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Daniel Sipe, *Text, Image, and the Problem with Perfection in Nineteenth-Century France: Utopia and Its Afterlives*. Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013. 218 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, and table of contents. \$99.70 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781409447764; £60.00. (eb). ISBN 978140946156.

Review by Laurence M. Porter, Oberlin College Affiliate Scholar.

Daniel Sipe's original, well-written, thoroughly researched book coordinates French historical events with literature and the visual arts from the Revolution through the Second Empire. During this period, he sees three major phases of the utopian imagination: hopes for a harmonious, well-ordered, egalitarian society; satiric withdrawal as these hopes were dashed by the failure of the Second Republic in 1848; and disenchanting fantasies of a futuristic substitute utopia composed of two distinct classes—hedonistic humans and subservient (often female-gendered) machines. Sipe frequently evokes the totalitarian dystopias into which utopias can degenerate when the rigorous application of principles of social order reintroduces the hierarchies Utopian thought tried to supersede. As background, he could have profitably evoked the double cycle of absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, republic, and empire through which French history revolved between 1789 and 1875, when Republican delegates finally achieved a majority instead of a plurality and consolidated a republican form of government. Because politicians are opportunists, practicing the art of the possible, whereas utopians advocate for the impossible, the latter have little traction in government, and their *projets de loi* are at best a sideshow. The true visionaries are the reformers who work for greater justice within and despite the system. Victor Hugo was one of the few who began as a dreamer in politics, in the 1830s and 1840s, but returned in the 1870s to become a useful public man.

A good starting point for more fully exploring the idea of utopia is to contrast it with the topos of the *locus amoenus* and the genre of pastoral, in which pleasure, privacy, and (often) irresponsibility go hand in hand. The secular pastoral typically features the couple rather than the community in idleness rather than at work, whereas the utopia requires a hierarchy—or at least, a person in charge who gives directions. Nostalgic revivals of pastoral occurred often during the periods Sipe discusses—Marie Antoinette's play farm (*le hameau*) at Versailles, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*, Nerval's *Sylvie*, Zola's *Faute de l'abbé Mouret*—although the idyllic spots described in pastoral are impermanent, and contain forebodings, as in Milton's Eden "tending to wild" or Poussin's gravestone inscribed "ET IN ARCADIA EGO" (I, too, am in Arcady). The Pastoral/Utopian polarity remains deeply engrained in everyday life, figured by the vacation home versus the working vacation (Habitat for Humanity, trail maintenance, and so forth).

This contrast helps show why Sipe's chapter five, "Gendered Utopias and Female Automata," does not belong in his book. To be sure, "the synthetic female" justifies and imposes "matrices of male domination and desire" (p. 167), but the male's solitary enjoyment of her subservience is no more "utopian" (collectivist, task-oriented) than a basement retreat where he can watch pornography or play with sex toys. Such activities are debased, mechanized forms of the uxoriousness that diverts the flawed heroes of world literature from their missions or any other mode of social usefulness in *Le Chevalier à la charrette*, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, *The Golden Lotus*, *La Cousine Bette*, *La Fin de Chéri*—to say nothing of

gender-bending innovations such as Proust's Baron Charlus or Rachilde's male automaton in *Monsieur Venus* (the last, mentioned by Sipe).

The same problems of digressiveness and category confusion, straying from *solidaire* to *solitaire*, weaken chapter two, focused on Chateaubriand's *Atala*. Sipe pinpoints several doctrinal and ethical incoherencies in this text, but he should have treated its history and its context in much more detail. *Atala* originated as part of Chateaubriand's long epic poem, *Les Natchez*. Like many precursors since the Renaissance, he tried to revive the classical epic. His innovation was to mingle Native American with Christian mythology, while drawing heavily upon earlier French missionaries and explorers who reported on the customs and history of the tribes living in North America, while fictionalizing them. Chateaubriand sought a threefold public: one for the sentimental story of a doomed cross-cultural love; another for a grandiose historical spectacle; and a third for the cultural discoveries of anthropologists and missionaries working in the French-claimed territories soon to be abandoned through the Louisiana Purchase of 1807 that helped to fund Napoleon's wars of conquest in Europe. Once the Concordat had been granted in 1802, legalizing the Catholic Church in France (and providing a vast supply of free labor from nuns who could again teach in the primary schools or nurse patients in hospitals), Chateaubriand realized he could find a fourth and more numerous public by becoming a Catholic apologist. He detached *Atala* and *René* from the still-unpublished *Natchez* to add a pathetic romantic dimension of doomed loves to his apologia, *Le Génie du Christianisme*, using them initially as "teasers" to promote advance sales. Concurrently, his grafting of Catholic topics onto his epic helped him evade government censorship.

Himself a displaced person, a French aristocrat in exile after fighting France in l'Armée des Princes and being wounded at Thionville, Chateaubriand could to some extent identify with the endangered Native Americans, as his preface to *Atala* demonstrates. Moreover, in the wake of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* and Voltaire's *L'Ingénu*, he creates the hero Chactas to serve as an outside observer and critic of French culture. The "utopia" of Father Aubry's Indian mission in the wilderness, grafted onto the main work after the fact, adventitiously interjects a proselytizing Catholic focus into a formerly sentimentalist story. "There's a place for us," thinks Chactas—but deluded by a naïve interpretation of Catholic doctrine, *Atala* has already drunk poison; and the Governor of Canada will soon betray Chactas by selling him into slavery in Marseilles. Then enemy tribes massacre all the inhabitants of Aubry's mission colony. In short, every powerful cultural force in North America makes the survival of this "utopia" impossible. Indeed, had the settlement survived, it soon would have destroyed itself. Although the naïve young Chactas does not understand this, Chateaubriand does: like other Europeans, Aubry practices slash-and-burn agriculture that will ruin the land for the future. "La gerbe d'un été remplaçait l'arbre de trois siècles. Partout on voyait les forêts livrées aux flammes pousser de grosses fumées dans les airs, et la charrue se promener lentement entre les débris de leurs racines" (p. 111; Garnier, 1962). Chactas's beatific reactions, which immediately follow this description, exemplify tragic irony. His happiness will end the very night of his arrival. As I demonstrated elsewhere, one cannot separate the artificial, authorial construct of *Atala's* "utopia" from the times in which Chateaubriand was embedded. [1]

So much good work has already been done on utopian thought in nineteenth-century France that Sipe often has to rummage along its outer associative fringes to find new material. Nevertheless his excellent chapter two, on Étienne Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie* and on its author's political career, justifies his entire volume. Cabet was a politician, as well as a theorist and novelist. He published two analyses of the French revolutionary traditions, and was exiled from France between 1834 and 1839. He may have had as many as 100,000 followers, and he eventually founded a community in America in 1847. He was inspired both by Thomas More's *Utopia* and (I would add) by the subversive, parallel anti-Restoration *Charbonnerie* and the Italian *Carbonari* movements. He advocated a benevolent, egalitarian despotism in his bestseller, *Voyages et aventures de Lord William Carisdall en Icarie*. Sipe performs an inspired reading of this work, analyzing the subplot of a love triangle to illustrate the problems created by a subversive

surplus of individual desire that remains unsatisfied by a utopian system based on an even distribution of goods. When persons become desired objects, individual desires conflict and become confused (as in the *Iliad* or the polyamorous world of the film *Les Tricheurs*). The public confession and triple marriage that finally resolve the plot do not entirely eliminate jealousy. “Melodrama,” Sipe shrewdly concludes, “might be Cabet’s way of asking [whether] scientific socialism is actually capable of comprehending the mechanics of human polity or, worse, [whether] it might put an end to [the desiring imagination] itself” (p. 89). Apparently, Cabet’s predictable, romantic happy ending reassured Louis-Philippe’s censors that revolution was no longer in play, thus they did not object to the novel.

Sipe’s discussion of J. J. Grandville’s collection of satiric drawings, *Un autre monde* (1844), achieves another original, excellent overview. It does not belong in a book about utopias or dystopias, but we are fortunate to have it anyway, all the more so because of the well-chosen illustrations, whose presence depends on the collaboration of an enlightened publisher and an inspired author. Perhaps, as Sipe suggests, *Un autre monde*’s cross-species hybrids mock Fourier’s notion that enlightened people may eventually develop additional organs. Visually, Grandville works along three lines: a depiction of Doctor Puff’s puffery (false advertising) gone berserk in a human society; a society of grotesque beings composed of human, animal, and vegetable elements; and the pernicious leveling effects of egalitarian socialism. *Un autre monde* is no dystopia, however, because the dupes are unaware of their victimization, and the monsters are complacent, whereas dystopias are scary. Nor is *Un autre monde* a utopia, because no reader would aspire to join it, any more than we would want to step into a Breughel painting. Grandville’s forte was parody. And it made him extremely prominent in his day. His historical timeliness may derive from his motif of hybridity understood as a critique of the *bâtardise*—and therefore, the illegitimacy—of a constitutional monarchy. 1830 proved all the more disappointing because government along the lines of the English parliamentary system had long been considered an ideal in French political thought. The realization of an ideal cannot help but be disappointing. Moreover, although Stendhal for one (see *La Chartreuse de Parme*) saw through the specious, brutal grandeur of imperialist conquest, many still felt nostalgic for France’s domination of Europe under “L’Autre,” Napoleon I.

Chapter four, “The Aesthetics of Work and Madness in Courbet and Baudelaire,” displays Sipe’s characteristic originality, sensitivity, and erudition, but does not really cohere. Courbet’s painting “L’Origine du monde” is not a good example of dystopia either, because the woman depicted only via her sexual organs does not function as a conscious agent. She may be exploited, or her vagina may threaten to engulf the neurotic male, but neither of these scenarios represents either a utopia or an anti-utopia. Yet again, it seems misguided to characterize Baudelaire’s dandies as enacting “seditional anti-utopianism” (p. 192; see also pp. 159-166). Being a dandy is a solitary, narcissistic pleasure, no more seditious than Bartleby the Scrivener’s refusal to make copies.

On chapter five, “Gendered Utopias and Female Automata,” I have commented above. To elaborate on details, one must point out that Sipe omits at least four “voices” that must be mentioned—two if one wishes to understand the Utopian tradition as other than entirely homocentric, and two more if we wish to read *L’Ève future* with full comprehension. First, the writings of the fierce French women revolutionaries, who claim a role in fostering political change instead of remaining dutiful automatons limited to children, kitchen, and church. Second, an early satire of self-centered male privilege in Mme de Staël’s play *Le Mannequin*, in which a young woman rids herself of an unwelcome suitor by tricking him into courting a female-gendered, life-sized doll veiled by a gauzy curtain. Her greatest appeal is that she says nothing, while appearing to listen approvingly to the suitor’s monologue. Third, the voice of Sowana, the idealized female spirit who comes to inhabit, speak through, and impart a soul to the female automaton of Villiers’s *L’Ève future*. Fourth, the voice of God, which speaks through the shipwreck in which Thomas Edison’s sacrilegious creation is forever lost. One requisite of most utopian visions, which Sipe leaves unmentioned, appears to be the subjugation of women. Women reacted. The feminist counter-utopia—which may or may not include men in roles other than breeders—was certainly present in France during the first half of the nineteenth century (Sand’s *Lélia*), and reappeared, for example, in

Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* or Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*. Perhaps the most compelling nineteenth-century individualist parallel to this feminist utopia appears in Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. The title character briefly erupts within the routine social order, amuses herself, and passes on. "She takes care of herself; she's ahead of her time" (to quote Billy Joel), as Marivaux's Marianne had done a century earlier.

Sipe's strong conclusion begins ingeniously, but not entirely convincingly by citing literary examples of the railroad to figure a negative utopia, as in Pellerin's kitschy painting of a locomotive speeding through a virgin forest in Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* or in Zola's *La Bête humaine*. The weaknesses of this comparison are that the railways Sipe mentions figure the blind faith that industrialization will foster progress, rather than embody the utopian goal of a fully organized society; moreover, railway passengers are passive, and they travel each in his own way, whereas participants in a utopia must stay and work together to create it. Better anti-train examples occur in lyric poetry, when the lyric self refuses to travel by rail (Vigny's "La Maison du Berger"), or gets off before reaching the conventional destination (Mallarmé's prose poem "La Gloire," eschewing the tourist destination of Fontainebleau in favor of a private retreat reached one stop earlier). Sipe's last four pages contain memorable insights, pithily expressed, although as of November 2013, recent events have dashed his hope that "in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria these ever-changing, always adapting groups [the virtual communities of the electronic media] have, for a moment at least, defied centralization and ideological polarization" (p. 196).

Every critic has favorite examples, and no book can mention them all. But given that Sipe has read widely, and has suggestively provided glancing views of literatures other than French, I would have liked him to include H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, with its childlike, innocent Eloi, and the subterranean society of Morlocks (engineers who maintain the machines that keep the world in operation, and who devour the Eloi in return), as well as Wells's *Island of Doctor Moreau*, inhabited by a dystopian underclass of mammals partially humanized by cruel surgical operations—and which finally rebel.

Historians provisionally but wisely consider history to be a never-ending process, but mythmakers and humanists like to create beginnings and endings for history by fiat. The Bible provides a fine example of such etiological and eschatological myths, although while en route, its societies are anything but orderly. One might instead begin with the master utopia of Western literature, Plato's Republic. This thought experiment imagined two classes, ordinary people and the Watchmen, later provoking the satirist Juvenal's query "quis custodiet ipsos custodiet?" (but who will watch the Watchmen themselves?). In more recent utopias, as the Eldorado of Voltaire's *Candide* suggests, John Locke's "uneasiness" or divine discontent prevents the hero and his companion from remaining in an ideal but static society. People need challenges, or else they'll stagnate, as Arnold Toynbee pointed out in a vast cross-cultural study many years ago.

As for literary treatments of the future, Sipe's discussion should have looked beyond dystopia and the afterlife to include fantasies of race suicide. For example, Michel Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires* describes a hedonistic present that destroys its participants, while the protagonist foresees a future in which humans cease reproducing themselves, knowing they will be replaced by a race of superior humanoid beings—one of whom "speaks" at the end to read us our epitaph.

Literary critics who want to be read have to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Surely, Daniel Sipe will do much more good work, but it will have greater impact if he first writes a paragraph outline (a *précis* made of complete sentences, with subjects and conjugated verbs) before his final draft. At present, although he avoids blatant repetitions, he keeps cycling back to subjects he has touched upon before. Instead, he should plan out a steadily unfolding logical progression that his readers will experience as a powerful current. Such a dynamic is rhetoric's most potent form.

NOTE

[1] Laurence M. Porter, "Conscious of the Exotic and Exotic Consciousness in Chateaubriand," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 38/3-4(Spring-Summer 2010): 159-171.

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