

# The Everlasting City

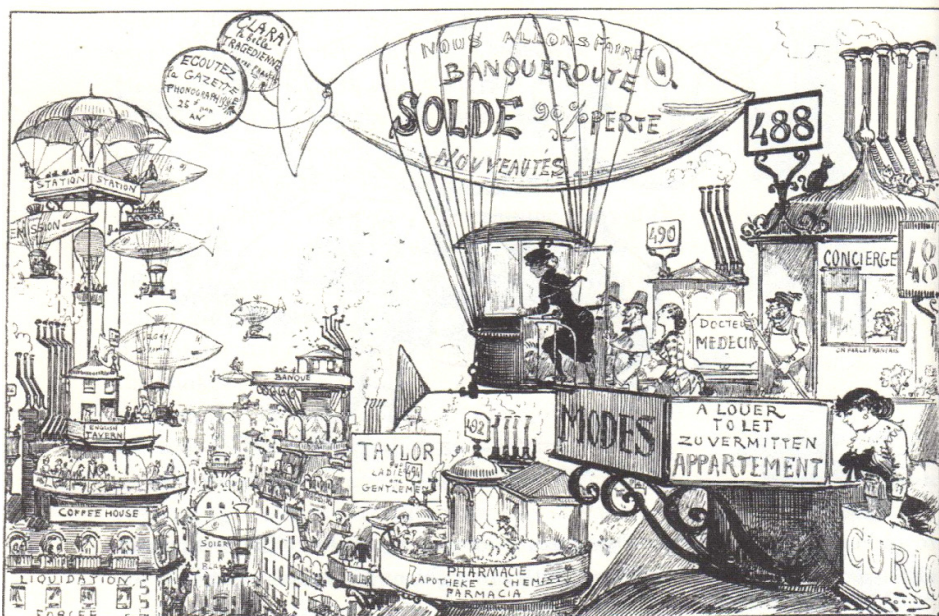
Introductory note by Mariano Martín Rodríguez;  
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**A**mong the various types of fiction which deal with the creation of symbolic imaginary cities there is one which had an interesting development. Between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century several authors explored the ethical and aesthetic possibilities offered by setting their fictions in symbolic spaces. These symbolic spaces, which combine the plausibility of the Borgesian “reasoned imagination” (utopias and similar genres) with an imaginary dimension, usually have a legendary tone to them (in an undetermined past or present time, often with exotic elements) and feature a high level of abstraction. This is compatible with their rich descriptions of the unquestionable materiality of their spaces, which confers the symbol a sensual density unlike the abstract cerebrality of pure allegory. These turn-of-the-century symbolic cities are embedded in a geography serving the parable and conferring it true meanings. The latter, however, may be

vague and force the reader to use their imagination, creativity and intellect to mentally rebuild the proposed fictional universe, including its potential sense and the way it works.

The varied and pervasive rhetorical means in the texts contribute to the outstanding detail with which their fantastic geography is endowed. Nevertheless, the described imaginary cities possess an enigmatic quality, since the wealth of detail allows for voluntary omissions and unresolved contradictions building up the desired feeling of fantastic or legendary mystery. Through this, readers are invited to see the detailed geographical, historical and social descriptions as speculative and transcending mere reason. The poetic atmosphere thus created and the scarce number of precise answers to the text’s implicit questions seek an emotional rather than purely rational understanding of the depicted world. The metaphorical writing usually favoured in this type of

literature generates ambiguity and, therefore, many potential readings. In consequence, the didactic function of the parable as a mode is closely linked to the poetic effect it produces, that is to say, to its literariness. The potential social or ethical moral of the story is secondary. The creative exercise implied in the building of symbolic urban spaces aims to elicit a reading pleasure of both rational and emotional nature, and demands a collaborative effort: readers must recreate these fictional worlds and actively



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find personal and social meaning in them in order to really enjoy this difficult, but excitingly sophisticated sort of literature.

Among the significant examples of turn-of-the-century symbolic urban fictions worth mentioning is a Spanish story, in which the protagonist is a city that could be deemed a model for a more famous symbolic city as regards its conception: the City of Immortals described by the Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges in “El inmortal” (The Immortal), *El Aleph*, 1949. That Spanish story is “La ciudad eterna” (The Everlasting City), published in a Spanish newspaper in 1902 by Francisco Navarro Ledesma (better known for writing the first and most significant novelised biography on Miguel de Cervantes, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra*, 1905). After his premature death, the magazine he ran, *Gedeón*, re-published “The Everlasting City” in September 1905 in the obituary issue following his death. Although this periodical was largely popular and it was custom then to preserve literary magazines’ issues (but not newspapers’), it is impossible to ascertain whether Borges came to read this story during his long youth sojourn in Spain. The idea of imagining a city built by immortals which over time ends up in ruins could have occurred to both writers separately. Both could have been inspired by Bernard Lazare’s “La ville sans effroi” (The City Without Fear), from the collection *Le Miroir des legends* (1891), since the latter has a similar literary approach: a traveller arrives at an ancient-looking city inhabited by bizarre immortal or immortal-like characters. The Spaniard and the Argentine exploit masterfully the feeling of the sublime stemming from the stone ruins they so beautifully know how to describe (the former, with that turn-of-the-century or *art nouveau* style; the latter, adopting the scholarly and ironic neoclassicism of the inter-war period or *art deco*), and of the abhorrent destiny of a city that highlights the existential boundaries of the very idea of immortality. In Borges’ story, the degenerate immortals

wander aimlessly like shadows among the rubble of a city of classic antiquity style. In Navarro Ledesma’s story, Athanatopolis (the city without death) is also a creation of the similar sort, but the immortals have left it due to the lack of stimuli in everlasting life. After being granted immortality, its inhabitants undergo a process of psychological deterioration that should have led to a state akin to that suffered by Borges’s immortals, but which they avoid by fleeing the city. Only one man remains in the ruins, a Jew who plays the symbolic, and already stereotyped, role of the character obsessed with coin and gold and who turns out to be as powerful as death itself, as Honoré de Balzac underlines at the end of the story. This is narrated, in a hereafter full of great personages of Western culture, by Dante Alighieri, the character who had left it in order to visit Athanatopolis. Therefore, the symbolic city is described within the framework of a “dialogue of the dead,” whereas Borges conflates the genres of historical/archaeological fiction and lost world romance in his tale about the City of Immortals. However, in both cases their meta-literary dimension is clear. In any case, the artistic value of Navarro Ledesma’s story is not dependent upon the parallelisms with Borges’s story, or its historical significance as a potential forerunner to that Argentinean genius. The literary quality of the Spaniard’s text is to be found in the masterful manner in which the imaginary urban world is endowed with extraordinary suggestive power. This grants the story a representative universal value as a reflection on immortality, linked to poetry and art. These represent the sole way to acquire the only immortality worth seeking: the immortality of fame and the Elysian Fields. Physical immortality on Earth is akin to degeneracy, whereas material wealth cannot prevent a similar kind of degeneracy, because gold brings about the intellectual and spiritual death of humankind. ●

Francisco Navarro Ledesma

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All the immortals had fallen silent, tired of recalling, amongst Homer's hearty laugh, Voltaire's sharp snigger and those tragedy-inducing quagmires and quandaries that we take for matters of life and death on earth. Then the one called Alighieri, who was in the habit of neither laughing nor speaking, and without losing his grave, pensive, forlorn stance, focused his eagle's beak on the deepest eyes around him. Not those of Socrates', nay, nor Goethe's, but those of a one-handed soldier, a native of Alcalá de Henares. His voice, neat and vibrant as if emerging from a golden throat and modulated by a tempered-steel tongue, emerged thus:

"Halfway along the road of life, I found myself lost and unaided in a dark, rough and intricate forest. The trunks seemed to be thousands of years old. Some were as robust as the bulky mass of Sant'Angelo castle and proportionately as high—a colonnade on which lay the roof that is the sky. A queer dread seized my soul, an insuperable fright, a fascination of sorts provoking not the desire to flee danger, but rather to face it. I made my way stealthily under cover of the foliage. In the solemn and eerie silence, the thicket was dense. Birds, insects and reptilians had left the enchanted forest mayhap centuries ago, and those trees bereft of nests and singing birds and with cracked and split barks, albeit leafy and green, looked dead. After a long walk of a number of hours—or maybe some years—the thicket opened up. The tight squadron of trees loosened up and before my eyes it appeared: so wondrous a view that the despicable language of mankind could not describe, least of all I, who invented a language to show hell, purgatory and paradise to this mad world.

A large city in ruins it was, sitting on a high and distant summit. From the clearing, an overgrowth-ridden road of ancient and chipped stones resembling an old man's denture led into the city. By the side of the road, an inscription, with a hand pointing to the city, read: Athanatopolis, the city where no one dies.

'What will it mean not to die?' I thought for a moment and, then, quickened my pace.

The surroundings offered a lifeless vista. In the uncultivated fields, with no trace at all of the merry undulation of ploughing, mad weeds and wild flowers wilted gloomily—their parched shells fell on the waste of past weeds and bygone flowers. The waters of a river idly slithered by unburdened, for the river carried no mud or scrub; on its bottom, motionless rocks forming an age-old crust could be seen. Neither its course nor its banks teemed with uncouth boatmen as on the Tiber, or with cheerful and singing laundry-women as on the Arno. The birdless forest rhymed with the fishless river.

On the opposite bank, the city, like a beggar who has rid himself of the heavy tatters tiring him during the bitter ascent and who finally lies face up into the sun, had hurled down the steep slope shreds of its ramparts, large stones the colour of a quince's bruises or an overripe golden apple. Flaps of bulwark and masonry abounded here and there. The monumental gate I had crossed was a torn-down semicircular arch, for it had lost the keystone, which elevated its two hunched piers to the sky like two arms begging for mercy.

Overwhelmed as if carrying on my shoulders the weight of all that ruin, I struggled through streets flooded with rubble, narrow alleys cleaved between the sheer walls of old buildings in which my steps reverberated like tolls, and grandiose squares decorated with bronze statues—their features eaten away by moss—or with portly triumphal arches whose inscriptions were worn. In the streets, squares, sumptuous buildings and impoverished dwellings there was no one to be found, nobody, at all. The deep and hostile quiet filled the soul with fright, accustomed to a world responding with some sounding echo when under the sway of the sun's midday caress. There were no mice, flies or spiders in the immortal city—solely the sporadic cracking of a rafter, a voussoir

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collapsing or a wall splitting open. Only time lived there, only time ruled, decided, counted and seemed to fall implacably over everything from high above. Exhausted and trembling at the thought of nightfall in such a fearful desolation, I halted to recover my strength, sat on a broken ashlar and listened with a care enhanced by the fever which was working its way through me. Presently, a human noise shook me off the stupor I was immersed in. Human it was, indeed, the most human of all –no other than the tinkling of many gold coins counted very hurriedly by a hand very skilled at that business. I ran towards the noise, a Doric-colonnaded marble palace. As I neared it, I heard several cries of terror –shrill and high like a vulture’s screaming–, somebody running hastily and, then, impetuous panting. In the palace’s main courtyard I saw an abnormally high mound, a gigantic pile of gold coins which seemed to well up out of the huge, open skylights of the cellars, also choking perhaps with that cursed metal: there were Neapolitan and Aragonese florins, German kreutzers, Austrian forints, Breton crowns, Arabic dinars, Visigothic resounding solidis, Hebrew medals, Roman Minos staters, Greek didrachms, Phoenician melqarts and pierced golden pieces from China; there were also gold nuggets from Ophir, ingots from Arabia, bars worked by the copper hands of the Hindus of the Ganges. Never did all the Genoese bankers, opulent Pisans and great monarchs of the distant East see or dream such a mountain of gold. And there were no sentinels, no Cerberus, no terrifying dragons to guard it and keep it, but a single man –naked, wan, weak, thin. His beard covered most of his body. Crooked hands and feet clung convulsively to the coins. His eyes were the colour of gold, as if imprinted with the reflection of the sole object of their centuries-old contemplation. By observing his pupils, which resembled two florins, it was plain that man had not looked at the sky or the earth from time immemorial. No trace was left in those eyes of the soft and tender quality usually

acquired through social intercourse. For aeons they had failed to answer any loving gaze or friendly request. They were eyes empty of pity –a tyrant’s eyes. When he looked at me, betraying an unfathomable fear, first his pupils quivered; his red eyelids like bloody scraps came after; then, all of his body twisted. When he came to realise, after so many years, he was not alone, he succumbed to the same dread I had at knowing myself alone. Fear made him run, going round the gold pile defending it like a jackal shields its prey, until, in the end, spent and worn-out, he dropped on the gold, nails up, those menacing claws ready to fight me off.

Seeming to me he must have forgotten language, I signalled to him he was not to fear me and, to make my message clearer, shrugged and spat disdainfully on the gold pile. It placated the miser. I spoke to him in Latin, yet to no avail. I made another attempt in Greek and it pained me to see such an abject soul did understand divine Plato’s language. After I made known to him in few words I had not come lured by the gold’s clanging, he opened his eyes widely, possessed by a millennial mistrust, and, then, burst out laughing –I promise you, his laughter sounded like jingling coins. I realised he took me for a madman. I posed questions he did not answer: he was incapable of fixing his thoughts on any other thing than his beloved treasure, the only object and exclusive care of his life. Then I remembered I carried in my pouch three Venetian golden doubloons. I produced them gingerly and put them before him. The eyes of the miser, who possessed greater riches than Croesus or Midas, popped out of his head and he sprang at me, his warped claws seeking viciously my face. It was when aiming to hurt me that it dawned on him: I was as immortal as he and, therefore, he could cause me no harm. Despairing at knowing there was still in the world some gold which was not his, he lowered his arms dejectedly. Sallow, large tears scalded his cheeks. He started uttering in the purest Greek a long litany of entreaties and moaning for the purpose

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of coaxing me to give to him those three little coins impeding his absolute bliss –the failure to possess them would render his immortality intolerable.

‘The coins shall be yours,’ I said, ‘if you tell me, without concealing any detail whatsoever, the inscrutable mystery of this forsaken city. Now, I must know it all!’

A devilish glee lightened his century-old visage and two flushing patches appeared in the miser’s hollow cheeks out of a new sense of hope. He stood up and the sun, which for centuries had not painted his brow, lightened the upper part of his bald pate with the radiant light which sparkles upon the brows of thinkers and artists. For my three doubloons, that man intended to create a magnificent masterpiece and so he did. He went about collecting rags he wanted god knows why, adjusted them to his lanky and gaunt body, put them on with grace and elegance; reaching out his right arm, he began with Demosthenian attitude and words not unlike Thucydides’ when relating how the great Athenian Pericles sang the praises of the city of Pallas. And he spoke. He spoke like the Greek used to back then, in the manner we have attempted a hundred times without success, because the fibres and veins of our thinking and the skin around it are not as strong, fine, supple and vibrant. I know for certain I will fail to put into words what he said, but shall merely recast it in a simpler fashion –at best, mine will be no more than a dream of the shadows of those I heard.

Athanatopolis, the city where no one dies, was the cradle of a cultivated and most graceful people. All its citizens loved beauty and exercised virtue as understood by Socrates –who is now listening to my words– that is, the most perfect manner of virtue there is, to the best of my knowledge. In reward for their goodness, the Demiurge paid a visit to Athanatopolis and, in deeming it a paragon for men, decided that the city should be everlasting and its inhabitants im-

mortal. Such was the reasoning of the divine Intelligence, for thus depraved and ill-governed humanity would always have a shining example.

The result was exceedingly woeful. The huge orgies and most solemn celebrations the Athanatopolians revelled in on account of their immortality were followed by a period of sedate meditation. Years and years went by, slow and monotonous, and those men, certain that they would not die, progressively lost the spur to carry on living. Work and order were the first to disappear. Being unable to die, it was inane to obey to anybody. The authorities could not find anyone to rule. Free from the fear of dying, military and civil discipline died out and, along with it, the Army and the Government. No one worked. Even if their houses collapsed, the immortal men would rise from the rubble. Even if there was no sustenance, life would go on. All distinction of caste and class was removed –as death levels all men, so did immortality. The hatreds, envies and resentments which hitherto separated men and women were forgotten like petty, futile matters; alas, so was love, once loathing and jealousy were eradicated. It took several centuries for this to eventually happen. The flesh grew weary of taking pleasure and, shortly after, lust being dead and buried, ideal love –the same ideal love you, Plato, were awakened to by Dyotima, a foreigner in Mantinea, and I too by the delicate Monna Bice, my forever loved one– faded away like the last wisps of smoke after a flame is gone. Love being no more, musicians fell quiet, painters gave up their palettes and poets lost their voice. Palates were tired of every gastronomic delicacy –they indolently chewed wild weeds for the sake of entertainment. Lips too were the victim of excess –they knew every type of kiss, flattery in all languages, the sound of all music. Against such noiseless orchestra of universal tedium, only the sage went on working in his laboratory, indefatigable, seeking truth. Every object which could be analysed went through his retorts and stills. The sage, guided by an odd intelligence,

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ascertained nothing as unquestionable and yet pursued his endeavour. Eventually, after a thousand years, a conviction got hold of his soul and halted his work, leading him to smash the retorts in despair. It was impossible to uncover the truth without examining corpses, for only death reveals to us the secret of life. And thus the sage was the first who, heroically renouncing his immortal condition, left the city and returned, with raised chin and eyes full of faith, to the world where death is. He showed the way to the rest. In the centuries which ensued many followed his steps: the lovers, their thoughts focused on transient beauties; the irate and the resentful, yearning the might to kill a fellow man; the envious, longing to covet the possessions of another; the gluttons, craving to delight in new sensations; the despots, their wills bent on tyrannising peoples; the aristocrats, striving to be possessors of pride before other mortals; and, in the end, even the workers, who earned their livelihoods with their hands, fled last of all after having had enough inaction and sloth –they went after the harsh and brutal stroking of the earth, mattock leaning on the shoulder, intent on doing something, even if only digging their own grave. I saw them all, the miser said with lightning-fast words, all marching away. From time long before this happened, I had hoarded in this palace money aplenty, so I burrowed, sniffed, scavenged and mined the entire city for the rest. It's been three hundred years, but I am now certain there is no coin left in Athanatopolis that is not mine, except for those in your hands.

I gave them to him, begging him to show me the road the grim immortals had taken. He pointed at it vaguely and went back to observing, re-observing, touching and fondling the three coins which so overjoyed him. Dusk was imminent and I rushed away. I looked back two or three times. Seated on the pile of gold, the miser was flipping the doubloons. No doubt he had already forgotten me and the tale of the History of the Everlasting City.

I re-entered the obscure forest. It felt like coming back to life. I sighed with glee and remembered Beatriz, my forever beloved Monna Bice..."

Dante hushed and the one called Hegel, who had listened to him most attentively, said:

"Then, death is life's ultimate mainspring."

To which the one named Balzac answered sprightly:

"Death, or gold."