

Towards Helhaven

Three Stages of a Vision

1971

Kenneth Burke had a great talent for irony, comedy, and satire. One can see it here in the first of the Helhaven essays, as well as the second, "Why Satire," but one can also see it in Burke's poems, his "Flowerishes," in "Epilogue: Prologue in Heaven" in *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1961), in parts of a great many of his essays, and in his letters. Anyone who ever saw or heard Burke "perform" in his prime will remember his improvisational humor and his raspy laughter at his own ironic jokes and cracks. Like any satirist, Burke had a great sense of the absurd and a remarkable ability to reduce things to absurdity just by following certain tendencies to the end of the line—as he does here with computers, hyper-technologism, and pollution. Reading the essay twenty-five years later, one can only say of Burke's predictions that they were, alas, all too true. The Culture-Bubble on the Moon is not so far-fetched as it might seem at first. Burke himself would have been dumbfounded by the astounding computer revolution of the nineties, a technological revolution that was just beginning during his last years. Now there are computer screens everywhere and soon, every school in the country will be equipped with them and have access to the worldwide web. In some schools, there are proposals to do away with books and have students do all their reading on individual laptops.

Hypertechnologism is one of the main themes of Burke's late essays, as is the fact, according to Burke, that it is language based. It is hypertechnologism that creates "counter-nature," another main theme of Burke's late essays.

INTRODUCTION

Not without uneasiness, I am going to indulge in a bit of satire. For several reasons satire is a troublous form, not the least being that some people don't know how to take it. Years ago I published a satire closely akin to the theme of my present "Helhaven" vision.

It was called "Waste—or the Future of Prosperity." The general slant was that, although there is a limit to the amount that people can use, there's no limit to the amount that people can waste. Therefore, in order to ensure maximum production, hence maximum prosperity, all that we

needed to do was keep on wasting at a constantly accelerated pace—and we could look forward to a permanent bull market.

The article was written shortly *before* the big market crash of 1929. It was published shortly *after* the crash. It satirically welcomed the already emergent principle of planned obsolescence which has since taken much mightier strides forward, so that not only products such as automobiles or refrigerators are scientifically designed to wear out before they should; but even architectural piles of considerable magnitude are now planned as temporary structures, to be knocked down after a few years and replaced by monsters twice as big (and they in turn will soon be getting pounded apart—or if not, then they will simply fall apart).

For a time, after the crash of 1929, the standard ways of accelerating prosperity by wastage lost some of their momentum. But even so, the tradition remained intact. And while many unemployed persons were starving through lack of wages with which to buy things, prices were kept up by the fact that much food was being systematically destroyed on the farms where it was produced. This was the era of the plowing-under of the little pigs.

Since those dismal days, of course, wastage has more than regained its pace. I recently read that, whereas ten years ago each citizen contributed an average of four pounds of trash a day, we now average six pounds a day; and if our current methods of production and distribution can maintain this exacting cultural standard, it is estimated that by 1980 the average output of trash per day will have climbed to the enviable height of eight pounds per citizen.

But in my earlier article, satirically saluting this view of what is usually known among us as the highest standard of living in the world, I also had a satirical passage along these lines: Despite our national prowess as wasters under conditions of peace, I said, one must recognize that war is a still more efficient means of wastage. So I included a reference to the encouraging promise of greater arms production. A syndicated columnist seized on that, quoting it as though it were to be taken straight, without the satiric discount. And in newspapers throughout the country he aired his moral indignation at the thought that any publication would sink so low as to see in war production a boon to prosperity. At the time, the editor of the weekly which had published my satire told me: In all his many years as an editor, he had never published a satire that did not provoke a rash of letters from indignant readers who had taken the piece on its face, without allowance for the satiric twist.

But things have moved on since then, until now, as Juvenal said in the

Rome of his day, it is hard not to write satire. For we all now know about the solemn puzzling of our many crack economists who can't figure out how we could possibly get along without the fantastic squandering of war material in Vietnam and the various other suspect regimes we subsidize whereby, along with such ideal wastage as the ABM system and supersonic transport planes, many factories can be kept busy, employing a vast peacetime army of factory workers in such economically helpful military output.

When I wrote my piece "Waste—or the Future of Prosperity" (1930), there was of course no talk of computers. And waste was small potatoes as compared with the concerns that now beset us, such as pollution by mercury poisoning, which has made the fish of several whole states inedible, and also has been found in life in the high seas.

On the other hand, though I have, for several months, been compulsively clipping news stories about pollution, in the long run any kind of complaining becomes a damned bore. I recall some months ago, when I was addressing a conference of English teachers in the Northwest, a section that teams with conservationists. Indeed, even while I was there, university students were doing Herculean labors cleaning the junk out of a scenic river into which every conceivable kind of discardable object had been dumped. I was scheduled to talk on "creativity." My point was that the center of "creativity" in our day was with the physical sciences, which were having an almost miraculous upsurge. And the job of the social sciences and the humanities was somehow to try to keep up with the cultural problems which this great flowering of creativity in the physical sciences had imposed upon us. So, by way or introduction, I talked for a bit about the unwanted side effects of industrial expansion. Then I happened to say, "But surely, you didn't want me to come three thousand miles just to talk with you about the subject of pollution." And I got a most disturbingly enthusiastic outburst of applause. Similarly, I had read how the Scots are indignant because some lecturer claims that pollution has killed the Loch Ness Monster.

As for complaints about technology: All of us have been weary of them for quite some time. The "God is dead" theologians have helped us to realize: It were far better that we blaspheme Our Father than that we blaspheme Technology.

We are sick of Lamentation. What we want is AFFIRMATION. And if we can't get affirmation by any other route, then let's get at least the sheer *gestures* and *accents* of affirmation, with the help of a satiric twist.

For our slogan, then, we stoutly affirm: We must not turn back the

clock. We must continue in the ways that made us great—6 percent of the world's population, using up 40 percent of the world's production.

Forward, outward, and up—as per my vision of Helhaven, to which let us now repair.

I THE HIGH PROMISE OF THE COMPUTER

Those persons are wronging the computer who say that it will cause unemployment. Consider this situation, for instance: You confront a citizen with a questionnaire that required many hours to plan and many more hours to fill out properly. Yet all such data, however slowly and laboriously assembled, could be run through a computing apparatus in a flash. Thus is it not obvious that computers will enable us to gather ever greater mountains of information? And the greater the number and complexity of the computers, then proportionately greater the amount of painstaking effort that must go into the programming of such inquiries, with a correspondingly increased number of man-hours devoted to the task of keeping these omnivora adequately fed. For recall that, unlike human beings, they can perform continuously twenty-four hours a day. Accordingly, you need but allow for the great disparity between the time needed to assemble the data for a punched card and the fraction of a second in which it can be processed once the information is assembled, whereupon it becomes obvious that properly varied and complicated questionnaires could require at least three hours a day of a citizen's time in filling them out, plus all the other hours involved in planning, programming, and interviewing; then add the time and effort spent in publishing the material, and the many further activities required by the fact that no one will read it. Hence still other ingenious operations must be planned, to coordinate all such findings with many other equally unread and unreadable reports by specialists in totally different channels of investigation.

For instance, who knows how many bingo players also subscribe to the thesis: "We can't get out of Vietnam now because we shouldn't have been there in the first place"? Who knows the correlation between belief in progress and peptic ulcers due to food additives? Who knows whether the Pill has made for more fun or more boredom? Who knows the average age of the experts who helped President Johnson put over the Gulf of Tonkin ploy? Who knows what percentage of leaders in the military-industrial complex have become the parents of flower children? Who knows how much of the money that the United States shells out for Vietnam gets shipped straight into Swiss bank accounts by members of the

Thieu-Ky clique? Who knows what? Who knows from nothin'? Who knows his from a hole in the ground? And so on. Obviously, once we start in a big way biting on bits of information, an endless range of further information opens up before us. Is it true or false, for instance, that Johnson's private estate appreciated to the extent of five million dollars during the years when his ill-starred, five-starred war saddled his country with further costs of circa eighty-three billion?

Above all, let us take to heart the encouraging front-page story from our nation's capital (*New York Times*, June 27, 1970). "The police, security and military intelligence of the Federal Government are quietly compiling a mass of computerized and microfilmed files here on hundreds of thousands" of citizens who are adjudged to be what is known to the trade as "persons of protective interest." Data banks building such an "array of instantly retrievable information" would provide gainful occupation for an enormous army of snoopers, even if the purpose were but to keep known criminals under surveillance. But the scope of this Argus-eyed investigation goes far beyond that. For instance (and here's a nice conceit): "The computer might immediately supply you, for but the asking, with all the information it contains on the 'characteristics' of subjects encoded on its tapes—all the short, fat, long-haired, young white campus activists in Knoxville, Tennessee." True, at that point the reporter was probably just airing his high idealism—yet his example helps justify my claim that, on one such project alone (and I can promise you that each graduate student in the social sciences can make a dozen questionnaires be needed where but one had been before), the speed with which the computer can scan, store, ingest, and put forth its info will vastly increase the amount of work needed to keep it adequately fed. For what is more obvious than the fact that data banks along those lines cannot be complete until they tell us, in a flash, how many citizens believe in organic gardening, how many grow furious when they have been hit with the same damned singing commercial again and again and again (they who couldn't have stood a few bars of even the greatest music thus sadistically reduplicated), or how many happen to lithp when they thap pith?

However, there still remains the possibility that, regardless of all such contributions to the magnifying of the GNP (by which is meant "Gross National Product," *not* "guinea pig"), a computerized technology may produce a troublesome situation in which, despite the urgent generating of "new needs," the proliferation of labor-saving devices actually does save some labor—and to that extent a certain percentage of our workforce might be unemployable (and thus they will be socioeconomically

use-less to the state except insofar as corresponding instruments can be developed whereby the very existence of such unemployed would provide jobs for various sociological and psychiatric specialists devoted to the study of their plight).

However, insofar as there is unemployment (to be distinguished from those kinds of unemployment we call leisure), and insofar as some of the unemployed may not manifest enough disorders to keep researchers gainfully employed, the vision of another possibility (or rather, I should say, *opportunity*) opens before us.

First, there is the technical fact that computers, if properly fed, could digest and excrete authoritative information as to the number of citizens that the given economy can gainfully employ, along with the various categories of employment that would also be predictable.

For this purpose all that is needed is the gathering of data designed to predict (on the basis of each citizen's profile at the age of two) just what grades any class of such citizens can be expected to receive during its school years, what kinds of schools (if any) will be attended, what quality of education will follow from such schooling, how many are most likely to be dropouts, and what incomes these various classes of citizen will predictably receive, at various stages along their lifespan.

Thus, we would need only to arrange a draft by lot. Such a wholly democratic process would enable us to isolate the number of citizens, in the various categories, that the economy cannot employ. For instance, at the age of two, Citizen CQ7-0912-5478 gives reliable indications that he would end up as a public accountant, at such-and-such a salary. But there are more of such incipient accountants than the economy can take care of. Accordingly, it is decided by lot how many of such two-year-olds must be drafted for inclusion in a class of unemployed accountants.

Any such scientifically selected group will not have to attend school, or take jobs, and the like. But, in accordance with their classification, at the proper age they will receive whatever grades, diplomas, wages, honors, and such the computer had predicted for them, if the whole class of such incipient accountants were actually to go through all these processes that would necessarily involve the elimination of a given number. And later, in the course of their maturing, they will receive all the subsequent sums, services, psychiatric or medical aid that computerology will have established as natural to their station.

True, there are problems still to be ironed out, as regards a wholly accurate rating for all necessary data. Also, some persons drafted to be classed as unemployed accountants might be tempted to try augmenting

their legally guaranteed incomes by moonlighting in other occupations. Yet, even if these and other difficulties should prove this plan unworkable, we should never forget what splendid proof the computers have already given as regards their great contribution to the production, distribution, and consumption of military hardware. One might think, for instance, that the concept of "cost effectiveness" could not possibly serve as a test for the rationalizing of a remote foreign invasion such as United States involvement in Indochina. Rather, you'd tend to judge that this adventure under the guidance of the Pentagon's five-star businessmen is just about the most costly and ineffective blunder in all the history of Imperialism. Similarly, you'd tend to think that by "body count" is meant body count. But once you introduce the computer as a factor in your calculations, everything falls perfectly into place. Then all you need do is plaster a given area with a given amount of indiscriminate bombing, and the computer tells you what proportionate number of enemy combatants should be counted as dead bodies. (You could also compute the corresponding number of women, children, old men, and allies that got slaughtered—but forget it!) Thanks to the computer, a notable idealistic dimension has been added to what would otherwise be a pretty sorry show. And just as "body count" doesn't mean body count, so "cost effectiveness" doesn't mean cost effectiveness. And by the same token we dare hope that our insistence upon an "honorable peace" won't tie us down to anything like an honorable peace, after so dishonorable a war.

II A RESIDUAL PROBLEM

But however great the computer's contribution to our culture may be, there still remains the problem of how life on Earth can manage to survive the burdens of worldwide pollution that plague the ways of industrial progress. When you consider how much such "effluence" is almost inevitable in such highly developed technologic enterprises as oil refineries, pulp mills, chemical plants—in sum, the profuse production of power by the mining and processing of minerals, the use of agriculture for industrial purposes, and the consumption of either fossil fuels or atomic energy—it becomes hard to imagine how such trends can be adequately neutralized so long as *Hypertechnologism* continues to set the pace for mankind's way of life. And the most violent of communist or fascist revolutions are far from the depths of radicalism that would have to be reached before the adventurous ideals of exploitation that are associated with modern industrial, financial, and political ambitions could

be transformed into modes of restraint, piety, gratitude, and fear proper to man's awareness of his necessary place in the entire scheme of nature. Add also the grim fact that so many government bureaus, in response to the pressure of private lobbies, function as representatives of those very interests whose excesses they are nominally designed to control.

Frankly, I enroll myself among those who take it for granted that the compulsiveness of man's technologic genius, as compulsively implemented by the vast compulsions of our vast technologic grid, makes for a self-perpetuating cycle quite beyond our ability to adopt any major reforms in our ways of doing things. We are happiest when we can plunge on and on. And any thought of turning back, of curbing rather than aggravating our cult of "new needs," seems to us suicidal, even though the situation is actually the reverse, and it is our mounting technologic clutter that threatens us.

But I do not despair. For a true futurism is now dawning among us. The promise of the gospel of Total Futuristic Promotion is most quickly announced in a parable-like observation of this sort: When you find that, within forty years, a great and almost miraculously handsome lake has been transformed into a cesspool, don't ask how such destruction might be undone. That would be to turn back—and we must fare ever forward. Hence, with your eyes fixed on the beacon of the future, rather ask yourselves how, if you but polluted the lake ten times as much, you might convert it into some new source of energy. Thus, conceivably, you might end up by using the rotted waters as a new fuel. Or, even better, they might be made to serve as raw material for some new kind of poison, usable either as a pesticide or to protect against unwholesome political ideas.

There you glimpse the principle behind the vision. In sum: If there is a drive, why not drive with it, towards an ideal end? We need but extend to "perfection" the sort of conditions we already confront in principle when we buy bottled water because the public water supply is swill; or when a promoter, by impairing the habitability of some area (as, for instance, with a smeltery or a jetport), makes profit enough to build himself a secluded, idyllic estate among still uncontaminated lakes, meadows, and wooded peaks.

For a happy ending, then, envision an apocalyptic development whereby technology could of itself procure, for a fortunate few, an ultimate technological release from the very distresses with which that very technology now burdens us.

III THE SOLUTION: THE CULTURE-BUBBLE

Some give a decent life on Earth ten years, some thirty, some at most a hundred. In any case, now that the Irreversible Change is on the way, get in on the ground floor. Buy shares for yourself or your family in Helhaven, the greatest apocalyptic project this side of Mars.

HELHAVEN, the Mighty Paradisal Culture-Bubble on the Moon. Safer than any Sea Meadows venture (even under the Arctic ice) More nearly attainable than a Martian project, HELHAVEN, the Ultimate Colony, merging in one enterprise, both Edenic Garden and Babylonian, Technologic Tower. And paradox of paradoxes: This Final Flight will have been made possible by the very conditions which made it necessary.

Profiting by the best resources of both the physical and the social sciences, along with experts of administrative and managerial capacity, the colonists' range of options will be considerable. Some will, of course, prefer accommodations in the Luna-Hilton Hotel. Some will choose private quarters, as in suburbs (if that's how their past experience makes them feel most at home). But there will also be arrangements whereby dwellings can be equipped with picture windows looking out, as it were, upon the wholly lifelike illusion of an austere mountain scene, or a deserted lake, either distant, or with waters that seem to lap at the piles on which the house itself is built.

Also, in one compartment of the bubble, there will be an actual man-made shoreline, with waves, and breakers, splendid for surfing, and the best white sand for luxuriating on the beach (though protected from the sun and exposed only to a scientifically designed substitute). In another compartment, there will be the simulacrum of an Alpine cabin reached by a ski tow, with an artificially snow-covered slope that makes possible the most delightful of earthly winter sports. There will be dream-gardens, gambling joints, places to get lost in, and a Super-Lookout, about which more in a moment.

The lessons already learned from air-conditioning on Earth will have been so perfected that each such area will be kept in proper climatic balance. However, experts in psychophysical problems have also recommended that various Chambers of Discomfort be provided, since some consultants have pointed out that too orderly a mode of existence can itself become a source of personal disorder. But there is still some debate as to whether a Whipping Room should be made available for customers so inclined—or should I say two Whipping Rooms, one active, one passive?

Among the most deeply probing facilities in the Culture-Bubble will be the above-mentioned Super-Lookout, a kind of chapel, bare except for some small but powerful telescopes of a special competence. And on the wall, in ecclesiastical lettering, there will be these fundamental words from the *Summa Theologica*: "And the blessed in Heaven shall look upon the sufferings of the damned, that they may love their blessedness the more." The underlying situation here is this:

In order that the Lunar Bubble be kept perfectly provisioned (and we are being frank about such matters because we want you to realize how scrupulously this entire project is being planned), there will still be the necessity that gases, minerals, and even some organic growths be reclaimed now and then from Earth. Thus the New Colonialism will entail frequent missions back to our Maternal Source for such replacements. Increased experience in the use of spacecraft will make it certain that the trip itself will not be dangerous. But the possibility of encountering a nasty band of still-surviving hominids will add risk to these forays, and give them somewhat the quality of marauding expeditions (though the expression is obviously unjust; for any Lunar Paradisiacs of the future will be but replenishing their gigantic womblike Culture-Bubble, as it were, from the placenta of the Mother Earth from which their very body temperature is derived, and which is just as much our home, however filthy we shall have made it before clearing out, as it is the home of any scurvy anthropoid leftovers that might still somehow contrive to go on hatching their doubtless degenerate and misshapen broods back there among those seven filthy seas).

The bold fellows employed by the Bubble's Great Astronauts Corporation will be entrusted with such adventurous duties of salvaging. And those subscribers who at times choose to enter the Dark Realm of Meditation in the Super-Lookout Chapel can, while watching the Astronauts in their flights to Earth, get occasional glimpses of the worse-than-Yahoos still gasping and squirming and pestering one another on the Progress-gutted planet by which our Lunar Paradise will originally have been made possible.

In all frankness, however, one problem has yet to be solved. Since Technologism is to be tied in with Imperialism, one can reasonably expect that descendants from certain construction workers on, say, a Martian Promotion or a Sea-Bottom Meadows project might want to pick a fight with the peace-loving Lunar Paradisiacs. It has not yet been decided whether plans should also allow for the possibility that future expansionistic-minded Lunar patriots might want to undertake a pre-

ventive war and at the same time extend the scope of Helhaven's hegemony. The cost of the whole Lunar project would be increased astronomically if such defenses had to be provided for, rather than the fairly negligible offensive weapons required when our peace-loving expeditions abroad seek to outwit the feeble resistance of the remaining subnormal Earth-organisms. We must be realistic in such matters. It's hard to believe that homo sap. will ever learn to be, in his very essence, peaceful. For by sheer definition it stands to reason that homo sap. is a sap.

ENVOI: NOCTURNE WITH NOISE

Spring springs among us, on this sod,
Spring vs. Total Fall—
and may there be some kind of God,
that He have mercy on us technologic all.

ADDENDUM: ANTICLIMACTIC RUMINATIONS

Reverting to the subject of the computer, I'd note that it has already had great influence in the shaping of doctoral dissertations. There is almost an automatic tendency to work up a postgraduate project built around some kind of questionnaire whereby not the student but the persons questioned must do the bulk of the work. Recently, in a related sort of enterprise, I was interviewed for three hours, while all my answers were being taped. Occasionally the interviewer would say, "In sum, your position is such-and-such." I said, "No, that's not what I meant." Then I was told, "But there are only so-and-so many answers here, and I must check off one of them." So presumably the statistics have me assigned to the category best suited to the needs of the questionnaire, which had no exact bin for my answers. Then the interviewer left me with an elaborate set of blanks to fill out besides. There were such questions as: "With whom have you talked seriously about this matter (a) within the last three months, (b) within the last six months, (c) within the last year?" Or there'd be a list of a dozen or so possibly causative factors for something, and I was asked to rate them in relative importance, 1, 2, 3, throughout them all. I meant to behave, but simply fell apart. Having received a follow-up inquiry on July 3, I couldn't resist demurring the very next morning, and dating my letter "Independence Day" I said that, just as some people are not especially photogenic, some not especially phonogenic, and some not especially apt kinesics-wise, I find myself totally nonquestionnaireogenic. Even so, the questionnaire was sent to me in toto once again.

Returning to my vision of the "Remnant," in Helhaven, there are at least two more points that I'd like to incorporate into this scheme somehow.

The first has to do with the fact that the ever-intensifying cult of industrial power is robbing the world of many delicious natural flavors, as when oil spills and thermal pollution destroy good fishing areas. One angle I thought of was to boast that "some chemists, fired by the Helhaven vision, have nearly perfected a way of so treating mercury that it tastes like caviar. Another expert, taking to heart the thought that people like barbecued meat, has nearly synthesized an all-bituminous steak. Along these lines, the denizens of Helhaven can be promised a food supply wholly industrialized, plus an artificial stomach better able to digest such products." These promises are based on the fact that already many substitutes and additives from the chemical laboratory have been replacing unadulterated organic foods ever since we got Mom out of the kitchen and into the office or workshop.

Also, it must be recognized: To a great extent, conservationists are not in need of jobs that cause pollution. Their properties thrive better under simpler conditions. But people out of work will welcome an industry that seems likely to provide them employment, even though they might be quite aware that it will cause much contamination. In such situations, we must face it, the unemployed poor are one with the French monarch who said, "After me, the deluge." It's a mean problem.

But in any case, let there be no turning back of the clock. Or no turning inward. Our vice president has rightly cautioned: *No negativism*. We want AFFIRMATION—TOWARDS HELHAVEN
ONWARD, OUTWARD, and UP!

NOTES

This essay was first published in the *Sewanee Review* 79 (winter 1971): 11-25. Copyright 1971 by the University of the South. Reprinted with the permission of the editor.