Historical Optimism: the Use of Utopia in the Enlightenment Era

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"Utopia cannot be reduced to its content."

– Tom Moylan.[1]

In this paper, I will argue that the use of utopian literature in the Enlightenment displays the historical optimism found in that era by looking at three texts in their historical situation: Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), a traditional utopian model, as a product of the Renaissance and the age of discovery; Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), a dystopic text, as a text of Restoration, the age of desolation; and Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762), a feminist utopian text, as a text occurring in the Enlightenment, the age of categorisation. In her *Women's Utopias in the Eighteenth Century*, Alessa Johns states:

> Eighteenth-century female utopists were among the writers grappling with play between optimism and doubt. Their unenviable political position – extensive obligation without commensurate rights – led them to question some emerging ideological orientations even as they reinforced others.[2]

A framing of the utopian literary genre can poignantly depict this play between optimism and doubt. Viewed within the utopian literary tradition of

COLLOQUY text theory critique 17 (2009).
www.colloquy.monash.edu.au/issue17/crawford.pdf

dystopia, *Oroonoko* exposes the dangers of dehumanisation. The text is pessimistic in its call for an end to colonialism and a reworking of current political views. This text shows the doubt of the period – a questioning of convention and an exploration of what can happen if no change occurs. The colonialism Behn exposes is limited, yet still gruesome, including a grand finale of dismemberment. While not traditionally read within the utopian grid, Behn uses literary devices common to the genre and also writes a clearly cautionary tale. Scott's *Millenium Hall* depicts a feminist, philanthropic, utopian community. Her text envisions a more optimistic view of the possibilities for society. By combining two utopian models, Scott audaciously seeks reality. Through her own projects in the Bath community, Scott saw her fictions as representing something that could and should be implemented. She also critiqued the marginalisation of women depicted by the Squires. The hope of implementing societal ideals, while posing solutions to societal critique, is prefigured in the political, social, cultural and economic changes already made, and which would continue. By demonstrating the merger of human effort and Providence (two traditionally opposed models of utopia) and through her use of space/place, Scott's view became, essentially, more optimistic – the historical context here provided a general societal optimism that became the soil for a unique flourishing of utopia.

Utopia as a Genre: Types, Models, Themes

The utopian genre imagines another way of life, which is often set in direct contrast to the way things actually are. Lyman Tower Sargent gives a general and concise definition: "Utopias are generally oppositional, reflecting, at the minimum, frustrations with things as they are and the desire for a better life."[3] Most scholars trace the term "utopia" to More, who wrote of a "no place," a perfect society upon which the traveller stumbles. The realism or plausibility of the utopian society is thus paramount. As Bertrand de Jouvence declares, "the designation of 'Utopia' should be denied to any exposition of a 'New Model' of society which is bereft of pictures concerning daily life."[4] Equally significant is the notion of isolation. Each utopia, in some way, must have boundaries between itself and other communities. Themes of time and space are therefore of heightened pertinence. Questions are begged: how do we get here? Is this future reality or past paradise? Is this somewhere we can travel to or create or have created for us by a deity of some kind? Thus, topography and architecture, space and place are prominent features of utopian literature. These physical structures frame and enforce societal ideology. As Nicole Pohl observes, "urban

planning and urban architecture not only reflect the deterministic political and social system of the utopian society, but also reinforce it by introducing mechanisms of social control."[5] While specifically referring to More's text, Pohl demonstrates how space – where people sit, where they eat and where they live – expresses ideology and reinforces hierarchy.

Chris Ferns identifies two types of utopian narrative: a centralist/authoritarian narrative and one not predicated on order. The former offers stability and security, a freedom *from* something (usually chaos), while the latter is more libertarian and concerned with individual freedom and self fulfilment.[6] Thus, readers should not be surprised by the link between narrative structure and ideology – that, for example, we find more travellers' tales in the age of exploration.[7] Ferns continues:

> What utopian fiction does is reveal still more nakedly the nature of the relationship between ideology and narrative strategy – not least because of the gaps and contradictions which emerge when the two are considered together.[8]

Dystopia is the other side of utopia. The two are opposite and complementary, in perfect juxtaposition for comparison and critique of one another and society. As Krishan Kumar states:

> Utopia and anti-utopia support each other; they are two sides of the same literary genre. They gain from each other's energy and power. The one paints the future in glowing tones; the other colors it black. But the imagination of whole societies and the techniques of representing them in all their particularities are features that they share in common. Both deal in perfected societies, the only difference being whether they attach a plus or a minus sign.[9]

Yet the text itself is not the whole. Indeed, as Tom Moylan notes: "utopia cannot be reduced to its content."[10] Rather, utopian discourse must be regarded in its historical context. In the relation of utopian discourse to historical context, we shift to an exploration of our three texts, in order to re-examine the uses of utopia in the Enlightenment.

Utopia and the Age of Discovery: More's text in the Renaissance

Prior to the development of the Tudor monarchy, England had been notoriously unstable. Scholars note that the "social and economic health of the nation had been severely damaged [by the] decades-long struggle for royal power."[11] With the emergence of Renaissance Humanism, and in the

face of disruption by the Reformation, it is no surprise that More's *Utopia* – first published in Latin – was both static and authoritarian.

The historical context of More's utopian text is clearly identifiable. The copious style of the Renaissance, as characterised by Erasmus, is certainly present.[12] More's traveller learns of an established society, and the narrator describes how the people eat, work, trade; he describes their unique treatment of gold, their marriage customs, their religions and the safety found in the embedded hierarchy of this commonwealth. More's traveller witnesses no slave rebellion, as in *Oroonoko,* nor does he question the mistreatment of the lower class, as in *Millenium Hall*.

The static social vision described by Ferns is typified by a lack of interest in progress. Indeed, the only progress that can be identified is *outside* the utopian society. So, More's narrator concludes by pleading: "Now, will anyone venture to compare these fair arrangements in Utopia with the so-called justice of other countries?"[13] Yet there is no overt hope for societal change for More's readers. Indeed, the narrator confesses that some of the customs of the Utopian people are strange, but nonetheless concludes: "I freely admit that there are many features of the Utopian Republic which I should like – though I hardly expect – to see adopted in Europe."[14]

This utopian text says much in its context. It critiques society and aspires to stability, but it does not expect either change or implementation.

Dystopia and the Age of Desolation: Behn's *Oroonoko* in the Restoration

The Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 gave renewed hope to the traditional landed elites in England,[15] but philosophy and the new sciences nonetheless "encouraged a challenge to traditional wisdom and learning."[16] In *Oroonoko*, Behn echoes the "skepticism and freethinking"[17] that flourished in the late seventeenth century.

As in the utopian genre more generally, the colony to which Oroonoko is transferred is a place of isolation, removed from both other plantations and native communities. The text explores daily life both in Coramantien (later Ghana) and Surinam. While Oroonoko's daily life is not one shared by most slaves – he is a warrior and prince in Coramantien and still a king-like figure and European-like slave in Surinam – the depiction of daily life is of daily events rather than the pure theorising of utopia. Indeed, Katharine M Rogers goes so far to say it was Behn's aim "to ground extraordinary adventures in actuality."[18]

As in much other utopian literature, Behn has an "eye witness" function as the alien/foreigner, and constructs the colony of Surinam in Edenic

terms.[19] Yet there is clear dysfunction in the text – that of slavery – which is crucial to the framing of *Oroonoko* in the dystopian mode. This initial disruption of utopia, found in the first few pages, prefigures another, more dramatic, violation of utopia: dehumanisation. Mutiny and dismemberment are certainly not qualities of the positive utopian text. In *Oroonoko*, the "happy society" is built on the dehumanisation of slaves, while the character Oroonoko is referred to as an animal or monster, or compared to the land.[20] When he tries to inspire the men to rebel against the colonial oppressors, he compares the treatment of slaves to that of animals:

> They suffered not like men, who might find a glory and fortitude in oppression, but like *dogs* that loved the whip and bell, and fawned the more they were beaten. That they had lost the divine quality of men and were become insensible asses, fit only to bear; *nay, worse*: an ass, or dog, or horse, having done his duty, could lie down in retreat and rise to work again, and while he did his duty endured no stripes.[21]

Shortly afterward, he questions the reason for his imprisonment and that of the other slaves:

> Have they won us in honorable battle? And why are we by the chance of war become their slaves? This would not anger a noble heart, this would not animate a soldier's soul; no, but we are bought and sold like *apes or monkeys*, to be the sport of women, fools, and cowards.[22]

Further evidence of dehumanisation lies in the comparison between slaves and land, as Anita Pacheco observes: "Slaves here are a bit like land, the customary form of aristocratic wealth, which was not only a capital asset but also involved lordship over others."[23] Slaves, then, are treated as landscape, an asset to a regime. The comparison between slave and land occurs when Oroonoko is wounded. Just as Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) questioned the "hope placed in science and the scientist," so *Oroonoko* questioned the confident expansion of the British Empire via colonisation.[24] Through the genre of romance (depicted in the love story of Oroonoko and Imoinda) and in the theme of moral values (questions regarding what should be does and how to live rightly), Behn counters the dehumanisation of the colonial subject through the character of Oroonoko, the royal slave. As a dystopia, the model of a static society is judged and found wanting, with Behn's text rejecting the current practices of slavery and societal inequality.

Feminist Utopia and the Age of Categorisation: Scott's *Millenium Hall* in the Enlightenment

The late seventeenth century marks a shift from feudalism and mercantilism (domestic economies) to expanding colonial companies, as the scientific discoveries of the previous era made way for new markets. Enlightenment ideals included reason, education, equality and "progressive notions about the polis,"[25] and there was a reorganisation and creation of space, which "configured social intercourse."[26] This relation between physical space and ideology is significant. Not only were large spaces, such as buildings, reconfigured but also small spaces, like the cabinet, within which one displayed an "obsession with collecting specimens in a cabinet of curiosities."[27] Space and place are thus keen interests in the Enlightenment, an interest shared by utopian literature.

Scott's *Millenium Hall* is situated at a merging place of two models: those brought about by human effort and those brought about without it. The text features evident Edenic space – even more than Behn's colony of Surinam, the grounds of the hall echo a state of paradise. From the garden and river to the house and temple, the earth upon which the Hall exists is distinct from what the narrator and his travelling companion were used to seeing. Lamont, a male traveller who accompanies the narrator to the Hall, remarks upon his arrival: "If Nebuchadnezzar had such pastures as these to range in, his seven years expulsion from human society might not be the least agreeable part of his life."[28]

This is a providential place. While the reader recognises the active role of Providence in the histories of the women, the novel's descriptive sections exposes how the women founded the community, bringing it about with human effort – the effort of pious women.[29] With this blending of utopias, *Millenium Hall* calls for immediate and necessary implementation.

Returning to the theme of space, it is significant that the Hall itself is in the countryside, away from the city. There is a strong element of isolation here, although there are also various ties to other communities. Second, there is a separate area – the "country adjacent" – of disadvantaged peoples. The women of Millenium Hall help the poor by giving them cottages and the chance to work free from the pressure of their former employers, the Squires who "indeed grew rich."[30] This work was with the poor and deformed, and, using Johns' language, focuses on "the plight of women and other subalterns."[31] It is important to note, however, that the view of Millenium Hall as a positive community for women is not unanimously shared. Vincent Carretta, for example, argues that the male narrator usurps the female voice and subjects the women to the male gaze.[32] Since masculinity

is excluded from the utopia, because it is indicative of "individualistic and socially disruptive desire," Scott's utopia cannot expand "into the larger social sphere."[33] But the call of this utopia is not for an all-inclusive totality – rather, it functions as separate from society, while still participating in it to some degree. This can be seen most poignantly in the marriages that occur no less than two times per year. The women of Millenium Hall host the weddings of their young female students at the Hall itself, and give them monetary gifts to help with their financial security.[34] This practice and support of marriage suggests that there is no intention to replace society altogether, only to influence it in a positive way.

The community Scott establishes in the Millenium Hall contains, as Ana M Acosta writes, a space "created and set aside to contain that which belongs nowhere else – anomalies, deformities, monsters."[35] Here, the individual is not meaningless, as in static utopian models, but rather embraced by a caring community – the feminist utopia. Drawing on Enlightenment ideals, Scott calls for social change. As Johns states:

> Feminist utopias of the eighteenth century recognized their partiality and at the same time offered plans that, leaning on the Enlightenment ideals, sought to improve the lives of subalterns and create the possibility for women to become active reformers and political subjects.[36]

Yet the Enlightenment, seen so clearly that Scott attempted to live out the vision, only made this hope possible. Indeed, *Millenium Hall* can be seen as a fictional, idealised account of Scott's time in the Bath community.[37]

Scott thus challenges the use and role of money and the exclusion of those seen as unproductive, when her peripheral women are given a place to live – a space to be – and a way to contribute. Certainly her work in Bath, as well as the didactic tone of her piece, speaks to a call for implementation. As a blend between utopias brought about with and without human effort, *Millenium Hall* becomes a call for the immediate, necessary betterment of society.

Utopia in the Enlightenment

In the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789, there was a noticeable decline in the use of the literary utopia as a genre and a shift toward utopian polemics and tracts.[38] This flourishing use of utopia recurs in the late nineteenth century, with writers like Edward Bellamy, William Morris and H G Wells, and again in the late twentieth century with authors such as Charlotte Perkins and Ursula Le Guin.[39]

Enlightenment ideals are uniquely displayed in utopian literature, specifically in Scott's text. More's static, authoritarian utopia is present in the age of discovery, and stability is sought in the political unrest of the Renaissance. Behn's dystopia is located in the scepticism of the Restoration. She critiques the dehumanisation involved in established society, as evidenced in the tale of Oroonoko and the violence he experiences. Scott's text is more optimistic. It is hopeful for change in a way not previously evidenced. She combines two models of utopia and utilises space to assert the plausibility of a community like that of the women of Millenium Hall. Despite her critique of society, she posits a feminist utopian community and proposes to put it into action.

Actually, she does more than propose: the community of Bath is in fact the audacious assertion of the plausibility of utopia in the optimistic zeal of the Enlightenment.

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NOTES

[1] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible* (New York: Methuen, 1986) 39.

[2] Alessa Johns, *Women's Utopias of the Eighteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) 5.

[3] Lyman Tower Sargent, "Utopia Traditions: Themes and Variations" in *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western* World, eds Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 8.

[4] Bertrand de Jouvence as quoted in Krishan Kumar, "Utopia and Anti-Utopia in the Twentieth Century," *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 252.

[5] Nicole Pohl, *Women, Space and Utopia, 1600-1800* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006) 5.

[6] Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1999) 14-15.

[7] Ferns, *Narrating Utopia* 17.

[8] Ferns, *Narrating Utopia* 17.

[9] Kumar, "Utopia and Anti-Utopia" 253

[10] Moylan, *Demand the Impossible* 39.

[11] M H Abrams, general editor, "The Sixteenth Century, 1485-1603" in *Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1B, 7th edition (New York: Norton, 2000) 470.

[12] Sir Thomas More, *Utopia* [1515], trans Paul Turner (New York: Penguin Press, 1961).

[13] More, *Utopia* 129.

[14] More, *Utopia* 132.

[15] M H Abrams, general editor, "The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century, 1600-1785" in *Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1C, 7th edition (New York: Norton, 2000) 2046.

[16] Abrams, "Restoration" 2050.

[17] Abrams, "Restoration" 2049.

[18] Katharine M Rogers, "Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Studies in the Novel* 20:1 (1988) 11.

[19] Behn, *Oroonoko* 2170. When describing the native people of the colony, the narrator states: "The beads they weave into aprons about a quarter of an ell long, and of the same breadth, working them very prettily in flowers of several colors of beads; which apron they wear just before 'em, as Adam and Eve did the fig leaves, the men wearing a long stripe of linen which they deal with for us" (2172). This is restated, drawing a parallel with the natives to "our first parents before the Fall" that represent the "idea of the first state of innocence, before man knew how to sin" (2172). Not only are the natives described in Edenic terms, but also the land: "'tis most evident and plain that simple Nature is the most harmless, inoffensive, and virtuous mistress" (2172). Nature is only depicted as harmless as it is before the Fall. By claiming Nature's loveliness and host-like qualities, the land itself becomes associated with Eden. However, in utopian literature, the land of plenty functions to eliminate labour.

[20] Yet the narrator also makes a dehumanising comparison: "[H]is grief swelled up to rage; he tore, he raved, he roared, like some *monster* of the wood, calling on the loved name of Imoinda" (Behn, *Oroonoko* 2212; emphasis added). Here, Oroonoko is described to the reader as animalistic. Also, the mob who seeks out to find the missing Oroonoko shouts, "Oh, *monster!* That hast murdered thy wife" (2213; emphasis added). This likening to a monster transitions from the animalistic to the grotesque.

[21] Behn, *Oroonoko* 2205; emphasis added.

[22] Behn, Oroonoko 2205-6; emphasis added.

[23] Anita Pacheco, "Royalism and Honor in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Studies in English Literature* 34:3 (1994) 499.

[24] Kumar, "Utopia and Anti-Utopia" p. 253.

[25] Johns, *Women's Utopias* 157-9.

[26] Pohl, *Women, Space and Utopia* 8. Pohl engages with Jurgen Habermas to discuss structural transformation. For more on this, see Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), trans Thomas Burger. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

[27] Ana M Acosta, "Transparency and the Enlightenment Body: Utopian Space in Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* and Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*" in eds Nicole Pohl and Brenda Tooley, *Gender and Utopia in the Eighteenth Century: Essays in English and French Utopia Writing* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) 115.

[28] Sarah Scott, *A Description of Millenium Hall and the Country Adjacent* (1762), ed

Gary Kelly (Orchard Park: Broadview Press, 1995) 57.

[29] Examples of such a model are found in "Eloquent Peasant of Ancient Egypt," Aristophanes, Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* and the monastic orders of St Benedict and St Francis (Sargent, "Utopia Traditions" 10). These texts focus on the action of individuals and establishment of government (or a more general structure) as key components to the foundation of utopia. While *Millenium Hall* possesses several qualities of the utopia brought about without human effort, clearly it is the women who pool their money and are actively philanthropic in the community. The utopia does not merely exist, but it exists because the women created it. The Hall itself serves as an example of this. After his death, Mr Morgan's will indicated that his wife should have ownership of a house "which fell to him" one month before his death (Scott, *Millenium Hall* 158). The house was "sufficiently furnished" and "in such good order" that the women settled quickly. Then, noticing the poor around them, the women "instituted schools for the young, and alms-houses for the old," soon followed by "furnishing a house for every young couple that married in their neighbourhood, and providing them with some sort of stock, which by industry would prove very conducive towards their living in a comfortable degree of plenty" (Scott, *Millenium Hall* 159).

[30] Scott, *Millenium Hall* 65.

[31] Johns, *Women's Utopias* 18.

[32] Vincent Carretta, "Utopia Limited: Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* and *The History of Sir George Ellison,*" *Literature Criticism form 1400 to 1800* (Detroit: Gale, 1984) 339, 341.

[33] Betty Schellenberg *The Conversational Circle: Re-reading the English Novel, 1740-1775* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1996) 89.

[34] Scott, *Millenium Hall* 162-3.

[35] Acosta, "Transparency and the Enlightenment Body" 115.

[36] Johns, *Women's Utopias* 162.

[37] See Eve Tavor Bannet, "The Bluestocking Sisters: Women's Patronage, *Millenium Hall*, and 'The Visible Providence of a Country,'" *Eighteenth-Century Life* 30 (2005) 38. For a few years, Sarah Scott and Elizabeth Montagu lived together in a house in Bath, which they financed themselves and from where they launched various philanthropic endeavours. As such, they sought to enact the ideals of the so-called Blue Stocking society, namely, equality for women in all spheres.

[38] Johns, *Women's Utopias* 161.

[39] Johns, *Women's Utopias* 161. Tom Moylan also identifies this utopian trend as dwindling off and not resurging until the twentieth century. See Moylan, *Demand the Impossible* 15-28.