*Karl E. Meyer* Post 12/21/78

# Jonestown: On the Literary Trail to Paradise

No end of "lessons" will be derived from the Jonestown tragedy, which brings out the moralist in all of us and turns every other commentator into a student of Conrad, Spengler and Dostoevsky. Yet I am surprised that so little attention has been paid to the simple fact of the commune's location in the Guianas, a circumstance filled with a fearful symmetry.

More than any other patch of earth, the Guianas are associated with the quest for an earthly Eden in the form of an aborginal paradise. There is a connecting line that joins the Peoples Temple to Eldorado and Utopia, and to persistent notions of the Noble Savage, which resonate in the novels of Voltaire and Waugh. It is no accident, as Marxists say, that when British Guiana became Guyana in 1966, the new country chose to dub itself the world's first Cooperative Republic.

*Mr. Meyer, a former Post correspondent, is a free-lance writer.*

We tend to forget what a powerful stimulus the discovery of the New World was on the Western imagination. In 1516, hardly a generation after the Columbian voyages, Sir Thomas More was inspired to write "Utopia," describing a mythical island kingdom with a moral perfection that shamingly contrasted with European savagery (More, of course, was later beheaded by Henry VIII).

To make his fantasy plausible, More claimed that his description of an ideal commonwealth was obtained from a shipmate of Amerigo Vespucci during that explorer's visit to South America in 1504. According to More, his informant, simply named Raphael, parted from Vespucci at Cape Frio in South America and came upon Utopia during his wanderings, thus discovering "To my mind, the best country in the world . . . where everything's under public ownership, and no one has any fear of going short, as long as the public storehouses are full. . . . Nobody owns anything, but everyone is rich—for what greater wealth can there be than cheerfulness, piece of mind and freedom from anxiety?"

More's Utopian vision anticipated the Spanish conquest of the Aztec and Inca empires, whose bullion made Madrid the richest capital in Europe and whose communal structure won the fulsome praise of friars like Las Casas. So marvelous were the Indian civilizations of the New World that the Spanish gave sober credit to the existence of Eldorado, a lakeside kingdom ruled by the Golden One, a monarch anointed in gold dust.

For close to 70 years, the Spaniards sought Eldorado in a score of expeditions. The search prompted Orellana's discovery and descent of the Amazon in 1541–1542, an epic voyage that gave the river its name and for the first time demonstrated the immense size of South America.

By the 1590s, the Spaniards had concluded that the elusive city of Eldorado was in the Guianas, and their reports came to the notice of Sir Walter Ralegh, then out of favor with the aging Queen Elizabeth. Ralegh seized on the tales of Eldorado to promote an expedition to the Guianas in 1595, with the aim of finding in the Orinoco basin the City of the Golden One.

Returning empty-handed, Ralegh sought to confound his detractors by describing the Guianas as a demi-paradise in a narrative spaciously entitled "The Discoverie of the Large, Rich, and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana With a Relation of the Great and Golden City of Manoa (Which the Spanyards Call Eldorado)." His fluent account was filled with superb yarns, including a description of a tribe of headless giants, which inspired Shakespeare's references in Othello to "men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders." (Ralegh returned 16 years later to the Guianas, but his second voyage was also adjudged a failure, an offense that eventually led to his execution by James I.)

Thanks to the myth of Eldorado, a peculiar magic was associated with the Guianas. In his satiric masterpiece, "Candide" (1759), Voltaire located his version of Utopia in the same jungles. Voltaire's eponymous hero, determined to prove that this is the best of all possible worlds, turns up in a city called Eldorado, which "an Englishman named Ralegh came very near to" but missed discovering because it was hidden in precipitous peaks.

In a clear allusion to More's fantasy, Voltaire describes an ideal community in which all the male inhabitants are priests. ("What!" Candide demands. "Have you no monks to teach, to dispute, to govern, to intrigue, and to burn people who do not agree with them?" "For that," replies the 172-year-old king of Eldorado, "we should have to become fools.")

Following Voltaire, the accounts of travelers magnified the exotic splendors of the Guianas. In the 1800s, the renowned Baron Alexander von Humboldt brought to the startled attention of Europe the existence of the electric eel, capable of stunning a horse, which he discovered in the Orinoco basin. The English eccentric, Charles Watterton, explored the Guianas in the early 19th century and described every kind of natural marvel—alligators that could be mounted like horses, insatiable vampire bats, immense snakes that could be discouraged by simply socking them on the nose—in a highly readable minor classic, "Wanderings in South America" (1825). Echoes of Watterton persist to this day in reports from Guyana on the fearful menace of snakes, jaguars and piranhas.

It was surely with an eye to this literature that Evelyn Waugh chose to set the denouement of "A Handful of Dust" (1934) in the Guianas. Waugh had visited British Guiana a few years earlier, and had ventured into the Amazonian jungles to inspect a religious commune (a Benedictine monastery) at Boa Vista in Brazil. He was not enthralled:

"Already, in the few hours of my sojourn there the Boas Vista of my imagination had come to grief. Gone; engulfed like an earthquake, uprooted by a tornado and tossed skyhigh like chaff in the wind, scorched with brimstone like Gomorrah, toppled over with trumpets like Jericho, ploughed like Carthage, bought, demolished and transported brick by brick to

*More, Ralegh, Voltaire: "The Guianas are associated with the quest for an earthly Eden, an aboriginal paradise."*

another continent as though it had taken the fancy of Mr. Hearst; Troy was down."

Waugh fled from Boa Vista, and used the memory in the final chapters of "A Handful of Dust." The novel's non-hero, Tony Beaver, betrayed by his wife and his friends, turns up in Georgetown as a member of an expedition intent on locating the fabled Indian city of Demerara (a traditional name for British Guiana).

Beaver becomes separated from his companions, and winds up as the prisoner of a demented half-caste, Mr. Todd, who owns the works of Charles Dickens but who cannot read. In an antiphonic reference to the whole Noble Savage tradition, Waugh condemns his hero to reading Dickens over and over again to his illiterate captor, somewhere in Amazonia.

A political and religious reactionary, Evelyn Waugh nonetheless anticipated Jonestown in much the same way that his fellow Catholic novelist Graham Greene—a political and religious liberal—anticipated the American tragedy in Vietnam in his novel, "The Quiet American" (1960). It was Shelley who remarked that poets were the unacknowledged legislators of mankind, a sweeping statement of the kind we have learned to view with distrust. Still, from Thomas More to Evelyn Waugh, there is evidence that poets are better barometers than pundits, however well-briefed, or politicians, however well served by opinion polls.