

Marie Edelson

THE HAPPY VALLEY IN SAMUEL JOHNSON'S  
THE HISTORY OF RASSELAS, PRINCE OF ABISSINIA  
AS AN ANTI-UTOPIAN ALLEGORY

*The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* enjoyed a considerable popularity in the period immediately following its publication in 1759. To-day its reputation relies mainly on its position in the history of English literature as a classic example of the oriental philosophical tale, which is generally believed to have little to offer to twentieth century readers. The presentation of the happy valley in the first fourteen chapters of the tale, however, reveals quite unexpectedly an amazingly modern aspect of Samuel Johnson's vision.

The central theme of *Rasselas* emphasizes the futile search for happiness; the hero of the tale encounters a great number of people and experiences numerous adventures only to come to the conclusion that no man can ever be fully and lastingly happy, and it appears, at the same time, that the thirst for happiness and the futile desire to keep it are an inseparable part of the human condition.

The happy valley, where prince Rasselas had to spend a fairly long period of his life due to the peculiar habit of his country that had its heirs to the throne kept away from political intrigue, in a secluded place, provides the most persuasive argument in favour of Johnson's thesis that happiness cannot be attained.

The happy valley has all appearances of an earthly paradise; it has been planned so as to satisfy every need and desire of royal children and their attendants except one - they cannot leave the valley at their will. This flaw in the perfection of the "paradise" is enough to make it a place of unhappiness.

The existential tragic incompatibility of human desire with reality brings Johnson's vision close to 20th century philosophical views on man's nature, but the most striking "modern" feature of his presentation of the happy valley is in the anti-utopian character of its allegory.

The fact that the part of *Rasselas* dealing with the happy valley is an allegory both places the work in the long tradition of allegorical writing and draws attention to it as a literary work in vogue since allegory, after a period of neglect and hostile rejection, is now back in the good graces of scholars and critics.

Bernard Einbond, the author of *Samuel Johnson's Allegory*, has doubts as to whether all of *Rasselas* should be interpreted as an allegory, but he does not hesitate about the allegorical character of its first fourteen chapters. He refutes the fairly common interpretation of this part of *Rasselas* as an allegorical presentation of the world of the optimist and suggests instead that it is in fact "a valley of inexperience". He believes that "The allegory of the Happy Valley teaches us that man craves experience and that his thirst for experience can never be quenched for long"<sup>1</sup>.

One cannot but agree with Einbond when he says that life in the valley limits one's experience. It seems fairly obvious, however, that the lack of experience matters so much because it excludes the possibility of happiness and that its absence in the lives of the inhabitants of the valley (as the very name of the place ironically suggests) is the central quality in its description. It appears therefore rather misleading and unnecessary to look for this kind of substitute for the name given by the author himself if only because it directs the reader's attention to a less significant aspect of the presentation of the valley.

*The History of Rasselas* with its happy valley is quoted by Robert C. Elliott in *The Shape of Utopia* as an example of how too much good makes life stupefyingly boring<sup>2</sup>; the boredom of continued

<sup>1</sup> B. L. Einbond, *Samuel Johnson's Allegory*, Mouton, The Hague, Paris 1971, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. C. Elliott, *The Shape of Utopia. Studies in a Literary Genre*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London 1970, p. 119.

pleasure becomes all the more unbearable since it cannot be avoided. Oddly enough the author of the collection of literary sketches *Pochwała utopii*<sup>3</sup> (*In Praise of Utopia*), Maria Niemojewska seems to overlook the imperfections of the happy valley and places Samuel Johnson among writers who have created utopian visions of perfect societies: the title of her book suggests that the happy valley offers a pattern of social order worth imitating. One cannot possibly accept this view since the way in which the valley has been presented proves that the blueprint of the community designed to make its members happy does not fulfil its aim and that the very idea of planning and organizing happiness is wrong.

It may be argued, as Richard B. Schwartz points out, that Johnson's Augustinian view of human nature precludes any possibility of utopia: perfect harmony, equality, and benevolence are not to be expected from fallen man. However, the possibility of a utopia founded on secular principles is really irrelevant, for even if it were to be established a Christian such as Johnson would realize its inadequacy<sup>4</sup>.

The presentation of the valley exposing its flaws and inadequacies possesses, then, certain features of twentieth century anti-utopias whose purpose it is to reveal the false perfection of utopian systems.

The community living in the happy valley differs from utopian models in the fact that it does not constitute a self sustained and self-sufficient social system; its existence depends on rich natural resources which make work hardly necessary and on supplies from the outside world:

The valley, wide and fruitful, supplied its inhabitants with the necessities of life, and all delights and superfluities were added at the annual visit which the emperor paid his children<sup>5</sup>.

In spite of these features the happy valley is more than an earthly paradise since life in it is based on certain principles

---

<sup>3</sup> M. Niemojewska, *Pochwała utopii*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1987.

<sup>4</sup> R. B. Schwartz, *Samuel Johnson and the New Science*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Milwaukee, London 1971, p. 150.

<sup>5</sup> S. Johnson, *The History of Rasselas. Prince of Abyssinia*, Chiswick Press, London 1812, p. 4.

organizing the structure and the activities of its community which are meant to ensure its happiness and which, however, fail to do so. It is this fact exactly that establishes the affinity of the happy valley with twentieth century anti-utopias and gives Johnson's vision its surprisingly modern appeal.

A careful examination of the chapters on the happy valley reveals that they not only contain certain anti-utopian attitudes and ideas but they also make use of various literary devices of anti-utopia. These devices will be found in E. Zamyatin's *We* (1920), *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley and in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949) - three works generally regarded as classic examples of anti-utopia which are sometimes used as standards demarcating the domain of the genre. "The genre of anti-utopia is best defined", writes Philip Stevick, "as that class of works which is like its three undisputed exemplars"<sup>6</sup>.

The happy valley shares qualities both with the kind of society described in *Brave New World* and with that in Orwell's *1984*. The social patterning of the happy valley and its resemblance to a modern anti-utopia was noticed by Harrison R. Steeves in his book on the English novel of the eighteenth century. He comments on *Rasselas* as follows:

The welfare state! And without taxes! Aldous Huxley had little more to offer in *Brave New World*, though on a considerable level of ingenuity. So far as Johnson tells us, they did not have liquor or contraceptives, but they had official public relations council and policies<sup>7</sup>.

Harrison R. Steeves does not enlarge upon the similarities and their significances, yet they are worth examining.

The inhabitants of the happy valley (royal children in the first place, but also their courtiers and servants) live in a most comfortable and charming place amid beautiful pastoral landscapes:

---

<sup>6</sup> P. Stevick, *The Limits of Anti-Utopia*, [in:] "Criticism" 1964, VI, p. 234.

<sup>7</sup> H. R. Steeves, *Before Jane Austen: the Shape of the English Novel in the Eighteenth Century*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London 1966, p. 229.

Here the sons and daughters of Abyssinia lived only to know the soft vicissitudes of pleasure and repose, attended by all that were skilled to delight, and gratified with whatever the senses can enjoy. They wandered in gardens of fragrance, and slept in the fortresses of security. Every art was practised to make them pleased with their own condition<sup>8</sup>.

Gradually it becomes obvious, however, that no one is pleased. Imlac, Rasselas's friend and instructor, says to the prince:

I shall speak the truth; I know not one of all your attendants who does not lament the hour when he entered this retreat<sup>9</sup>.

When Rasselas remarks that at least they are in a place where it is impossible to do harm to one another and to envy others since all envy is repressed by "community of enjoyment", Imlac responds with the following reflection:

There may be community, [...] of material possessions, but there can never be community of love or of esteem [...]. They are weary of themselves and of each other...<sup>10</sup>

In spite of the prevailing mood of weariness and discontent "all the inhabitants of this valley celebrate their lot"<sup>11</sup>. The reason of this strange behaviour lies partly in their desire to encourage new people to settle in the valley and partly in the envy evoked by freedom other people may enjoy. But there is also another reason: namely the vague sense of threat. The prince's companions never complain about their lot because they fear the consequences of open criticism of the happy valley. What consequences they might be Johnson never says, he never mentions any institution comparable to Orwell's Thought Police, but there are implications of punishment for unorthodox views.

Johnson has created a seemingly content perfect community similar to the societies in Zamyatin's and Huxley's books, but its purpose is like that in 1984 to ensure that rulers will continue to possess power. To the government of Oceania the happi-

---

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

ness of ordinary citizens is of no consideration, what matters is that they should be kept in slavish submission by means of terror and lying propaganda. The distant (but powerful) government controlling the happy valley is not altogether benevolent either. Its tyrannical character can be detected even in the phrases used to describe life in the valley in which references to "imprisonment" and "blissful captivity" are fairly frequently made.

In 1984 appearances of universal happiness are kept up by the terrorised society itself unable to oppose its oppressors. The situation in the happy valley does not differ much from that in 1984 in this respect: the falsely blissful atmosphere is created by the self-imposed control of the inhabitants themselves and by propaganda used to persuade them to believe that there cannot be a better life. The teachers and guardians of the royal children

told them of nothing but the miseries of public life, and described all beyond the mountains as regions of calamity, where discord was always raging, and where man preyed upon man.

To heighten their opinion of their own felicity, they were daily entertained with songs, the subject of which was the happy valley<sup>12</sup>.

Most members of societies and communities presented in anti-utopias are easily manoeuvred into approval of the system. And yet there is usually someone not totally adjusted to it, who does not yield to utopian social engineering and who more often than not rebels against his society. The rebel first strives to fully understand his situation, then he either attempts to change his world or to escape from it. The presence of such a character gives anti-utopia certain advantages that utopia cannot avail itself of since, as is pointed out by Irving Howe, the conflict between the individual and society allows to develop his personality and adds drama and tension to the literary work<sup>13</sup>. In spite of these advantages anti-utopias do not become fully realistic novels.

Writers in the genre make no attempt to create naturalistic human beings;

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> L. H o w e, *The Fiction of Anti-Utopia*, "New Republic", April 23, 1962, p. 10.

their characters are stylized, mechanical, flat [...]. People presented in utopias [...] exist only to enact an allegory of the good life"<sup>14</sup>,

maintains Robert C. Elliott and his comment can be applied to anti-utopias as well, with the difference that characters in anti-utopias enact an allegory of the bad utopian life.

Both utopias and anti-utopias use characters as representations of certain attitudes and opinions; anti-utopian characters have more individual life due to the disturbed balance of the normally static ideal society. The unhappy maladjusted rebels are often defeated by the system: the Savage in Huxley's book commits suicide, in 1984 torture changes the dissident hero into a loyal citizen, and the main character in Zamyatin's *We*, D-503 undergoes an operation which removes all "subversive" thought from his mind. Some have more luck and are able to get out of their "brave new worlds". Johnson's *Rasselas* is among the lucky ones; but it takes him years first to understand his own situation and then find means of escaping from the valley. Dissatisfied with the life in the happy valley, full of doubt, in conflict with the apologists of the community, and searching for a solution to his problem *Rasselas* acquires a more complex personality and thus adds strength to the expressive power of the presentation of the general ideas and arguments he stands for. *Rasselas* resembles maladjusted heroes of twentieth century anti-utopias also in the fact that he moves away from his community and is, because of that, observed with suspicion by others. He

began to withdraw himself from their pastimes and assemblies, and to delight in solitary walks and silent meditations [...]. This singularity of humour made him much observed. One of the sages, in whose conversation he had formerly delighted, followed him secretly, in hope of discovering the cause of his disquiet<sup>15</sup>.

*Rasselas* would like to leave the valley, but it is practically impossible.

The only passage, by which it could be entered, was a cavern that passed under a rock [...]. The outlet of the cavern was concealed by a thick wood,

---

<sup>14</sup> Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

and the mouth which opened into the valley was closed with gates of iron forged by the artificers of ancient days, so massy that no man could without the help of engines open or shut them<sup>16</sup>.

The presentation of the seemingly ideal community as an isolated phenomenon in the supposedly real world that has no claims to perfection, distinguishes *Rasselas* from most twentieth century anti-utopias which show the world nearly completely controlled by a utopian system and in which places that escape its order and rule tend to be solitary islands and forgotten pockets of "traditional" life. Johnson did not feel threatened by the possibility of realization of the utopian order of the happy valley. To him it was a mere intellectual construct intended to confirm the author's opinion that life without changes and possibilities to chose causes unhappiness. This difference in motivation, the *raison d'être* of the construct, constitutes the main discrepancy between *Rasselas* and twentieth century anti-utopian visions.

The world outside the happy valley is not necessarily a pleasant place, but it certainly offers freedom to make one's "choice of life". The prince is eager to experience it even though Imlac warns him against its dangers, discomforts and miseries. *Rasselas* says to the poet:

I am impatient to see what thou hast seen; and since it is evident that thy former state was better than this. Whatever the consequence of my experiment, I am resolved to judge with my own eyes of the various conditions of men, and then to make deliberately my *choice of life*<sup>17</sup>.

Freedom of choice is, then, an important value to *Rasselas*, who does not differ, in this respect, from most heroes of modern anti-utopias striving to abolish excessive state control over the individual; the Savage, for instance, does not hesitate to give up all the material advantages of life in the "brave new world" for the sake of his personal freedom.

Rejection of compulsory happiness was also, according to the "old legends" quoted in Zamyatin's *We*, the motivation of Adam's and Eve's rebellion:

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

The two in Paradise were given the choice between happiness without freedom and freedom without happiness. They, blockheads, chose freedom<sup>18</sup>.

The makers of the utopian society in *we* believe that they have regained the paradise without freedom.

Unwilling to live in a similar paradise Rasselas manages eventually to dig a tunnel through the mountain, to get out of the valley, and to taste real life. The remaining thirty five short chapters of the tale give an account of the adventures of the prince and his three companions (his sister Nekayah, her attendant Pekuah and the poet-philosopher Imlac) in various parts of the world, which adventures serve to convince the reader that happiness is to be found nowhere. At the end of the tale Rasselas resolves to return to Abyssinia, possibly to the happy valley even, but life there will now be of his choosing, not imposed upon him.

The happy valley demonstrates how an organized system forcing "happiness" on people cannot succeed, how materially comfortable life leads to surfeit and how stagnation and discontent make one desire novelty at any cost.

Anti-utopias, it will be remembered, question the values propagated by utopian blueprints of ideal societies and prove that these societies cannot be perfect. In a sense, *Rasselas* goes even further than most modern anti-utopias, since the tale questions the validity not only of a given utopian system, but also that of utopia in general and suggests that no system promising happiness is possible. The wise sister of Rasselas, Nekayah (and with her the writer himself) asks the question:

Yet what [...] is to be expected from our pursuit of happiness, when we find the state of life to be such, that happiness itself is the cause of misery? Why should we endeavour to attain that of which the possession cannot be secured?<sup>19</sup>

While the complete narrative of *Rasselas* as a whole causes much disagreement about its genre, the fourteen chapters concer-

---

<sup>18</sup> Quotation translated by Maria Edelson. E. Zamyatin, *Ny, Izdatelstvo im. Tsekhova*, New York 1952, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

ning life in the happy valley constitute a unity which stands out from the rest of the work and has a marked character of its own. The present paper has demonstrated how the fourteen chapters resemble anti-utopian visions of our times and they are, therefore allegorical in the same manner and degree in which all anti-utopias are allegories of the bad utopian life enacted by their characters.

The decision of Rasselas expressed at the end of the book to return to Abyssinia may be interpreted as a conscious acceptance of human fate which allows for full happiness after death only and is impossible on earth.

The anti-utopian allegory of the happy valley teaches us that, although search for happiness is futile, it would be disastrous to give it up because passivity and stagnation cause grave problems. Samuel Johnson, like numerous authors of anti-utopias of our times, warns his readers against the dangers of the loss of the purpose of life, loss of freedom of choice, loss of dignity and humanity.

Most critics writing on anti-utopias to-day express their conviction that it is "a twentieth century phenomenon"<sup>20</sup>. Charles L. Glicksburg, for example, states, having in his mind A. Huxley's *Brave New World* that "the anti-utopian impulse made itself felt [...] as far back as 1932"<sup>21</sup>, but, in view of what has been said about Samuel Johnson's vision, one is entitled to maintain that the impulse was in fact felt much earlier, as far back as 1759, when *The History of Rasselas* was published.

Institute of English Studies  
University of Łódź

---

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Stevick, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

<sup>21</sup> C. L. Glicksburg, *Anti-Utopianism in Modern Literature*, "Southwest Review" 37, Summer 1952, p. 288.

Maria Edelson

SZCZĘŚLIWA DOLINA W *THE HISTORY OF RASSELAS*,  
PRINCE OF ABISSINIA SAMUELA JOHNSONA  
JAKO ALEGORIA ANTYUTOPIJNA

Powszechnie uznaje się za alegorię czternaście początkowych rozdziałów *Rasselasa* przedstawiających szczęśliwą dolinę. Alegoria ta dowodzi nieosiągalności szczęścia i ma szczególny charakter. Tak sposób przedstawienia życia w szczęśliwej dolinie, jak i sama społeczność ją zamieszkująca mają wiele cech, które upodabniają wizję Johnsona do antyutopii naszego wieku takich, jak: *My Zamiatina*, Huxleya *Nowy wspaniały świat* czy *Rok 1984* Orwella.

Artykuł zwraca uwagę na te uderzające i dość liczne podobieństwa i wskazuje na możliwość interpretacji szczęśliwej doliny jako swego rodzaju prekursorskiej antyutopii.

Związki *Rasselasa* z konstrukcją i środkami wyrazu, jakimi posługują się antyutopie stanowią o charakterze alegorii szczęśliwej doliny.