Pamela Bedore

The Aesthetics of Utopian Imaginings in Louise Penny's *A Trick of the Light*

> "This murder is about contrasts," said Gamache, his voice low, soft. "About sober and drunk. About appearances and reality. About change for the better, or for the worse. The play of light and dark."
>
> —Louise Penny, *A Trick of the Light*

The cultural zeitgeist of twenty-first-century North America would seem a much richer breeding ground for detective fiction than for utopian literature. After all, how does one even imagine utopia in a cultural context shot through with cynicism, neoliberalism, postmodernism, and a deeply interconnected global community unable to agree on strategies for dealing with the major challenges of our time, which include such exigent threats as climate change, pandemic, and rampant inequities? Utopia is, by its very nature, an impossible genre. As encapsulated by the homonymic wordplay that Sir Thomas More gave his island, Utopia—*u-topos* (good or perfect place) and *eu-topos* (no place)—the genre is defined by its paradoxes. Ursula K. Le Guin's metafictional short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973), dramatizes the paradoxes of utopia, revealing several important points about the genre. First, the twentieth century, with its jaded worldview—a worldview no doubt equally relevant to the young twenty-first century—has a contempt for joy that makes utopia seem not only impossible but perhaps also undesirable. Second, one of our strengths, as humans, is our diversity—of talents, abilities, and even desires; therefore, one person's utopia is likely to be another person's dystopia. Third, human cognition and perception function largely through contrasts, which means that it would

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be difficult to recognize let alone appreciate happiness or pleasure without sadness or pain. What Le Guin only hints at but that becomes clear when one compares utopia to its dark double, dystopia, is that a perfectly functioning society would eventually become boring, which would lead to another paradox: without suffering, guilt, and longing, there can be no meaningful art, and, for many of us, a society without art is, by its very nature, far from a perfect place. Given the difficulties of conceptualizing and sustaining a utopian vision, especially against the fraught socio-political backdrop of the early-twenty-first century, it is no surprise that utopian literature is hardly a dominant genre at the moment.

Detective fiction, on the other hand, is a thriving genre, as it might well be. By directly addressing the most abhorrent deviant behaviours in a society, detective fiction provides an exaggerated and yet familiar perspective on our contemporary world, one that contains none of the inherent contradictions that Le Guin and others identify in the genre of utopia. Certainly, the detective genre is not vulnerable to accusations of uncritically celebrating joy or of ignoring the cost of suffering. Indeed, detective fiction has long been understood as a genre that examines suffering and guilt in a complex way since, as W. H. Auden argues, "the crime of murder provides a special case of suffering, since society must stand in for the murder victim and either demand restitution or grant forgiveness" (149). Although it was long understood as a genre committed to restoring social order after the disruption of crime (Grella 47-48), such simplistic notions of justice and power are now regularly interrogated by scholars who locate the pleasures of the genre in a variety of spaces. Robert Rushing, for example, argues that "there is no hermeneutic component to the detective novel," suggesting that the reader's enjoyment is in the repeated misrecognition of clues (161). Charles Rzepka, on the other hand, argues that readers of detective fiction find pleasure in inventing a series of "imaginative, backward-looking arrays" of meaning alongside the detective (27). Whether the reader is actively or passively interacting with detective fiction's deep ethical and epistemological investments, the genre regularly engages with questions of aesthetics. Arthur Conan Doyle, for example, made art integral to the imagination of the detective through Sherlock Holmes' frequent forays into melancholy bouts of violin playing as well as visits to museums and theatres, which explicitly

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helped him to work over a problem by coming at a mystery from a different perspective. More contemporary detectives whose investigative acumen is enhanced by their love of art include established characters like P. D. James' Adam Dalgliesh, as well as more recent creations like Ausma Zehanat Khan's Esa Khattak.

Utopia and detective fiction appear to have entirely different, almost opposing rhetorical projects, since utopia tries to imagine a better future while detective fiction tries to understand a past wrong. As Elena Gomel notes in her study of ontological detective narratives, these impulses are not necessarily incoherent; detective conventions such as clue-gathering, interrogations, red herrings, and reveal scenes can be found in both utopian and apocalyptic narratives. I would argue that the ethical and socio-political consonances between detective fiction and speculative fiction have laid the groundwork for a utopian detective series located in the imaginary village of Three Pines, Quebec, and conceived by former CBC broadcaster and now mystery writer Louise Penny. Penny's critically acclaimed Inspector Armand Gamache series is wildly popular in Canada, as well as in the much larger market of the United States. That popularity, I believe, is a result of Penny's use of detective fiction to present a wonderfully hopeful vision that both acknowledges and transcends the paradoxes of the utopian genre. Penny draws upon the conventions of two contrasting subgenres of detective fiction: the cozy, which provides comfort and is generally set in a small town and keeps violence offstage, and the police procedure, which emphasizes that crime occurs every day by foregrounding violence, usually in a metropolitan setting. By repeatedly bringing murder to her utopian village, Penny provides the contrast required by a very disparate group of citizens so they can recognize their happiness, and even their joy. Further, she creates a context in which art is not only possible but also necessary to her utopian community. By casting a wide net on aesthetics—representing traditional paintings and classical poetry alongside new media products like *YouTube* videos—Penny repeatedly explores the potential of art not only to perform a critique of contemporary society but also to imagine a better future, thus demonstrating that twenty-first-century detective fiction can capably house one of the most vibrant utopian projects of our time.

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The Theoretical Underpinnings of Twenty-First-Century Utopia: The Art of Walking Away

The twenty-first-century utopian studies that help us understand Penny's project focus on the genre's potential to generate social change. Led by Fredric Jameson, utopian scholars of the late-twentieth century have turned away from the classic Marxist analysis of utopia as a force that may divert attention from real revolution, arguing instead that utopia provides an "imperative" to imagine "radical alternatives" (Jameson 416). In considering how utopian literature can lead to real-world change, Peter Fitting traces the move from traditional utopias that engage readers intellectually to more challenging and ambiguous utopias that invite readers to identify emotionally with the characters. These new utopias tend to resist narrative closure, thus attempting to "break out of the passivity and illusionism of the traditional reading experience in an effort to push the reader to work for change" (29). Lucy Sargisson speaks to this promise even more explicitly when she explores the transgressive potential of utopia as "profoundly pragmatic" (3), as well as critical, subversive, transgressive, and creative (12). Utopias, for Sargisson, "provoke us to think differently about the world. Hence, utopianism has a transformative function" (12). But how does utopia create transformations? For Tom Moylan, utopia as a concept offers possibilities for transcending postmodern cynicism. It does this by analyzing the past, critiquing the present, and providing hope for the future. Lyman Tower Sargent gives us the term "critical utopia" to emphasize the rhetorical purpose of constructing a fictional utopian community as a contrasting society whose true function is to reveal critiques of contemporary culture. Margaret Atwood goes even further in complicating the relationship between imagination and critique when she introduces the term "ustopia," arguing that utopia and dystopia cannot be fully separated given how deeply they support, define, and intertwine with each other.

The visions of these scholars, which inflect Penny's Three Pines novels, owe much of their insight to Ursula K. Le Guin. In fact, I believe that the most valuable philosophical take on utopia in our time is not a work of criticism but a work of fiction: Le Guin's groundbreaking short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." Drawing upon the paradoxes and philosophical complexities of nearly five centuries of utopian writing since Thomas More's

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genre-defining text, *Utopia* (1516), Le Guin addresses the impossibilities of utopia. Her second-person narrator acknowledges immediately that a perfect society will mean different things for different people, and thus invites readers to imagine their own details, going so far as to suggest that if Omelas seems too "goody-goody," then "please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate" (279). The key to a utopian city for Le Guin is contrast. The details of perfection are explicitly vague, but the price is perfectly clear, for in the basement of a beautiful public building in Omelas, there lives a hungry, lonely, frightened, naked child that makes possible whatever utopian vision one prefers. The chilling depiction of the child in the basement evokes the contrasts of utopia—the contrast between different utopian visions, between the joyous citizens and the suffering child, and between the lifelong citizens of Omelas (who choose happiness) and the eponymous ones who walk away (and who, presumably, accept guilt). What does it mean to walk away from Omelas? In reflecting upon those who walk away, the narrator says, "The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist" (284). The indescribable and uncertain existence of the destination speaks to the aesthetics of "Omelas." On the one hand, if the good people of Omelas have only two reactions to the child in the basement—acceptance or avoidance—powerful art is both unnecessary and impossible. On the other hand, the most interesting people in Omelas are the ones who walk away, and the narrator asserts that their story exceeds the possibilities of description, suggesting the need for an art that can transcend the limits of the plain language through which "Omelas" is told.

How does one conceptualize, compose, and communicate a genuine utopian vision that features true joy after Le Guin's devastating metafictional analysis of the genre? Louise Penny takes up this challenge by focusing on aesthetics—on the possibility but also the need for aesthetic communication—in her Inspector Armand Gamache detective series (2005-present). Drawing as much upon P. D. James' cultured Detective Dalgliesh as upon Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and her village of St. Mary Meade, Penny deliberately describes her charming, murder-plagued, and utterly impossible village of Three Pines as not appearing on any map despite its existence in the Townships of south central Quebec. Penny draws together the generic investments of utopia and of two

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disparate subgenres of detective fiction—the cozy and the police procedural—to produce an unexpected but deeply successful blend that suits the terrain of twenty-first-century Canadian genre fiction. The series arc develops a utopian vision while each novel provides an episodic murder mystery that interacts with—sometimes supporting and sometimes complicating—that larger project. Penny focuses on the utopian concepts most difficult to describe in words—happiness, suffering, guilt, and joy—as she articulates the importance of art. Through an analysis of the seventh novel of the series, *A Trick of the Light*, the novel that includes the most wide-ranging collection of aesthetic explorations—we can see how a series of multi-faceted, vibrant, sometimes joyful and sometimes viral aesthetic works can articulate and make visible the possibility of utopian change in the twenty-first century.

Classic Ekphrasis: Clara's Painting of the Acerbic Poet and the Angry Madonna

Throughout her series, Penny regularly interweaves stories of crime and of aesthetics, repeatedly demonstrating the rhetorical and analytical power of art. In the utopian world of Three Pines, art makes arguments, art illuminates. Penny's main detective character, Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, is a clear literary descendant of P. D. James' Adam Dalgliesh, a great lover of visual, aural, and literary arts. Indeed, many of Penny's novels include ekphrastic descriptions of poems, songs, and paintings—usually Canadian, but sometimes Commonwealth—that cast light upon the dynamics underlying a murder investigation. In this way, Penny points to the power of art to speak both to the darkest, most-difficult-to-articulate complexities of the human experience and to the possibility of joy. Her detective series is shot through with exactly the aesthetic contrasts needed to imagine a twenty-first-century utopian space.

A Trick of the Light foregrounds contrast as it describes in detail a thick tapestry of paintings and poems that act as backdrop, commentary, and motive for yet another murder in the otherwise idyllic village of Three Pines. This murder is set against the Montreal art scene. Art critic and recovering alcoholic Lilian Dyson has attended the solo art show of painter Clara Morrow and is later murdered in Clara's garden in Three Pines. Clara's painting of the elderly, acerbic poet Ruth Zardo (whose poems are quoted in the novels, and

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are actually penned by Canadian writers including Margaret Atwood) gives the novel its title and serves as a complex figure for Penny's utopian project. Ruth is a delightfully contradictory character, at once bitter and hopeful. She regularly performs an almost flamboyant misanthropy even as she provides helpful insights to her friends, including detectives Gamache and Beauvoir. Clara's portrait of Ruth, introduced in earlier novels, now hangs on the wall of the Musée d'art contemporain, where it is finally available to speak to the world outside of Three Pines. It can be read, whimsically, as one who walked away from Omelas, as a representation of utopia—with all its complexities—in the bustling Montreal art scene, providing an oddly hopeful vision of female wisdom and possibility, but only if one pauses to look carefully.

Clara's painting captures the complex relationship of religious, aesthetic, and utopian impulses in a postmodern world. Initially described by its surface features, the portrait shows "the head and scrawny shoulders of a very old woman. A veined and arthritic hand clutched a rough blue shawl to her throat" (17). The narrator then moves into an explanatory mode, attributing emotion to the woman in the portrait: "She was angry. Filled with contempt. Hating what she heard and saw. The happiness all around her. The laughter. Hating the world that had left her behind. Left her alone on this wall. To see, to watch and to never be included" (18). This description tracks with Ruth, whose most common utterance is "fuck off" and who, in one of her finest books of poetry, describes herself—and perhaps, by extension, her culture—as FINE (fucked-up, insecure, neurotic, and egotistical). At the same time, Ruth is not simply "an angry old woman. [Clara had] in fact painted the Virgin Mary. Elderly. Abandoned by a world weary and wary of miracles. A world too busy to notice a stone rolled back. It had moved on to other wonders. This was Mary in the final years. Forgotten. Alone" (24). The notion of an abandoned Virgin Mary left behind by a postmodern world speaks to the theme of vexed religious emotion and practice that pervades the series and that is especially notable in Quebec, once the centre of Canadian Catholicism and now a visibly more secular place. The Ruth/Madonna of the painting represents the anger, contempt, and loneliness of an abandoned elderly woman whose work—as mother of Christ or as creator of brilliant poetry—is mostly ignored in the twenty-first century.

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Clara's aesthetic project does not ignore the hope of an earlier, probably imaginary but possibly more joyous time—a time that believed in the sanctity of Christ and the power of art. Indeed, Clara's painting represents Ruth/Madonna's loneliness and anger in order to highlight her joy. The importance of Clara's optimistic—even utopian—vision is confirmed by Thérèse Brunel, once the chief curator at the Musée des beaux-arts in Montreal and now a senior officer in the Sûreté du Québec. From her perspective as an expert on both art and crime, Brunel describes Clara's art as "quite joyous" (269). "How lovely if that's where art's heading," she muses. "Because it might mean that's where the human spirit's heading. Out of a period of darkness" (269). This comment, by a highly respected colleague of Gamache's, evokes Le Guin's contemplations about joy in a postmodern world. As the narrator of "Omelas" asserts, "We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy" (278). Indeed, Le Guin uses the word "joy" to introduce the turn of the story from utopian description to the child in the basement: "Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing" (280). This articulation of the suffering child suggests that the only way we can believe in joy is if we believe that it has been purchased by suffering.

The suffering in Three Pines is seen in the frequent murders that interrupt daily life in the idyllic village, but it is also linked to art—the process of creating it as well as of sharing it, as evidenced by a conversation between Clara and Ruth:

> "Do you remember all your reviews?" asked Clara.
> "Only the bad ones."
> "Why?"
> Ruth turned to look at her directly. Her eyes weren't angry or cold, not filled with malice. They were filled with wonder.
> "I don't know. Perhaps that's the price of poetry. And, apparently, art."
> "What d'you mean?"
> "We get hurt into it. No pain, no product." (106)

Ruth here posits the artist as a kind of child in the basement, as a figure whose suffering makes possible utopia. In this moment, as an elderly poet tells a middle-aged painter that artists "get hurt into it," the focus is on Ruth's eyes, often angry or even malicious, but "filled with wonder" as she speaks of the artist's role. It is in the eye of the Ruth/Madonna painting that we

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get the titular "trick of the light," what art dealer François Marois reflects is the painting's greatest power: "But how remarkable is that? For Clara Morrow to, in essence, capture the human experience? One person's hope is another person's cruelty. Is it light, or a false promise?" (101). Indeed, it is this ephemeral but sublime insight that leads to the solution to the murder.

The portrait of Ruth can be interpreted as a realistic representation of an old woman, or it can be understood as a transcendent aesthetic piece that finds the perfect balance of light and dark in merging a living poet with the mother of Christ to capture a twenty-first-century world in which notions of joy and divinity are paradoxically possible and impossible, thinkable and unthinkable. The novel ends in the perspective of Armand Gamache watching Ruth, who earlier rescued two abandoned duck eggs and nursed one of the baby ducks to adulthood; the duck has now flown south with her flock. As Gamache observes the utopian village of Three Pines, he sees Ruth, at her usual spot, waiting for her duck to return. In a reversal of an earlier moment in which Three Pines looks like a painting rather than a three-dimensional village (104), Clara's painting now comes to life as Gamache hears a duck's cry and sees Ruth, whose "veined and bony hand at her throat clutch[ed] the blue cardigan" and who looks into the sky as "in her weary eyes there was a tiny dot. A glint, a gleam" (339). In this final line of the novel, Ruth is posed exactly as she was in Clara's portrait, with the exact dot of light in her eye that marks her as both poet and Madonna. But here, in her real life in the utopian space of Three Pines, she has transcended her role as "embittered old poet," and in a move that echoes the Virgin Mary awaiting the return of Christ, Ruth is filled with hope as she searches the skies looking for her duck.

The iconography of the Virgin Mary—and Clara's decision to merge it with a depiction of the poet—serves as a complex representation of the utopian themes that pervade the series. Traditionally, the Virgin Mary represents the impossibly perfect mother—the blessed mother whose immaculate conception is achieved without the taint of sex, a woman who sacrifices for her child, and who eventually intercedes on behalf of those who pray to her. Importantly, she is the mother of Christ, the sacrificial lamb who offers up His death and suffering to save all of humanity. Within the utopian frame of "Omelas," Christ can be seen as a version of the child in the

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basement whose sacrifice buys the possibility of utopia for everyone else. Clara's portrait reminds us that the child in the basement has a mother. In Le Guin's story, that mother is mentioned only once, in the description of the people who visit the child: "The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks" (281). The mother, however, does not speak in Le Guin's story, any more than the Virgin Mary speaks in Christ's story. But in Clara's painting, speech transcends medium, and the visual representation does provide a voice for the mother, who is simultaneously angry and hopeful in a world in which her story is mostly sidelined, in a world in which most people ignore the child in the basement, the price paid by others for their own happiness. By moving this painting from the solitary studio of middle-aged Clara Morrow to the walls of a prominent gallery, Penny suggests that art can provide an articulation of and resolution to paradox. By showing two contradictory notions in tension and balance, art may be the key to imagining a utopian future.

Intertextual Aesthetics: Stevie Smith, Humpty Dumpty, and the Serenity Prayer

Alongside the fictional aesthetic products described and interpreted within the novels, Penny also explores the intertextual power of existing art, most potently in her analysis of a well-known poem, an anonymous prayer, and a nursery rhyme. In *A Trick of the Light*, Clara's fictional painting of Ruth is repeatedly considered in conversation with Stevie Smith's poignant short poem, "Not Waving but Drowning" (1957). Smith's poem acts as a leitmotif that evokes the figure of the child in the basement while providing an interpretive puzzle to the mystery reader. The very first words of the novel are taken from Smith's poem:

> *Oh, no, no, no*, thought Clara Morrow as she walked toward the closed doors.
> She could see shadows, shapes, like wraiths moving back and forth, back and forth across the frosted glass. Appearing and disappearing. Distorted, but still human.
> *Still the dead one lay moaning*.
> The words had been going through her head all day, appearing and disappearing. A poem, half remembered. Words floating to the surface, then going under. The body of the poem beyond her grasp. (1)

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Clara here is at her vernissage, the preview night before the opening of her first solo art show at one of Montreal's most prestigious galleries. This sequence articulates Clara's anxiety at putting her almost excruciatingly joyful paintings on display, allowing others to see that her vision of the postmodern world is inflected by hope. As Le Guin's narrator opines in "Omelas," "The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting" (278). The shapes that Clara perceives "like wraiths moving back and forth . . . across the frosted glass" are in fact the bodies of her friends and critics, come to the gallery to support—and judge—her art. As she perceives her audience through an almost prismatic surface, she imagines the partially forgotten poem as a possibly drowning body, speaking to the existential angst that makes possible the joy in her paintings.

As Smith's lines slide through Clara's anxiety-riddled mind, she eventually lands on the final stanza, revealing or reminding the reader of the heartbreaking closing lines:

> *Oh, no no no,* thought Clara. *Still the dead one lay moaning.*
> *I was much too far out all my life*
> *And not waving but drowning.* (5)

The framing image of Smith's poem—a man whose friends think he is waving while he is actually drowning—is often associated with suicide and the temptation for blithe onlookers to turn away from a person in need. When Clara quotes the final lines, starting with the chilling echo of "*Oh, no no no*" that opens the novel, she omits an important phrase from the poem: "it was too cold always." The omission ties back to the onlooker's comment that the dead man always loved larking, and that the water must have been too cold for him on the day he drowned. "Oh, no no no," any utopian writer will tell us—Louise Penny here just as forcefully as Ursula K. Le Guin in "Omelas"—"it was too cold always." The circumstances leading to the man's death, *and* to the onlooker's ignoring and/or misinterpreting the warning signs, were present long before the fateful day. The drowning man's death could have been avoided but for the common human flaw of looking away from suffering, of recasting suffering as something that does not require our

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attention or intervention, of assuming there is nothing we can do for the child in the basement.

Smith's poem recurs throughout the novel, inviting the reader of detective fiction to engage in interpretation and to ask the obvious question: Who appears to be waving while actually drowning in this story? Or, framed in utopian terms, who is the child in the basement? As "Not Waving but Drowning" arises, unbidden, in Clara's mind, she associates the drowning man with two people: her husband (an easy fit) and eventually herself (a more complex psychological move). Peter Morrow has always been a far more commercially successful painter than his wife, repeatedly and masterfully crafting gorgeous paintings based on extreme close-up perspectives of everyday objects from nature and commerce. His works are perfect fare for elegant office building decor. The reader knows—although Clara initially does not—that Peter has long been jealous of his wife's more uneven, less successful, but sometimes transcendent artistic endeavours. The Stevie Smith poem recurs in Clara's mind when she and her husband toast her success: "[O]ver the flute [Clara] was staring at Peter, who suddenly looked less substantial. A little hollow. A little like a bubble himself. Floating away. *I was much too far out all my life,* she thought as she drank. *And not waving, but drowning*" (124). Clara initially berates herself for not noticing that her recent success as an artist has been difficult for her husband. Eventually, however, she does the type of gender analysis facilitated by feminist utopias of the 1970s and 1980s, realizing that she has supported him emotionally throughout their twenty-five-year marriage in a way he has never returned.

Clara's new insights occur at the intersection of detective fiction, utopia, and art. In the final reveal scene typical of classical detective fiction, Gamache invites all of the murder suspects to the Three Pines bistro, frequently marked as the utopian centre of the village. Instead of reciting the timeline or forensic details of the murder, as one might expect in such a scene, Gamache expounds upon the various interpretations of Clara's poet/ Madonna painting:

> "Was it real, or just a trick of the light? Hope offered, then denied. A particular cruelty."
> He looked around the gathering. "That's what this crime, this murder was about. The question of just how genuine the light actually was. Was the person really happy, or just pretending to be?"

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> "*Not waving but drowning*," said Clara . . .
> But this time, as Clara recited the poem, Peter didn't come to mind. This time Clara thought of someone else.
> Herself. Pretending, for a lifetime. Looking on the bright side, but not always feeling it. (314-15)

It is not through the act of creating her painting that Clara recognizes her own vulnerability, but through her own suffering. It is through the act of hearing interpretation—importantly from an expert on murder rather than on art—that she gains crucial insight into her role. By visually representing hope and joy alongside the poet/Madonna's anger and loneliness, Clara places herself as an artist in the role of both the drowning man and the bystander, of the suffering child and the joyous citizen of Omelas.

The metaphor of the man who is drowning and not waving can also be applied to a person with a substance abuse problem who appears to be enjoying life ("larking," as Stevie Smith calls it) while actually engaging in serious self-harm. *A Trick of the Light* delves deeply into questions around alcoholism and recovery, once again rewriting a common utopian trope. In the late-nineteenth century, when utopian fiction and communities flourished in Europe and North America, utopian writers often provided detailed blueprints of their imagined worlds that addressed outliers to their perfect societies, including criminals and alcoholics; alcoholism was generally viewed through the lens of illness, since there would be no vice in a true utopian society. In her novel, Penny depicts alcoholism through the lenses of aesthetics and community. In some sense, she shows, the alcoholic is both the child in the basement (the drowning man) *and* the joyful citizen of Omelas oblivious to the suffering that makes possible a pleasurable lifestyle (the bystander who assumes the man is waving). In the final analysis, Gamache carefully reads both the Serenity Prayer that serves as a cornerstone of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) process and a potent fairy tale symbol—Humpty Dumpty, the metafictional egg—to imagine how change is possible, and even necessary, in a utopian society.

The Serenity Prayer has a dual function within the novel. It is first introduced as a clue at the murder scene, since it is engraved on the back of an AA beginner's chip (a token to help members mark milestones of sobriety) found near the body of recovering alcoholic and murder victim,

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Lilian Dyson. The prayer is simple: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." The investigation into Lilian's death leads Gamache into readings and conversations about Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization that draws upon the theological rather than the medical or the juridical. As Gamache learns more about alcoholism and recovery, he peruses the AA book that the murdered woman had been reading before her death in order to retrace her final thoughts, but also to familiarize himself with the philosophical landscape of a key organization for dealing with the problem of addiction. Gamache reads the book as an aesthetic object, "losing himself in the archaic but beautiful language of this book that so gently described the descent into hell and the long climb back out" (244). This quest metaphor appears to be in contrast to another from the book: "*The alcoholic is like a tornado, roaring his way through the lives of others*" (220). The AA book, like Penny's novel, demonstrates the duality of addiction—the fact that the addict can be at once victim and victimizer, can both descend into hell and act as a natural disaster causing enormous harm to self and others.

The Serenity Prayer's attention to understanding what can and cannot be changed addresses a fundamental problem of utopia: without change or conflict, a perfect society would be boring, thus leading to an absence of powerful art. In the philosophy of AA, not everything can be changed, so the focus is on discernment rather than on potentially stagnant stability. As a prayer, the Serenity Prayer takes as foundational some kind of higher power—whether a denominationally associated notion of God or something more personal—that acts as an assurance that the addict is not alone in facing change. When Gamache attends an AA meeting, he encounters Thierry Pineault, the Chief Justice of the Quebec Supreme Court. In describing the therapeutic benefits of the organization and its meeting structure, Thierry reaches for the metaphor of light that pervades the novel: "But they [the alcoholic's demons] have far less power, if they're in the light. That's what this is about, Inspector. Bringing all the terrible stuff up from where it's hiding" (171). This is the same move that is made in "Omelas," where every person must visit the child in the basement and try to understand the scapegoat as well as they can when they return to the light of day. The alcoholic willing to face what they have done, willing to bring the

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demons to the light, is akin to those who walk away from Omelas, from what is known, comfortable, and ultimately unethical. The Serenity Prayer, with its elegant simplicity, and the large philosophical tome entitled simply *Alcoholics Anonymous*, provide an aesthetic lens that allows for a full communication of this nuanced, complex idea.

The literary nuance of the AA materials is paired with a far older and more potent figure from English fairy tale, Humpty Dumpty. The famous fictional egg has a dual function in Lewis Carroll's *Through a Looking Glass*: he is both a literary critic who interprets the nonsense poem "Jabberwocky" for Alice and a disquieting figure who creates a metafictional paradox for the little girl when he assures her that he will be perfectly fine perched on his wall even though she is familiar with the nursery rhyme and knows the egg's fate. When Gamache interviews Suzanne Coates, the murder victim's AA sponsor, the witness brings up Humpty Dumpty, explaining that some alcoholics are too damaged to find helpful the difficult and painstaking work laid out in the twelve steps of AA. At the same time, Suzanne notes, some—like Lilian, the murder victim—are spiteful, and are as likely to push someone else off of the wall as to fall themselves. Having internalized the different metaphors used in conceptualizing the alcoholic's experience, Gamache realizes that Lilian was caught between two versions of herself when she died: "But what a world between the two," he muses. "In one Lilian was sober and healthy, and in the other she was cruel, unchanged, unrepentant. Was she one of the King's men, or had she come to Three Pines to push someone else off the wall?" (220). As he thinks through the metaphor, Gamache compares the alcoholic to the fictional egg: "Maybe, [Gamache] thought, that was the point of Humpty Dumpty. He wasn't meant to be put together again. He was meant to be different. After all, an egg on a wall would always be in peril" (245). Indeed, an active alcoholic, whether they have committed a shameful act or not, is always perched on the edge of disaster, just one drink away from a fall. And yet, the insight of the alcoholic's experience, like that of the person who mistakes a drowning man for a falling one, may set the stage for a more hopeful future.

In her description of Clara's gorgeous and provocative painting, with its conception in the utopian space of Three Pines and its various interpretations by characters ranging from art critics to detectives, Penny presents a fictional

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work of art that forwards the utopian project of critiquing the present and imagining a better future. In the most resonant intertextual references of *A Trick of the Light*—to the Stevie Smith poem, the Serenity Prayer, and the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme—Penny presents well-known real-world works of art that accomplish much the same rhetorical goals. We see Clara gain insight into not only her art but also her relationship with her husband through an extended engagement with Stevie Smith's poem. We see Gamache, initially unfamiliar with the practices of AA, learn about the process of addition recovery and the place of a much simpler poem—the Serenity Prayer—in helping people imagine a different future for themselves and their loved ones. And finally, we see Gamache connect a very familiar text—the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme—with a concept captured in Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" and in a work of new media that rounds out Penny's exploration of the utopian potential of several different aesthetic forms.

The Strength of Broken Things: The *YouTube* Video and Leonard Cohen

A Trick of the Light introduces a work of new media that has a large footprint across the Armand Gamache series: an anonymously created and posted *YouTube* video that functions very differently from the other aesthetic works Penny includes. The video spans four novels of the series: *Bury Your Dead*, *A Trick of the Light*, *How the Light Gets In*, and *A Better Man* (the sixth, seventh, ninth, and fifteenth novels, respectively). It is an imaginary work of ekphrasis—an audiovisual aesthetic product described in words. Unlike Clara's painting or the intertextual pieces already discussed, the *YouTube* video does not provide clues to Gamache, who is usually shown as an impressive art critic. The detectives here misinterpret the video, and yet their continued grappling with its potential meanings highlights the insight of another intertextual piece central to the series and its utopian project: Leonard Cohen's iconic song "Anthem," whose chorus—"There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in"—recurs frequently and even gives a title to the ninth novel of the series.

Following Le Guin's articulation in "Omelas" that the utopian genre cannot maintain narrative momentum by simply providing a blueprint of a perfect society, Fredric Jameson argues that utopia asserts the possibility of an

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alternative "by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break" (232). In the Armand Gamache series, the "break itself" occurs in *Bury Your Dead*, the novel preceding *A Trick of the Light*, when Gamache is faced with a domestic terrorist plot to blow up an enormous Quebec dam which would cause devastating power outages in Maritime Canada as well as in the much more populated Eastern Seaboard of the United States. After substantial conflict with his superiors at Sûreté Headquarters, Gamache ends up leading a police raid in which both he and his mentee and future son-in-law Jean-Guy Beauvoir are shot, and four young Sûreté agents are killed. Although the police succeed in preventing the plot, Gamache is wracked by guilt and sorrow caused by the loss of his officers and by the near death of Beauvoir. He is physically and psychically scarred by the raid, and his suffering is emphasized by the innovative narrative structure of *Bury Your Dead*, which juxtaposes Gamache's current investigation (while on a busman's holiday) with a series of fragmentary, trauma-laden, out-of-order memories of the raid. The *YouTube* video, which splices together unreleased police-cam footage and public media reports, provides the first coherent narrative of events to the reader.

The *YouTube* video, like all the works of art engaged by *A Trick of the Light*, is subject to multiple interpretations. For Beauvoir, Gamache's right-hand man, the video highlights some of the dangers of aesthetic representation. Beauvoir is not a fan of art. Early in the novel, he is relieved to be at a murder scene after spending the evening at the art gallery showing Clara's work: "Art scared him. But pin a dead body to the wall and he was fine . . . There was nothing subjective about it. No question of good and bad. It wasn't an issue of perspective or nuance. No shading. Nothing to understand. It just was. Collect the facts. Put them in the right order. Find the killer" (39). When faced with an aestheticized representation of police work, released without his knowledge or consent, Beauvoir experiences extreme vulnerability that separates him from his techniques for reading a crime scene. He sees himself differently, but he also imagines how the gazes of others are impacted by the video. "Something had changed," Beauvoir reflects in *Bury Your Dead*. "It was the way people looked at him. It was as though they'd seen him naked, as though they'd seem him in a position so vulnerable, so exposed it was all

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they could see now. Not the man he really was. An edited man" (317). Beauvoir, who has never felt comfortable around art, now finds himself "edited," revised, altered not only by the event of the police raid but also by its representation. He becomes obsessed with the video, watching the scenes in which he and Gamache are shot again and again, eventually developing an opiate addiction that threatens his career and even his life.

Gamache, long established as a superior art critic across aesthetic modes, also struggles to effectively interpret the video. The assemblage of footage presents a positive picture of the police, shown as heroically risking their lives while fighting terrorists in armed conflict in order to protect the people of Quebec. For Gamache, though, this is a dissonant interpretation of events. Although the terrorist plot was foiled, the police action feels like a failure to Gamache, who blames himself for the loss of several officers. His interpretation of the video is deeply flawed, a fact that is revealed over six novels as he pursues a secret investigation into the video's creation and distribution. Gamache reads the video as an especially sinister product. He describes his investigation into the video in almost melodramatic terms, reflecting that he and the Brunels (friends who help with the investigation) "had one other, outstanding, qualification. They were nearer the end than the beginning. As was he. The end of all their careers. The end of all their lives. If they lost either now, they'd still have lived fully" (271). Gamache reads the video as an indictment of his poor police work, when it turns out it was created out of guilt by an agent who gave Gamache poor intelligence.

Beauvoir's and Gamache's initial failures of interpretation vis-à-vis the *YouTube* video do not ultimately result in failures of detection. Gamache's investigation into the video's authorship allows him to discover and ultimately prevent a second terrorist plot in a later novel. Beauvoir's mental health and addiction challenges lead him to move past his early arrogance and approach life and detection with more insight and humility in later novels. The *YouTube* video is not celebrated as a work of art in the same way as other pieces, but it is nonetheless crucial in examining both guilt and trauma in the utopian project. In "Omelas," the narrator states that a utopian world surely contains no guilt even as the story's focus on the ones who walk away suggests that guilt is essential for an ethical life. In Penny's novel, guilt is emphasized in the complex interpretive work performed around the

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YouTube video's creation and consumption. Guilt prompts the video's creation, guilt pushes Gamache to investigate its roots, and guilt is later evoked when the investigation leads to the discovery of a horrifying plot in a later novel. Suffering is equally salient. Although Jameson argues that utopia focuses on the break itself rather than on the society created by the break, Penny's series is able to do both, partly because detective fiction always provides another break in a future novel. In developing a long series in which her main characters are broken by reality but recover in part through their interactions with art, Penny often evokes the iconic voice of Leonard Cohen, whose "Anthem" gives voice to the possibility of finding hope even after trauma. In *A Trick of the Light*, it is Myrna Landers, retired psychiatrist and now bookstore owner in Three Pines, who articulates to Beauvoir the hopeful vision of the series: "Things are strongest where they're broken" (227).

Conclusion

In the end, "Omelas" suggests—and the Armand Gamache detective series shows again and again—that art is not only possible in utopia. It is necessary for utopian imaginings. The main conceptual stumbling blocks of utopia reside at the limits of language. Joy. Happiness. Guilt. Suffering. Philosophers, theologians, and utopian thinkers of various stripes have and will continue to articulate complex ideas around these vital, slippery terms. Understanding the relationship between these concepts is at the centre of the utopian project: does an absence of guilt necessarily lead to happiness? Is joy always tied to suffering? And if so, one's own or someone else's? These complex concepts and the ways they fit together cannot, of course, be described only in words. As Penny demonstrates in her foray through many art forms—from traditional to new media—in *A Trick of the Light*, utopia is not only written. It is seen in the contrast between light and dark in a powerful painting, felt in the half-remembered lines of a poem, etched onto a cheap coin that takes on enormous value as a shared symbol of achievement, and even glimpsed in the painful documentation of a traumatic event in a *YouTube* video. Three Pines, like Omelas, does not exist on any map. But the idea of Three Pines put forward by Louise Penny's multi-faceted art—the utopian longing and the possibilities encapsulated therein—exists in its ekphrastic ability to imagine.

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