaps writing in reaction to the ambiguous status of the novel itself, which is simultaneously a utopian tale and a "scientific" proposal. But the problem is not only the amalgamation that the *Voyage* makes of genres; rather, the Icarians' "substitution of one antinomy for another" points to a more problematic conflation of the modes of discourse and of praxis. Cabet and his followers, it seems, had blatantly conflated a discursive form of political protest (the novel and its derivatives) with a political system (Icarianism). If this is an important distinction for our times, it is because the willing conflation the group was espousing between the fictional *Icaria* and the socialistic movement that bore its name had unwittingly signaled a new reality, one in which the ideological terrain had shifted from the realm of *systems* to that of *stories*. To put it another way, the discourse of utopianism, monopolized for decades by social scientists like Fourier, Proudhon and, paradoxically, Cabet himself, takes a radical turn toward the literary and the fictional as it is appropriated by popular culture in the decade before the 1848 revolution.¹⁸ Might we not say as much of the conspiratorial fictions that rule our day? Today's conspiracies share with the Icarians the fact that they cannot simply be summed up as cynical politics aimed at undermining attempts to ground political discourse in a set of shared facts. Not unlike the Icarians, our modern day conspiracists willingly act out and think to live in the dystopian world of their making, and, in this, might we also conclude that they too have conflated a form of political protest with a political system?¹⁹

For readers of Cabet, the shift from social science to utopian fantasy is as abrupt as it is unexpected. Indeed, we can pinpoint the period during which the leader turned to actively conflating literary *Icaria* with his political system in calling for the establishment of an intentional community in America. In tacit recognition of the tremendous personal investment that his novel had fostered among his followers, Cabet announced a repackaged emigration plan on 9 May 1847. A spectacular front-page article appeared in the group's official mouthpiece, *Le Populaire*, with the headline, "Let's leave France and go to *Icaria*!" (Cabet 1846–1852, 1). If Cabet's about-face is remarkable, it is because the author had been trying for years to drum up interest in the construction of a community based on his system. Only one year earlier in *L'Ouvrier, ses misères actuelles, leur cause et leur remède, son futur bonheur dans la communauté, moyens de l'établir* (The Worker, his present miseries, their cause and remedy, his future happiness in the community, means

of establishing it), Cabet had laid out essentially the same arguments as he does in subsequent proposals for the Icarian community. Yet in this mostly forgotten text, he makes no allusion to Icaria (real *or* fictional), preferring, as he had done previously, to frame his project within the discourse of social science.²⁰

It is in this context that we should read the remarkable claim that Cabet is making in this oddly worded 1847 headline where he calls on his followers to accompany him not to the real geographical space of America but to the fictional place that had replaced it. Therein, it seems, Cabet had found a way to tap into the widespread enthusiasm for all things Icarian by repackaging his proposals within the context of the novel. He reiterates and expands on these tactics of conflation when in the same month of May 1847, when he publishes a lengthy exposé entitled *Réalisation de la communauté d'Icarie* (Realization of the community of Icaria). Proudhon had been right; with this text, Cabet's system had now become indistinguishable from the fictional land. In effect, the American settlement simply proposes yet another *mise en scène* of the social organization that had been "proven" by the felicitous outcome of the novel. This dubious tactic would lead authorities to prosecute Cabet for fraud, a crime for which he would be found guilty in absentia, as he had left to join his followers in the American Midwest.²¹

Here the historical conjuncture is critical. In launching his program on the eve of the 1848 revolution and pursuing it after the establishment of the Second Republic, Cabet is refusing the position of activists such as Marx and Proudhon who believed that a communistic system could only rise from the ruins of industrial, capitalistic Europe. Cabet's project marks a significant turning point, coming as it does at the very moment when the emergence of a social, democratic society in France must have seemed almost certain. In postulating his Icaria as a kind of anti-Europe or anti-France, an autarky on the margins of the known world, Cabet contravenes prevailing socialist dogma where the dream of universal transformation excludes the individuated, localized spaces that had inspired Icarian fandom.²² In a sense, the Icarians' intentional community foreshadows and negatively reflects the failure of the idealistic Second Republic in its implication that the time for large scale social transformation had passed – a view that Marx vehemently attempts to dispel in an article published in an 1848 edition of the *Revue communiste* where he specifically exhorts Cabet's followers in these terms:

Frères, restons sur la brèche de notre vieille Europe, travaillons et luttons ici, car ce n'est qu'en Europe qu'il existe actuellement déjà tous les éléments pour l'établissement d'une communauté des biens, et cette communauté sera établie ici ou ne le sera nulle part. (as quoted in Marin 1973, 350)

[Brothers, let us remain in the breach of old Europe, work and fight here, because it is only in Europe that there currently exists all the elements for the establishment of a community of goods, and this community will be established here or will be nowhere.]

Fictions and counter-fictions: anti-Icarian art and the death of utopian politics

Despite the outpouring of its fans, only a few of the Icarians' original works made it into *Le Populaire*, whose columns were jealously guarded by Cabet himself. Nonetheless the movement did have something of a poet laureate in the person of Pierre Lachambeaudie

whose fables, poems, and songs Cabet regularly excerpted in the *Almanach Icarien: astronomique, scientifique, pratique, industriel, statistique, politique et social* (Icarian Almanac: astronomical, scientific, practical, industrial, statistical, political, and social).²³ Most of the works that Cabet borrowed for the *Almanach* are drawn from Lachambeaudie's 1844 *Fables*. A friend of Pierre Leroux, the Saint-Simonian philosopher and political economist, Lachambeaudie was prone to folksy allegories promoting communistic principles:

Quoi! désormais tout penseur est suspect!
 Pourquoi ces cris et cette rage impie?
 N'avons-nous pas chacun notre utopie
 Qui de chacun mérite le respect? (1851, 460)
 [What! henceforth every thinker is suspect!
 Why these screams and this unholy rage?
 Don't we each have our own utopia
 that deserves everyone's respect?]

The timing and portent of Lachambeaudie's work is critical. At the height of the utopian speculation that fueled the uprisings that would set mid-century Europe ablaze, Lachambeaudie is advancing the idea of an individualized utopia ("Chacun notre utopie" [Don't we each have our own utopia]) suggesting that even in the run-up to the June Days, utopianism had taken a distinctly sectarian turn. If this development indicates anything, it is that the collectivist dream of wholesale transformation that was being promoted by socialist activists working in France was at loggerheads with a more intimate, libidinal fantasy of the kind that inspired the Icarians. Significantly, Lachambeaudie dedicates his utopia to "lovers" and "poets" in the ironically titled "La Folle" (The Crazy girl):

Sur la réalité malheureuse qui s'appuie!
 Ah! plutôt embrassons quelque fraîche utopie,
 Ayons notre marotte, agitions nos grelots.
 Pour le cœur des amants, pour l'âme des poètes
 La vie est un miroir aux brillantes facettes ...
 Il ne faut pas souffler sur leurs prismes si beaux,
 Ni jeter de nuage entre leurs silhouettes ... (1851, 11)
 [The unhappy reality on which we lean!
 Ah! Let's rather embrace some fresh utopia,
 Let's have our hobby horse, let's wave our bells.
 For the hearts of lovers, for the souls of poets

Life is a mirror with brilliant facets

.....

We must not blow on such beautiful prisms,

Nor throw a cloud between their silhouettes.]

Lachambeaudie's poem, beginning with the title, demonstrates that the author was both aware and derisive of the growing sense of disillusionment with the perpetually dilatory state of utopian affairs. "La Folle" is a celebration of the reality-negating power of utopian imagination and not a nod to the systems-makers whose designs for the construction of a real utopian society never came to fruition. That Cabet would include such a piece in *Le Populaire* is another indication that the author of *Comment je suis communiste* had come to recognize the power of his utopian fantasy.

"La Folle," with its "prismes si beaux," [beautiful prisms] opens up interesting avenues of dialogue with anti-utopian works such as Baudelaire's "Le Mauvais vitrier" ("The Bad Glazier" 1869). The similarities are so striking, in fact, that it is difficult to imagine that the poet of *Le Spleen de Paris* was not intimately familiar with Lachambeaudie's poem. Baudelaire's (1975) prose poem gleefully depicts the destruction of "des vitres magiques, des vitres de paradis" [magic windows, windows of paradise] which an unsuspecting glazier proposes to the poem's speaker (287). Françoise Meltzer (2011) has argued that Baudelaire's "Vitrier" might be read as a "satire of reversibility" where the innocent glazier is punished by a sadistic narrator and thus paradoxically redeemed to "pride and life," that is, to a *réalité malheureuse* (65). This reading dovetails well with the historical trajectory of utopian optimism in mid-century France. We might add that here the narrator cathartically expunges his *own* scarcely disguised utopianism in a way that only privilege and power can – through the prurient spectacle of surrogated affliction. In curing the innocent *vitrier* of his utopian illusions, Baudelaire's narrator is enacting a belated and sterile kind vengeance on his own well-documented utopian illusions.²⁴ In its gratuitous violence "Le Mauvais vitrier" takes aim at the nature of middle-class utopian fantasy, focused not on socialist-egalitarian imperatives, but on the libidinal *topos* of personal satisfaction and unchecked freedom.²⁵

The consequences of these gestures of appropriation and transference are equally addressed by the anonymous author of *Confession d'un communiste-Icarien* (Confession of a communist-Icarian):

Quelquefois, en effet, je prenais au sérieux les chimères enfantées par l'imagination de Cabet; quelquefois je m'imaginai que l'Icarie existait réellement et que sa reine Cloramide avait bien été détrônée, en 1782, après une guerre de rues et de barricades, au profit d'Icar, le chef de l'Opposition; mais souvent aussi je m'apercevais que le *Voyage en Icarie* n'était qu'une excursion à travers un pays imaginaire. Je me prenais alors à regretter qu'une société ne pût s'organiser sur les bases que Cabet avait données à la Société Icarienne. (1849, 7)

[Sometimes, in fact, I took seriously the illusions born of Cabet's imagination; sometimes I imagined that Icaria really existed and that its queen Cloramide had indeed been dethroned in 1782 after street fighting and barricades, for the benefit of Icar, the leader of the Opposition; but often also I realized that *Voyage en Icarie* was only an excursion through an

imaginary country. I then began to regret that a society could not organize itself on the foundation that Cabet had given to the Icarian Society.]

This passage suggests that Cabet's utopian reader vacillates between states of delusional exuberance ("je prenais au sérieux les chimères ..." [I took seriously the illusions]) and melancholic regret ("Je me prenais alors à regretter ..." [I then began to regret]). A far cry from the placid veneer of unchanging happiness that was the hallmark of the utopian narrative from Thomas More to Louis-Sébastien Mercier, this excerpt underlines the extent to which Icarian utopianism had embraced the vicissitudes of Romantic fervor.²⁶

To the corpus of anti-Icarian works, I believe we might also add Baudelaire's "Le Voyage" ("The Voyage"). This poem, which Baudelaire chose to serve as the capstone to his *Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), reads like a response to a well-known Icarian song "Le Ciel d'Icarie" (The Icarian sky) penned by a certain Hardier. The song takes up the call to emigrate by imagining the sea voyage at the moment when land has been spotted:

Mais à l'Ouest qui donc a crié terre?
Frères, Amis! C'est le sol désiré.
Oui c'est bien lui: que mon âme est ravie!
S'il est désert le vice en est exclu.
Qui le premier touchera l'Icarie?
Nous y voilà; (bis) terre vierge, salut! (1848, 1)
[But there in the West, who yelled land?
Brothers, Friends! This is the desired land.
Yes, it really is: how delighted my soul is!
If it is deserted, vice is excluded.
Who will touch Icaria first?
Here we are; (bis) virgin land, hello!]

In addition to recalling the title of Cabet's novel, Baudelaire's "Voyage" replicates the imagery of Hardier's song, only to reverse its outcomes, and more generally to decry the "orgy of imagination" that utopianism had become in the years before the 1848 revolution:

Notre âme est un trois-mâts cherchant son Icarie;
Une voix retentit sur le pont: « Ouvre l'œil! »
Une voix de la hune, ardente et folle, crie:
« Amour ... gloire ... bonheur! » Enfer! c'est un écueil!
Chaque îlot signalé par l'homme de vigie

Est un Eldorado promis par le Destin;

L'Imagination qui dresse son orgie

Ne trouve qu'un récif aux clartés du matin. (Baudelaire 1975, 1:33–40)

Our soul's a three-master seeking Icaria;

A voice resounds upon the bridge: "Keep a sharp eye!"

From aloft a voice, ardent and wild, cries:

"Love ... glory ... happiness!" Damnation! It's a shoal!

Every small island sighted by the man on watch

Is the Eldorado promised by Destiny;

Imagination preparing for her orgy

Finds but a reef in the light of the dawn. (Baudelaire 1954)

Composed in 1859, "Le Voyage" develops a general metaphor for the pathological excesses of a vagabond imagination, yet for contemporary readers the flight from a "vile homeland," the ocean passage to Icaria coupled with the predominate place that desire and self-projection play in the poem would have certainly recalled the all too recent illusions that had brought many (Baudelaire first among them) to believe for a time in the utopian transformation of French society. When read in this light, Baudelaire's unflinching appraisal recalls the object lesson of the 1848 revolution, of which he would later quip, "1848 was only amusing because everyone made utopias like castles in the sky" (1975, 680).

In both their dithyrambic and cynical iterations, what these examples make clear is that, even during the Second Empire, Icaria remained a symbolic battleground for a set of larger ideas and conflicts that had informed the Revolution of 1848. Ironically, though, these pro- and anti-Icarian literary works collectively mark the same movement of regression and disintegration. Here utopianism as a social science and political system (whose rational paradigms had emerged from the works of the *Philosophes*) is effaced in a wave of fictional praxis.

Toward a utopian narratology of collectives: an antidote to conspiracy?

In the end, the American Icarians' perilous interest in the novel's melodrama on the eve of what was sure to be a journey fraught with real danger and adversity speaks to the power of the tropes of personal expression and freedom in the nineteenth-century utopian experience. Extrapolated from Cabet's topsy-turvy utopian novel, the corpus of fictional texts that accompanies the rise of French Icarianism suggests that the group imagined not only a community of goods but an egalitarian libidinal economy, one which promoted and allowed for the vagaries of individual passion while at the same time expressing the hope of mastering the excesses of desire through the utopian system. This is what is so compelling about the reception of the novel: Cabet's followers seem much less concerned with reproducing its organizational principles than they are intent to envision the American Icaria as a creative space of self-fulfillment and personal freedom.

It is in the critical tension between the dirigisme imposed by the architects of these socialist utopias and the distorting effects exerted by the collective imagination of their

disciples that these curious designs reveal their significance. In the case of Cabet's group, it seems that before they could transform an abandoned Mormon settlement on the banks of the Mississippi river into their own Icaria, they had first to map out and colonize the fantasy-laden geography of their collective desires. In doing so, these amateur poets and *chansonniers* were staking out the boundaries of a libidinal topography as a kind of spontaneous precondition of emigration. In these projections, Icarian art tells us something about the complicated oscillations that mark the nineteenth-century imagination as it waivers between the rational and the dream-like, the programmatic and the passional.

In contrast to the resigned, alienated (if quietly subversive) melancholia that Ross Chambers (1987) describes as one of the hallmarks of mid-nineteenth-century cultural production, Icarian fiction had proposed a kind a hopeful futurology that is virtually unknown to the discursive forms that will dominate the cultural landscape of the Second Empire, and, indeed, to the dystopian tropes that predominate the anticipatory narratives of our modernity.²⁷ It is in this sense that utopian literature provides essential context for the developments of our day (and whose general direction Baudelaire's conflicted anti-utopianism encapsulates). In the same way that Baudelaire's embrace of anti-utopianism can be read both as a confirmation and as a rejection of the utopian dreams that were dispelled with Louis Napoléon's coup d'état, might not today's dystopian conspiracies be read as utopias in negative form? From the embrace of fictional narratives to factional populism and the rejection of progressive cultural ideas like those proposed by the Icarians, today's conspiracy theories are in many respects the progenies of the utopian imbroglio of the nineteenth century. Penned almost twenty years ago, Jacques Rancière's assessment of "democratic individualism" in post-cold war democracies remains doubly relevant: it points backward toward the "collective" libidinal economies of nineteenth-century utopianism, and forward, to the deeply aggrieved dystopias of today's alt-right conspiracists:

Ten years ago, those who celebrated the final victory of liberal democracy, human and individual rights over the constraints or horrors of collectivism, are now changing their tone. Today, they say, there are too many rights and too many duties, too much free choice and too little collective discipline and social bond. Democratic individualism would now jeopardize democracy. (2005, 141)

For many on the Right in our day, there is a sense that the whims of marginal communities have forced consensus on larger society, that "democratic individualism" has paradoxically led to a return to the "horrors of collectivism."

But, one might reasonably ask, what utopias are today's conspiracy theories seeking to negate, as utopianism has been mostly absent from Western political discourse since the nineteenth century? I would suggest that the functional concerns of groups such as QAnon are paradoxically similar to those of the Icarians as they take aim at the forces they see as detrimental to their vision of rural self-sufficiency and freedom from overreaching governments. Of course, there is a certain poetic irony in the realization that many adepts of today's alt-right conspiracies may be the direct ancestors (or at the very least the intellectual inheritors) of the European utopians that settled rural America. In these areas, where QAnon and similar movements have coalesced, the embrace of dystopian narrative serves as an outlet for anxieties that emanate from the perceived dangers posed to the dream of an idealized way of life. In these tellings,

America is a utopia lost, one in need of rediscovery, calling to be made great again. In championing Donald Trump as its messiah, QAnon has effectively tapped into a deep vein of popular resentment against the Woke cultural agenda of today's Left. These voters, as Thomas Friedman asserted in the wake of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, "not only feel looked down upon, but they also resent what they see as cultural censorship from liberal elites" (2020).²⁸ I wonder if the backlash against the Icarians and their emigration to America might be read as a similar expression of resentment. Indeed, with their departure, the Icarians had effectively "canceled" both the political status quo and their socialist brethren's internationalist aspirations. Indeed, the conservative politics behind the anti-Icarians' dystopian readings are on parallel with a whole slate of progressive movements that factions such as QAnon seek to discredit, ranging from Black Lives Matter and #MeToo to a more capacious understanding of gender and the Green New Deal.

In retrospect, anti-Icarian art, in disarming Cabet's popular movement, contributed to the ideological framework that propped up Napoléon III's still fragile hold on power. In discrediting alternative political models, the anti-Icarians signaled that France had resigned itself to the realpolitik of Napoléon's authoritarian regime. Likewise, in embarking for America, Cabet's disciples had perhaps intuited (and unintentionally hurried on) the demise of social utopianism's universalist dream. Yet their failed experiment along with countless others like it should not be dismissed out of hand, as their depictions of social harmony can be resurrected as powerful agents of resistance. Unlike the dystopian projections of their opponents which offer only violence, hatred, and misery, utopianism, as Bloch asserts, is ultimately less about devising ideal systems as it is a general assertion of hope.²⁹

We must not forget that the Icarians' optimistic projections serve, even in their naiveté, to reveal the vapidness and cynicism of the authoritarian and consumerist societies that would become the hallmarks of modernist culture. In a process that mimics in reverse the historical unfolding of the Icarian project, utopian optimism might then be the very antidote to today's divisive and demonizing dystopias. To be sure, visions of gender and racial equality, bold ambitions to rescue humanity from the calamity of climate change, and other so-called "utopian" sentiments are mocked and derided by the adherents of dystopia. That these hopeful projections provoke such vehemence and hatred point to their potential. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Icarians' American project is the fact that the group's passional economy takes form through a process of narrational mapping and not, as many nineteenth-century social scientists would have had it, through the elaboration of complex systems for the management of desires and goods. In the face of these increasingly technocratic solutions, Icarian fiction might signal the enduring dream of participatory culture, one that longs nostalgically to return a state of being where social reality is negotiated in stories. In its shared narrative, Icarian fan fiction is neither about creating works of art nor of parsing out elements of doctrine, but about imagining the contours of consensus.³⁰ In this respect, the ensemble of Icarian literature might in the future lead us to formulate a *utopian narratology of collectives*. By this I mean to signal a narratology that is not based in the archaeology of collective memory but rather in a *futurology of collective movements of hope* as they coalesce incessantly in the margins of institutional power, acting as

counterweights to the divisive politics of conspiracy. In their absence there is only Q and unremitting melancholia.

Notes

1. For Stephens (1987), every utopia casts the “shadow” of its own dystopian sub-text (16).
2. Here we might refer to Marin’s (1973) theory that utopias attempt to organize space like a text, and, in doing so, to propose a universal scientific theory of the social domain (253).
3. To understand the amplitude and impact of the utopian imagination that fueled the fictionalizing accounts of the American landscape, see Benjamin Hoffmann’s (2018) *Posthumous America*.
4. Although most anti-Icarian art was produced in proximity to the period of Icarian emigration (and thus to the Revolution of 1848), public interest in the movement spans several decades. Almost as soon as Cabet announced his emigration plan, a certain L. Guillemin, writing in 1847 under the *nom de plume* “Chasse à la liberté” (War on liberty), riposted with *L’exil de la liberté, ou projet de départ pour l’Icarie sous la conduite de monsieur Cabet* (Liberty’s exile, or project for the departure to Icaria under the direction of Mr. Cabet). It was in August of 1848 that the promoters Guénée et Tandou premiered the farce, “Un Voyage en Icarie, vaudeville en un acte” (Voyage to Icaria, vaudeville in one act) at the *Théâtre des délassements comiques*. In 1849 the Garnier frères issued the anonymously authored collection of “simples récits” titled “Confession d’un communiste-icarien” (Confession of a communist-Icarian) in which a would-be emigrant describes the “le vidage des poches entre les mains de Cabet et de ses agents” (12) [the emptying of pockets at the hands of Cabet and his agents]. My translations throughout unless otherwise stated.
5. Ground-breaking scholarship on Baudelaire’s utopianism was pioneered by Peter Hambly (2006). See, for example, “Leconte de Lisle, Banville, Baudelaire et le fouriérisme.”
6. In Baudelaire’s (1975) prose poem “Assommons les pauvres!” (“Let’s Beat Up the Poor!”) *Le Spleen de Paris*, in *Œuvres complètes* (1:357).
7. “Icarie est réellement l’abrégé de l’univers terrestre” (Cabet 2006, 21).
8. Cabet’s “Icarian movement,” as Jeremy Popkin (2006) recalls, “was the first to attract a mass following (perhaps as many as 100,000) during the 1840s” (113).
9. Robert Sutton (1994) points out that the group “persisted in following the communal plan dreamed of by Cabet and set out in the *Voyage en Icarie*” (4).
10. To garner support for their cause, activists sponsored a series of banquets held throughout France. Although meant to be a bourgeois affair, these events were quickly dominated by the working classes; they became a flashpoint when the Guizot government attempted to suppress them. See Vincent Robert’s (2021) *Le temps des banquets: politique et symbolique d’une génération (1818-1848)*.
11. It is perhaps the character of Sénécal who best represents Flaubert’s parody of utopian socialism and its excesses. Flaubert writes of this character that he “ne considérait que les systèmes” (2002, 119) [only considered systems]. “Il connaissait Mably, Morelly, Fourier, Saint-Simon, Comte, Cabet, Louis Blanc, la lourde charretée des écrivains socialistes ... et du mélange de tout cela, il s’était fait un idéal de démocratie vertueuse, ayant le double aspect d’une métairie et d’une filature, une sorte de Lacédémone américaine où l’individu n’existerait que pour servir la Société” (225–226). [He knew Mably, Morelly, Fourier, Saint-Simon, Comte, Cabet, Louis Blanc, the weighty cartload of socialist writers ... and from the mixture of all that, he had made for himself an ideal of virtuous democracy, having the double aspect of a tenant farm and a spinning mill, a sort of American Lacedaemon where the individual exists only to serve society]. The strict dirigisme of Sénécal’s utopianism, while typical of the period, provides a sharp contrast with the intimate libidinal economy imagined by Cabet and his followers.

12. For a distinctly more skeptical take on the motives of the gallant Icarian see Gustave Nadaud's (1862) anti-Icarian screed, "*Je suis dégoûté de la France*" (I am disgusted with France).
13. Cabet was emphatic on this point: "Je désire vivement être lu par les FEMMES" (2006, 550; Cabet's emphasis) [I strongly desire to be read by WOMEN]. For an extensive appraisal of female Icarians, see Diana M. Garo (2005), *Citoyennes and Icaria*.
14. *Voyage en Icarie* has two main plotlines. The first involves the forbidden love affair between Lord William Carisdall, an English adventurer, and his best friend's fiancée, the Icarian, Dinaïse. The second is related through the annual staging of a patriotic play recounting the socialist revolution led by Icar. The novel resolves the passionate dilemma of William and Dianise by applying to their non-conventional relationship the same organizational principles that insure the harmonious functioning of Icarian society. If their love affair is normalized it is because in Icaria private and public life are equally ruled by the idea that the community must use "la RAISON pour organiser le bonheur, la société et l'égalité" (Cabet 2006, 35; Cabet's emphasis) [REASON to organize happiness, society and equality].
15. It is no wonder, then, that song as a communal statement of unity was the preferred genre of the Icarians.
16. See Daniel Sipe (2013), Text, image, and the problem with perfection in nineteenth-century France: utopia and its afterlives.
17. Here Engels is referring specifically to literary utopias of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
18. In publishing his novel, Cabet (2006) had originally intended his fictional island to stand as a purely hypothetical model for the transformation of French society. In the Preface to *Voyage en Icarie* he writes, "nous n'avons pas la présomption de croire que nous ayons trouvé, du premier coup, le système le plus parfait pour organiser une grande Communauté: nous n'avons voulu que présenter un EXEMPLE, pour faire concevoir la possibilité et l'utilité du système Communautaire" (iv; Cabet's emphasis) [we do not presume to believe that we have found, at our first attempt, the most perfect system to organize a large Community: we only wanted to present an EXAMPLE, to help one conceive of the possibility and the utility of the communitarian system].
19. Viren Swami (2016), an expert in the psychology of conspiracy theories, notes that "Trump and the people around him are using a conspiracy narrative in my view to - not just to kind of have an argument with people but actually to mobilize people, to use it as a way of getting people involved in a campaign."
20. In fact, Cabet only cites his novel once in this text.
21. For Cabet's (1851) account of these events, see *Procès et acquittement de Cabet* (Trial and acquittal of Cabet).
22. Michel Foucault (1986) has called such configurations "heterotopias," which he theorizes as a predominant feature of the utopian experience as it has endured in the modern era. Heterotopias act like utopias in that they too reflect, invert, and contest "all the other real sites" (24). "Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality ... I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias" (24). What Foucault fails to consider are the effects of these essentially sectarian (and thus schismatic) formations, a characteristic shared by the Icarians and QAnon alike.
23. The majority of Lachambeaudie's works appear in the 1847, 1848, and 1852 editions. He is the most frequently reproduced author in the *Almanach* with seven pieces. The next most frequently cited authors are La Fontaine and Boulanger with two each.
24. Both Baudelaire's interest in utopian social theory (primarily of the Prudhonian variety) and his utopian activism at the time of the 1848 revolution are well documented. See, for example, Richard Burton (2002), *Baudelaire and the Second Republic: Writing and Revolution* and Jules Mouquet and W.T. Bandy (1946), *Baudelaire en 1848*.
25. This is what Jacques Rancière (2005) might call in our day the "porno-fiction futuriste ... d'union entre l'absolu de la liberté et l'absolu de la jouissance" (39) [the futuristic porno-fiction ... of the union between the absolute of liberty and the absolute of pleasure].

26. For Marin (1973) *Utopia* is a text without a story, where the premise of immutable happiness precludes elements of plot (81). Cabet's plot-driven novel marks a significant break with this tradition. Indeed, the convoluted love triangle that is at the center of the story threatens to upend all Icarian society.
27. See Ross Chambers (1987), *Mélancolie et opposition: Les débuts du modernisme en France*.
28. Quoting conservative Rich Lowry, editor of the *National Review*, Friedman (2020) concurs that, "Trump is, for better or worse, the foremost symbol of resistance to the overwhelming woke cultural tide."
29. Russell Jacoby (2005) states that today's utopias are "iconoclastic" in that they avoid producing a single, unalterable image of perfection as was the case with nineteenth-century European utopians. Jacoby unwittingly points to the ever-changing nature of dystopian conspiracy, whose forms are constantly shifting, ever mutable (xvi).
30. Even if such consensus always runs the risk of imposing the "tyranny of democracy" as Baudelaire and Rancière similarly assert, Baudelaire most famously in his unfinished pamphlet, *Pauvre Belgique*. See Baudelaire 1975, 2:1470–1530.

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