

**UTOPIAS AND DYSTOPIAS:  
THE BEGINNINGS AND ENDS OF THE GOOD  
AND THE BAD**

**STEVEN R. VAN HOOK  
University of Oregon**

**December 5, 1985**

Most utopian/dystopian novels provide some linkage from the present time (or the author's time), through the transitional circumstances and conditions, leading to the state of affairs described in the story. In other words, what brought about this utopic/dystopic scene? I examined two novels for such a descriptive mechanism: Aldous Huxley's *Island*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Coincidentally, and also worth examination, both books end with the fall of their respective social orders.

First, let's meet the central character in each of the two novels. *Island*, a utopian story, presents the standard perspective of the outsider coming in. Will Farnaby, the cynical slit-eyed journalist, lands on Pala by way of the ever-convenient shipwreck. As utopian authors must find some mechanism to keep the protagonist in Utopia long enough to circumvent the initial urge to retreat from the alien land, Huxley relies somewhat on Farnaby's physical infirmities suffered during his introduction to Pala.

(Often in utopian works, the outside visitor works more as an antagonist or foil than a protagonist, playing the "devil's advocate" to the novel's hypothesis of utopic viability. Such a dynamic not only adds legitimacy to the author's probing into the feasibility of Utopia, but also adds some tension and suspense, as the reader anxiously waits to see if the antagonist -- the pseudo-representative of humanity -- is finally convinced and converted.)

But what anchored Farnaby more to Pala -- and an interesting twist -- were his surreptitious motives to exploit the Island: it was his desire to destroy Pala that enabled his conversion. This is a twist that works well in the anti-anti-utopian format. In the utopian novel, Utopia must endure or the author's efforts and ideals -- as well as the reader's hopes -- are in vain.

Anti-utopian stories don't depend as much on whether dystopia endures or not; the message presented is utopian ideals are dubious. The anti-anti-Utopia must convince us that Utopia is possible, but present it in a way palatable to a cynical age: that Utopia can exist, but shall be challenged and conquered by greed, is a plot easily swallowed.

*Fahrenheit 451*'s leading character, the somewhat vacuous Guy Montag, seeks -- as to be expected -- an escape from his dystopic environment; first through forbidden books and contemplations, finally by a hasty and persued flight. However, as Montag escapes dystopia, simultaneously dystopia leaves him -- clearing the stage for a new backdrop in the explosion of nuclear war-fire. Rather than a clean escape, Bradbury instead ends the story with an entrance, and the reader is left to imagine what sort of society will be created by the returning reconstructionist professors.

What circumstances bequeathed by the past, merged at a junction and enabled the advent of Island's Pala? None outstanding, really. In fact, it's what **didn't** happen that allowed Pala to be -- a void suffering little intrusion, fertile ground for the right people at the right time.

Huxley writes: "The right people were intelligent at the right moment ... but it must be admitted they were also very lucky ... It (Pala) had the luck, first of all, never to have been anyone's colony." On this blank canvas, the Island's Raja -- steeped in "Indian painting and poetry and philosophy" -- collaborated with a doctor packing "European technology, European art, European ways of thinking" to create a landscape of ecological, sociological, and spiritual paradise. Huxley writes, "The king and doctor were now teaching one another to make the best of both worlds ... the best of all the worlds -- the worlds already realized within the various cultures, and beyond them, the worlds of still unrealized potentialities."

Again, it adds credibility to the anti-anti-utopian hypothesis that Utopia is a possibility, when Utopia can be developed by such unspectacular, less-than-heroic founders.

The dreary, joyless world of *Fahrenheit 451* is also precipitated by a vacuum; it emerges from a world purged of controversy, paradoxes, philosophy, conflicting theories. Bradbury's rulers believe "if you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none ... Don't give them slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy."

People no longer are expected -- nor allowed -- to think: "Whirl man's mind around about so fast under the pumping hands of publishers, exploiters, broadcasters that the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought!" writes Bradbury. The People willingly exchanged the turmoil and responsibility of free-thought for the sensually pleasing yet numbing narcotics of sleeping pills and interactive wall-television. Into this void of mindlessness stepped the tyrants: the wrong people in the right place and time.

(Shakespeare supposes "there's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." In the question of human will and effort versus luck and divine providence, I'll bow to greater minds than my own. The anti-anti-utopianist could expectedly rely more on chance than effort in the formation of Utopia, since luck -- to the contemporary critical thinker -- is more believable than super-human achievement.)

In the midst of Fahrenheit's intellectual ruins, Bradbury's professors prepare to rekindle the light of knowledge and literature "until another Dark age, when we might have to do the whole damn thing over again. But that's the wonderful thing about man; he never gets so discouraged or disgusted that he gives up doing it all over again, because he knows very well it is important and **worth** the doing," Bradbury concludes, underscoring a faith in humanity no self-respecting anti-anti-utopianist would dare suggest. Thus, with a fizzle, falls his dystopia.

More impressive is the hope Huxley holds out, even during the fall of paradisaical Pala. "Even in the worst society," he writes, "an individual retains a little freedom. One perceives in private, one remembers and imagines in private, one loves in private, and one dies in private -- even under Colonel Dipa."

Even under Orwell's Thought Police -- if but only for a flash -- freedom can flicker a moment, suggesting a hope for what's possible, like a distant star hints of an infinite universe: even with the foreknowledge of the sure death of "thoughtcrime," Winston Smith, in a desperate grab at freedom and dignity, penned in his self-damning diary, "To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and do not live alone -- to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone: From the age of uniformity, from the age of solitude, from the age of Big Brother, from the age of doublethink -- greetings!"

Yet, even tyranny is transitory, and though the occupying tanks roared through Pala, the rumble diminished as they passed by, and "the intruding noise died away ... Disregarded in the darkness, the fact of enlightenment remained."

And the Future -- the ultimate Nemesis of all good and evil -- shall be the sole monarch to whom is due all homage.