

“Renewed in health”: Meeting Giordano Bruno on planet Mars

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Abstract

Journeys to the Planet Mars (1903) and *Decimon Huydas: A Romance of Mars* (1906) by American writer Sara Weiss (1834?-1904) can be placed between the great utopias of the late 19th century and the Golden Age of Science Fiction. Written in the same years when astronomer Percival Lowell published his volumes dedicated to planet Mars, these romances reflect an era which was torn between spiritism and rationality, patriarchal world and female emancipation. The journey to the Red Planet is carried out through psychic energy, and the place of arrival reveals surprising affinities with the Earth. Next to religion, sciences play a fundamental role. All the spirits encountered on Mars used to be either scientists or philosophers, and among them Giordano Bruno stands out as a great thinker and the defender of liberty of thought and speech. By implicitly expressing her concerns about the betrayal of the American Dream in the end-of-Frontier age, Weiss seems to remind today's readers of their own responsibilities as regards civil rights and migratory policies in the age of Mars frontier.

Keywords

Utopia, Science fiction, Planet Mars, American literature

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1. Mars Utopias

Among all the possible worlds ever imagined or described throughout the history of Anglo-American literature, a corpus of long-neglected novels stands out, which for some years I have set out to recover from oblivion and bring to critical attention (among the very few critics who show some knowledge of such novels, see Morton 2002, Markley 2005, Crossley 2011, and May 2017). They may not be considered masterpieces as regards their literary quality, yet I believe they are important cultural testimonies of an era that was experiencing both the end of the Frontier (and therefore the fear that the Dream of an advance without limits could be interrupted) and a notable development in technology and communications. It was also an era of deep changes in the field of civil rights and ecological awareness.

Unlike other novels which we can generally label “utopian”, what these novels (or romances) have in common is planet Mars. This should come as no surprise, since the fin-de-siècle saw the spread of what has been called a veritable “Mars mania” (Crossley 2011: ix) spread, prompted on the one hand by the creation of more powerful telescopes that allowed a better observation of the planet, and, on the other, by the very end of the Frontier – something that required the search for other Frontiers, that is, other territories that might allow the Americans to continue their march of expansion. At the first such expansion found fertile ground in the science fiction genre; it then moved to the space race during the cold war; and finally, after generations of cinema and television docudramas, it began to encourage real projects of exploration and terraforming (just a new variant of Crèvecoeur’s “transplantation”, see Calanchi 2021) of other planets. In 1998 the Mars Society was founded by Robert Zubrin with the precise aim to spread a culture of exoplanetary expansion and to make Mars a habitable

planet. Now that Mars is often defined as the new Frontier¹, what seemed impossible until some years ago is becoming likely to happen in the next decade, as can be gleaned from in the NASA daily reports. While the rush to outer space is growing more and more global and industry-oriented, it has become 'normal' to hear talks about space tourism, mineral extraction from asteroids, and greenhouses on the Red Planet.

However, going back to the end of the 19th century, my research led me to select some of the many titles available (thanks to the Project Gutenberg and the universities' digital archives, as most of these texts are out-of-print) which are all linked to the planet Mars, though described in different ways and from different perspectives – including wireless communication, séances, religion, sustainable urban planning, proto-feminist claims, and even veganism. This is a partial but already considerable list: *The Man from Mars* by William Simpson (1891), *Messages from Mars, By the Aid of the Telescope Plant* by Robert D. Braine (1892), *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance by Two Women of the West* by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant (1893), *A Cityless and Countryless World* by Henry Olerich (1893), *Daybreak: The Story of an Old World* by James Cowan (1896), *Edison's Conquest of Mars* by Garrett P. Serviss (1898), *To Mars With Tesla; or, the Mystery of the Hidden World* by J. Weldon Cobb (1901), *The Certainty of a Future Life in Mars. Being the Posthumous Papers of Bradford Torrey Todd* by Louis Pope Gratacap (1903), *Journeys to the Planet Mars* by Sarah Weiss (1903), *Lieut. Gullivar Jones: His Vacation* by Edwin Lester Linden Arnold (1905), *Decimon Huydas: A Romance of Mars* by Sara Weiss (1906), *The Lunarian Professor and His Remarkable Revelations Concerning the Earth, the Moon and Mars* by James B. Alexander (1909), *The Man from Mars, Or Service for Service's Sake* by Henry Wallace Dowding (1910), *Through Space to Mars, or The Longest Journey on Record* by Roy Rockwood (1910), *Ralph 124C 41+ A Romance of the Year 2660* by Hugo Gernsback (1911), *To Mars via the Moon. An Astronomical Story* by Mark Wicks (1911).

To these novels, I wish to add three remarkable essays written by astronomer Percival Lowell: *Mars* (1895), *Mars and Its Canals* (1906), and *Mars as the Abode of Life* (1908), the third of which describes the possibility that terrestrials could rebuild human civilization on Mars after they will have destroyed their own planet with increasingly invasive activities linked to «deforestation, channeling and communication» (Lowell 1908: 109). Lowell was unknowingly referring to what we now call the Anthropocene in

¹ This neocolonial approach is particularly common in the economic field. See for example Weinzierl 2018; Zubrin 2018; Williams 2019.

showing the risks that would actually lead to the accumulation of non-biodegradable materials, climate change, and other catastrophic events such as tsunamis, fires, and melting ice.

All of these works were in fact the last great utopian narratives and we can date them to before the advent of the typical dystopias of the 20th century and before the rise of science fiction. By problematizing hot topics such as ecology, ethics, social justice, and gender equality, these utopias reveal what could have been a way out of the rush towards the abyss of inequality, war, and final self-destruction. Unfortunately, these works were literally erased by decades of literary and filmic Martian invasions, which in the course of time have built a totally different (literary and visual) imagery based on the lexicon and syntax of colonization, violence, and oppression – a series of works ranging from *War of the Worlds* to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Independence Day* and *Mars Attacks!* (to name just a few), and whose scenarios are completely different from those we find in the works here analyzed. This utopian literature, moreover, dialogues not only with human imagination, but with science and technology, showing us how deeply utopian thinking, when matched with a scientific approach, has played a fundamental role in the construction of a better world. The socio-cultural imaginary they created, together with the economic and political reforms they systematically alluded to, could have radically influenced the path that, instead, led us to fear for human survival on our planet – and to worry about the possibility that we may repeat the same errors in the Outer Space (York 2005; Barbanti et al. 2017).

2. Travelling to Mars

The works I have chosen to focus on are respectively entitled *Journeys to the Planet Mars* (1903) and *Decimon Huydas: A Romance of Mars* (1906 posthumous). Their author was a certain Sara Weiss (1834 or 1850? -1904), who wrote them approximately in the same years Percival Lowell published his essays dedicated to Mars. Both novels (or romances) could be approached as projections of the desires and fears of Americans in an era which wavered between religion and science, spiritualism and rationality, world patriarchy and women's emancipation. There is very little information about the author's life. We know that she was the daughter of an Ohio farmer and that she grew up in a very religious family in which any education other than church instruction was discouraged. She married an Adolph M. Weiss, who worked for the United States Express Company of St. Louis, Missouri, and died in 1904 (ISFDP 2012).

Journeys to the Planet Mars was published in 1903. It could well have been influenced by a Swiss book dealing with psychic experiences and alleged reincarnations on the Red Planet – *From India to the Planet Mars* by professor of Psychology Théodore Flournoy (1900) – which was immediately translated and reviewed in the *North American Review* by James H. Hyslop, professor of Logic and Ethics at Columbia University. In his review, Hyslop acknowledged the remarkable quality of the work, though openly declaring his own dislike of Flournoy's tolerance of telepathy, telekinesis and clairvoyance (Hyslop 1900: 745). Some years later he went back to the subject in his review of Weiss's romance, where he claimed that «for a variety of reasons alleged communications from the planet Mars must have considerable interest» (Hyslop 1913: 273). He added that he was not interested at all in the question of whether the planet was inhabited or not: on the contrary, he was attracted by the subconscious creation of the phenomenon in the minds of those who believed it, together with the issue of survival after death. Hyslop's review quotes a private letter from Weiss's husband who explains that, though Sara was not a professional medium, «her book was a thing given or inspired or dictated» (*ibid.*: 275).

Journeys to the Planet Mars is a romance of more than 500 pages that includes thirteen illustrations of the alleged Martian flora. These beautiful flowers are an integral part of the book, which revolves around a series of mediumistic journeys to Mars (whose name is Ento, which means “chosen” or “set apart”, Weiss 1903: iv). In her other text, *Decimon Huydas: A Romance of Mars*, we find more or less the same elements. The narrative voice, which here belongs to a spirit from Ento (Genessano Allis Immo), is particularly fascinating. The idea behind both volumes is that technological progress will increase the possibilities of communicating with Mars through radio waves, magnetism, and developments in physics, and in this way will improve the already existing relationships between the spirits who inhabit Mars and the Earthlings. At the same time, the séance that triggers the departure to other worlds dispenses us from descriptions of improbable rockets and spaceships, while anticipating the most recent modes of interplanetary travel in science fiction (teleportation, hibernation, black-holes crossing, etc.).

In a perfect balance of picturesque and sublime, the two romances offer visions of an alternative world on the Red Planet, a place where the living and the dead can converse with each other. But there is more to this: going to Mars is a journey of health, since whoever goes to that planet will return to Earth «renewed in health» (Weiss 1903: 164), and on Mars «Right living engenders health» (*ibid.*: 324). That the concept of health strongly

emerges in both novels is partly explained by the existence, at the time, of a movement called Social Hygiene, «which emphasized improving health and moral control» (Kolmerten 1991: xi). Its main purpose was to keep venereal diseases under control, also through a firm opposition to prostitution, and this helps us understand how the health discourse was inextricably linked to a moralizing intent. Today, after a pandemic crisis has swept planet Earth, it feels a bit weird to come across a point in the story where a group of Martian students are said to be engaged in studying viruses:

In the adjoining class room other students are engaged in Microscopic examination of Cryptogamic growths. For a short time we will observe them. We perceive that the specimens are of various species found in moist localities, or in ponds or other sluggish waters. That their sporules, wafted by winds or through the agency of aquatic fowls, are borne from one locality to another. That some are known to be inimical to health, even to life, but that science has found means to oppose and render ineffectual their virulence. (Weiss 1903: 212)

In addition to biology, chemistry also plays an important role, being described as the very engine of life, so much so that health appears to depend precisely on a chemical balance: «I may say that chemical affinities are qualities inherent in all substances and in all organisms. Equilibrium of chemical affinities means health; the reverse means disease» (*ibid.*: 221).

Even though the journeys are of a paranormal nature, scientific thought is frequently highlighted through chemistry, botany, or geology: in fact, Ento reveals surprising affinities with the Earth in terms of geological formations and atmosphere. Furthermore, the psychic journeys made to Mars at the request of «friends from the both sides of life» (*ibid.*: IV) are properly defined as a «mission» (*ibid.*: V) and have the objective of providing terrestrial information of a scientific nature («scientific inquiry», *ibid.*; «investigation», *ibid.*; «investigations», *ibid.*: 2, 4, 5, etc.) aimed at obtaining «truth» and «knowledge» (*passim*). However, the latter are accessible only through a disembodied condition («only through the mediation of disembodied spirits can be obtained», *ibid.*: V; «there is a limit beyond which the physically embodied man cannot penetrate», *ibid.*).

The protagonist is a female Medium who encounters the spirit of Mr. Carl De L'Ester, who had been passionate about astronomy ever since he was a child. He is accompanied by a group of friends he defines as his «Band» (*passim*). Among them, we are introduced to the famous German geographer, naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859);

Louis Agassiz, a Swiss biologist and naturalist who emigrated to the USA (1807-1873) and a member of the editorial board of the prestigious *American Journal of Science*; and even «Darwin, [...] Bulwer Lytton, Giordano Bruno» (Weiss 1903: 66). We all know who Darwin is (*The Origin of the Species* had been published in 1859), while Edward Bulwer Lytton is less known: he was a conservative politician, viceroy in India from 1876 to 1880; a poet, a Rosicrucian esoteric, and the author of *The Coming Race* (1871), a controversial book which probably gave H.G. Wells the idea of underground shelters for his *The War of the Worlds*. As regard Giordano Bruno, we shall come back to him soon.

Except for the Medium, all characters are spirits, that is to say they are already dead at the time when the events begin to unfold, on October 6, 1892. This is important to note, since we enter a utopian dimension in which the bond of friendship transcends the limits imposed by the duration of life; and in fact, we learn almost immediately that through these journeys the boundaries between life and death are canceled, since «humans are as links of an unbreakable chain» (*ibid.*: 5). The characters often debate the difference between body and spirit, which is resolved in a way that seems to dialogue with contemporary physics rather than with theology: as the Medium explains, in fact, the spiritual body has as much «substance» as the physical body, even if more «fine»:

[...] the spirit body is as substantial as is the physical body, but of a finer expression of substance. You now are apart from your physical body, yet you are conscious that your spirit body is substantial, and where there is consciousness there is being, which is but another name for spirit. I may add that there is not an atom of the universe that is not, in a certain sense, conscious, hence, in a certain sense, individualized and intelligent. (*Ibid.*: 70)

This resonates with *The Tao of Physics* by Fritjof Capra (1975), but Weiss also anticipates the studies of Einstein, Heisenberg and the Copenhagen school, as well as Schrödinger. Today we know that – starting from the proof of the well-known formula $E = mc^2$ (Einstein 1905) – an equivalence between mass and energy was established, in the sense that the two can be converted into each other: the energy is transformed into mass (energy disappears and you find yourself with a particle that wasn't there before) and, vice versa, mass becomes energy (mass is lost, as in the splitting of atoms or in the merger of black holes, and you find energy) in the form of electromagnetic waves, heat, or gravitational waves. Therefore, the former

distinction between body (made of mass) and spirit (made of energy?) no longer exists, as the two are fundamentally convertible into one another. Similarly, it is no longer tenable to assume that a body is something tangible, while energy is impalpable: they can be said to be two aspects of the same thing, like water and steam. Leaving aside their different density, matter and energy are ultimately two faces of the same coin.

3. Close encounters

On planet Mars, the protagonists of the novel find themselves at the same latitude and longitude as St Louis, Missouri (Weiss 1903: 17, chapter II), but the flora and fauna are of gigantic proportions («luxuriant verdure and a wealth of grains and other vegetation», *ibid.*: 18). The Medium's astonishment at the similarity between us and other planets' life forms (chapter III) leads De L'Ester to affirm that we are a single universal family, as he refers to a «universal relationship», a «universal relationship of substance» [...], observing that «on Ento you will find the same humans [...] as you find on any planet» (*ibid.*: 40). Further on, von Humboldt recounts that, after passing away on Earth and travelling in spirit to various planets, he has been able to see that life is similar everywhere: «life germs of fauna and flora ever are the same» (*ibid.*: 56). He also adds that «the universe is indeed a unit [...]. I do assure you that in limitless space there are myriads of worlds» (*ibid.*: 57).

At the same time, the novel reiterates that the Martians are more "civilized": «the Entoans, as a whole, are more highly civilized than are the peoples of our planet» (*ibid.*: 45). For example, far fewer of them fall victim to superstition in comparison with Earthlings: «at this time among Earth's peoples [...] multitudes are held in the bonds of ecclesiastical legends and dogmas which ever obscure the truth, and superstition ever is where truth is not» (*ibid.*: 46). Also, «the Entoans as a whole are more highly evolved spiritually, hence more highly civilized, than are the peoples of Earth. In the arts, their attainments are productive of most excellent results. As much may be said of the sciences» (*ibid.*: 47). In a mix of Christian theology and ancient Greece paganism, Ento's Genesis revolves around an (ungendered) universal principle that underlies everything and created «Gods and Goddesses» (*ibid.*: 47-8). Gender equality seems to be implicit in Creation, and beauty is so overwhelming that De L'Ester jokingly says that «had the mythical garden been as beautiful as this the commendably inquisitive Eve would have been content with the prescribed diet and the amiable Adam would, to this day, be promenading under the Edenic trees» (*ibid.*: 63).

In chapter 5 we finally meet Giordano Bruno. To enjoy Weiss's story, it is not necessary to know every detail of the life of this famous Dominican friar, philosopher and astronomer, who lived from 1548 to 1600 and fell victim to the Inquisition; however, it is certainly useful to briefly retrace his biography to better appreciate the author's choice, which fell precisely on this champion of independent thinking and intolerance of dogmas. Giordano Bruno was a great traveler, a curious and devoted scholar, a cosmopolitan, and the author of a number of books such as the *Sigillus Sigillorum*, in which he argues for the unity of cognitive processes including magic, and *De Magia*, where he postulates that magic is nothing more than the study of the infinite multidimensional texture that exists in the universe. Alone against almost everyone else, he believed in the Copernican theory as well as in the infinity of the universe, an idea that failed to convince even Kepler and Galileo. Bruno always declared that instruments would never guarantee exact measurements, since the flow of things does not maintain an identical rhythm, one entity never keeping the same distance from the other, and he also endorsed the view of the non-generation of substances. For these arguments and for his convictions about the Sacred Scripture, the Trinity, and Christianity, Giordano Bruno was first excommunicated, then imprisoned, judged a heretic, and finally condemned to the stake by the Inquisition of the Catholic Church. He was burned alive in Piazza Campo de' Fiori on 17 February 1600, during the pontificate of Clement VIII.

In Weiss's novel, De L'Ester prepares for the arrival of Giordano Bruno by talking about energy and underlining the close link existing between atoms and the universe, which sounds close to the theory of entanglement:

[...] the Infinite Intelligent Energy compels each and every atom to assume its orderly relation to all other atoms. Further, that indeed, atoms are embryotic universes, each atom containing within itself all the properties which anywhere exist, and any one atom may form the nucleus about which other atoms may congregate, until a world is in process of formation. (Weiss 1903: 80-1)

Then Bruno is introduced to the Medium:

De Lester – [...] We have not yet informed you that a dear friend, a member of our Band, is to meet us here, and at any moment he may arrive. No, you have not yet met him, but Ah, here he comes! Hail! hail! and a welcome from all. Madame, this is Giordano Bruno, of whom I doubt not you have some knowledge. We are delighted that you are to

have the pleasure of a mutual acquaintance.

Bruno – Madame, I kiss your hand and shall be honored if I may place you among my closest friends. (*Ibid.*: 86)

At this point we find a long, passionate speech in which Bruno recalls the tortures he suffered in his native land and concludes by expressing the hope that freedom of expression will always be maintained in the land of America. However, anyone expecting to find a treatise on cosmology or philosophy, will experience a certain disappointment:

Bruno – I am charmed, madame, that henceforth I shall have a place in the Band of which you are the valued instrument. Since my entrance into our spirit world, I have experienced much pleasure in visiting this and other Planets, but seldom have I desired to return to our own sorrowful Star. Memories of the terrible, woeful torture that freed me from my physical body have disinclined me to look upon the land of my birth. Ah, how often recollections of that sorrowful time force themselves upon my consciousness. Never have I been able to forget the hour when, rather than renounce what I knew to be a truth, I yielded up my mortal existence. But Giordano Bruno lives. [...] Despite Papal excommunication and condemnation to eternal torment, Giordano Bruno lives in a realm so surpassingly fair that even tongue of archangel cannot declare the glory thereof. (*Ibid.*: 87)

Bruno does not indulge in recalling the pains he went through, which are mentioned to be soon superseded by his conviction that life does not end with death and that there is actually an infinite number of lives and worlds. Rather, Bruno chooses to concentrate on the real theme of his plea, that is, freedom of thought and speech. This is a kind of freedom well known to Americans, as testified to by his admiration for the young republic and its turning into a "refuge" for the persecuted:

Madame, will you bear from me a message to the peoples of your native land? [...] Children of earth's most favored land, children of America, I, Giordano² Bruno, once a citizen of sun-kissed Italy, greet you. Rejoice unceasingly that freedom of thought and speech are yours. Guard jealously this priceless blessing which through centuries of bloodshed, torturing flames and agony unspeakable has become your heritage. Glorious indeed are your United States of America,

² Sara Weiss occasionally misspells the name "Giordano".

blest beyond expression in being as a “City of refuge” to the oppressed of other nations. [...]

I greet you, child Republic. Thou, indeed, art the brightest jewel in earth’s diadem of nations. Freedom is thy most precious possession; lest selfish greed and love of power may seek to wrest it from thee, wear it next thy heart. Swear by all that to you is sacred, that neither political nor religious intolerance shall find foothold upon your soil. Let your unalterable declaration be: Liberty of conscience, liberty of speech for all; license for no one. Cherish in your heart of hearts a love of justice, of forbearance, of toleration, of that charity which neither thinketh nor doeth evil, but permit no faction or Religion to interfere with your liberty of righteous action. (*Ibid.*: 87-8)

In the last part of his talk, Bruno hints that freedom is at risk. By alluding to “aristocracy”, he wants to warn his terrestrial listener about the fragility of democracy, not only in the United States but in the “entire continent” and for “all the peoples of our planet”:

Insidiously, aristocratic ideas are striving to cross the threshold of your Temple of Equality. Guard well its doorways. Sacrilegious hands are seeking to smirch the records of your courts of justice; let your vengeance fall swiftly upon the offenders. On the fair face of your Goddess of Liberty there is a troubled frown; beware lest die turn from you in anger. Spotless is her snowy robe, children of earth’s greatest Republic. See to it. See to it that in the coming years you shall not stain it with your heart’s best blood. [...] Madame, our spirit realms are deeply interested, not only in the progress of the United States of North America, but of the entire continent. It is a matter for regret that your people do not more fully realize that they are an object lesson for all the other nations of Earth. The heart-beats of your Republic send a vitalizing current through all the peoples of our planet. How all-important then, that this life current shall flow’ unpolluted to the hearts and brains of all nations. (*Ibid.*: 88)

Quite interestingly, at the end of the meeting Bruno gives the Medium a Martian name, “Gentola”, which – as specified some pages before – means in Ento «lady, friend, gentle, loving, kind, beloved and the like» (*Ibid.*: 84):

Madame, through your kindly attention to my words you have made me your debtor, but I feel assured that if these friends can

bear with me, I may ask as much of your courtesy. Now, with your permission, we propose conferring on you a new name. In madame there is no comradeship. Medium you do not fancy. Sara is somewhat familiar. Gentola, an Ento name, we consider very appropriate. Will you allow us to know you by this name, whose significance you understand? Yes? Then with Love and Truth as sponsors, you shall be to us Gentola. (*Ibid.*: 89)

This is an unprecedented, secular, even heretical baptism – since it is carried out by a character who was excommunicated and then executed in his human life. Furthermore, the fact of giving a new name to a woman is not a simple act of male gallantry (as in the previous hand-kiss), but an official welcome into a special brotherhood no longer made up of men only.

4. An agenda for the future

At this point we are faced with a kind of bifurcation: the 'other possible world', that of utopia, is no longer Mars but America, provided it will not abjure the principles on which it was founded. The image of the United States as a place of welcome, justice, tolerance, and charity is, in fact, put at risk by certain "aristocratic ideas" which are not made explicit in the text, but which can easily be traced back to American politics in the years when Weiss wrote the novel.

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, the United States was becoming the greatest industrial power in the world. Finance capitalism was also at its peak, thanks to the constant acquisition of labor from Europe and the establishment of monopolies. Starting from the 1880s, socialist ideas and worker protests spread, but the first signs of a change in migration policies were also noticed: in a nation of immigrants, immigrants began to be less welcome. After decades of unreserved acceptance, in 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Law was passed, followed by a first Immigration Act which restricted access to Europeans by excluding criminals, the sick, "convicts", "lunatics", "those likely to become a public charge" (LPC, a label that applied above all to women traveling alone), and in general «any person unable to take care of him or herself» (Immigration History website).

In 1891 a second Immigration Act increased the controls and also the list of excludable or deportable immigrants. In 1894 the Immigration Restriction League was founded; inspired by social Darwinism and the principles of eugenics, this league made various requests including a literacy test to keep the so-called "nonassimilating and undeserving" out of the

United States, i.e. mainly people from Southern Europe. In 1903, the year Weiss's novel was published, the third Immigration Act was passed, which «identified anarchists as targets for exclusion and made provision for their removal if detained after entry». Quite clearly, the attitude towards other possible worlds was linked to instances of social justice that seem very familiar to us today (see Immigration History website).

How would Weiss have reacted to the expansion of the Mexican – USA barrier under the Trump administration in 2017? What would she have thought about the anti-immigrant movement that, «once relegated to more extreme quarters, increasingly mainstreamed over the last ten years» (ADL 2022)? How would she feel about what Matthew Stewart calls “the 9.9%”, that is the “New Aristocracy” who owns the majority of wealth and is responsible for most inequalities on the planet (2021)? Though some further research would be helpful, it seems to me that a preliminary consideration can be made as regards this important chapter of a book which, I believe, ought not to be set aside and forgotten.

Firstly, the Earth-Mars journey takes place thanks to mediumistic powers: therefore, it is a psychic experience that requires neither physical movement (as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, 1915), nor hypnosis (as in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, 1888), but involves the intervention of a Medium, in her double role as a woman and a cultural mediator.

Secondly, in this utopia there is not just one single possible world outside our own, but there are many of them: the first is the *cosmic world*, made up of many planets all inhabited, including the planet Mars, similar to the Earth but distinguished by a more evolved civilization from the point of view of health, gender equality and religious freedom; another one consists in the *dimension* in which living and dead terrestrials can coexist and meet beyond the nationalities, languages, and periods in which they lived; a third one regards the *political sphere*, or more precisely the United States, not as it is but as it should be or should continue to be.

Lastly, I find it quite remarkable that the author, an American woman who had had access only to religious books in her life, should focus her attention on Giordano Bruno – an Italian friar who lived in the 1500s and was burned alive as heretic – to defend freedom of expression in *her own* country. We must not forget that the right to vote was acquired by women only in 1920 in the USA, and that, last but not least, the copyright of her novel was her husband's, not hers. I wish to link these considerations to the last pages of the book (451 ff.), which include a glossary, a list of translations of numbers, and even a grammar of the 'Ento' language. In my opinion, these pages, if we relate them to the floral tables, actually reflect two

clear aims: 1, to indicate to readers the similarities between the two worlds – Earth and Mars – and 2, to approach the inevitable differences through the creation of a dictionary that is very reminiscent of Roger Williams's *Key into the Language of America* (1643), the first attempt to linguistically interact with the Native Americans of New England and envisage intercultural communication (mediation?).

I might be wrong, but I believe that Weiss, in introducing her readers to other possible worlds, had the main objective of opening their minds so as to welcome science but also parapsychology, religion but also politics. She wished to help them become citizens capable of acting, on interlinguistic and intercultural levels, for the maintenance and protection of freedom and civil rights. Hyslop concluded his review by saying that it was impossible at that time «to pronounce any final judgment on such works. The time has not yet come to estimate their meaning» (Hyslop 1913: 283). Today we have moved even further from spiritism, and the rovers we sent to Mars are sending no proofs of dead souls walking on its surface. However, we have learnt to interpret utopia as a powerful means to keep human hopes alive. We have learnt to appreciate the works of the past without condemning their errors, but rather by giving value to their visions. And, from such literary 'possible worlds' as Weiss's Mars, we should also have learnt to honor and preserve justice, freedom, and equity more than profit and greed.

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