A Country Not Named , and: *The History of the Sevarambians: A Utopian Novel* (review)

Nicole Pohl

Utopian Studies, Volume 21, Number 1, 2010, pp. 172-176 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/utp.0.0008*

cultural impact and continuing reputation are inextricably linked with the trajectory of postmodernist aesthetics, and to downplay that connection is to the detriment of the work. Having said that, one postmodernist trope that Klinkowitz does deal with is the permeability of subjectivity, an area in which Vonnegut clearly was ahead of the curve. "We are what we pretend to be, and had therefore better be very careful what we pretend to be" (42) is the construction that he returns to on a number of occasions as an indicator of the slipperiness of contemporary identity, its ability to reform itself and to be based less on an immutable, authentic selfhood than on shifting coordinates of performative being.

Whether *Kurt Vonnegut's America* is actually about Kurt Vonnegut's America is a moot point: while Klinkowitz solidly locates his subject among post-1945 social concerns, this book rarely engages with America as an entity or even with how Vonnegut conceptualized his nation. What it is, is a moving and tender critical memoir that lacks at times the hard edge of criticism but delivers on the memoir through a personal and reflective anecdotalism. Vonnegut, as constructed by Klinkowitz, is a very human, personable, and honorable individual, committed to pointing out the wrong turnings taken by society but equally aware of his own flaws and limitations. One couldn't ask for much more from one's friends as a send-off, but at times one could ask for more from this book from a scholarly perspective. This book deserves great praise for what it achieves but should, perhaps, be read in conjunction with other Vonnegut criticism for a fuller picture.

Francis Lodwick. *A Country Not Named*. Ed. William Poole. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007. xii + 148 pp. Paperback, $30.00.

Denis Veiras. *The History of the Sevarambians: A Utopian Novel*. Ed. John Christian Laursen and Cyrus Masroori. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. 418 pp. Paperback, $31.95.

Reviewed by Nicole Pohl, Oxford Brookes University

> He gave man speech, and speech created thought—which is the measure of the universe
>
> —P. B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*

Thomas More conceived his most controversial book, *De Optimo Reipublicae Statu deque nova insula Utopia Libellus vere aureaus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus* (*Of the best state law and of the new island Utopia, truly a golden booklet, as pleasant as it is cheerful*), now known as *Utopia*, in 1515. It records the political and social ailments of early modern Europe through the eyes of the fictitious sailor Raphael Hytholdaeus in debate with Thomas More, Peter Giles, and Jerome Busleyden. *Utopia* endorses principal humanist debates on the best state government, civic self-government, social equality, and political wisdom in the light of the development of absolutism and early capitalism. Part of this humanist project was also the invention of an a posteriori language for the Utopians, preempting the modern Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, that language shapes thinking and, thus, culture. While More's Utopian language was not original but simply a way of encoding the Roman alphabet, it was based on the assumption (a) that language could be scrutinized for its perfection as evidence of divine inspiration and (b) that human language is imperfect. Johanna Drucker thus concludes:

> The universal language schemes which emerged in this period, particularly in the 17th century, were motivated by one or more of the following desires: to recover the lost perfection assumed to be embodied in the original language spoken by Adam; to find a system of polyglot translation capable of breaking down the barriers between peoples which were embodied in linguistic differences; and to construct a system in which linguistic categories would designate logical categories in a more perfect relation of language and knowledge. It was written language, rather than spoken language, which lent itself to these proposals, in part because the concrete quality of its visual form lent itself to more ready manipulation within the descriptive systems.[1]

Thus, seventeenth-century language schemes were divided into two strands: (a) the idea of a pre-Adamite, a priori universal language as proposed by the utopians Godwin and Wilkins and as the detailed introduction to *A Country Not Named*, by Francis Lodwick, shows; (b) the idea of an a posteriori, constructed language in the vein of More, Foigny, and Veiras.

Lodwick is an important figure in seventeenth-century philosophy and language theory. Along with More, Wilkins, and George Dalgarno, he attempted to create an artificial language, published first in *A Common Writing* in 1646 and then again with his innovative universal phonetic alphabet in the *Philosophical Transactions* in 1686. He also was part of the Pansophist circle of Samuel Hartlib, Jan Amos Comenius, and Gabriel Plattes. Pansophy's ultimate goal was salvation, but salvation for the Pansophists meant deliverance from ignorance, tyranny, and conflict. Thus their reform programs focused on politics, education, and religion and the possibility of a universal language. Influenced by Isaac La Peyrère and his notorious book *Prae-Adamitae* (1655), Lodwick contended that there were men before Adam and that the different nations of the world had arisen polygenetically. His new universal language scheme therefore drew on two oppositional ideas: (a) the idea of a language based on reason only and (b) a quasi pre-Adamite, pure language that reverts back to an assumed state of innocence and purity.

William Poole's excellent and detailed edition of Lodwick's manuscript utopia called *A Country Not Named* shows how Lodwick's ideas are developed in a fictional environment. The extensively researched introduction places Lodwick into his historical and cultural context. Lodwick's earlier work is characterized by his associations with the epistolary network centered on the Pansophists; his later writings, conversely, were produced after Lodwick had become a fellow and central administrative figure of the Royal Society and an inner member of Robert Hooke's coffeehouse club. Poole also indicates that Lodwick was interested in seventeenth-century utopianism and most certainly knew the writings by More, Bacon, Godwin, Cavendish, and Veiras. Possibly composed between 1655–56 and the late 1670s, *A Country Not Named* is a short utopian text, one that dispenses with the classical utopian paraphernalia of an elaborate imaginary voyage context and a detailed description of the country or society. The utopian society is a pre-Adamite oligarchy guided by the political power of the civil magistrate and the priest-king. The island nation, once attached to a mainland, is now artificially separated. It is divided into cities, towns, and villages, and, very similar to More, representatives of the different communities rule the nation on a local level. Land is distributed equally and fairly to guarantee everyone's well-being. The focus of the society is on the education of both sexes. The country's religion, following a theophany à la Bacon, is a Christian utopian church stripped

of Scriptures, most sacraments, and the idea of original sin. Also echoing Bacon here, every three years, emissaries travel anonymously to the neighboring country for reconnaissance. Poole's erudite edition is to be applauded for its careful and extensive scholarship, which elevates Lodwick from his relative obscurity to utopian scholars to an important utopian thinker.

As Poole outlines, Denis Veiras, author of *The History of the Sevarambians* (1677) and linguist himself, might have been influenced by Lodwick's *Universal Alphabet*, published only in 1685 but in circulation as manuscript already in 1673. *The History of the Sevarambians* has a complex provenance and publishing history that is echoed in the restricted knowledge we have about the author Veiras (also spelled Vairrasse or Vairasse, an anagram of the founder of Severambia, Sevarias). Part 1 appeared in London in English as *The History of the Sevarites or Severambi* in 1675, and parts 1–3 appeared subsequently in Paris as *L'Histoire des Séverambes* (1677–78), followed by parts 4 and 5 in French in 1679 when the English part 2 was also published. The complete version was translated from French into English in 1738. To make things more complicated, some parts of the editions overlap with later ones and/or have substantial differences.

The version edited by John Christian Laursen and Cyrus Masroori offers scholars and readers the 1675 original English text with the 1738 edition, translated from French, alongside it. Their introduction gives some basic information about publishing history, provenance, and known biographical facts about Veiras but sadly misses out on a more detailed textual and generic study of the text. While *The History* clearly borrows from Lodwick's ideas of universal language, it is also inseparable from the seventeenth-century imaginary voyage. In the imaginary voyage, utopia intersected with non-utopian historiographies of civil society, political economy, and literary genres such as the pastoral and indeed became another stepping-stone for contemporary anthropology and political science. Historical pessimism created utopias that idealized the "state of nature" and defined society and civilization as progressive alienation from an original good—they thus opposed Hobbes's antisocial notion of the "natural" man. In that, utopia promised the regeneration of society to its original state of innocence and peace. Utopias such as Denis Vairasse's *History of the Sevarites* or Gabriel de Foigny's *La Terre Australe connue* (1676) document simple, virtuous, and self-sufficient communities and thus offer their own contribution to the contemporary debate on

luxury and mercantile economy. The edition would have also profited from contextualizing Veiras in the milieu of contemporary Huguenot utopias, such as Gabriel de Foigny's *La Terre Australe connue*, which, like Veiras, uses the largely unknown and uncharted *Terra Australis Incognita* as an imagined utopian setting that promotes religious tolerance.

The Sevarite society is a "Cartesian utopia" (Saage): order and geometry in the space and architecture of the utopian country reflect and in many ways enforce order and social geometry on a social level. The country is ruled by an enlightened monarch, aided by different levels of councils that guarantee democratic involvement. Nevertheless, there is no private property, and the strictly regulated production of goods and work à la More makes this a seemingly egalitarian state. Religious tolerance and some basic principles of gender equality seem to support this. However, the heliocratic monarchy and the focus on collectivity and collective reason restrict individual liberty in the same vein as More's *Utopia* does.

Limitations aside, *The History of the Sevarambians* is an important and complex text. This edition, which provides two different editions, French and English side by side, is important to current utopian scholarship and offers readers and scholars the opportunity for detailed textual comparison and analysis.

Endnote

1. Johanna Drucker, *The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 176.

John S. Partington, ed. *H. G. Wells in "Nature," 1893–1946: A Reception Reader*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008. 514 pp. Paperback, £55.70.

Reviewed by Genie Babb, University of Alaska, Anchorage

John S. Partington has done readers and scholars of Wells a great service by collecting his contributions to the eminent journal *Nature* in one volume. Over the past decade, Partington has earned a reputation as an important Wells scholar; in addition to having edited *The Wellsian* from 1999 to