A STUDY IN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY: SOCIAL CRITICISM THROUGH THE LENS OF UCHRONIA IN KEITH ROBERTS' *PAVANE*[1]

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We often question how, our present would diverge if events in our past –or further behind in history– had occurred differently, leading to an altered outcome. In short, we often question: what if? That is why alternative histories – uchronias– are so appealing: they allow us to attempt to answer that question and explore some of its limitless possibilities, as well as to consider the present from a different perspective. In Pavane (1968), Keith Roberts reimagines a world in which, in 1588, the Spanish Armada succeeds in conquering Britain after the assassination of Elizabeth I, resulting in the unquestionable worldwide supremacy of the Catholic Church. From that point of divergence, the author builds up an alternative present in which the ripples of that specific alteration can be felt almost 400 years later, characterised by a feudal-based society that is politically, morally, and scientifically

stagnated. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse how Roberts constructs an alternative scenario following some strategies typical of the uchronian genre. Moreover, this article seeks to examine how this alternative version of history enables him to comment on, and criticise, the influence that religious fanaticism and tyrannical power have on the different sectors of the population. Thus, the analysis will study how alternative history can be employed as an interesting tool that allows us to examine, not only our past, but our present as well.

Keywords: uchronia; alternate history; allohistory; Pavane; Keith Roberts.

1. Introduction

It is part of human nature to wonder if and how our present could have potentially been different if an episode in our personal past – or even further behind in history– had occurred otherwise, causing a ripple effect whose aftermath could be felt even today. The development of uchronian narratives arises from a demand to satisfy the curiosity and fascination regarding the outcome of past events and the potential influence on our present. According to Karen Hellekson's definition, alternate histories –or uchronias– "revolve around the basic premise that some event in the past did not occur as we know it did, and thus, the present is changed" (2000, 248), and from there, they explore the subsequent ramifications.

One of such works, is Keith Roberts' *Pavane* (1968). In it, Roberts creates a world in which, after Elizabeth I's assassination in 1588, the Spanish Armada succeeds in conquering Britain. This episode, in turn, leads to a scenario in which the geopolitical landscape of Europe –and thus, much of the known world– is significantly reshaped. Consequently, religious and political power is further strengthened and consolidated by the Catholic Church, or as it is known in the novel,[2] The Mother Church. From that shift in

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[2] Although throughout this paper, the main text is to be referred to as a novel, it is worth mentioning that, as it will be explained later, it is

history –or as it is known in uchronian theory, the point of divergence– the author crafts an alternative throughout which he speculates about the consequences and impact of the development of those events almost 400 years later, in 1968.

Bearing all this in mind, the aim of this paper is to analyse the way in which Roberts constructs an allohistorical scenario following the parameters used typically within the uchronian subgenre. I shall explore how in this new version of 'history' that the author presents, this divergence in the course of historical events affects the society that arises as a result of it, and how the picture Roberts paints highlights the contemporary concerns about socio-political matters in his present.

2. Theoretical framework

Often included within the broad scope of science fiction, and generally considered one of its sub-genres, alternative history presents an essential historical contradiction at its core: a deviation from what we know –or think we know– to be 'true', at least according to official historiography, thus constructing what Brian Fay calls an "unconventional history" (2002, 1). From that essential premise, we can identify several different types of counterfactual narratives. For instance, William Joseph Collins classifies allohistories into four major groups in relation to the subject's position: "pure uchronia", "plural uchronia" –which places reality and the alternative side by side–, "infinite presents" –in which several parallel worlds may appear–, and "time-travel alterations" (1990, 85-86). However, Hellekson suggests, instead, a different taxonomy, which focuses on the "moment of the break" or the so-called point of divergence: she proposes "nexus stories" (which she further divides between time travel and battle stories), "true alternate history", and "parallel world" stories (2000, 251). She describes true alternate history stories as those that are set "years after a change in a nexus event, resulting in a radically changed world" (2000, 253),

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composed of a series of interlinked short stories, united by a prologue and a coda.

and through which the different ramifications of that point of divergence can be examined. This is precisely what Roberts explores in *Pavane*.

In this respect, Gavriel Rosenfeld states that the rise of uchronias very rarely happens in an isolated manner, but they rather emerge in waves in times when they feel necessary (2002, 93). It comes as no surprise, then, that this proliferation of uchronian fiction in the latter half of the twentieth century responded to a curiosity about the past that, more often than not, originates as the result of socio-economic, or political uncertainty during their conception. In fact, he regards allohistories as "documents of memory" (2002, 93). Furthermore, Grant Rodwell adds that the popularity of these narratives "marks a growing acceptance of the great need to experiment in our approaches to history" (2013, 98).

Consequently, alternative histories seek to either praise or denounce our present situation by comparing it, either favourably or negatively, to other potential realities. In his *Metamorphoses*, Darko Suvin proposes the idea of "cognitive estrangement" and highlights it as a core characteristic within science fiction. For Suvin, the genre has the significant effect of separating or "estranging" us from our usual assumptions about reality; particularly, in the case of uchronias, the estrangement arises "out of an alternative historical hypothesis" (49), which allows us to approach, consider, and rethink our own historical present.

In this vein, two types of models can be observed in uchronia according to Rosenfeld, who distinguishes between nightmare –dystopian– and fantasy –utopian– scenarios. He claims that allohistories that follow a "nightmare scenario" depict the past as being noticeably more negative and unfortunate, while "fantasy scenarios" do the exact opposite. The former, upholds the present in comparison to the past, and the latter, criticises and challenges it (2002, 90). Furthermore, he adds that each category implies a different political view. On the one hand, fantasy scenarios, in elevating the past and inevitably finding the present lacking, tend to have a more "liberal" approach to their questioning of our current social and political situation. On the other hand, nightmare scenarios, in exalting the present over the past, generally reinforce

the past choices that have led to it, thus being considered much more conservative in their assessment of the present (2002, 93). Because uchronia stems from a sense of dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, we might have expected utopic scenarios to be the norm. However, Rosenfeld also points out, nightmare scenarios sometimes can be "used for the liberal purpose of critique" (2002, 93), which is exactly what we find in Roberts' alternative world, and in many other allohistorical works. By approaching the present from a more favourable light against the past, it does not necessarily mean that the intention behind it is to justify actual past historical events or behaviours, but rather to simply reflect on the way history could have had a different outcome. Therefore, this allows, as Neil Easterbrook points out, to open the present "to critical thought in a way that few works of mainstream realism can" (2006, 484), precisely because of the "estranging" effect it has on the reader, as Suvin previously argued.

Taking this into account, and as far as thematic interest goes, there are a few frequent topics or events that are used time and again as settings for allohistorical narratives. It is not hard to believe, then, that the most recurrent counterfactuals are often related to events such as wars, or assassinations of key figures in history. Without a doubt, the exploration of a different resolution of World War II, particularly portraying a Nazi victory, is perhaps the most common point of divergence within the uchronian subgenre (Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* [1962], or Robert Harris' *Fatherland* [1992]). However, other popular counterfactuals revolve around episodes such as the American War of Independence, the American Civil War, or the Cold War, among others. This highlights the fact that alternate narratives often focus on, as Kathleen Singles has argued, historical events with "most significant and wide-reaching consequences" (2013, 49). If we concentrate on Britain, Nicholas Gevers comments on the fact that events such as the Reformation, and the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism –capitalism and its apparent progressive nature versus what he calls "Papist tyrannical stagnation" (1997, 175)– are very often explored is British uchronias due to their significance for the nation. By altering the results of this rather crucial moment in British history authors

can "interrogate the very idea of progress and consider alternatives" (1997, 174), as the analysis shall explore.

It is hardly surprising, then, that authors such as Roberts decide to examine this very idea in works such as *Pavane*. According to Amy Ransom, the novel "explicitly extrapolates how European society might look based on the victory of the Spanish Armada in the sixteenth-century", after rapidly succumbing to the growing power and influence of the Vatican (2010, 274). Interestingly, rather than developing a more traditional narrative structure, *Pavane* reads as a collection of six stories –measures– framed by a prologue and a coda. However, although we have the feeling that we are dealing with separate narratives, there is a common thread that binds them together chronologically through, mainly, the presence of different generations of the Strange family. Following a different character, each of these stories focuses on a particular aspect within this allohistorical Catholic world, exploring in depth the influence that religious fanaticism and tyrannical power have on the different sectors of the population. Eventually, this oppressive order causes social, cultural, economic, and scientific regression, until the systems in place cannot longer hold once technological, cultural, and social progress threatens to catch up, and revolution becomes inevitable.

Contrarily to this rather ominous context, in general terms, the 1960s in Britain were a period of improvement and modernisation: the country's economy had recovered from the devastation and ruin of World War II. There seemed to be a period of freedom in all social areas: women were able to enter the workforce and enjoyed more liberties than ever before, an improved healthcare and education systems became more widely available, and the country was open to a more globalised world. Regarding politics, the Labour Party was gaining power in parliament (Harold Wilson won the elections in 1964), and more forward-thinking policies started to be implemented: abortion was legalised *de facto* in 1967, and the death penalty was effectively banned in 1969. At the same time, this was a decade marked by political unrest worldwide: protests against the Vietnam War were rampant, the Cold War stretched on, and several key political figures were

assassinated, among them John F. Kennedy (1963) and Martin Luther King Jr. (1968). In Britain, many former colonies were progressively gaining their independence –particularly in Africa–, while other anti-colonial movements campaigned for the definitive end of the British empire. All of them events, that, one way or another, inform the atmosphere of turmoil that permeates *Pavane*.

3. Analysis

3.1 Fiction as a Response to Reality

Something that is at the very core of most uchronias is the so-called point of divergence. In the case of *Pavane*, as it has been discussed so far, this point of divergence –from which the historical narrative deviates– is made quite clear and recognisable in the prologue: the success in the assassination of Elizabeth I, and the subsequent conquest of Britain by the Spanish Armada. From that moment on, a new allohistorical line opens in which the consequences and repercussions of that temporal alteration are significantly different from the official historiographical version of events that has come down to us. Thus, we have what is known as a "counterfactual history". As Scott L. Roberts states, this counterfactual history occurs in works in which the point of divergence is related to historically 'realistic' circumstances, in this case, the assassination of a relevant historical figure (2011, 117). In terms of how the point of divergence presents itself in uchronias, Ramson proposes that it can be carried out "diegetically" –that is, more explicitly– or in a more implicit manner, throughout the different bifurcations from the 'real' history we can observe (2010, 259). Contrarily to *Pavane*, in other works the point of divergence is often not explicit from the start: we discover it as we become more familiar with the alternative world in which we find ourselves, and often we must trace the alternate history back in order to find the moment where everything changed.

In just two pages, Roberts situates the reader in a position where, when we approach the first measure set in 1968, we know exactly what has changed. After that, we witness how that deviation

from history has influenced the scenario presented –for better or worse–, and how different it is from our own. After this alteration, the political map of Europe has been completely redrawn under the power of the Holy Church, who rules with absolute dictatorial authority throughout the globe. By placing the point of divergence so far away from the present of the novel –and from the lifetime of the characters–, the author is able to completely explore the ripples caused by that divergence in a freer and more unrestricted way.

3.2 A Plausible Alternative?

Once we have established the exact point in which this counterfactual history branches out from the conventional account, the interesting part would be to see exactly in which ways the world Keith Roberts presents differs from the one we know to be true. To begin with, it goes without saying that Elizabeth I was, in fact, not assassinated, and went on to rule for another fifteen years until her death in 1603, further establishing Protestantism as the nation's religion. However, history shows us that her death for political reasons is not too far-fetched a possibility after all. According to Geoffrey Parker, there were at least twenty assassination plots on Elizabeth recorded during her lifetime, any of which, had they succeeded, would have profoundly compromised and influenced the historical and social future of Britain (2001, 150). Even though Protestantism and Lutheranism had been spreading out throughout Europe, most of the colonial powers at play on the European board –namely Spain and Portugal– were figureheads for Catholicism, and eager to bring England back into the fold. Had Elizabeth I's assassination succeeded, the prospect of Spain invading and conquering England –under the banner of the Catholic Church– would have been fairly plausible, as well as its aftermath. The way in which the author builds up this first part of the novel heavily relies on historically-rooted possibilities: the Catholic British population, heartbroken and grieving for the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, their last hope for the returning of the Catholic faith to England, would have taken arms against the Protestants and supported,

perhaps even welcomed, the Spanish invasion.[3] Rome then would have become even more powerful –with the assistance of other Catholic nations–, and the rest of Protestant states would soon have fallen in line.

Some authors question the plausibility of this alternative, arguing that this Catholic supremacy would have been challenged anyway by other Catholic states and monarchies, which would have "continued to assert themselves" in the European political landscape (Gevers 1997, 176). Nonetheless, this recognisable albeit alternate history does not seem to really continue past the prologue, where the reference to identifiable historical figures and events is reduced to a minimum. This defamiliarization estranges the reader, in Suvin's words, who is nonetheless able to recognise and establish the connections between the real and the fictional in order to compare one to the other.

3.3. A Different Version of Events

In the following six measures, the author depicts the situation in England in 1968, where the events of the first ("The Lady Margaret") take place, and then guides us throughout the next few decades up to an unspecified point in the future where the Coda is set. Through different characters, each measure focuses on a specific aspect of society: from the level of industrial development and the limitations of the communication systems used throughout the empire, to the role that women and lower-class people play under rigid and medieval feudalism, all of this under the omnipotent authority of the Mother Church. As Schenider-Mayerson puts forward, "most contemporary alternate histories have viewed big governments as a threat with few benefits" (2009, 74). In this version of history, that is certainly true. After four centuries under autocratic rule, we encounter an extremely feudal-based society in

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[3] Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots –the Catholic option for the throne of England–, was executed by Elizabeth in 1587, a year before the point of divergence in the novel.

England. Peasants, who are severely constricted within certain social boundaries, work to barely survive and are forced to serve their masters, the nobility, which, in turn, owes obedience to the monarch. This monarch, who does not hold any effective political power, is just a pawn governed by the Church, controlled by its figurehead, "spiritual father and the ruler of the known world" (Roberts 2000, 231), Pope John.

Conceptually, we find an autocratic regime through which the Church reigns uncontested. This Mother Church, as it addresses itself, has been able to remain in power for so long without significant opposition due to the tight and suffocating control it exerts on this very regimented population, and its efforts in halting any sort of technological progress that might challenge the *status quo*: "'Divide and Rule' had long been the policy, unofficially at least, of Rome" (Roberts 2000, 17). It is mentioned that there has been significant opposition to the rule of the Church, but any resistance has been swiftly and violently quelled before it amounted to a serious risk to the established order. This situation echoes the title of the novel, a dance with a very strict structure in which dancers have little room for freedom: "A pavane. Something stately and pointless, with all its steps set out. With a beginning, and an end… it's all totally pointless" (Roberts 2000, 249).

The societal configuration present in *Pavane* is highly hierarchical, both in terms of gender and class. Darko Suvin suggests that the position of women in fiction is often "both a good ideological indicator and a narrative equivalent to the position of the text between the discourses of repressive power and liberating knowledge" (1983, 155). It does not come as a shock, then, to find that, in this scenario, women are at the very bottom of the social structure. They take on traditional gendered roles, are treated as property, and have close to no rights. Interestingly, in the three main female characters –Becky, Margaret, and Elinor–, we see an evident resistance against this rigid structure. Nonetheless, their attempts at a more independent status are, in the end, crushed. Becky, once she returns home after her adventures in "the White Boat", is severely punished by both her abusive father and the local priest for daring to escape her duties. Margaret, although from a wealthy

background, becomes the plaything of an arrogant and entitled noble. Elinor, the protagonist from Measure Six –and Margaret's daughter–, refuses to bend to the Church's might and will, and stands up for her people and her loyalty to the King rather than to the Pope. She is the leader of the rebellion that would, in turn, end the Church's autocratic rule in England. Still, she will not live to see it and ends up defeated in battle.

This level of stratification is mirrored in the economic makeup of society, in which people are limited within the social class they are born into, and industry is severely restricted and manipulated in the interest of the establishment. Naturally, the technological situation we find in *Pavane* is very different from that of the actual 1960s. In this respect, Gevers argues that the twentieth century we know is "reshaped" in the novel and thoroughly invaded "by the Mediaeval" (1997, 178). In this counterfactual version, we feel as though we have been transported into a primitive setting, mildly altered with certain anachronisms that would not be foreign to the eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution. The first and second measures explore how the steam engine and the semaphore networks are as far as technological and scientific development has been able to advance, becoming the sole means of industry, transportation, and communication. This scenario proves the conspicuous stagnation of science and technology, which have been deliberately repressed and held back by the authorities to stop any hint of progress and to maintain its grip and authority over the population: "As long as the Church applies a censorship to certain forms of progress, which is what she does however strenuously the Popes deny it, we shall always be a scrappy little nation, living just above the famine line" (Roberts 2000, 223).

An argument could be made regarding the reasons why the Church would deliberately hold back on technological progress rather than championing it, if it could be used as a weapon for further repression. After all, imperialism has always relied heavily on employing technological advances as a form of military progress. However, as Csicsery-Ronay points out, in some cases, expansion is not driven by "greed or national pride, but by putatively superior ability of the imperial order to deliver peace and security" (2003, 237). Even with outdated resources, the Church has managed to hold

on to power for over four hundred years without real opposition. Thus, Roberts presents a reality in which those advances, even though possibly beneficial, are not necessary: the Church's goal is not further colonization, but rather maintaining the status quo they have created thus far. As long as it keeps a tight grip on the economic, social, and technological picture it has created, and it remains unchanged, there is no need for further investment in scientific progress that could potentially turn against and become a greater threat to the establishment. In fact, in *Pavane* we find that technological stagnation is the reason why the Church has managed to stay in power for so long.

As a result of the abovementioned, the little industry we encounter is divided into very close-knit guilds –another medieval-like concept–, whose members are extremely zealous of their secrets. The hauliers[4] make up one of the primary industries; despite their relevance, they are constantly exposed to ambushes from rival companies and thieves, and receive little financial or technological support from the establishment. For instance, the Bull of 1910 put forward by the Church stated a *Petroleum Veto*, forbidding the common use of diesel, which "had long been tacitly recognised as a bid to restrict the mobility of the working classes" (Roberts 2000, 183). This not only puts in jeopardy the hauliers' ability to earn their livelihood, but it also prevents social mobility.

In this vein, it is not surprising the limited existence, and even more limited use, of the communication services available. The only way to communicate around the Empire is through the semaphores, explored in the second measure, "The Signaller"[5]: described as some sort of mechanical towers that work in a similar manner to the telegraph, which controls incoming and outgoing communications: "It was talking (…) Whispering and clacking, giving messages and taking them from the others in the lines, the great lines that stretched

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[4] Hauliers, who drive steam engines or "locos", are responsible for the transportation of goods in the country.

[5] The Guild of Signallers are in charge of national and international communications through the operation of semaphores, telegraph-like machines that code and decode messages.

across England everywhere you could think, every direction you could see" (Roberts 2000, 59). They can only be managed by the Guild of Signallers, an extremely exclusive group whose access is highly restricted for the lower classes. Naturally, the ownership or use of these towers is only available to members of wealthy families and nobility, the only ones who could afford such luxury. For the rest of the country, long-distance communication is virtually impossible, a hindrance intended to keep the population virtually isolated. In this measure, we follow Rafe, who despite all odds, manages to rise from his working-class background and become a Signaller. However, after an attack in the forest, he dies alone in his post. When his body is found by his superiors, we see how his death means nothing to them apart from the loss of potential, as well as a waste of the training he had undergone. Despite enjoying perhaps more freedom than other guilds, in the end, signallers –just like any other person trapped in this system– are ultimately replaceable cogs in a larger machine that will not mourn them when they are gone.

Due to paralysis of progress in all areas, this society is deeply rooted in the past and extremely superstitious: "This was the twentieth century, the age of reason; but the heath was still the home of superstitious fears" (Roberts 2000, 17), even after the systematic oppression by the establishment to eliminate any other religious alternative. The figure of the Pope centralises all political and religious power, and under his authority progress of any kind is utterly restricted. He is presented as the equivalent of absolutist monarchs, heavily reliant on their armies while enjoying debauchery and luxury at the expense of their people: "If the Church would sell half her altar plate, she could buy shoes for everybody in the country" (Roberts 2000, 224). Interestingly, although this figure is often mentioned, he is also heavily absent throughout the novel. From the very beginning, we are introduced into a society in which the Catholic Church and the Vatican hold all power and wealth: they control the gold reserves, and most of the taxes people pay, by gruellingly working the fields under very harsh conditions, go to fill their already full vaults: "What else could you expect … when half the tax levied in the country went to buy gold plate for its churches?" (…) Gold, stacked anywhere but in the half-legendary coffers of the Vatican, meant danger" (Roberts 2000, 7-8). Money is power, and

the Church ensures that no single individual –including the nobility–
has enough of either to avoid a potential threat to its authority.

If we take Suvin's cognitive estrangement as a key uchronian
feature, then one of the most recognisable historical aspects in
Pavane is certainly the presence of the Inquisition, known for the
cruel methods of torture it employed to fight sin. However, in this
alternative world, the 'Court of Spiritual Welfare', described as a
substitute of the original organisation under a different name, is
responsible for administering justice: "There had once been another
name for the Court, a name that even in the Church-owned West had
fallen into evil repute. The Inquisition" (Roberts 2000, 133-34).
This new institution is presented as the saviour of humankind:

> In the history of the world, there had been no power like the power
> of the second Rome. To hold half a planet in the cup of your hands:
> to juggle, to balance one against the next forces nearly beyond the
> mind of man to grasp … Anglicanism had torn the country once, the
> history of it was all there in the great books that lined the study
> walls. Then, England had glowed … with the light of the *auto-da-
> fé*. (Roberts 2000, 145-46)

Similarly, the Inquisitor General is substituted by the 'Witchfinder
General'. Just as in the real institution, the Court of Spiritual
Welfare –led by Father Hieronymous [6]– punishes any kind of
deviation, such as "witchcraft, heresy, and raising of devils"
(Roberts 2000, 136), through utterly dreadful mechanisms:

> The shrieks of the damned, and the dying, and the dead. And the
> sizzling of braziers, thud of whips splitting flesh; creaking of leather
> and wood, squeak and groan of sinews as machines tested to
> destruction the handiwork of God. John had seen it all … while the
> great mad Judge upstairs extracted from the foaming of epileptics
> the stuff of conviction after conviction. (Roberts 2000, 139)

In spite of the manipulation of the past at the hands of the Church to
erase any trace of it, the Anglican faith is resurfacing as well. In the
fourth measure ("Brother John"), a monk traumatised by his

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[6] Clearly inspired in the figure of the Inquisitor General.

experiences as a witness in Court's trials decides to challenge the institution, and starts a revolt against the authorities:

> He told them about the might Change that would come, sweeping away blackness and misery and pain, leading them at last to the Golden Age (…) the buildings of that new time, the factories and hospitals, power stations and laboratories (…) the age of tolerance, of reason, of humanity, of the dignity of the human soul. (Roberts 2000, 161)

John denounces the extremely unfair system they are under, the way the Church subjugates and tortures people in the name of God. He blames it for the apparent regression and speaks of a new era that would rapidly develop in all aspects –social, economic, religious, and technological–, once the yoke that drags them down is lifted. The breaking point of this society is the fact that scientific advances cannot be stopped or interfered with for much longer, and the people (from all different walks of life and sectors of society) start rebelling against the oppression of the almighty Church. As we can see throughout the Sixth Measure ("Corfu Gate"), the Revolt of the Castles –or Brother John's revolt– ultimately fails, but it plants the seed for a future free from the oppressive grip of the Church that can be observed in the Coda.

3.4 Coda

Singles proposed that there are certain alternative histories in which there is an element of 'convergence': "While the former [divergence] involves bifurcation, the latter refers to the re-unification of two paths" (2013, 23). In *Pavane*, we find a point of convergence at the end of the story, in the Coda. It is set in an unknown year, although we can assume it is not that far from the events of the previous chapter: after all, its protagonist is the son of one of the characters that took part in the revolution from the Sixth Measure. He travels, as if on pilgrimage, to his land of origin to visit the ruins of the castle where the war started. Despite the failure of the rebellion against the Church, we are shocked to see that, just a few decades later, that immense power has completely fizzled away, and it no longer rules the world. John writes to his son, recalling the events we seem to have missed in the time before the Coda: the

rebellion, though failed, sparked the light for a subsequent revolution. Apparently, the uprising began in the unspecified Western colonies, who succeeded in freeing themselves from the chains of the Church –easily achieved due to their geographical upper hand in being further away from the centre of power. The rest of the territories soon followed all "without bloodshed and without sacrifice" (Roberts 2000, 274). The Catholic Church, at some point in between, has been defeated. Every technological device and development that it had forbidden for centuries started to be widely used, soon catching up with 'real' historical progress.

In a way, in a relatively short period of time the world has 'recuperated' from the harm inflicted to society and science by the autocracy of the Church, and it has moved on to a more recognisable line, more similar to our present, as if "all past dreams and future visions had met in one melting point of Time" (Roberts 2000, 33). However, through this letter, we are led to believe that the Church, in reality, was holding back progress because humanity was not ready for it yet. And when they proved to be ready, it stepped aside, easily allowing them to claim it back, merely having postponed it. This provokes in the reader an anticlimactic feeling: after centuries of Catholic domination and tyranny, it seems a bit far-fetched to believe that the Church was actually looking out for humanity's sake all along –a gatekeeper of progress–, acting as a mere "beneficial decelerator that slows down history in order to avoid the drawbacks of the industrial age" (Winthrop-Young 2006, 886).

> So men spat on her memory, calling her debased and evil; for many years yet this will be true… The Church knew there was no halting progress; but slowing it (…) Giving man time to reach a little higher towards true reason; that was the gift that saved this world (…) Did she oppress? Did she hang and burn? A little, yes (…) She gave back what all thought she had stolen; the knowledge she was keeping in trust. (Roberts 2000, 275-76)

Through his criticism of the aftermath of a long-standing global autocratic government –a Catholic empire–, we could argue that his goal was to criticise the way the effects of such a rule have, in this case, on the territories previously occupied by Britain. However, the apparent benevolence of the Church feels quite shocking, and a little disappointing, after reading the previous measures. Centuries of

oppression and tyranny seem justifiable for the sake of the greater good. Not only that, but although the rebellion seems to have sparked an anti-imperialist movement the was eventually successful, the novel highlights that the end of the Catholic empire was not due exclusively to a desire for self-government on the part of the oppressed: the Church itself had an active role in allowing its power to fade.

4. Conclusions

Regardless of a very forgiving ending, there is a clear criticism towards the Catholic Church, at least as it was four centuries ago: a cruel, backwards institution that held insurmountable amounts of power and wealth, considered an enemy of progress throughout history. Not only that, but we can see parallels between this allohistorical empire and the factual British occupation of a large part of the globe throughout centuries. Keith Roberts envisages a world in which this power was never challenged, and the repercussions had it been the case. This paper has tried to show how this alternative version of history enables the author to comment on the influence that religious fanaticism and tyrannical power have on the different sectors of the population and its effect on the overall progress of society over time. Specifically, on how it causes social, cultural, economic, and scientific regression and stagnation, as well as what the long-term consequences of the aforementioned scenario are. Furthermore, because the 1960s in England were a period of economic and technological progress and modernisation, by creating this alternative nightmare scenario, we could say that the intention behind the novel was to validate and, in a way, seek comfort in his present and the social liberties and material advantages it affords.

At the same time, due to a generalised feeling of unrest and violence outside of Britain –as the disintegration of the former British empire continued–, we could safely assume that *Pavane* works, in a way, as a cautionary tale against the unrestrained power of empires and the lack of humanity they ensue. However, although the novel criticises tyrannical power –religious and political–, this

censure is somewhat obscured by the Coda. In the end, centuries of oppression seem to be redeemable, even justifiable: after all, the world is all the better for it now. If we take into account Roberts' present socio-political circumstances, we could argue that his portrayal of the dangers of imperialism is rather ambiguous.

As Fay claims, "unconventional history opens doors onto ways we can understand the past, and can understand our understanding of the past" (2002, 1). We cannot look upon the present without regarding the past, and allohistorical narratives have the potential to play an important role in how we approach the traditional historical discourse. By reading and writing uchronia, we try to find the answer –or at least *one* of the possible answers– to how the world as we know it might have been different today, whether the intention is to exalt the present over the past, or the other way around, allowing us to "see more clearly what we have been and what we may become" (Kerslake 2007, 1). Uchronia challenges conventional notions of history, and the idea that it is not, in the end, just another form of fiction, but rather explores "the road not taken" (Cowley 2001, xii), and contributes to the conversation about its unfilled gaps and unrealised possibilities, as well as giving us in the present a way to critically think about the past.

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