INTRODUCTION

Utopias of One

1

The word "utopia" is now almost entirely meaningless.[1] Its "definitional capabilities have been completely devoured by its connotative properties," writes Jacques Rancière. "Sometimes it refers to the mad delusions that lead to totalitarian catastrophe; sometimes it refers, conversely, to the infinite expansion of the field of possibility that resists all forms of totalizing closure."[2]

Yet all utopias share at least one basic feature: failure. The word's etymology makes the point: Thomas More invented the word "utopia" in 1516 by combining "eu-topia" (good place) and "ou-topia" (no place). Failure is inevitable—whether the aim is a social structure that harmonizes individual and collective interests or freedom without limit.

Not all utopias fail in the same way, of course. Some end in mass death. Others remain fixed to the pages of novels and manifestos. The reasons for failure also vary. Some utopias rely on violence. Others are quixotic. Most are simply unable to overcome the class interests of an elite or the inertia of everyday life.[3]

Failure can be redeemed as social critique. "Utopia," argues Jay Winter, "is a fantasy about the limits of the possible, a staging of what we take for granted, and what is left unsaid about our current social conventions and political cultures."[4] From this perspective, all utopias (even the most catastrophic) testify to the inadequacy of the status quo—and to humankind's enduring desire for a better world. As Ernst Bloch writes, "the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present."[5]

This cursory account of utopia connects Fruitlands and the Soviet Union, William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) and B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948), and Jean Baudrillard's "Utopia deferred . . ." (1971) and Anahid Nersessian's *Utopia, Limited* (2015).[6] An unrealized, unrealizable ideal; the consolations of social critique—this is utopia.

2

Utopias of One departs from this account of utopia. The book follows eight writers—Henry David Thoreau, W.E.B. Du Bois, Osip and Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, Anna Akhmatova, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, and J. H. Prynne—as they respond to the failures of utopia by constructing utopias of one. These utopias do not fail. But their success comes at a cost: they cannot serve as models for readers hoping to perfect their own lives or remake their communities. Utopias of one are exclusive—and, in most cases, inimitable.

This book tracks the emergence of these utopias within and against modernity's two most ambitious attempts to harmonize individual and collective interests: liberalism and communism. My approach is comparative and transnational. The book's chapters move from antebellum America through the end of Jim Crow, from Stalin's Russia through the Soviet reform period known as the "Thaw," and from England and America at the dawn of World War I through the end of the Cold War and the emergence of neoliberalism. Together, the chapters capture how writers from diverse contexts create lived and perfect worlds—for themselves alone.

From one perspective, utopias of one are unremarkable. In *Charles Olson: A Scholar's Art* (1978), Robert von Hallberg criticizes American poets who attempt "to change American culture by establishing common knowledge and values" but then settle for "the achievement of a personal order."[7] In *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000), Susan Buck-Morss laments the rise of "personal utopianism," which she associates with "the abandonment of the larger social project" and "political cynicism."[8] From this perspective, utopias of one simply reaffirm my earlier account of utopia and failure: a utopia of just one person is a contradiction in terms—and thus no utopia at all.

But from a different perspective, utopias of one represent a limit case of literary efficacy—*what literature can and does make happen.* (Efficacy: "Power or capacity to produce effects," to quote the *Oxford English Dictionary*.) The texts I examine are not merely occasions for imagining or promoting alternatives to the status quo or for representing totality—what Joshua Clover calls "the inner dynamic of social existence and its forms of appearance."[9] The texts are not primarily critical, analytical, aspirational, inspirational, sentimental, or even representational.[10] Their efficacy is real, direct, and dramatic—yet isolated and isolating, singular and specific.

This is my first overarching claim: the texts I examine create perfect worlds. My second overarching claim is related: the texts I examine create perfect worlds by refusing or failing to present models of perfect worlds. Efficacy and divisiveness go hand in hand. For the writers I discuss, the dissolution of community is the first step toward establishing an alternative to community. The book, in this way, offers an account of utopianism that does not default to an account of failure and social critique.

Despite the book's complexity and breadth, it explicates a basic sequence of events. A writer responds to the failure of utopia—America in the aftermath of Reconstruction, the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the world under neoliberalism—by devising his or her own utopian project. The project is precarious. It risks solipsism at one extreme and mere critique at the other. Ultimately, its effects are asymmetrical and highly improbable: a perfect world that cannot be replicated or shared.

Utopias of One attempts to illuminate these "asymmetries"—how texts benefit writers and neglect (and even harm) readers. Occasionally, the asymmetries (and the utopias that result) are intentional. Writers develop techniques to estrange readers: irony, obscurity, invective, cliché. But in many cases, the asymmetries are unintentional. Writers do not intend to abandon "the larger social project" (to quote Buck-Morss again), yet discover that they are unable to reverse the divisive effects of powerful institutions: legal segregation, government censorship and surveillance, class. In such cases, writers save themselves and leave readers behind.

The utopias I discuss are thus morally ambiguous. They reflect and reinforce the atomization of modern life. But they also demonstrate literature's power to create lived and perfect worlds. In light of this moral ambiguity, the book does not promote narratives of redemption or wrongdoing. My aim is not to celebrate or indict a subgenre of literature—or to identify heroes and villains. My aim is to describe the construction and significance of utopias of one. If read with a sense of political optimism, the book may seem cynical; if read with a sense of political pessimism, the book may seem consoling, even hopeful.

Utopias of One attempts to address a series of questions at the intersection of aesthetics and politics—questions about dissent and complicity, personal and aesthetic autonomy, genre and world-making, and the meaning and value of perfection. (The book will, I hope, provide a framework for understanding the efficacy of other texts, and for understanding how utopian desire survives the failure of utopia.) In the process, the book confronts a vexing hermeneutical problem: If utopias of one are, by definition, exclusive, how can we, as readers, identify and evaluate them?

3

The first utopia of one I discuss is Thoreau's "experiment of living" at Walden and in *Walden* (1854).[11] When Thoreau moved to Walden Pond on July 4, 1845, his goal was to maximize his independence. America, from his perspective, had failed. The government (at all levels) had betrayed its own liberal ideals. Slavery and imperialism defined everyday life. Reform seemed impossible. Voting (for those who could vote) was an act of complicity. The abolitionist movement was in disarray.[12] The utopian community at Brook Farm was breaking down.[13] Fruitlands had collapsed a year and half earlier.

To maximize his independence, Thoreau radically reduced the size of his world. As I discuss in the first chapter: he minimized his social and financial obligations, and chose to live in an artificially circumscribed environment. He also developed a practice of writing and rewriting that refined his perception of his environment. Writing became an instrument of attentiveness and suppression—a way to improve his vision and restrict its range. At Walden and in *Walden* there was little or no conflict between receptivity and sovereignty. Thoreau could be open to his surroundings and in control—vulnerable and secure.

This was the beginning of Thoreau's utopia of one: a world small enough to be received in its entirety. To revitalize certain liberal ideals, he deprioritized or abandoned others. Personal sovereignty took precedence over popular sovereignty—or, to be more precise, personal sovereignty and popular sovereignty became one. This is one reason that *Walden* is such an innovative and radical book. Thoreau did not respond to the failures of utopia by proposing a new way to harmonize individual and collective interests. He dissolved the difference, transforming *the* world into *his* world.

Thoreau's utopia of one puts readers in an awkward position. How should we relate to his carefully tailored world? The options are all problematic. We could take *Walden* as a model and attempt to cultivate our independence. But to do so would be self-defeating—an act of dependence, not independence. Alternatively, we could "stand aloof" (the phrase is Thoreau's) and cautiously evaluate the project's strengths and weaknesses.[14] But to do so would be to ignore the project's allure and the intimacy of Thoreau's address. Finally, we could reject the project altogether—as narcissistic, even dangerous. But to do so would be to ignore the project's moral seriousness and Thoreau's virtuosity. The best response might be all and none of the above—to adopt and abandon roles constantly: to become a disciple, then a disinterested critic, then a skeptic, then a disciple, ad infinitum.

Walden's reception history testifies to this awkwardness. The book is one of the most celebrated and reviled books in literary history. Some readers struggle to adopt and abandon a range of roles—an impossible task, especially in the long run. ("The writer keeps my choices in front of me," Stanley Cavell writes, "the ones I am not making and the ones I am. This makes me wretched and nervous.")[15] But most are happy to ignore the book's complexity—and thus the book itself—and adopt a single role.[16]

This awkwardness was a deliberate effect. Thoreau did not want to become responsible for the lives of his readers. Why, then, did he publish *Walden*? Why address readers at all? As I argue in chapter 1, he recognized that to maximize his independence, he had to confront his imbrication in social norms.[17] *Walden* is the most prominent site of that confrontation.

Thoreau thus describes the construction of a utopia but not *how* to construct a utopia. This omission represents a significant shift in the history of utopian literature. Traditionally, utopian literature presents models or

blueprints for constructing perfect worlds. More's *Utopia*, for example, models three general principles: "equality of all good and evil things among the citizens . . . ; a fixed and unwavering dedication to peace and tranquility; and utter contempt for gold and silver."[18] Readers are meant to adopt (or imagine adopting) these principles in their communities. (The leaders of the October Revolution, for example, did just that—almost four hundred years after the publication of *Utopia*.) Thoreau's project is an exception. Its exclusivity and inimitability are essential characteristics.

Thoreau's utopia of one, in this way, threatens the very idea of utopia. In *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (1987), Krishan Kumar writes:

> Thoreau's two-year experiment in solitary living around Walden Pond can almost be considered the epitome of American utopianism. It breathes its spirit through and through. It carries to a logical extreme the utopian promise of America to grant every single individual the right and opportunity to pursue his own vision, however idiosyncratic, of the good life. The paradox, of course, is that it is also the *reductio ad absurdum* of American utopianism. One man does not make a community, even a utopian community.[19]

Yet this is exactly what Thoreau wanted to do: make a one-man community—a utopia of one. To ask whether his project should count as a utopia is to ask about the capaciousness of a specific word. But it is also to ask about perfection itself. Is perfection still perfection when it cannot be shared?

I do not know for certain how Thoreau would have answered this question. Despite his narcissism, he rarely describes his inner life at Walden. (As E. B. White notes, Thoreau "disguised most of the facts from which an understanding of his life could be drawn.")[20] Readers observe Thoreau's utopia from the outside. We can track its construction but not confirm its effects. This is not an accident, of course—it is a way to protect his independence.

In the conclusion to *Walden*, however, Thoreau intimates that the project's most significant shortcoming was its unsustainability, not its exclusivity:

> I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear, that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open.[21]

These lines are ambiguous, but they suggest that when Thoreau decided to leave Walden in September 1847, he did so for two reasons. First, he had begun to imitate his own behavior. ("[I]mitation is suicide," Ralph Waldo Emerson

writes in "Self-Reliance" [1841]. Self-imitation is still imitation.)[22] Second, Thoreau's contemporaries (who would have learned about his project from various sources, including Thoreau himself) had become too proximate—their paths had begun to converge with his own.[23] Thus, the problem was not that his utopia of one was, in fact, a utopia of one, but rather that it could not remain so.

<center>4</center>

Utopias of One does not identify a genealogy of projects influenced by *Walden*. The book focuses instead on a process and a concept. The other writers I discuss develop their own projects, which reflect their own goals and contexts. Du Bois responds to the failure of Reconstruction. The Mandel'shtams and Akhmatova respond to the failure of Soviet communism. Stevens responds to the failure of humanism, and Pound and Prynne to the failure of what both might describe as global capitalism. (Stevens is the outlier: he does not respond to the failure of a political or economic system; he responds to the failure of a system of thought.) Yet the basic sequence or paradigm holds. The failure of utopia leads to a utopia of one. Language becomes a medium of independence, and independence an opportunity for perfection.

What is independence? The word has many synonyms or near-synonyms: autonomy, sovereignty, freedom, free will, liberty, agency, self-determination. These concepts all have their own dictionary definitions and context-dependent connotations.[24] Yet in most modern accounts, they entail two seemingly complementary ideas. To be independent (or autonomous, sovereign, free, etc.) is to be beyond the control of others and in control of oneself.

In "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958), Isaiah Berlin calls these ideas "negative liberty" and "positive liberty," respectively, and argues that they, in fact, are not complementary at all. "Negative liberty" reflects an ideal of noninterference: "I am normally said to be free," he writes, "to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity."[25] "Positive liberty," in contrast, reflects an ideal of mastery: "Freedom is self-mastery, the elimination of obstacles to my will, whatever these obstacles may be—the resistance of nature, of my ungoverned passions, of irrational institutions, of the opposing wills or behaviour of others."[26] Negative liberty is thus incompatible with positive liberty. To maintain an ideal of noninterference, one must avoid interfering in the lives of others—and, perhaps, in one's own life as well.

Hannah Arendt complicates matters further. In "What Is Freedom?" (1958–61), she argues that freedom and sovereignty, and freedom and free will, are both mutually exclusive:

> Politically, this identification of freedom with sovereignty is perhaps the most pernicious and dangerous of the philosophical equation

of freedom and free will. For it leads either to a denial of human freedom—namely, if it is realized that whatever men may be, they are never sovereign—or to the insight that the freedom of one man, or a group, or a body politic can be purchased only at the price of the freedom, i.e., the sovereignty, of all others.[27]

Arendt is making two arguments. First, sovereignty is an illusion. Individuals and groups are never fully in control of their surroundings or themselves. Second, sovereignty is socially undesirable—a zero-sum game of power and powerlessness. For Arendt, freedom has little to do with control. It is, instead, an act that interrupts the "automatism . . . inherent in all processes."[28]

In *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Saidiya V. Hartman links this zero-sum game to a history of racism:

Prized designations like "independence," "autonomy," and "free will" are the lures of liberalism, yet the tantalizing suggestion of the individual as potentate and sovereign is drastically undermined by the forms of repression and terror that accompanied the advent of freedom, the techniques of discipline that bind the individual through conscience, self-knowledge, responsibility, and duty, and the management of racialized bodies and populations effected through the racism of the state and civil society.[29]

In this account, independence always entails its opposite. Racism is a barrier to independence and a consequence of independence. In an endnote, Hartman quotes Étienne Balibar, who draws attention to the contradiction in the meaning of the word "subject": "why is it that the very *name* which allows modern philosophy to think and designate the *originary freedom* of the human being—the name of 'subject'—is precisely the name which *historically* meant suppression of freedom, or at least an intrinsic limitation of freedom, i.e., *subjection*?"[30]

On closer examination, the list of synonyms or near-synonyms of independence devolves into a list of irreconcilable and contradictory concepts. The desire to escape domination leads to various forms of domination, including self-domination. Sovereignty is, at once, an impossible ideal and not an ideal at all. The history of independence is a history of slavery and racism.[31]

This impasse would not have surprised Thoreau. His particular solution was to construct an artificial environment in which he could be sovereign and nonsovereign—powerful and powerless. At Walden and in *Walden*, he consolidated what C. B. Macpherson would call his "possessive individualism" and what Leo Bersani would call his "authoritative selfhood," while making such defense mechanisms unnecessary.[32] In the process, he was able to maximize his independence without eliminating the world or denying his receptivity, or seriously injuring others or himself.

The other writers I discuss embrace different solutions to this impasse—or ignore it altogether. Du Bois, for example, attempts to evade the "lures of liberalism" by developing a practice of freedom that does not lead to oppression. Osip Mandel'shtam, in contrast, accepts these lures—despite the antiliberalism of the Soviet Union. He develops the most radical project of all: composing a poem that links his independence to his death. His performance of an epigram mocking Stalin in 1933 anticipates Berlin's claim that the "logical culmination of the process of destroying everything through which I can possibly be wounded is suicide."[33] Mandel'shtam's performance led to his arrest in 1934 and his death in a Gulag transit camp in 1938. "Total liberation in this sense," Berlin laments, "is conferred only by death."[34]

Ultimately, the ability to solve or mitigate the impasse is an index of relative safety. In extreme circumstances, a zero-sum game of power and powerlessness might seem justifiable—even desirable.[35]

5

Apart from identifying a genealogy, there are three ways to write a book about the efficacy of utopian literature. First, one could select a single case study—such a book might examine Thoreau's utopianism. Second, one could select a series of case studies based on their similarity—such a book might examine utopian responses to the failure of Soviet utopianism. Third, one could select case studies based on their complementarity—such a book might (and, of course, *would*) resemble *Utopias of One*.

This third way has specific risks. The case studies might prove disparate. The pursuit of complementarity might lead to discontinuity: a collection of essays, instead of a greater-than-the-sum-of-its-parts monograph. The case studies might also sacrifice depth for breadth and thus alienate readers. Finally, and most significantly, the case studies might lead to false generalizations.

But there are benefits as well: depth and breadth, a diverse audience, genuine theoretical insights. Ideally, the pursuit of complementarity would lead to a multifaceted account of a single phenomenon while challenging critical assumptions about national context, periodization, and genre. More dramatic, a rigorous comparative and transnational study, attentive to the importance of historical and political context, might lead to a *nonnational* study that exposes a long-ignored facet of literary efficacy.[36]

Utopias of One, I hope, avoids these risks and realizes at least some of these benefits. The book investigates a series of different yet complementary case studies. The chapter on Du Bois, for example, focuses on his *Autobiography* (1962, 1968) and his defense of communism, especially Soviet communism. The next chapter—on the Mandel'shtams—focuses, in part, on Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's memoirs and her attack on Soviet communism. The

coincidence is not an occasion to take sides—to argue that Du Bois was right about communism and Nadezhda Mandel'shtam was wrong, or vice versa. Instead, the coincidence is an occasion to interrogate how a single ideology and a single genre can lead to such divergent opportunities for self-making and world-making.

The comparison between Du Bois and Nadezhda Mandel'shtam is particularly fascinating. Both wrote autobiographies in the late 1950s, and both were unable to find publishers at home. (*Autobiography* was first published in Moscow in 1962—in Russian translation. The initial volume of Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's memoirs was first published in New York in 1970—in English translation and Russian.) Both writers also had to negotiate de-individualizing traditions of autobiographical writing. Du Bois had to confront the history of African American autobiography. ("If the goal of autobiography is the assertion of individuality," writes Henry Louis Gates Jr., "the typical black memoir is assigned the contrary task: that of being representative.")[37] Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, in turn, had to confront the history of communist autobiography. ("Communist autobiography," writes Igal Halfin, was "the standard by which entrance into the brotherhood of the elect was determined.")[38] Together, the two autobiographies illuminate the resources of a genre.

But the book's case studies are not only comparative; they are also transnational. The chapter on Du Bois begins in Washington, DC, and travels to New York, Moscow, Beijing, and Accra, among other locations. The chapter on the Mandel'shtams begins in Karelia in northwest Russia and travels to Moscow, Oslo, New York, Ann Arbor, and Princeton, among other locations. The book's other chapters are similarly global, traveling from Saint Petersburg to Oxford and back again, Cambridge to Hartford, and London to Tokyo to Cambridge to Guangzhou. By attending to these itineraries, *Utopias of One* captures how the transnational circulation of texts influences their efficacy.

This transnational approach reflects a trend in scholarship but also a sincere attempt to understand utopia. Utopian projects violate national borders and undermine the coherence and hegemony of nation-states. Yet utopian projects also consolidate national borders and nation-states. Consider, for example, the American Revolution or the October Revolution—or any revolution—or the African American civil rights movement. A strictly national or international approach to any of these projects would be inadequate.

Utopia is also transhistorical.[39] Yet utopia has a different status after the Industrial Revolution—and, especially, after the Green Revolution and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Theodor W. Adorno makes the point: "This is the true consciousness of an age in which the real possibility of Utopia—that given the level of productive forces the earth could here and now be paradise—converges with the possibility of total catastrophe."[40] The conditions that make utopia possible also make total catastrophe possible. The paradox is detectable, already, in Thoreau's anxieties

about the railroad, which carried ice from Walden Pond to ships traveling to
"Charleston and New Orleans, [and] Madras and Bombay and Calcutta."[41]
The paradox is explicit, finally, in Du Bois's participation in the antinuclear
peace movement in the early 1950s, at the height of McCarthyism. To under-
stand utopia is to understand its special significance in modernity.

Utopia, in this way, justifies the book's comparative and transnational ap-
proach, and its historical framework. But what justifies its focus on poems
and memoirs instead of stories and novels, and, especially, science fiction, the
genre most frequently associated with utopia? My answer: nonfictionality. The
worlds that poems and memoirs represent are not fictional—they are part of
our world, the world. The worlds that stories and novels represent, in contrast,
are fictional—separate, counterfactual.[42] For poets and memoirists, world-
making is an act of remaking the world they already inhabit.

This distinction between nonfiction and fiction is imprecise.[43] But two
examples help clarify my argument. First: when Wallace Stevens makes the
following claim in "Sunday Morning" (1915, 1923), he is addressing his own
anxieties about materialism:

> Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
> Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
> And our desires.[44]

The claim would resonate differently if Stevens were already a committed and
satisfied materialist—or if he were representing the anxieties of a fictional
character named "Wallace Stevens." The claim would also resonate differently
if its truth-value mattered to Stevens alone—or if its truth-value in the poem
were distinct from its truth-value in the world. But "Sunday Morning" repre-
sents (or better, presents) a real person confronting a real problem in the real
world. By addressing his anxieties in the poem, Stevens is attempting to ad-
dress them in the world—our world—as well.[45]

A second example—this time from a radically impersonal poem by the
contemporary English poet J. H. Prynne. When Prynne writes the following
lines in *The Oval Window* (1983), he is most likely not representing his own
anxieties:

> Sideways in the mirror and too slow
> to take up, it is the point of death. Not
> lost from the track as passing its peak
> but the cycle burns out on the axle,
> quenching a thirst with lip salve slicked
> on the ridge of its porridge bowl. Still
> spoilt by bad temper the screen relives
> a guessed anxiety: wounds were his feast,
> his life to life a prey.[46]

Prynne—the historical Prynne, who recently retired from the University of Cambridge after almost sixty years of teaching—is not the speaker of this poem. But it would be a mistake to assume that the speaker must then be fictional. The poem might not have a speaker—at least not a consistent, identifiable speaker. Regardless, the world of the poem is still our world. As Prynne writes, "It has mostly been my own aspiration . . . to establish relations not personally with the reader, but with the world and its layers of shifted but recognisable usage; and thereby with the reader's own position within this world."[47] Again, "this world"—our world.

Many poems are wholly fictional, of course—the *Odyssey*, Goethe's *Faust* (1808, 1832), Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (1842), Ezra Pound's "The Beautiful Toilet" (1915). "Sunday Morning" includes fictional characters: the woman who "feels the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe," the "ring of men."[48] Some memoirs might be novels, and vice versa.[49] Herman Melville's *Typee* (1846) might be a memoir and a novel.[50] But the distinction between nonfiction and fiction, however fuzzy, helps explain the efficacy of poems and memoirs, on the one hand, and stories and novels, on the other. Stories and novels present counterfactuals that model (and involve readers in) alternative social arrangements, and invent characters that simplify complex ethical and psychological problems. (As Candace Vogler notes, "With any luck, *no* human being will be knowable in the way that *any* literary character worth repeated readings is knowable.")[51] As a result, novels and stories are especially suited to social critique.[52] To state my argument as baldly and precariously as possible: poems and memoirs create utopias; stories and novels depict utopias.[53]

Do my case studies lead to any theoretical insights? The case studies, taken together, suggest a new theory of literary efficacy. Standard theories assume that literature changes the world (if it changes the world) by motivating or educating readers. Consider Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (1861) or Nikolai Chernyshevskii's *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) or Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). The memoirs and poems I discuss, in contrast, change the world by ostracizing readers. If *Utopias of One* had a subtitle, it might be *The Antisocial Utility of Literature*.[54]

The case studies also suggest a new theory of aesthetic difficulty. Standard theories associate aesthetic difficulty with defamiliarization, political resistance, elitism, prophecy, and attempts to solve (or simply represent) difficult conceptual problems.[55] The memoirs and poems I examine are difficult for these reasons. But they are also difficult because their effects are singular. The utopias they create are available to their authors alone.

These theories of literary efficacy and aesthetic difficulty are interrelated. Indeed, they connect two parallel discourses about autonomy. The first concerns personal autonomy—how individuals maximize their independence. The second concerns aesthetic autonomy—how texts resist the contexts of their production or reception or both. Lisa Siraganian, in *Modernism's Other*

Work (2012), provides one account of the connection: "The freedom of the art object not from the world generally but from the reader's meaning specifically presents a way to imagine an individual's complicated liberty within yet enduring connection to the state."[56] For Siraganian, aesthetic autonomy is a metaphor for personal autonomy. (She identifies a homology between the two kinds of autonomy.) In *Utopias of One*, in contrast, aesthetic autonomy is an instrument of personal autonomy, which, in turn, is an instrument of utopia.[57]

6

The book has three parts, each focused on a distinct geopolitical context or keyword. Part 1 examines two responses to the failure of American liberalism and the enlightenment ideals of America's founding fathers. Chapter 1 concerns *Walden*'s pedagogy. What, I ask, can we, as readers, learn from reading the book? What does Thoreau learn from writing it? What is the connection between these scenes of pedagogy (or anti-pedagogy)—between our experience of *Walden* and Thoreau's experience of Walden and *Walden*?

Chapter 2 concerns Du Bois's utopianism during the last fifteen years of his life, after his final break with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). I track his increasing commitment to Soviet communism and examine the difficulty and efficacy of his *Autobiography*. How, I ask, did Du Bois's utopianism lead, finally, to a utopia of one?

Du Bois's political commitments foreshadow the book's shift, in part 2, to the Soviet Union. Chapter 3 concerns two anti-Soviet texts: Osip Mandel'shtam's so-called Stalin epigram and his widow's memoirs. Chapter 4 examines Anna Akhmatova's two great late poems *Реквием* (1935–62) (*Requiem*) and the famously difficult *Поэма без героя* (1940–65) (*Poem without a Hero*). These two chapters, together, investigate the efficacy of utopian literature within a failed and failing utopian state, and the connection between dissent and complicity.

The book's third and final part departs from these contexts. Its focus is, at once, more global and more local. Chapter 5 examines Stevens's repeated attempts to use his poetry to establish a livable form of secularism—to find value in a world of fact. Independence, here, is not a matter of escaping political oppression but of self-regulation. Chapter 6 examines Ezra Pound's and J. H. Prynne's use of Chinese poetry to understand the problem of motivation—and the incentive structures that govern modern life. How, I ask, does difficult poetry illuminate the difficulty of motivating social change?

The book's conclusion, "Utopias of Two," concerns the challenges and value of reading such difficult texts. The book, here, comes full circle, examining the work of Thoreau's near-contemporary Emily Dickinson. (Dickinson becomes the ninth writer in the book's archive.) Why, I ask, should we, as readers, attempt to access utopias of one?

Utopias of One, as a whole, responds to my frustration with critics who read utopian literature exclusively as an instrument of social critique. For these critics, utopianism is either quixotic or ironic. I adopt a less settled approach and attempt to evaluate the practical effects of utopian literature. Failure and social critique, I argue, are not utopia's only fate. Utopianism can (and occasionally does) have concrete, utopian consequences.

But *Utopias of One* does not respond to a frustration with social critique itself. Indeed, the book is fully invested in various forms of critique—in correcting standard accounts of canonical authors, in challenging frustratingly abstract scholarship on aesthetics and politics, in making political arguments. The book is future-oriented in a way that many of my central texts are not. The authors I discuss want utopia now—and get a version of it. I just want to get the authors right.[58]

NOTES

Introduction: Utopias of One

1. Similar claims have been made about other political and philosophical concepts. "It will be seen," George Orwell writes in "What Is Fascism?" (*Collected Essays* [1944]), "that, as used, the word 'Fascism' is almost entirely meaningless" (113). In *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946), Jean-Paul Sartre writes, "For now that it has become fashionable, people like to call this musician or that painter an 'existentialist.' . . . Indeed, the word is being so loosely applied to so many things that it has come to mean nothing at all" (20).

2. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 40.

3. Some utopias succeed and by succeeding reveal their spuriousness. As Theodor W. Adorno notes, "I would like to remind us right away that numerous so-called utopian dreams—for example, television, the possibility of traveling to other planets, moving faster than sound—have been fulfilled. However, insofar as these dreams have been realized, they all operate as though the best thing about them had been forgotten—one is not happy about them. . . . [O]ne sees oneself almost always deceived: the fulfillment of the wishes takes something away from the substance of the wishes." See Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing," 1.

4. Winter, "Minor Utopias," 72.

5. Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing," 12. Fredric Jameson makes a similar point in the introduction to *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005): "Utopia," he writes, "can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment . . . therefore the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively" (xiii). Later in the introduction, he argues, citing Sartre, that for "those mindful of the very real political function of the idea and the program of Utopia in our time, the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism might well offer the best working strategy" (xvi).

6. In "Utopia deferred . . ." (originally published as "L'utopie a été renvoyée . . ."), Baudrillard writes, "There could be no model for utopia nor utopian function, because utopia denies the inscription of all finality, whether unconscious or in the class struggle. . . . In the topic of the sign, Utopia is the gap, the fault, the void that passes between the signifier and the signified and subverts every sign" (61, 62). In *Utopia, Limited*, Nersessian argues that "Romantic literature functions as utopian thought insofar as it takes its own formalism to mime a minimally harmful relationship between human beings and a world whose resources are decidedly finite" (16).

7. von Hallberg, *Charles Olson*, 41.

8. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld*, x.

9. Clover and Sutherland, "Always Totalize."

10. These overlapping categories—the critical, analytical, aspirational, inspirational, sentimental, representational—are not exhaustive, but they do index most work on literary efficacy. Consider two recent and influential defenses of poetry. In "The Poetic Case" (2007), Christopher Nealon identifies poetry's "political unconscious" as "a tone that makes both affirmation and exploitation audible at once" (886). ("[L]earning how to listen for it is the central task of aesthetic theory today," he adds.) In *Being Numerous* (2011), Oren Izenberg identifies poetry as "a site for the articulation of a new humanism." His thesis: "Against a poetics of poems that enters deeply into the texture of the experience of persons (whether as representation of that experience or occasion for it), the poets I will describe

here seek ways to make their poetic thinking yield accounts of personhood that are at once *minimal*—placing as few restrictions as possible upon the legitimate forms a person can take—and *universal*—tolerating no exemptions or exclusions. Finally, they will also demand that our concepts of personhood identify something *real*: not political fictions we could come to inhabit together, or pragmatic ways of speaking we might come to share, but a ground on which the idea of a 'we' might stand. This poetry, I argue, is an important site for the articulation of a new humanism: it seeks a reconstructive response to the great crises of social agreement and recognition in the twentieth century" (4). For critics as different as Nealon and Izenberg, poetry is critical and aspirational: it helps us understand the world and promotes (or "articulates") a program to change the world.

11. Thoreau, *Walden*, 51.

12. For a brief account of the turmoil within in the abolitionist movement in the 1840s, see Lowance, general introduction to *Against Slavery*, xxv–xxvi.

13. For an account of the slow dissolution of Brook Farm, see Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia*.

14. Thoreau, *Walden*, 134.

15. Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 49.

16. A case in point: the controversy that followed the publication of Kathryn Schulz's *New Yorker* essay, "Pond Scum: Henry David Thoreau's Moral Myopia" (2015). Schulz writes, "Thoreau was, in the fullest sense of the word, self-obsessed: narcissistic, fanatical about self-control, adamant that he required nothing beyond himself to understand and thrive in the world. From that inward fixation flowed a social and political vision that is deeply unsettling" (http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/19/pond-scum). A flurry of responses defending Thoreau followed—from, among others, Jedediah Purdy in the *Atlantic*, Donovan Hohn in the *New Republic*, Richard B. Primack and Abraham J. Miller-Rushing in the *Boston Globe*, and Simon Waxman in the *Boston Review*.

17. Judith Butler makes the general point eloquently in *Undoing Gender* (2004): "One is dependent on this 'outside' to lay claim to what is one's own. The self must, in this way, be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself" (7). Earlier in the book, she notes, "If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean that it is impossible. It only means that paradox is the condition of its possibility" (3).

18. Guillame Budé, letter to Thomas Lupset, included in the ancillary materials to the 1517 edition of *Utopia*, 114–15.

19. Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 82. Roland Barthes, in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1977 and 1978, makes a related claim: "there can be no solipsistic utopia." See Barthes, *The Neutral*, 40. For a brief discussion of solipsism, see chapter 5, note 46.

20. White, "A Slight Sound," 295.

21. Thoreau, *Walden*, 323.

22. Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 259.

23. Thoreau gave public lectures about his project at Walden as early as January 1847. See Dean and Hoag, "Thoreau's Lectures before *Walden*," 169–75.

24. In *Isolated Cases* (2004), Nancy Yousef discusses the connection between the terms "independence" and "autonomy": "The terms *autonomy* and *independence* share as primary definitions the idea of being 'self-governing.' Earliest usages of both terms in this sense—referring either to the will of a political entity or of a person—date to roughly the same period (between 1611 and 1640, the age of Hobbes and Descartes). *Independence*, with its extended definitions of freedom from authority, influence, and other forms of reliance on others, has broader application than *autonomy*, but the terms are largely synonymous. To be independent, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, is to be 'self-governing, autonomous, free'; to be autonomous is to be 'self-governing, independent'" (12).

25. Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 122. Berlin's "body of men" should be read expansively to include a range of factors that interfere with our independence—social norms, state power, capital, and so on. Yet this list reveals the complexity of independence: social norms, for example, interfere with our independence while determining our understanding of, and desire for, independence.

26. Ibid., 146.

27. Arendt, "What Is Freedom?," 163.

28. Ibid., 167.

29. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 122.

30. Balibar, "Subjection and Subjectivation," 8.

31. This inquiry into the meaning and effects of independence only scratches the surface. The inquiry does not, for example, consider the relation between independence and luck—or the relation between independence and mood. In *The Poet's Freedom* (2011), Susan Stewart discusses how weather limits our independence: "Recent studies show that our moods are responsive as well to positive and negative ions in the atmosphere. The warm, dry conditions that facilitate air pollution and result in positive ions produce negative moods, whereas the negative ionic concentrations characterizing the period after rain, or the atmosphere that surrounds circulating water like waterfalls and seashores, or even running shower water, inversely result in good moods" (64). In *Isolated Cases*, Yousef considers why "critiques of the self-determining subject" are today "virtually commonplace" (6).

32. Macpherson, *Political Theory*; Bersani, *Culture of Redemption*, 3.

33. Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 140.

34. Ibid.

35. This inquiry does not attempt to explain why so many of us prize independence despite its impracticality and perniciousness. Yousef notes that "The power of the idea of an originally independent or self-made individual never derived from its being mistaken for a fact (insofar as it claimed that status, it was contested from the outset) but from the theoretical and imaginative implications of conceiving the individual as such, from the barely articulated needs and desires such an idea could meet, and the barely acknowledged anxieties and fears it could attempt to quell" (*Isolated Cases*, 19). Lauren Berlant's account of "cruel optimism" provides a model for understanding how our attachments can simultaneously protect and threaten us. "'Cruel optimism,'" she writes, "names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. What is cruel about these attachments . . . is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being" ("Cruel Optimism," 21). The desire for independence might be an instance of this x—a source of both sustenance and harm, and thus not easily abandoned. From this perspective, independence is not a zero-sum game—it is a social trap. Social traps, to quote John Platt, are situations in which individuals or groups get "started in some direction or some set of relationships that later prove unpleasant or lethal and that they see no easy way to back out of or to avoid" ("Social Traps," 641).

36. I thank one of the book's anonymous reviewers for the term "nonnational."

37. Gates, "Bad Influence," 94.

38. Halfin, *Terror in My Soul*, 19.

39. The history of utopian literature is coextensive with the history of literature itself—beginning, at least, with Hesiod's account of the golden age. Indeed, many critics believe that utopianism is coextensive with humanity. Bloch, for example, identifies the desire for utopia as the "pervading and above all only honest quality of all human beings" ("Something's Missing," 5). Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel begin their history of utopian thought by noting, "Anthropologists tell us that blessed isles and paradises are part of the dreamworld of savages everywhere" (*Utopian Thought*, 1).

40. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 33.

41. Thoreau, *Walden*, 297–98.

42. In *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), Nelson Goodman argues that fictional worlds are also part of our world—"albeit metaphorically." "'Don Quixote,' taken literally, applies to no one," he admits, "but taken figuratively, applies to many of us—for example, to me in my tilts with the windmills of current linguistics" (103–4). Goodman's qualifications ("albeit metaphorically," "but taken figuratively") point to the difference I want to emphasize.

43. In "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" (1974–75), John Searle argues that the sole criterion for determining the difference between nonfiction and fiction is the intentions of the author: "the identifying criterion for whether or not a text is a work of fiction must of necessity lie in the illocutionary intentions of the author. There is no textual property, syntactical or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction. What makes it a work of fiction is, so to speak, the illocutionary stance that the author takes toward it, and that stance is a matter of the complex illocutionary intentions that the author has when he writes or otherwise composes it" (65). Searle's claim reverberates in Dirk Eitzen's less precise but more straightforward claim in "When Is a Documentary" (2005): "'Might it be lying?' is what distinguishes documentaries, and nonfiction in general, from fiction" (89). ("A lie," Arnold Isenberg writes, "is a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it" [466].) The value of Eitzen's claim will become clear in the paragraphs that follow.

44. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 55.

45. As Jonathan Culler points out in *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), most critics assume that all poems have "speakers," which they equate with fictional characters. (For example, even skeptics of critical orthodoxy such as Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins refer to "poetic fictions," and to the "first-person speaker of the lyric," as "a fictional person" [general introduction, *The Lyric Theory Reader*, 5].) Culler argues, in contrast, that lyric poetry is not "a form of fiction": "To claim that lyric is not, at bottom, a form of fiction seems a significant advance and in particular helps to identify the disadvantages of the most prominent current theory of the lyric, which treats the poem as the speech act of a fictional persona: the fictional imitation of a real-world speech act" (7).

46. Prynne, *Poems*, 321.

47. The passage is from a letter from Prynne to the poet Peter Riley. Riley quotes the passage as the epigraph to his pamphlet, *The Reader* (1992), and appends the date, September 15, 1985. See Riley, *The Reader*.

48. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 53, 55.

49. *Walden* contains fictional elements—the "artist in the city of Kouroo," for example. But the book is still a work of nonfiction. In *Bird Relics* (2016), Branka Arsić describes the combination of the "miraculous and natural" in Thoreau's writing: "Thoreau is not a fiction writer. The generic characteristics of all of his writings—*A Week* is a memoir, *Walden* is autobiography, the *Journal* is a record of perceptions and thoughts, while the natural history essays are structured according to the logic of scientific writing of the day—require that we treat their content not as fiction but as truth, and their utterances not figuratively but declaratively, as testimonies. Yet, his declarations are sometimes so eccentric, they so radically blur the distinction between what is possible and what is not, between miraculous and natural, that one must raise the question of whether to take them seriously" (1).

50. *Typee* is a rare case. In most cases, one can, at least eventually, distinguish between fake memoirs (*Go Ask Alice* [1971] and James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* [2003]) and fictional memoirs (*Moby Dick* [1851] and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* [1955]). *Typee* is almost certainly a fictional memoir—in other words, a novel—but scholars are still not certain about exactly what happened to Melville on Nuku Hiva. The difference matters. Melville's critique of cultural imperialism would resonate differently if it were, in fact,

based on firsthand experience. One way to determine *Typee*'s status as a work of fiction or nonfiction would be to adopt Eitzen's advice and ask, can *Typee* lie? Answer yes, and you're reading a work of nonfiction; answer no, and you're reading a novel. See Eitzen, "When Is a Documentary?," 89.

51. Vogler, "The Moral of the Story," 15.

52. In a review of Jeremy Glick's *The Black Radical Tragic* (2016) in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Slavoj Žižek writes, "That's why one needs narrative fiction, from Glissant to O'Neill, from Eisenstein to Fanon. Art plays with possible alternatives and thus provides the dense cobweb against the background of which the reality of what happened acquires its true profile" (https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/prophetic-vision-haitis-past/). For Žižek, here, art (that is, narrative fiction) illuminates reality's "true profile."

53. An exception—one of many, perhaps: In "Bernhard's Way" (2013), Michael Clune demonstrates how a novel might create a utopia of one, reading Thomas Bernhard's *Woodcutters* (1984) by way of Samuel Beckett's trilogy. Clune summarizes his argument: "Bernhard thus endows the first person narrative with an entirely new meaning and value. That meaning and value utterly exhausts itself in the experience of its creator. What is verifiable from our readers' perspective is the following: 1) Bernhard thinks, in good postmodern fashion, that the problem of art is a social problem. 2) He thinks through this postmodern problem to conclude that the ideal form of art will not be dependant [*sic*] on social relations. 3) *Logically, such a form can give satisfaction only to its creator, never to its audience.* 4) In freeing life from recognition, such a form will 'transform' its creator, and give him the only 'real satisfaction' possible in art or life. 5) The end of *Woodcutters* suggests that Bernhard sees in his novel just such a form. 6) *Woodcutters*' exploitation of the first person narrative techniques of Beckett's *Molloy* provides some limited evidence that the joy expressed at the end of the novel *is the joy of real satisfaction at total transformation*" (my italics). See Nonsite.org at http://nonsite.org/feature/bernhards-way.

54. I thank Steph Burt for this phrase.

55. Izenberg catalogs the ways critics have attempted to justify the difficulty of experimental poetry: "So variously fragmented, occulted, difficult, and silent; so assertively trivial, boring, or aleatory are the types of poetry on the 'experimental' side of the critical divide, that critics who champion the work have gone to great didactic and theoretical lengths to imagine, explain, justify, and market alternative species of pleasure and interest to compensate for the loss of traditional aesthetics. Such justifications include 'the fascination with what's difficult,' the penetration of the veil of the esoteric, the masochistic pleasures of derangement, the politicized shock of estrangement, the tranquilizing or meditative dwelling in the ambient" (*Being Numerous*, 11). Daniel Tiffany challenges what he calls "the common presumption, associated with models of textual difficulty, that obscurity is principally a feature of works considered to be arcane, virtuosic, or deliberately experimental . . . [O]ne must consider the possibility," he argues, "that literary conceptions of obscurity may be rooted in the social *misunderstanding* of demotic speech, thereby shifting the phenomenology of obscurity away from its conventional association with elite culture and toward the lyric vernacular—especially poems composed in slang, jargon, or dialect" (*Infidel Poetics*, 8).

56. Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work*, 4.

57. A note about art and instrumentality. Art is instrumental. Writers write to achieve certain effects in the world. Indeed, anti-instrumentality is itself an instrumental aim. Michael Robbins quotes Izenberg: "Critics writing about poetry usually assume, without thinking about it, that the poem has priority. Izenberg has challenged this assumption: 'the *a priori* conviction that all poetic projects imagine the crucial relation to poetry to be a relation to an object—an object of labor, of perception, of interpretation—is an unwarranted assumption; even a sort of fetishism.' He insists that '*what the poet intends by means of*

poetry is not always the poem.' Commitments might come first" (Robbins, forthcoming; Izenberg quotation from *On Being Numerous*, 11–12). I would go further than Robbins and argue that commitments *always* come first. The commitment to write a poem is always a commitment to the value of poetry in the world. Perhaps the greatest theorist of art and autonomy, Adorno, did not repudiate instrumentality as such—he repudiated instrumental reason, which might be defined as a focus exclusively on means, and as a refusal to reason about ends. For Adorno, art can be (and is) an instrument of truth and resistance—a way to undermine narrow and false conceptions of rationality and value. For an additional account of art's instrumentality, see note 30 in the conclusion.

58. A note about frustration. *Utopias of One* discusses texts that it cannot fully understand, let alone explicate. Some readers of the book have detected a frustration with these texts. These readers might be correct—I do not exempt myself from my claims about the connection between ostracism and efficacy. But my frustration is not disappointment, irritation, or exasperation—despite the etymology of "frustration." I am full of wonder for the texts I discuss—for their artistry and commitment and, especially, their power. Their ability to frustrate readers (myself included) is, paradoxically, an index of their greatness—and their relevance to politics, history, and philosophy. I would not change them (or resolve their moral ambiguity) if I could. Frustration, in these cases, is almost an experience of beauty.