

Paulding Satirizes Owenism

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One Sunday in August, 1826, Robert Owen stood before the assembled Owenites of New Harmony, Indiana, and read them passages from a book that had just come into his hands, *The Merry Tales of the Three Wise Men of Gotham*.¹ James Kirke Paulding, satirist extraordinary, defender and protector of the American name and faith, had scored another contemporary success. *The Merry Tales*, like its predecessors, *The Diverting History of John Bull and Brother Jonathan* (1812), *The United States and England* (1822), *John Bull in America* (1825), was another of Paulding's satires in the "paper war" between Great Britain and the United States. The anti-British virus that had infected so many American writers produced in Paulding an intermittent fever the recurrences of which required little or no provocation. Paulding's animus was directed at the British travelers in the books cited above; it was leveled at Scott in *The Lay of the Scottish Fiddle* (1813) and *Koningsmarke* (1823). In *The Merry Tales* it was Owenism, English legal procedure, and phrenology that incurred Paulding's wrath.²

Though the story of Owen's experimental community has been told and retold,³ often with a needless amount of

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¹ George B. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement* (New York, 1905), 150. Marguerite Young, *Angel in the Forest* (New York, 1945), 236-237, gives a very distorted version of the incident.

² *The Merry Tales of the Three Wise Men of Gotham* (New York, 1826) has not received proper attention from American literary historians and critics. In chapter XIII of *The Literary Life of James Kirke Paulding* (New York, 1867), William I. Paulding quoted, without comment, all of the "Introductory Dissertation" from *The Merry Tales* and the first paragraph of each of the three satires. Amos L. Herold's *James Kirke Paulding, Versatile American* in *Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature* (New York, 1912-), No. 85 (1926), the only full length modern study, disposed of the book in one paragraph. "The pieces . . . should not be called tales. They are really narrative essays. In the first, a humorous exposition, Paulding satirizes Robert Owen's idea of the perfectibility of man. The second is a pleasant satire on courts and laws. The third . . . belittles the pretensions of phrenology." See page 114.

³ Recent studies dealing with New Harmony are Young's *Angel in the Forest* (poetic-fiction, 1945) and Richard W. Leopold's *Robert Dale Owen, A Biography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1940). Earlier accounts may be found in John Humphrey Noyes' *History of American Socialism* (Philadelphia, 1870); Robert Dale Owen's *Threading My Way* (New York, 1874); and George B. Lockwood's *The New Harmony Communities*

scorn,⁴ it is not out of order to sketch it again as a background for an analysis of Paulding's satire. Robert Owen had good reason to abandon his plans for reforming society in England according to his rational pattern. Prelates and potentates from England to Russia had applauded his efforts at New Lanark, but when it became obvious that his aim was not only to reform society but to remodel the industrial society of England by parliamentary legislation his supporters deserted in headlong flight. There was ample precedent for his turning to America as the place to make the great social experiment. For two centuries the disheartened and the disillusioned of Europe had been crossing the Atlantic to the new Canaan to set up societies, theocratic and economic, on a soil untainted by the corruptions and perversions of the Old World.

In the promised land, where fertility and salubriousness were already legendary, new civilizations were certain to thrive. Owen was no stranger to these visions. Furthermore, had not the inhabitants of America, through successful application of *reason* to the establishment of a new political system, shown themselves peculiarly susceptible to the operation of the reasoning faculty? And had not Owen found a ready audience in those Americans to whom he had addressed his schemes in Europe? John Q. Adams, among others, had listened approvingly as he poured the "new view of society" into his ears.⁵ When he heard from George Flower that George Rapp was preparing to sell his Harmony Community on the banks of the Wabash, Owen was more than ready to launch the project that would show the world

(Marion, Indiana, 1902). Sketches by contemporaries include Paul Brown's *Twelve Months in New Harmony* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1827), Duke of Saxe-Weimar's *Travels Through North America* (Philadelphia, 1828), "Letters of William Pelham" in Harlow Lindley's *Indiana as Seen by Early Travelers* in *Indiana Historical Collections* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1916-), III (1916), "Diary of William Owen," edited by Joel W. Hiatt, in *Indiana Historical Society Publications* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1895-), IV (1906), 1-134, "Papers of Thomas and Sarah Pears," edited by Thomas C. Pears, Jr., in *ibid.*, XI (1937), 1-96, and "Diaries of Donald Macdonald," edited by Caroline D. Snedeker, in *ibid.*, XIV (1944), 143-380.

⁴ See especially D. C. Peattie, "When Communism Was Tried in America," in the *Reader's Digest* (Pleasantville, New York, 1922-), LXI, November, 1942, pp. 67-70.

⁵ Robert Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen* (London, 1857-1858), *passim*.

the truth of his doctrines. He bought Harmony in 1825 for \$125,000.

Owen's arrival in America had all the characteristics of a messianic visitation. Owen, of course, was a masterful promoter. No one had keener notions of how to arouse sympathy or elicit support than this canny Welshman: notices to the press; an address to the public; dinners with merchants, philanthropists, and politicians; a carefully wangled invitation to address the Congress of the United States where he exhibited a model of his community and answered congressmen's queries clearly and forcefully.⁶ He was not looked on as a freak, far from it; he was sought eagerly by the great and learned of the day, and obligingly explained his views to all and sundry. The whole amazing episode was capped by his "call" to all men of good will to come to him at New Harmony and demonstrate at once the soundness of his system.⁷

To New Harmony came many who were earnest seekers after the perfection promised, men like William Pelham, Thomas Pears, and Paul Brown; to it also came the rag, tag, and bobtail democracy of the indigent west, a circumstance that Owen could neither foresee nor understand. In the flush of initial enthusiasm, Owen packed himself off to England, leaving the colony to the guidance of his inexperienced eldest son, William, and a group of faithful believers. The problems confronting the directors were almost insuperable.⁸ By the time Owen returned in 1826 schisms and dis-

⁶ In New York, in 1824-1825, Owen was entertained by Charles King, Judge David Ogden, Abram Ogden, DeWitt Clinton, Dr. David Hosack, and Stephen Van Rensselaer. In Philadelphia he met with Dr. James Rush and Mathew Carey. In Washington he talked with John Q. Adams, John C. Calhoun, William Wirt, and James Monroe. He discussed and exhibited plans at a soiree given by Dr. Hosack and at a dinner at Van Rensselaer's. He also presented his plans in a private lecture at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. His "Discourse on a New System of Society" was delivered February 25, 1825, and repeated March 7. Later, in the fall of 1825 he gave similar addresses in New York and Philadelphia. All his public utterances were well noticed by the press. He also visited, late in 1825, Prince Charles Bonaparte and Prince Lucien Marat at their estates near Trenton, New Jersey. "Diaries of Donald Macdonald," in *Indiana Historical Society Publications*, XIV, *passim*; see also Lockwood, *The New Harmony Communities*, 87.

⁷ His call was made in a widely publicized address at New Harmony, April 27, 1825. *New Harmony, Indiana, Gazette*, October 1, 1825.

⁸ See Brown, *Twelve Months in New Harmony*; "Letters of William Pelham," Lindley, *Indiana as Seen by Early Travelers*, in *Indiana Historical Collections*, III; "Papers of Thomas and Sarah Pears," in *Indiana Historical Society Publications*, XI.

illusionment had wrought damage irreparable. Despite the intellectual recruits in the "Boatload of Knowledge,"⁹ there was no possibility of regaining lost ground. Constitution after constitution was drawn up and as quickly abandoned. Finally, to retrench financially, though by no means admitting complete collapse of the scheme, Owen was forced to break the community holdings into individual parcels and quit the experiment.¹⁰ Despite optimistic farewell addresses,¹¹ history as well as contemporary opinion branded the venture with the derogatory epithet—failure.

Americans were generally of two minds regarding New Harmony. They were either enthusiasts or critics. The enthusiasts praised Owen's experiment and sought to extend it elsewhere. A record of these proliferations of Owenite communism would fill a fair-sized volume.¹²

The critics fall into two classes: those who, because of their fundamentalist theological doctrines, thought the rational experiment in social organization contrary to God's will and holy ordinance, and those who believed Owen's system to be a violation of the normal patterns of human behavior. The former attacked Owenism for its free thought, its godlessness, its "Fanny Wrightism" (then a term signifying loose sexual attitudes), its leveling of the social distinctions "created by wealth," its enmity toward the institutions of property and marriage.¹³ That there was much semantic trickery in these allegations is apparent; yet there

⁹ The contingent of scholars and savants gathered by William Maclure and Owen that arrived in New Harmony in January, 1826, included some of the best scientific and educational minds available at that time.

¹⁰ Leopold's *Robert Dale Owen* contains the most accurate account of this troubled period in the life of New Harmony.

¹¹ Owen's addresses were delivered on May 26 and 27, 1827. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement*, 166, 173.

¹² Quakers everywhere, especially in New York and Pittsburgh, set up Owenite Community study groups. Elias Hicks was one of those thus interested. See "Diaries of Donald Macdonald," in *Indiana Historical Society Publications*, XIV, for Owen's contacts with Hicks and other Quakers. Besides the schismatic offshoots at New Harmony, Owenite colonies were established at Yellow Springs, Ohio; Albion, Illinois; Valley Forge, Pennsylvania; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Blue Springs, Indiana; Haverstraw, New York; Coxsackie, New York; and Nashoba, Tennessee. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement*, 177ff.

¹³ One of the most virulent of these attacks was written by L. S. Everett several years later, during the Abner Kneeland persecution. *An Exposure of the Principles of the "Free Inquirers"* (Boston, 1831), alleged that the heresies of Frances Wright, Robert Dale Owen, Robert L. Jennings, and Kneeland all originated in New Harmony Owenism.

was hardly more of it in them than there is in some of the more recent castigations of New Harmony in our own day.¹⁴

Another example of criticism of this type is found in a popular bit of doggerel much clipped by the newspapers in 1826.

The Devil at length scrambled out of the hole
Discovered by Symmes at the freezing North Pole:
He mounted an iceberg, spread his wings for a sail,
And started for earth with his long, barbed tail.

He heard that a number of people were going
To live on the Wabash with great Mr. Owen:
He said to himself, "I must now have a care,
Circumstances require that myself should be there."

The Devil discovers that Owenite principles have been set up to replace religion and that there will soon be no one to listen to preachers. "Since it's plain that religion is changed to opinions," the Devil hastens home to enlarge his dominions.

The Devil then mounted again on the ice,
And dashed through the waves, and got home in a thrice,
And told his fell imps whom he kept at the pole
Circumstances required they should widen the hole!¹⁵

Of the second class of critics, none was more fair, honest, and reasonable in his refutation of Owen than W. L. Fisher of Philadelphia. In 1826, he wrote a telling pamphlet, based on the philosophic theories of Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and Francis Hutcheson, showing that all reform must be *within*. Reformation, requires that man look "to the manifestations of good in the secret soul," said Fisher; when he does, this *community* is rendered unnecessary, in fact, each person will then form "a sort of nucleus, which would attract other persons, and these again becoming the

¹⁴ Peattie, "When Communism Was Tried in America," in *Reader's Digest*, LXI, November, 1942, pp. 67-70.

¹⁵ Quoted in both Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement*, 103; and Young, *Angel in the Forest*, 214-215. John Cleves Symmes was an eccentric genius noted for Symmes' Purchase in Ohio and notorious for his fantastic theory that the interior of the earth was "hollow and habitable." See James McBride, *Symmes' Theory of Concentric Spheres: Demonstrating that the Earth is Hollow, Habitable, and Widely Open about the Poles* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1826); John W. Peck, "Symmes' Theory," in *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* (Columbus, Ohio, 1887-), XVIII, 28-42.

examples of reformation to others, the world would soon exhibit an elysium." With unusual acumen Fisher wrote:

It appears to me that self-interest and the knowledge of the influence of circumstances, on which Robert Owen rests his plan of reformation, in his "new views of society", are incapable of producing, under any modification, the effects proposed, and that the new system contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction.¹⁶

James Kirke Paulding also belonged to this second critical group. While Fisher gently and effectively undermined the philosophical foundations of Owenism, Paulding belabored them with sarcastic bludgeon hoping to reduce them to ridiculous nonsense. Paulding's *Merry Tales* satirized several prevailing notions. The three wise men of Gotham put out to sea in a bowl bound, most naturally, for the Concentric Spheres, the area inside the hollow terrestrial globe seriously postulated by Captain John C. Symmes.¹⁷ Having met with misfortune and rebuff at the hands of practical Americans, they had planned new conquests in that more favorable locale. Being philosophers rather than navigators, they regaled each other with the events that led them to make this wise decision. The first wise man, Mr. Harmony, told a tale about himself, "The Man Machine, or, the Pupil of Circumstances" (Owenism); the second, Mr. Quominus, related his history, "The Perfection of Reason" (Common Law); and the third, Dr. Spurrem, unfolded a remarkable narrative, "The Perfection of Science" (Phrenology).¹⁸ They fell out among themselves and in the ensuing struggle the bowl was cracked and they were engulfed in a watery vortex which undoubtedly carried them directly to the Concentric Spheres.

"The Man Machine, or, the Pupil of Circumstances"¹⁹

¹⁶ W. L. Fisher, *An Examination of the New System of Society by Robert Owen Showing Its Insufficiency to Reform Mankind with Observations on the Operation of the Principle of Virtue in the Mind of Man* (Philadelphia, 1826), 13.

¹⁷ Whether Paulding had the bit of doggerel in mind when he wrote or not is uncertain. Such a concept is a "natural" for the satirical minded.

¹⁸ The title page of *The Merry Tales* bears a crude woodcut of the three men in a bowl. The phrenologist holds a charted head, the lawyer a law book, and the man machine a model readily recognized as that which Owen exhibited throughout the United States.

¹⁹ *The Merry Tales*, 21-142. Paulding chose the phrase "Man Machine" in order to stress that aspect of Owen's philosophy which claimed that man was the product of forces acting upon him from outside himself.

is a miserable tale if considered merely as narrative; as satire only second rate. Nevertheless, it is a formidable attack on Owen's theories and attracted the notice of Owen himself. For that reason it deserves analysis.

The Man Machine had been born in a country "unworthy of his nativity," the son of a poor man whose only wealth was a "fruitful wife and a great store of children." He had been bound out from the ages of nine to thirteen to a factory owner who worked him fourteen hours a day and even fined him for sneezing though he was choking from cotton dust. Then, a celebrated philanthropist conceived a plan devoted to the production of cotton cloth and the perfectibility of man. The Man Machine began working in the new factory after his old employer had fined him for wiping away tears occasioned by listening to a bird singing outside the factory window. His new employer gathered five hundred men, women, and children about him and made a speech expounding his social theories. The "new view of society" was enthusiastically set in operation.²⁰ Soon, however, "counteracting principles" began to interfere with the philanthropist's schemes. To check these disturbing forces he attempted to train the children *ab ovo*,²¹ though with indifferent success. One such child was eventually brought to perfection; he would do only what he was told to do and he met an early demise by being run over by a wagon since no one in authority was near to tell him to get out of the way. Such things as emulation, imposition, preferences, and petty inequalities continued to upset the master's schemes. Whatever success the project enjoyed resulted from the efforts of the "committee of management" which did all the thinking, planning, and deciding.²² The workers accepted the rule of the committee because the community's common surplus fund was steadily increasing. The treasurer, a "perfect" person at the time of his election, was overcome by the

²⁰ Paulding regularly refers in his footnotes to a work called "A New View of Society," one of the titles by which Owen's theories were broadcast. The speech quoted by the Man Machine, however, is a badly and deliberately garbled version of Owen's speech to the United States Congress.

²¹ Paulding was, of course, referring to Owen's concept of kindergarten education, and to his insistence that all men had been erroneously trained from birth.

²² Similar committees of management characterized the New Harmony community.

love of money and absconded with the fund. Whereupon, the members of the community, lacking the "cement" of the surplus, began to sigh

for that freedom of will, that release from eternal restraint—eternal supervision—and eternal monotony which they were obliged to submit to, in order to arrive at perfection. The idea of freedom was so exquisitely grateful, that they forgot their losses, and in a little time, in spite of my master's exhortations, and the logic of his New View of Society which he read over to them six times, they flew away like gay birds in all directions, leaving a disconsolate teacher without any scholars, but myself, and few of the lame, blind and incapable of the community who were left behind.²³

Finally, the Man Machine came into a small fortune. Offered the position of treasurer if he would invest it in the factory-community, he refused and returned to the world to put the "new views of society" into practice on his own estate. He was soon mulcted of most of his property and his own steward had him sent to a madhouse. When released, the Man Machine sold his estate to the steward and set out for the new world with what remained of his wealth. Fleeced of that remainder by a fellow passenger, he was thrown into jail. A kind American rescued him from this predicament and gave him a home and employment. Unfit for any labor requiring individual responsibility and unable to convert his American benefactor to his views, the Man Machine longed to leave. Happily, he heard of the "sublime theory of Concentric Spheres" and set out at once for that region to seek anew the "perfectibility of man." Such was the Man Machine's story as he told it to his two companions in the bowl.

Paulding's arguments against Owenism centered about three points: (1) Owen's denial of inherent traits or passions, (2) his disregard of the natural inequalities in man, (3) his failure to provide a positive incentive to virtue.

As Paulding viewed Owen's philosophy, the chief flaw

²³ *The Merry Tales*, 75-76. Either Paulding was reading the adverse letters appearing in the press or he was unusually perspicacious. He wrote the *Merry Tales* early in 1826; the "Preface" was written in February. Of those who left the colony the Man Machine has this to say: "What became of the grown up children, thus putting themselves upon their country, destitute of the habits and experience necessary to self-government, security, nay, existence in the wide world, I know not to a certainty. I have heard that many were wrecked upon the unknown coast of the world, and that the remainder, during a great part of their lives, were indebted for support, to that society which they had deserted, in pursuit of perfection." *Ibid.*, 76.

lay in the failure to account for conduct arising from the inner temperament of man. He returned to this problem no less than three times in the satire. Typical of his argument is the following dialogue between the philanthropist (Owen) and the Man Machine. What were the "counter-acting principles"? the Man Machine asked. They are "all those vices, folies, inconsistencies, absurdities, habits, principles, and feelings, which an erroneous system of education for the last six thousand years has implanted in the human race, so as to change, as it were, their very natures, making them almost unsusceptible of perfectibility."²⁴

What was an erroneous system of education? continued the Man Machine. "A system which counteracts human nature." But, can there be such a thing if "human nature" is merely wax? countered the Man Machine.

"Right, sir—right—human nature is an absurdity, a nonentity—a—a—in short, man is nothing but a machine, and his nature, or the first principle of his existence, nothing more than the force of an innate—an innate—an—a—law of matter like that which causes the wheel to go in a circle, and the runner in a horizontal line."

"But it has often puzzled me, sir, why—if human nature is a mere machine with its one inflexible law of action like that of a wheel—why you should take so much trouble to make it go better. But after all, sir, I don't see how this explains the counteracting principles."

" . . . the counteracting principle is that tendency to wrong and mischief, which is planted in the Man Machine by an erroneous system of education; and the force of circumstances is nothing more than the temptations thrown into his way by this erroneous system. . . . avarice, lust, ambition, envy, malice, and revenge"

"O! I understand now—what we used to call the passions."

"The passions! 'tis false, sir—they are not what we used to call the passions—the passions are phantoms—they have no existence except in the brain of stupidity—they are the infamous incestuous product of the vile system of education pursued for the last six thousand years."²⁵

Having thus made the Owenite philanthropist look ridiculous, Paulding, somewhat too smugly, considering the weaknesses of his method, turned to the assumption that lay behind Owen's denial of an inherent human nature. Owen maintained that the factors in human conduct that led to evil—envy, ambition, malice, etc.—were primarily the result of inequalities. Eliminate inequalities and much of man's "evil nature" will disappear. To Paulding this offered ex-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

cellent opportunity for satire. Though there might be a leveling of distinction based on property, there were still serious tendencies toward inequality that could not be eradicated. Equality could not be achieved. The young men all wanted to marry the same girl and could not be persuaded that another girl was equally good. The lady whose husband had a ten-year claim on the surplus fund looked down on the lady with only a five-year stake in that fund. She valued the difference as much as if she actually possessed it. Prettier children were another source of inequality. The philanthropist could regulate the number of children but not their looks. A dispute between two women arose over the position of their parlors; one faced north, the other south. The dispute spread to the entire community; the factionalism was not ended by the master's decision that to be in the sun in winter was equal to being out of it in summer. Equality, not the exercise of talent was the purpose of the community; consequently, no system of rewards could be employed. The Man Machine once tried to achieve the master's favor, but he found that he was resented and hated. "Individual perfectibility was incompatible with the perfectibility of the whole, and the only way to preserve HARMONY was to be no better than other people."²⁶

Paulding, like Aldous Huxley, was intrigued with the idea that the collectivistic society destroyed all incentive to complete, wholesome, virtuous living. As there were no "mutual wants, mutual weaknesses, and mutual dependence, there was no room, nor indeed any occasion, for the exercise of the social virtues, except so far as they are negatively exercised in refraining from actual violence or injury." Only the chief and the planning committee exercised any powers other than the capacity to work. There could be no use of virtue, talent, or intelligence by the members of the community.

They thought for us, and they acted for us. They made the laws, and they administered them. They took care of our morals, our manners, and our money, while we, thrice happy machines, . . . worked by rule, ate by rule, slept by rule, and were as merry as so many cabbages, growing in regular lines. . . . We did not labour with that spirit and alacrity men do when they are labouring for themselves, but from a

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 47. That this portrayal was a perversion and distortion of Owen's theory made no more difference to Paulding than it makes to present day critics of New Harmony.

habit acquired by the machine, which went its regular course day after day. But this, my master considered as the highest proof of perfectibility, which properly understood, consisted in doing every thing necessary to the happiness of the community not from a sense of duty but from a habit acquired by the Man Machine.²⁷

The "regularity becoming to perfect machines," the "beautiful monotony, like the ticking of a clock, or the evolutions of a spinning jenny" that must inevitably accompany such attempts at organized communal living were mirth-provoking to Paulding; to his successors in that line of criticism they are spectres of a fearful doom.²⁸

It would be interesting and enlightening if we had Owen's reaction to Paulding's satire. Eden planters today might profit from Owen's answers. The fact remains, however, that Paulding, good Jacksonian Democrat that he was, expressed the basic individualistic attitude of his time. The "force of circumstance" dictated his attitude and directed his pen.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 64-66.

²⁸ Here, too, Paulding (and his ilk in whatever era) ignored the fundamental purposes of Owen's social experimentation. That there was no monotony is abundantly proved by the outcome of the experiment. It collapsed, not from too much regularizing but from too little. *Ibid.*, 86.