

Searching for Utopia in Melville's Novels of Polynesia: *Mardi*

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Introduction

Herman Melville's most popular books of his career were his first two, *Typee* and *Omoo*, both of them containing semi-autobiographical stories based on his real adventures in the South Pacific, mixed with commentary which often calls into question the values of his own society while lauding the perfection of untouched Polynesian cultures. This paper continues the exploration of utopian themes in Melville's early works that began in an earlier paper which dealt with *Typee* and *Omoo* (Farnell 17–26), by extending that exploration into the linked but very different novel, *Mardi*.

Although it involves a young adventurer exploring a South Pacific society as in the first two books, *Mardi* is not based on Melville's real experiences in any but the loosest sense. It is Melville's first true work of fiction, a "Polynesian paradise" converted "into a microcosm, an allegorical frame for a 'world of mind'" (Rosenberry 51), and although it begins realistically enough, it soon takes a deep turn into the territory of the fantastic, transforming from a straightforward adventure novel into a work of philosophy, parody, and political

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commentary.

The book was received poorly, perhaps due to its strangeness and lack of narrative unity, and it was the first of many financial disappointments for Melville, despite its many wonderful passages. Melville wrote it during 1847-1848, when France was going through another revolution, “a year of worker-student alliances and revolutionary manifestos promising the advent of a new age” (Delbanco 107), which Melville compares to a volcanic eruption in *Mardi* (1154-6). Writing at this time must have had its influence on the revolutionary tone, both political and spiritual, of Melville’s novel, but there were quieter revolutionary movements at home in America which had their influence as well.

American Utopia

American utopian experiments were far from uncommon throughout most of the 19th century, the majority being of a religious nature. Like the early Puritan settlers, some immigrants to America came in search of, more than freedom or opportunity, an entirely new way of living. Before and during the writing of *Mardi*, the British Shakers, the German Pietists, Rappites, Zoarites, and various types of Anabaptists, and the bizarre ideas of the French philosopher Fourier all found fertile ground on American soil and attempted, with varying success, to establish their own ideas of perfect societies. There was no lack of home-grown utopian communities, either. Melville’s friend Nathaniel Hawthorne was a founding member of Brook Farm, and he recalls his time there in the 1840s in the Preface to *The Blithedale Romance* “as being, certainly, the most romantic episode of his own life—essentially a day-dream, and yet a fact ...” (634) ; this, even though the self-sufficient socialist ideals of Brook Farm

required its intellectual members to spend all day toiling in the fields, leading Hawthorne to complain that he had “no energy left for writing” (Holloway 129).

Before proceeding further, a definition of that elusive term “utopia” might be in order. In my earlier essay, I focused on Robert Nozick’s definition of a utopia as a society in which “none of the inhabitants [...] can imagine an alternative world they would rather live in” (299)—that is, a society which the members perceive as perfect or nearly so, something which we can imagine as being very difficult to achieve, but in the case of some of the island paradises of the South Pacific, barely possible. This definition worked well for *Typee* and *Omoo*, which described real-but-fragile utopias in the forms of the Taipi Valley (a utopia intact for the moment, on the verge of invasion and destruction by Western forces), Tahiti (a utopia in the process of withering and dying under assault from those same forces), and Hawaii (utopia lost, thoroughly corrupted by missionaries and capitalism), but here the more usual definitions of utopia apply. Although American utopian experiments may have served as inspiration, the primary utopian society in *Mardi* is wholly fictional. Thus, this essay will usually stick to the definitions laid out by Claeys and Sargent, who describe the basic utopia as “a nonexistent society” that is “substantially different from the one in which the author lives” and is “recognizably good or bad to the intended reader” (1). They add refinements, of which the most pertinent to this essay are the eutopia (*eu* being Greek for “good”), or “a utopia that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which the reader lived,” and the utopian satire, “a utopia that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of the existing society” (1-2).

Vivenza

Of the utopian satires, *Mardi* has at least two, and the case can be made for others as well. The first and most important of these is described in Chapters 157-162. Here, in perhaps the most closely studied chapters of the novel, the travelers—Taji, an American in search of his missing lover, and three Mardians: the demigod King Media, historian and priest Mohi, young minstrel Yoomy, and loquacious philosopher Babbalanja—land at and explore the island of Vivenza, a funhouse-mirror parody of the United States. This land is a utopia because its inhabitants claim it to be, and a satirical one because it falls so short of their claims of near-perfection and because it serves as a biting criticism of Melville's homeland. The travelers read an inscription of "immense hieroglyphics" on an arch as they enter the lagoon, "In-this-re-publi-can-land-all-men-are-born-free-and-equal," but they spot a tiny addendum "hidden away in yonder angle" which reads "Except-the-tribe-of-Hamo" (1169-70, Ch 157). At the time, black Americans were sometimes referred to as descendents of Noah's son Ham, cursed for seeing his father nude and drunk; this slender biblical evidence was used by many Southerners as sacred justification for continuing the institution of slavery.

The exploration of Vivenza reveals further evidence of its imperfection. The people constantly boast that their nation is greater than all others, and that, as members of a democracy, "We are all kings here; royalty breathes in the common air" (1171, Ch 158). Their Temple of Freedom (the Senate building) features a whipped slave hoisting a red-striped flag: "as we drew nigh, a man with a collar round his neck, and the red mark of stripes upon his back, was just in the act of hoisting a tappa standard—correspondingly striped" (1171, Ch 158). Like the citizens of Thomas More's *Utopia*, the Vivenzans see

no hypocrisy in claiming to have a perfect society while holding others in bondage. Any criticism, no matter how well-meant, is responded to with fury, such that the travelers worry about their safety (1187, Ch 161), revealing the insecurity of the Vivenzans.

The visit to Vivenza ends with a discussion among the travelers on the morality of slavery and how it may be ended. Though they all (except for Taji, the narrator who remains silent for much of the middle of the novel) express a fervent desire to see slavery abolished, King Media cautions hot-blooded youth Yoomy that there are no simple answers, that though slavery is “a blot, foul as the crater-pool of hell,” war is an evil as well (1191-2, Ch 162).

In this, Melville takes a stance that we see strengthen throughout the rest of his career: clear-eyed and balanced, seeing evil for what it is without flinching, but refusing to support extreme actions in combating it, actions which could result in even greater evil. Thus he dodges the charges of sentimentalism and pamphleteering that continue to dog Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but opens himself to criticism for not being a stronger supporter of Abolition.

This is related to what scholar James Miller terms “The complex figure in Melville's carpet” (3). He says that every one of Melville's major works features a question and an answer:

What should be man's response to his situation in the universe, where evil is omnipresent and where man by the involuntary act of birth becomes inevitably involved? [...] Melville asserted the necessity of man to compromise his ideals, frankly and without private or public deception, in order to come to terms with the world's evil and his own. (4-5)

If we accept this theory—and Miller makes a strong case for it—then we have

to see that Melville's works display a skepticism for the very idea of utopia, which can also be described as a society which tries to be wholly good (in the utilitarian sense) while eliminating evil. Melville's Calvinist background, which includes the crucial concepts of Original Sin and the total preordination by God of everything that happens, seems to preclude the possibility of conceiving a world freed of sin.

But Melville's stance is a bit more multivalent than Miller seems to allow. As Walter Herbert demonstrates, Melville's struggles with Calvinism reflect those of his time, as the fatalistic doctrines of the Calvinists and the more hopeful, liberal ideas of the Transcendentalists and other sects wrestle for the soul of the nation. It is the latter who have utopianists among them.

Serenia

Thus, we must wonder whether the most obvious utopia in *Mardi*, the penultimate island of Serenia, is a true *eutopia* or another *satiric* utopia. The travelers are at first reluctant to land there, even though their canoe is damaged following a storm; their arguments for not landing recall Emerson's criticism of Brook Farm, when he called it "a perpetual picnic, a French Revolution writ small, an age of reason in a patty pan" (quot. in Holloway 128). But they succumb to the entreaties of an old man and follow him to the island (1284-5, Ch 186), where they interrogate him about the nature of his utopia in a question-and-answer dialog common to many utopian works, such as Campanella's "City of the Sun." To every question, the old man gives an answer of perfect reason combined with a humble faith in Oro, the Mardian name for God, and Alma, the Mardian Christ.

Media and Babbalanja start by criticizing Maramma, Mardi's oppressive

Holy Isle and the other satiric utopia of the novel (980-1019, Chs 105-117), and assuming that Serenia will be more of the same, though they admit that they have received a much warmer welcome. Their interview of the old man reveals that the Serenians live according to the precepts of Alma/Christ, helping the weak and poor, turning the other cheek from attacks, and not judging others, for “if he dissent from us, we then equally dissent from him; and men’s faculties are Oro-given. Nor will we say that he is wrong, and we are right; for this we know not, absolutely” (1287-8, Ch187). Thus, as in More’s *Utopia*, they have a freedom of belief, though not a freedom *from* belief—that is, there are no atheists allowed (More 129-31). They have no kings, indeed no governance at all, living in a state of loving socialist anarchy—though “The vicious we make dwell apart, until reclaimed” (1289), a wise choice as many American utopian experiments failed largely because they allowed anyone to join rather than making sure applicants shared the philosophy of the community (Holloway 111). They also have no temples, regarding the whole world as a temple, and no priests other than Alma Himself (1291).

The old man’s beautiful description of a life lived simply through Reason and Faith yoked together results in a conversion experience for the entire group of travelers, except for Taji, whose obsession with finding his lost love Yillah outweighs all. That night, Babbalanja dreams an angelic vision of holy Love tinged with sadness, a vision that apparently reflects and redeems all his earlier cynical, demon-possessed babblings (1294-9, Ch 188), and the troubled philosopher decides that he has found his true home. As the others leave, he preaches to them with all the arrogance of the new convert, telling Taji to give up his mad quest, Media to give up being a king but become a leader in creating a just society, aged Mohi to “die, calm-browed,” and Yoomy to become a

nationless do-gooder, a kind of socialist knight-errant (1300, Ch 189). Apparently, all but Taji accept this advice (though Moji doesn't seem ready to lie down and die just yet), and in the final chapter we hear of Media's return to find unrest in his kingdom, where he stays to join the struggle to make it over into something more in line with the ideals of Serenia (1315-6, Ch 195).

Critics disagree over the extent to which Melville meant Serenia to be taken seriously (Dillingham 119). It does not seem at all likely that he was, like some utopian writers, gravely proposing a society that he hoped would become real. His description of Serenia is simple and brief, lacking the obsessive-hobbyist tweaking of details that the committed utopianist displays (Jameson 35). But it is still a playground for his characters; was it meant to be taken seriously within the context of the story? William Dillingham argues that, "At best [Babbalanja's] contentment on Serenia can only be temporary," claiming that it will last a little while, but then, mirroring Taji's brief happiness with Yillah, the philosopher will "awake one morning to find it disappeared, and spend the rest of his life as a searcher in frantic pursuit" (121). And yet Dillingham does not believe that Serenia is a utopian satire, but "genuine [...], as if [Melville] *wished* it could be the final answer to Babbalanja's problems and the world's ills. The Serenias of man's world are not wrong but only sadly inadequate and thus temporary" (122).

But Serenia is not meant to survive in the real world; indeed, it is not even a parody of a real-world place. While one could try to make it out to be a parody of an American utopian commune, it doesn't match any of them particularly well. The Serenians are too calm and not flesh-denying enough to be Shakers, too pious to be Brook Farmers or New Harmonyists, too open-minded to be Amish or other communal Anabaptists (Holloway). And as the

second-to-last island, Serenia is well out of that long middle section of the novel in which each island is a parody of a real-world nation, where Vivenza features so prominently. It is, like the final island of Flozella, a pure fantasy, but one can think of it as serving a revolutionary purpose nonetheless. Ernst Bloch, in his explorations of the utopian function of art, expresses the idea of an impossible-in-the-real-world utopia's revolutionary function as "a countermove against the bad existence," calling one's assumptions about what is possible or impossible into question, making one aware of the possibilities of improving the world so that one can bring that bad existence "to the point of collapse" (109). Thus, while it may not seem likely that Babbalanja will live happily ever after, this is beside the point. The more important question is whether Serenia acts as an "opiate of the masses" comforting notion, or whether it acts as an activism-inspiring Blochian "countermove." Clearly, it is more the latter than the former.

But in addition to acting as a positive inspiration, there is a danger of a negative inspiration that isolates the dreamer into self-aggrandizing "evil putschist activism that explodes and contains an overly subjective factor," making him believe he can do whatever he wants in noble pursuit of his goal (Bloch 109). This we see in Taji's apparently suicidal pursuit of Yilla. The missing damsel is of course a person, not a place, but she serves the same unattainable-goal function as a utopia: a dream that inspires. Utopian inspiration, taken too far and too egomaniacally, leads one off the cliff.

Later Works

Before drawing conclusions about utopia in Melville's early works, a necessarily brief look at utopian or anti-utopian themes which surface in some later

works may be useful.

Moby-Dick features only a brief allusion to a utopian community in the form of Gabriel, the fanatic prophet from “the crazy society of Neskyuena Shakers” (314, Ch 71), who effectively takes over the *Jeroboam* through violence and playing on the crew’s superstition. While Gabriel himself appears insane—indeed, he seems to be a sort of second-rate foil for Ahab: similar in his madness and ability to conceal it, but without Ahab’s presence or focus—it seems unjust to call one of the longest-surviving utopian communities “crazy.” The Shakers, an offshoot of the Quakers established in America by “Mother” Ann Lee in 1776 at Niskeyuna, New York, managed to survive into the 20th century despite their practice of strict celibacy (Holloway 58, 222). Their rigid self-control was relieved by passionate outbursts of religious frenzy at evening services, from which they got their name (Holloway 75), and their undeserved reputation for insanity.

Pierre, on the other hand, presents a religious anti-utopian argument in the form of Plinlimmon’s pamphlet on “Chronometricals and Horologicals” (210-5, Book XIV), which is a perfect expression of Miller’s “complex figure” argument above. It reads almost as if it were written by a Babbalanja who had indeed found Serenia wanting, but who found equanimity in a more realistic philosophy.

In *The Piazza Tales*, “Bartleby” can be viewed from a utopian perspective as well, with the title character living in his own mental utopia, one of Bloch’s narcissistic “putschist” ignorers of reality, an obsession that leads to his early death (Melville, *Piazza Tales* 64-5). And we can see dystopia—“dark pictures of the world, offering perspectives on the human condition which, if true, would make utopian dreaming an utter waste of time” (Beecher 90)—in the

seventh and eighth sketches from “The Encantadas,” “Charles’s Isle and the Dog-King” and “Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow,” both of which show potential island-utopias gone awry. In the former, a petty dictator is overthrown, but the resulting democracy is “a permanent *Riotocracy*, which gloried in having no law but lawlessness” (*Piazza Tales* 217), while in the latter, lack of both luck and foresight combine to leave a woman stranded, alone and bereft on a desert island, where her dignified suffering is compounded when passing whalers rape her instead of rescuing her (229), and even when rescued by the narrator’s ship, she is forced to betray and leave behind most of her loyal dogs (234). These dark shadows of the Taipi Valley remind us that evil is inescapable, and that, like the tortoise shell in an earlier sketch, “Two Sides to a Tortoise,” darkness is naturally ascendant; if we turn the creature over to regard only the bright (lower) side, the upside-down tortoise (a symbol of the world) is immobilized and doomed to die (188-9).

Finally, in the paired diptych “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” we see utopia and dystopia reflecting each other. But the utopia here is satiric, a utopia of self-satisfied bachelor-lawyers who never consider that their paradise can only thrive because they are supported by the dystopias of the working class, as reflected in the narrator’s visit to a paper factory that employs only unmarried girls who are treated worse than the dangerous machines which they serve like slaves.

Conclusion

Melville is at his most utopian in his early novels of Polynesia. Not only youth and his still-recent experience of living in a Polynesian utopia as a captive, but also writing during a new French Revolution and during America’s

heyday of utopian communal experimentalism, made utopia seem almost within reach. Yet even in these works, he does not fully fall into utopia's seductive embrace. He succumbs to neither of the pitfalls: the soporific escapism that lulls one into a comfortable ignorance of the dark side of things, nor the narcissistic extremism that inspires one to take activism to self- and society-destructive lengths—even though he seems, at times, to betray a grudging respect for his doomed crusaders like Taji and Ahab. Even in these early works, he looks at utopia with a clear and knowing eye, informed by a hard-won knowledge that darkness is inescapable, that we do not get what we deserve, and that while utopia may inspire, one must live in the real world.

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