

THE ULTIMATE AMERICA –  
MARGE PIERCY'S *WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME*<sup>1</sup>

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America started as a utopia. The New World, looming on the shadowy outskirts of the Old World and its civilisation, was a real-life fusion of Sir Thomas More's utopia, no place, and eutopia, the good place. In words of Mircea Eliade, its "... colonization ... began under an eschatological sign: people believed that the time had come to renew the Christian world, and the true renewal was the return to the Earthly Paradise or, at the very least, the beginning again of Sacred History..." (Eliade 1973: 262-263). America, the utopia which has been coming to its fruition for more than five hundred years and the United States, which has been striving to fulfil its optimistic utopian promise of equality, happiness and ultimate self-realisation for more than two hundred years, both seem more and more to prove what the late Paul Tillich called the "untruth" of utopia.

The untruth of utopia is that it forgets the finitude and estrangement of man, it forgets that man as finite is a union of being and non-being, and it forgets that man under the conditions of existence is always estranged from his true or essential being and that it is therefore impossible to regard his essential being as attainable. ... "the man" it presupposes is, in fact, unestranged man. Here utopia contradicts itself, for it is precisely the utopian contention that estranged man must be led out of his estrangement. But who will do this? Estranged man himself? (Tillich 1973: 299).

The American dystopia, the idea of which, I believe, started to win the American imagination somewhere in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the 19th century, seems then to be a necessary outcome of the American utopia.

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It has resulted in a profusion of both real-life and literary projects aiming at the restoration of the never-reached, though presumably partially realized, ideal. Springing from a deep disillusionment with American reality, these projects seem to have taken even deeper roots from the belief that the “country is destined to be *the great nation of futurity*” (O’Sullivan 1988: 9) and that at least a potential for greatness has not been lost.

The 19th century, which marked the closing of the American wilderness frontier, produced at the same time new awareness of the multiplicity of mental and social frontiers which must be crossed if the utopian ideal was ever to be realized. Barriers between genders, races and classes, taken for granted and usually rationalised and strengthened even in utopias, especially classical utopias (e.g., in Plato’s “Republic”), first discarded by Americans in the Declaration of Independence, finally ceased to be treated as natural and unproblematic even in social practice.

The legacy of a myriad of American political, social and literary utopias pervades American literature as a whole. Marge Piercy’s literary utopia *Woman on the edge of time* (1976) can, I think, be used to show the way in which many of these visions, often contradictory, can melt to form a new ideal: the ultimate America.

The female protagonist of the novel, Connie Ramos, a Chicana in her middle thirties, communicates with the year 2137 and explores with Luciente, her guide, the village of Mattapoissett, Massachusetts. Almost from the beginning of the story, brief trips to the village become literally the only way for the protagonist to escape temporarily the oppression of her own society. Being a poor ethnic minority woman, Connie suffers all the injustices of the 20th century American social arrangement. She is finally (due to a tragic coincidence) committed to a mental hospital. The existence of Mattapoissett is then hypothetical for two reasons: firstly, because the reader forever hesitates whether or not to treat it as a figment of Connie’s feeble mind, and secondly, because, as her guide explains, it is “only one possible future” (Piercy 1976: 177).

“People of the rainbow with its end fixed in earth” (Piercy 1976: 141), as Connie calls them, seem to put into life the idea of Jeffersonian “integral human being, living outside urban civilisation, who by an act of will passes from the individual to communal self” (Żyro 1994: 52-53; quote trans. A. Rzepa). Although the well-being of the community is definitely most important for them, each individual is given ample space to develop. This idea is expressed even in the spacial organisation of the village. Though there are a number of communal buildings, such as the fooder, where they gather to eat and spend time together, each of them has his/her own place, a simple and spacious hut.

They are sophisticated peasants, spiritual descendants of the procession of farmers and backwoodsmen marching through American literary and political

writings. They are Jeffersonian self-sufficient farmers who neither buy nor sell anything; a collective Natty Bumppo, who enters the wilderness to learn from it and use it without destroying it; they consciously give up the idea of big cities (“they didn’t work”) and live now in communion with their environment. “We have limited resources,” explains Luciente. “We plan cooperatively. We can afford to waste ... nothing. ... Our – you’d say religious – ideas make us see ourselves as partners with water, air, birds, fish, trees. ... We’re built of elements ancient as the earth” (Piercy 1976: 68, 125). Nature fuses then with the Emersonian Universal Being, the Oversoul circulating through each human being; it is not considered just to be of use, or to present a symbolic veil through which to pierce and reach mysteries of a higher existence; it’s the beginning and the end, the teacher and guide, but also an obligation, a responsibility. So the members of the Mattapoissett community recycle, compost or reuse everything they can, use solar energy as well as rainwater kept in rainwater-holdings on the roof of each house, and choose not to control the weather although they are capable of doing so; they rarely eat meat, and they kill animals only to cull the herds and to retain the ecological balance.

The awareness of the complexity of human interactions with nature, both on the physical and spiritual levels, was common to the majority of American 19th century utopian communities. Though in most cases far from the pantheism of Piercy’s utopia, they were likewise centred around broadly conceived ecological concerns, evident e.g. in their treatment of soil and its crops (Shakers), in the idea of peaceful coexistence with and within nature (Fourier phalanxes, e.g. the North American Phalanx), and in the belief that “a true life, although it aims beyond the highest star, is redolent of the healthy earth,” expressed by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody in her “Plan of the West Roxbury Community (Peabody 1988: 321). In consequence, these communities, just like Piercy’s imaginary community, were answering (at least to some extent) Thoreau’s call to simplify.

Apart from the idea of the retreat from the corrupt society and giving up unnecessary embellishments of life, Thoreau’s doctrine of simplicity rested on the concept of body- and spirit-enriching work, allowing people to recapture the awareness of their necessary unity with nature. “The economy he proposed ... was to the end of getting and spending one’s life, an economy of spirit ..., one that denied the Puritan necessity of working with the sweat of the brow, one that made work itself a joy and a pastime rather than a duty” (Paul 1962: 102), a common means of developing body, soul and intellect. The inhabitants of Mattapoissett also develop and express themselves through such uncompetitive labour. Nobody is forced to do what they cannot do, as the utopians believe that a person fulfilling an assigned task reluctantly will not do it properly, and thus – in some circumstances – may put others in jeopardy. They change the

type of work freely, unless they feel a particular job is their calling, because they treat work and education as one ongoing process. Everyone teaches others and education is not strictly structured. "Who wants to grow up with a head full of facts in boxes? ... What person thinks person knows has to be tried out all the time," declares Luciente (Piercy 1976: 131). Similarly, Transcendentalists in Brook Farm, Shakers and members of Oneida among others, believed in the idea of work as pleasure (Oneidans called it "attractive industry") and rejected the artificial division between mental and physical work. In Shaker communities, just like in Mattapoisett, the amount and type of labour performed depended solely on the will, decency and social consciousness of each member. Similarly, inhabitants of Brook Farm believed in universal, integral education and wanted "every associate, even if he be the digger of the ditch as his highest accomplishment [to be] an instructor in that to the young members" (Peabody 1988: 214). The major educational aim in many social utopias of the 19th century America was to produce well-rounded, self-sufficient personalities, who would be at the same time open to the needs of others and ready to help the community. In Piercy's imaginary village, education is to attune individuals to the rhythm of natural and communal life, to the needs of their own body and spirit (this knowledge is called "inknowing" and allows them to control e.g. their own heart-beat and blood pressure), as well as to the needs of bodies and spirits of others ("outknowing"). They teach the young ones "to feel with other beings, ... sharpening of the senses, ... states of consciousness, types of feeling" (Piercy 1976: 140).

The process is to produce a well-known, all-American mixture of community spirit and fierce individualism. The wilderness functions as the essential and symbolic medium of self definition. The teenagers of Mattapoisett enter it and try to survive alone in the midst of it when they feel they are ready to break personal dependencies and then come back as equal community members. The aim of this initiation rite is for each individual "to find out how [he/she] is alone as well as with others," which will allow them later to "go deep into [themselves] and develop [their] own strength" (Piercy 1976: 116). From that moment on they are free to choose the name they feel defines their personality best and change it any time they believe they have outgrown it.

The freedom of self-definition which this right symbolises includes also the freedom of cultural self-definition, achieved by means of breaking "the bond between genes and culture" (Piercy 1976: 103) as well as the bonds of nuclear family and the strictures of gender. The inhabitants of Mattapoisett are cultural and sexual androgynes.

The reformation of the institution of the family and the transformation of relations between sexes have been at the core of American utopian experiments and the call for them has most often come from women, especially feminists.

Experiments have included free love, different variations on marriage (like e.g. "complex marriage" in Oneida) and celibacy. With the Women's Movement the ideas of equality between the sexes started to gain ground. Margaret Fuller was one of the many who indorsed them; at the same time, she believed that human beings are in fact androgynous. Man and woman, she wrote, "represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another ... there is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman" (Fuller 1994: 75). As contemporary feminists have pointed out, there is an essential connection between the personal and the social element, and the realisation of the androgynous ideal involves radical changes in man-made hierarchical social organisation; "it requires an openness to cooperative, communal structures and relationships ... the injection of ... non-hierarchical, non-elitist structures into our society; ... collective systems are androgynous." (Topping Bazin – Freeman 1974: 196-211). Giving up social structuring and valuation involves on a more advanced level attaching equal value to different cultures.

To fuse all these elements and achieve a perfect society, the women of the world conjured up in Piercy's novel gave up "the only power [they] ever had ... the original production: the power to give birth" (Piercy 1976: 165). Luciente explains that breaking the biological bondage was the only way for women to become equal, the only means by which men could "be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers" (Piercy 1976: 165). Mothering is then voluntary and open to both sexes. The genetic material is stored in special places called "brooders," where community members go after one of them dies, and "signal the intent to begin a baby" (Piercy 1976: 161). The embryos develop in special containers within the brooder. As the genes of darker-skinned people have previously been mixed well through the society, there is no link between the culture babies are born to and their skin colour. Cultural identity, however, is very important; each village defines itself culturally. The bases of this definition are, once again, voluntary and everyone is free to move anywhere else and change their cultural identity. "We don't want the melting pot where everybody ends up with thin gruel," declares Luciente. "We want diversity, for strangeness breeds richness ... " (Piercy 1976: 103). The cultural legacy of the past is then used creatively, to enrich the present. At the same time the danger of racial tension or conflict is virtually non-existent.

In Piercy's novel the American identity emerges in its full and ideal self, the American dream seems to come to its completion in the vision of a truly egalitarian, non-discriminating society, which lives free of constrictions of race and gender, though not denying their importance. However, as Luciente reminds us, "all things interlock. We are only one possible future ... Alternate universes coexist, Probabilities clash and possibilities wink out forever" (Piercy 1976: 177). Not surprisingly, a glimpse into one of these alternative futures assures

Connie that excesses of technology used to control and kill human beings can produce a society based on sharp contrasts between classes, races and genders, on power and greed, on dependence and cruelty. Piercy's warning call echoes many similar statements coming from American thinkers and reformers, and focusing on the dangers of the industrial and technological society. Among these one might mention Jefferson's call against mercantile, corrupt cities; Thoreau's denunciation of the greed-producing industrial civilisation; as well as a wealth of other voices. Rapid industrial development of the country in the 19th century produced a profound fear that the whole humanity might lose control over its own fate, and what is more, that the behaviour and life of individuals might be controlled by elite groups having access to the newest achievements of science and technology. At the same time, the optimistic promise of progress engaged the American mind and popular culture (Marx 1986: 36-69). The image of the machine-in-the-landscape as well as the pastoral mode became almost omnipresent both in classical American literature and other popular cultural images of the era, as has been demonstrated by Leo Marx in his study *The machine in the garden* (1964). In Piercy's novel the reader is confronted with an image of the machine-without-the-landscape, as the alternative technocratic society controls only space platforms, the moon and Antarctica. Symbolically, the barren community rules over wasteland, having severed any links with life-giving and life-sustaining nature.

The people of Mattapoissett trace the danger to the Manhattan Project "when technology became itself a threat" (Piercy 1976: 56), and to biological sciences: "control of genetics; technology of brain control; birth-control surveillance; chemical control through psychoactive drugs and neurotransmitters" (Piercy 1976: 223). All these prove lethal, because they indicate restriction, control, and the ultimate dehumanisation, mechanisation of human relations.

Luciente warns Connie, that hers is "the crux time" and it might indeed be true. America might be about to reach and cross one more frontier and enter either the path to destructive social atomisation and mechanisation or the path to utopia: to the ultimate, pluralistic and tolerant America. Since Marge Piercy's utopian vision rests on a number of ideals omnipresent in American literature and culture, the elements it is built from might be treated as a cultural given. Even though the essential untruth of any utopia must be kept in mind, it might be assumed that at least the promise and utopian potential of America are still alive. The ideal of the "melting pot of nations" seems to be dead, but American cultural tapestry remains compelling. It is up to those living in the crux time to make the hues of the social fabric more and more matching in the future without allowing them to degenerate into a riot of jarring colours.

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