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So Close, So Far: The Puzzle of *Antangil*

Nadia Minerva

An edict was issued stipulating that the fathers of the nobility of all the provinces should ensure that the poor be fed, looked after and educated at the expense of the rich, at no cost to the fathers and mothers.

That the wealthy would pay for their room and board according to their fortune ... as valued by the President ...

In this way the wealthy are to pay for the sustenance of the poor as a matter of course. So much so that the people hardly feels any burden or trouble. As soon as the edict was delivered, everyone brought their children with great joy stemming from the desire of the rich to see their children receive a good education, at a lower cost than before; as for the poor, they were relieved of the burden of their own children, with the hope that one day they would hold, like the rich, a respectable office and rank, without any special treatment among them, merit, wisdom and learning being the only criterion among them.¹

If the reader of *Antangil* anticipates the radical boldness of other utopias, they will be disappointed. Nevertheless, in many respects, this utopia merits attention. Set in the context of its time, its innovations still qualify it as the first great French utopian novel. Inspired by Thomas More's *Utopia*, *Antangil* appeared anonymously² in 1616, exactly a century after More's masterpiece and some years before the *New Atlantis* by Francis Bacon and *The City of the Sun* by Tommaso Campanella.

In *Antangil*, recourse to the utopian modality forged by More – assuming and creating a reality opposite and symmetrical to the existing order – is combined with the denunciation of the social evils and political contradictions of France in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. That period was marked, first by religious war, then, after the assassination of Henri IV (1610), by insecurity and instability linked to the renewal of baronial conflict and by the rekindling of religious hostility.³ Responding to this state of conflict, the narrator of *Antangil* offered the story of a nation where peace, security and well-being reigned. Utopia tangibly replaces an unjust and broken structure and stands as a place for the fulfilment of collective interests.

The story is an account of the daily encounters of the narrator with an ambassador of the Kingdom of Antangil, during a visit to the island of Java in 1598, a date that emblematically recalls the Edict of Nantes and the return to

religious peace in France.⁴ The work is comprised of five books. The first was dedicated to the geographic location of Antangil, followed by a description of the physical characteristics of the kingdom. The second book concerned its political and social system. The third was concerned with the organization of the army. In the fourth book, education and culture are dealt with (and the present chapter will focus specifically on this). The fifth described the kingdom's religion (surely protestant, although there was still a hint of Catholicism) and noted the absence of every form of zealotry. Religion there was not a source of conflict but contributed to the maintenance of a peaceful and ordered society.⁵

As is usual in utopia, the authenticity of this state is suggested by meticulous attention to the details of geographic location. Precise information was a fundamental element contributing to a sense of credibility. South of Grand Java, Antangil lies between 22 and 50 degrees south (1).⁶ Its context is the powerful myth of 'Terra Australis'. In line with contemporary taste for the exotic and the legendary, the richness of the kingdom's natural resources, the blessings of God and nature, was described in detail. Another myth, that of the Age of Gold, renewed in accounts of voyages of exploration of the second half of the sixteenth century, was made tangible, as it was in many utopias.

The inhabitants of Antangil had opted for an elected monarchy, in which the king had a merely representative function: the antithesis of the absolute and hereditary monarchy in force in France at the time. Such a sovereign was no longer the incarnation of the deity and his only function was to delight the people with the magnificence of his dress and his residence, and with the pomp of his cortège. Legislative and executive power was in the hands of an elected body: a Council (in which an equal number of nobles, citizens and inhabitants of the villages take part) and a Senate, made up of 100 wise men, chosen not by birth or for their wealth but on merit. Private property had been abolished. The state owned all land and natural resources. This enabled the state to meet public expenses without taxing the population. The family provided the base of the social structure, and families were organized in a pyramidal hierarchy. The head of each level of family groups (ten, one hundred, one thousand, etc.), was responsible for checking the amount of assets of its members and for supervising their morality, modesty and industriousness. In Antangil, the poor or vagabonds did not exist. The family provided for orphans, widows, the elderly and those unable to work, while the care of the infirm was guaranteed by public hospitals. Should the family not be able to provide for its members because of poverty, it was the state that met their needs through a system of taxes, proportional to the wealth of the nobles and rich members of society. Finally, corruption was controlled by a prudent choice of dignitaries and magistrates who were required to have great moral integrity. After having shown how the highest responsibilities could only be achieved after a difficult apprenticeship during which the merits of each candidate emerged, the narrator concluded: 'Thus, gradually, they reach honours, not through purchases, sales, barter or favours,

all of which bring misery, decline and disaster for states and republics' (156). It is an open attack on the venality of office in force in contemporary France.

The theme of education and culture was dealt with in the fourth book: 'On nurturing and educating the youth' (113–56). Education – a concern of all creators of alternative societies – often witnessed bold and impressive innovations in utopian writing.

Great importance was attached to education and culture as a means of promoting ethics and social discipline. The challenge of improving humanity was assigned to the process of learning: 'Entreaties, discipline, punishment are to little avail to make people better who are not first disciplined and educated: how indeed could a stupid, uncouth, treacherous or unmanly people, who are ignorant and unwise, ever value propriety, virtue and glory' (113–14). Man was not by nature inclined towards virtue. It was only thanks to an education system capable of correcting the naturally bad inclinations of humanity that people could be disciplined and improved, so enhancing their security, happiness and well-being. 'When she first shapes us, nature does not use the most vivid colours; nurturing and ruling need to be applied, even with the most willing and manageable minds' (114). Education was the means to accommodate citizens to the spirit of society. Anthropological pessimism met pedagogical optimism. The negative image of humanity, surely inherited from Judaeo-Christian traditions, was here balanced by faith in education, a legacy left from the Renaissance. Humanity is corrupt; but a good society could redeem it.

To this end, all citizens received an education, although the educational system was different for the two social classes, noble and rich commoners at one end and the common people at the other. The former were educated in a national Academy and in colleges in the provincial capitals where the best professors taught the arts and sciences (114).⁷ They paid a fee according to their income and the excess was used to pay the fees of the poor. The length of study in the Academy was eighteen years, divided into three phases (126). In the first, from six to twelve years, the young learned to read and write, and studied grammar, poetry, history, music and some elements of geometry and cosmography. In the second phase, from twelve to eighteen years, the subjects were rhetoric, mathematics, dialectics, physics, metaphysics, medicine, architecture and fortification. In the third phase, from eighteen to twenty-four years, the same subjects were taught with the addition, for two years, of instruction in the law and the constitution. In this third stage, training in the law courts was foreseen. Theology was reserved for those who would have an ecclesiastical career. In order to follow such an intense programme, lessons absorbed for eleven hours a day, the author took care to provide some relief by alternating the teaching of theoretical and applied disciplines. Large classrooms and libraries and a rich programme of study made encyclopaedic knowledge accessible, while gymnasiums and open courtyards, where the young were expected to do hard physical exercises, guaranteed the development of healthy,

agile bodies. Teachers emphasized the harmonious and gradual development of the young. Exercises were appropriate to the students' age groups and physical activities were chosen for the different age ranges so as not to damage young bodies and encourage concordant growth. Only when they reached twenty years of age were the students free to venture outside of the Academy to visit the city and the court and have their first experiences of life. When their studies were finished, the nobles and the wealthy were called to public office, first with a year's training in the provinces, at the end of which they received commendation or criticism. Knowledge and know-how were both harmoniously developed in *Antangil*.

The rest of the people, of both sexes (197),⁸ were instructed in reading, writing, arithmetic, drawing and the catechism. However, the possibility of higher education, paid for by the wealthy citizens, was provided for the most gifted of them. Class and privilege were modified by the recognition of merit and a kind of solidarity amongst the social classes, in which the hegemonic class nonetheless retained their hold on power: 'all the chief offices, honours and ranks ... without the people objecting, for they are justly and equitably governed by them, and there being room for merit to pave the way to such rank' (156).

The Academy was like a city, which contained all that was necessary for the community living there, from storerooms, to a hospital and a cemetery. The segregation of young people was total, almost as if they were being defended from any contact with the outside world before the conclusion of the formative process, the aim of which, as has been seen, was to instil knowledge and the virtues, those of 'devotion' and 'obedience' (195), which alone could protect the state from bad government and corruption. Internal organization was rigorous and challenging and the system of discipline could be suffocating. The students' day was frantically full. Moments when they could relax and take their minds off study were rare. Austerity ruled even the food, the dress code and the living standards, which were extremely sober and characterized by a frugal well-being without any slackness, since 'what is done is meant to teach them frugality and prudence, and to make them intimate and open with everyone, without making distinctions except through personal merit, the most humble being treated there on an equal footing as the most important man' (132–3).

As in the platonic republic, higher education in *Antangil* was reserved for an elite, even if, with an adequate system of scholarships, the sons of the poor could join those of the nobles and the rich in the highest level of education, the Academy. On the other hand, in More's *Utopia* the working class had opportunities for exemption from manual work and admission to the status of intellectuals if they pursued a suitable education – devoting themselves to study in their free time. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference with More's *Utopia*. In *Antangil*, admission to the Academy was carefully controlled, while in *Utopia* the courses were free to everyone, including women.

The absence of Latin amongst the subjects taught should be noted; it is a sign of modernity. The presence of dialectics and rhetoric nevertheless signals a curriculum still marked by tradition. This relates to the controversies of the day about colleges and academies in France. At the time of Henri IV, schools were attracting growing numbers of students. In the colleges, six hours of grammar courses were taught as well as Latin rhetoric, for six long years of formal study. The university colleges and those of the religious orders (like the Jesuits with 14,000 students in the province of Paris alone) expected teachers and students to converse in Latin. In *Antangil*, the classics were translated into the vernacular. Suppressing Latin, the entire program could be rewritten.

Why did the anonymous author choose the formula of the Academy as the institution of education? The Academies of colleges, where equestrianism, fencing, dancing, mathematics and fortification were taught, were greatly criticized at the time. It was thought that they were not intellectually profitable and did not prepare students for conversation or debate.⁹ In *Antangil*, instead, these skills were greatly prized and the young had various opportunities to develop them.¹⁰ For example, it was required that all students should answer the teachers' questions in order to train themselves to be 'flexible and informed' (131). Every day, after lessons, students had to give an account of what they had learned, 'to make the mind sharp and perceptive, so as not to be without anything to say, but to become secure and determined in the face of objections' (135); they also participated in debates on the arts and the sciences, in fearless battles 'of words and explanations' (152), which were held around the table or during walks.

However, an oppressive atmosphere weighs on the young of *Antangil*, who are always under scrutiny. Even on Sundays, they are busy with supervised activities, 'since the young ones, in their restlessness ... are bound to be up to mischief' (140). Entry into adulthood did not take the inhabitants away from the vigilant eyes of the censor who examined their behaviour and attitudes with mistrust. In fact, on leaving the Academy, the young *Antangilians* had not finished their education. They live in common, supervised residences because it is thought that otherwise they would become prey to their own wills, and 'may corrupt each other and spoil the good upbringing and discipline they have received' (151). In *Antangil*, the entirety of personal life was controlled, and appraised or criticized, publicly. Spying and informing were the instruments of a regime of suspicion from which none escaped.

The modern reader, aware of the rights and inalienable needs of the young, may be driven to judge this denial of liberty in general, and of children and adolescents in particular, negatively. Another aspect of *Antangil* seems, nevertheless, to redeem the darkest aspects of its educational imagination. Its aim was to make the whole of the existence a continuum of learning, of education and personal development. It was the idea of life-long learning, already expressed by Plato and Aristotle, and reinforced by More, which gave

education a central role, a solid anchorage in the utopian imagination.¹¹ In this utopia, beyond a concern for the equal development of every individual, we may find the objective of social justice achieved through the offer of opportunities to everyone and allowing those capabilities which were not revealed initially to blossom.

For the poor ... what also helps them greatly is the liberality of their rich colleagues and companions who hold nothing as expensive for their friends, since they share among themselves almost all possessions. There are no controversies leading to duels. On the contrary, there is agreement, benevolence, joy and entertainment ... when they leave the great schools to listen to rhetoricians, mathematicians, philosophers, doctors, lawyers and theologians, whom the king keeps near his palace, so that everyone can continuously learn new things, and consolidate what has already been learnt. (151–2)

Marked by its own blending of old and new, *Antangil* remains a moderate, bourgeois utopia. It had little of the subversive quality or the corrosive spirit which have been generally expressed by the genre since 1516. *Antangil*, with its sedate tones, still had space for the illusion of a political solution of the crises faced by civil society. Its proposed socio-political structure, rather than a revolution, offers, with appropriate reforms, to repair a fractured civil society. Utopia was therefore nearby and its realization was possible. Thus, as usual, the narrative strategies of the literary utopia generate distance: the journey, the Antipodes of the southern seas, the favourable natural environment. But there is a more profound strategy of distancing. The traveller had never reached utopia. He was not a direct witness who knew first hand and had experienced the otherness of what he reported. What we read is not his story but a story told to him by an ambassador. The space represented was in reality a mental space. Elsewhere is projected into a nowhere, but it fully retains its capacity to construct a socially positive model, here and now. Setting aside the utopian stereotypes, the reader's attention should be captured by the peacemakers' desire to mediate between religions, by the encouragement of participation in government, by the protection of the weak, and by public education. Of course, this all has a class orientation but it is balanced by equity and solidarity.