

Joachim Koester / Matthew Buckingham
Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State
2001

Section 2/11

I asked people I met about their experience living in the Free City. I got into the habit of carrying a small tape recorder with me. If they agreed, I would tape our conversation. I met a DJ named Thomas who played music on the Christiania Radio station, which was the first alternative to Danish State Radio. He had grown up in Christiania and I made an appointment with him for an interview. When we met, I asked him how long he had lived at Christiania? He said, "about 16 years." I asked him if he'd ever lived anywhere else? "Yes," he said, "two years in Bornholm..." As I listened I thought about what it means to speak, which sounds a bit simplistic, I admit, but still it did take Marcel Proust three thousand pages to come to the conclusion that he was a writer and that he did have the ability to narrate his own life. Sitting with Thomas I saw how I was trying to understand myself, in the context of Christiania, by listening to the experiences of someone else. But, just as we assume certain places exist, we also assume that someone is speaking.

One day I was sitting alone at Nemoland. A very tall man nearby got up and slowly approached me, staring suspiciously at the microphone in my hand. I said to him—"You want to know what I'm doing." He refused to answer, and stepped closer, towering over me. He bent down and carefully opened the fingers of my left hand which were curled around the small tape recorder. He saw that the tape was not moving—that I was not recording anything. I silently pointed to the tape-counter, where the numbers were stationery—neatly lined up at "zero, zero, zero". He ignored my gesture and calmly unplugged the microphone from the recorder. Stepping back a bit he looked me in the eye and said "Now I can speak."

He told me he would address me in Swedish, guessing correctly that I am from Gothenburg. He said he'd noticed me around Christiania and wanted to know what I was doing here. He considered me highly suspicious, and in a warning tone he told me there are three types of people in Christiania: sympathizers, dependents, and opportunists. Then he asked me: "Which are you?"

Thinking that one could say this about any place, I replied, half-joking, that I didn't know yet. This made him even more skeptical of me. He told me I should make sure never to photograph him, that no one ever had, and that I could never record his voice. The only person who had done that regretted it, he said. At the end of our conversation he told me his name was Beowulf.

I read the epic poem, Beowulf, in a class called Classics of English Literature while I was a high-school exchange student in Valley Hill, Minnesota. For me, what was even more interesting than the poem itself was the experience of reading it in the frozen Northern United States. The winter days there were slightly longer than they are in Sweden or here, but the arctic air made it twice as cold. My host family, Mary and Richard Bowman, lived at the edge of a new suburban development with their daughter Ruth who was a year younger than me.

Late at night I would sit at the desk in my bedroom reading Beowulf, periodically looking out the window into the black winter night, my head filled with lake-monsters, giants, and dragons. I imagined all of the action from the story taking place somewhere out there in the dark void in front of me. Thought itself can be anarchic and lawless, indifferent to authority, and sometimes it is the words themselves which reflect this, astonishing us with their au-

tonomy—somehow containing nothing and still provoking bursts of meaning:

"Svart natt föll, och täckte mig i mörker."

"Natten faldt sort, og dækkede mig i mørke."

"Black night fell, and covered me in Darkness."

Etymologically the letter 'u' in Utopia makes it a paradoxical concept. This is because Thomas More borrowed this letter from two different Greek prefixes: E-U, meaning happy; and O-U, meaning nowhere, in effect coining a word which implies that the ideal society is a happy place to be found nowhere. This paradox forms the essence of the literary model of Utopia, which is formulated as a criticism of the present moment. The original intention of Utopia was not to provide a blue-print for realizing an ideal society, but to establish a discourse in the gap created when the ideal confronts the real. This is why, strictly speaking, to question Utopia by asking "does it work?" or "is it really Utopian?" is misleading.

But historically, Utopia, as a literary catalyst for social and political change, was quickly drawn into different efforts to actualize Utopia. These attempts were sobering in many cases—what was theorized in the Renaissance, developed in the Enlightenment, and tested in the nineteenth century often became dystopian in the twentieth century. Utopia, defined as the search for the ideal society is, in its singularity, immediately problematic—the 'ideal society' for whom?

This is why some people say that ideal cities are doomed to remain uninhabited, or if inhabited, find themselves gradually submerged in life, no different from life pure and simple.

As a teen-ager from Sweden, Minnesota was deeply alienating to me, but Looking at the homes and parents of other kids at school, the Bowman family was very ordinary by American standards. The only thing really out of character at the family's house was the old European sports car in the back yard which was slowly rotting into the ground. This was one of Richard's long-term projects, dating all the way back to his college days, which had been allowed to hang around without ever really progressing at all. This eye-sore was in the far corner of the back yard, behind a woodpile which I think was supposed to hide it. It was the last sign of civilization in the neighborhood.

At that point the enormous pattern of square yards with their rectangular houses came to an abrupt end. Beyond the Bowman family's property was a vast undifferentiated bumpy field of weeds and dried dirt hills, destined some day, I suppose, to be leveled out, filled with new houses, and annexed to the neighborhood. But for the moment this empty space extended almost as far as the eye could see. Almost. In the far distance, nearly out of sight, stood the Valley Hill Shopping Mall, the largest shopping mall in North America, at the time, which could only have meant, I suppose, that it was also the largest in the world.

When Spring finally arrived, this is where Jacob Mulberry and I would hang out. Jacob said it was like the space between two thoughts. It was our favorite place to meet. The atmosphere there reflected our feelings for each other. When I returned to Gothenburg at the end of that summer, Jacob was referred to by me, and everyone there, who heard of him, as my "American Boyfriend."

Byens Lys, Christiania
August 25th - September 15th 2019
thursday - sunday 3pm-7pm