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Dystopia and the End of Politics

Benjamin Kunkel

IN RETROSPECT, the nineties can seem an anomalous decade, the only one since the Second World War when technological civilization did *not* appear particularly bent on self-destruction. Of course, not everyone greeted the end of the cold war as the dawning of a millennium of capitalist democracy, but even dismayed leftists tended to forecast the coming century by extrapolating from current trends. These included increased liberalization of trade, increased commodification of natural resources (such as water) and human roles (such as fertilization, courtship, and the care of the elderly), the internationalization of culture, continual advances in digital technology and genetic science, the rolling back of governmental authority to its police powers, and regular elections to ratify it all. This vision, whether taken for a nightmare or a dream, was of a world integrated under a total market and consecrated to private as opposed to public life: the “private sector” of corporations, and the “private life” of households. You called this tendency globalization if you liked it, neoliberalism if you didn’t. Either way, the sense was that capitalism would, for the foreseeable future, consolidate its achievements rather than undermine them.

This notion of the future neglected certain facts. For one thing, it’s not as if no one knew about global warming during the nineties. Indeed, the end of the cold war and the first public awareness of climate change arrived almost simultaneously. In 1988, the Soviet Union declared it would no longer intervene in the affairs of allied countries, and in the same year the scientist James Hansen testified before the U.S. Congress that he possessed a “99 percent” certainty that “global warming is affect-

ing our planet now.” In December of 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved; the following summer, the so-called Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro produced the UN’s first climate change treaty, with its aim of “preventing dangerous anthropogenic interference with Earth’s climate system.” And, though the connection was rarely noted, these developments were not quite unrelated: petroleum exports made up some 60 percent of the USSR’s foreign currency earnings, and the same high oil prices that buoyed the Soviet rivalry with the United States encouraged conservation in the West. When, in the mid-eighties, oil prices collapsed, it not only helped finish off the USSR but increased fuel consumption outside of the Soviet bloc, which in turn accelerated global warming, along with—something else to worry about—the depletion of the earth’s oil reserves. Many of our newer anxieties turn, in fact, on the idea that the oil-intensive planetary transportation system so vital to the functioning of contemporary capitalism ultimately abets climate change, the arrival of peak oil, and the circulation of viruses, while globalized financial markets are capable of spreading contagions (as in the “Asian flu” of 1998) of a different kind.

None of this was impossible to imagine during the nineties. But it may have been simply too much to take that the cold war should immediately be succeeded by awareness of a dangerously overheating planet. Part of this is simply that it’s not the same thing to know something yourself (you and your favorite periodicals), and to know something you know your neighbor also knows. As Susan Sontag noticed in an essay called “The Imagination of Disaster,” about the typical science fiction movie of the early cold war, the arrival of the new menace (monsters, aliens) was “usually witnessed or suspected by just one person, a scientist on a field trip.” That was phase one

of the plot. Phase two involved the “confirmation of the hero’s report by a host of witnesses to a great act of destruction.”

As viewers of the old and many of the new disaster movies know, it’s in phase two, with its crowd of witnesses, that the feeling *This is really happening* dawns, and true panic begins. In the real world of history, things happen more slowly, and even a televised real-life version of that fundamental disaster movie set piece, the destruction of a great city—New Orleans, by Hurricane Katrina—hardly signifies the imminent end of life as we know it. Still, it changes one’s private mood to know the public mood has changed.

A VISIT TO A BOOKSTORE or multiplex confirms the new strain of morbidity in the air. Every other month seems to bring the publication of at least one new so-called literary novel on dystopian or apocalyptic themes and the release of at least one similarly themed movie displaying some artistic trappings. (Artsy, but not quite aspiring to be art, films like *28 Days Later* and *Children of Men* might be called, without scorn, “B+ movies,” to distinguish them from ordinary apocalyptic crowd-pleasers.) What is striking is not so much the proliferation of these futuristic works—something that has been going on for generations—but the wholesale rehabilitation of such “genre” material for serious or serious-seeming novels and movies. If ordinary citizens are taking their direst imaginings more to heart than before, so, it would appear, are novelists and filmmakers. The new cultural prestige of disaster will be worth returning to later on.

First, however, a distinction needs to be made between the dystopian and the apocalyptic, because these categories refer to different and even opposed futuristic scenarios. The end of the world or apocalypse typically brings about the collapse of order; dystopia, on the other hand, envisions a sinister *perfection* of order. In the most basic political terms, dystopia is a nightmare of authoritarian or totalitarian rule, while the end of the world is a nightmare of anarchy. (There is also the currently less fashionable kind of political dream known as *utopia*.) What the dystopian and the apocalyptic modes have in common is simply

that they imagine our world changed, for the worse, almost beyond recognition.

Both versions of the future are plentifully on offer in recent literary fiction and B+ movies. In *28 Days Later* (released 2002), an accidentally released supervirus transforms virtually all of Britain into a population of cannibalistic zombies. Margaret Atwood’s novel *Oryx and Crake* (published 2003) is a post-apocalyptic bestiary of genetically engineered species; among them, in a world half-drowned by rising seas, lives apparently the last surviving human. Michel Houellebecq’s *Possibility of an Island* (published 2004) is narrated by a misanthropic contemporary of ours named Daniel, as well as numbers 24 and 25 of the successive clones made from this not-quite individual. Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (published 2005) is another clone novel; it concerns genetic supernumeraries raised for purposes of organ harvesting. And cloning likewise furnishes subject matter for David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (also published 2005), where one of five braided narrative strands takes the form of a Q & A between a normally human historian and an imprisoned rebel “fabricant,” who—unlike Ishiguro’s clones, with their lamblike passivity—has escaped an underground world of slavery into horrified awareness of the genocidal nature of a “corpocracy” raised on the blood of clones. Mitchell has imagined the smoothest-running and most cynically organized of possible dystopias, in which business and government have melded with one another—perhaps for this reason the narrative is set in South Korea, notorious in the late nineties for its state-supported *chaebols*, or conglomerates, and “crony capitalism”—and the sole revolutionary movement abroad in the land is in fact sponsored by the corporate state to supply it with the fictitious enemy it requires.

Such feats of organization are inconceivable in the recent run of apocalyptic fictions, which—as an era of confident globalization gives way to one shot through with ecological anxiety—lately outnumber their dystopian counterparts. In Cormac McCarthy’s fantastically grim *The Road* (published 2006), all non-human nature has perished beneath the shuttered skies of a nuclear winter, and social organization as such appears to persist only in

the form of roving cannibal gangs; the story follows the efforts of a father and his pre-adolescent son to elude these “bad guys” (as the father-hero matter-of-factly calls them) while scavenging cans of food for themselves. Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (released 2006, and based on the 1992 P.D. James novel) mixes dystopian elements with the apocalyptic premise that no human child has been born for seventeen years, leaving civilization to crumble under the accumulated weight of age and despair; once the world’s unique pregnant woman arrives on the scene, the handsome desperado played by Clive Owen takes up the burden of shepherding mother and child to safety. The Biblical template for such stories is of course Joseph’s rescue of the infant Jesus from Herod’s soldiers during the massacre of the innocents, and it is persistently suggested about both the movie’s epochal newborn and McCarthy’s kindhearted boy that he may be our Redeemer.

Often it seems that the contemporary apocalyptic mode offers only a few possible combinations of a restricted set of elements: for example, just as McCarthy’s setting is the southeastern portion of a charred and depopulated former United States, so in *The Pesthouse* (published 2007), Jim Crace has imagined a desolated America where environmental collapse and something called the “Grand Contagion” have reduced the onetime U.S. colossus, as well as all knowledge of the modern world, to the status of rumor and legend. The American downfall is more recent and less complete in Matthew Sharpe’s *Jamestown* (also published 2007), where a busload of prospectors sets out from New York City, with the Chrysler Building tumbling behind them, in search of scarce petroleum, and connects with a group of “Indians” whose tribal status is a matter not of ethnic composition but of the simulated native folkways they have adopted in order to ride out what one character calls “the end of civ.”

Note, too, that both *The Pesthouse* and *Jamestown* are primarily love stories. In Crace’s novel, the wreck of the world throws together a decent young man and a virtuous young woman who escape from bloodthirsty highwaymen in possession of a surrogate child and de-

termine to establish an old-fashioned frontier life of modesty and virtue: “Some land, a cabin, and a family. A mother waiting on the stoop.” *Jamestown*’s story of a spirited and resourceful postmodern Pocahontas (as the girl calls herself) meeting her good Johnny Rolfe (John Rolfe in the history books) naturally conjures up a similar vision of the resettlement of North America by the honorable and just. But Sharpe’s version is tragedy-as-farce: Pocahontas is murdered; a ludicrously unkillable warlord with an arrow lodged, Steve Martin-style, in his brain rules a ruined New York City; and the author appears to endorse the idea, floated by several characters, that the ostensible phases of human history are just so many disguises for a single continuous era of violence, conquest, and oppression.

In general, fantasies of a social situation radically simplified and ennobled by the imperative of survival—a life in which good-versus-evil is all that could be said to remain of either politics or morality—dominate contemporary visions of the end of the world. It would be nice to feel that a warmed-over entertainment like *I Am Legend* (released 2007), a third film adaptation of Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel, is too empty and unimaginative in terms of its catastrophic premise (a supervirus), its villains (cannibalistic zombies), and its idea of virtue (solitary heroism of the stoical family man) to suggest comparison with recent work by so formidable a writer as Cormac McCarthy. But in fact *The Road* and *I Am Legend* have a lot in common. Impressively stylish productions, they are also alike in presupposing a collapse of civilization that happens utterly and all at once rather than by degrees—in the movie the trigger is the supervirus, in the book “a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” signaling all-out nuclear war—and both stories set the decency and steadfastness of the solitary hero-father against the sheer evil of a human population otherwise consisting of marauding cannibals.

THIS QUICK inventory of recent apocalyptic and dystopian fictions—with an almost equal number left out—does some violence to each work in its particulars. But as certain features of the imagined future land-

scape are visible only from a great height, it should now be possible to venture some general topographical observations.

Each of the more dystopian novels sketched above involves human cloning. It should also be clear that in the current political context the clone novel can hardly fail to suggest a nightmare of perfected neoliberalism. In the clone novel, class society—in what may be a lurid reflection of our distinction between citizens with full legal rights and “illegal” foreign workers without them—hardens into a strict demarcation of castes. Thus in Mitchell and Ishiguro, clones are bred to slavery and slaughter in order to spare “normals” (*Never Let Me Go*) or “consumers” (*Cloud Atlas*) the necessity of death and labor. Or, alternatively, in the much funnier vision of Houellebecq, it’s the rich who clone themselves (and their pets) in the quest for quasi-immortality and narcissistic tranquility: from generation to identical generation, Houellebecq’s placid and solitary “neohumans” e-mail one another and masturbate before Webcams, while outside their fenced-in preserves old-fashioned human beings, “less numerous and more dirty” than before, must mate and struggle with one another in person: “Occasionally they throw themselves on each other, fight and wound each other with their blows or their words.”

IN ITS MAIN features, then, the world of the clone novel—whether the clones *are* the rich, or merely exist *for* the rich—is the present-day world made grotesque by its own longevity. (Ishiguro’s counterfactual novel in fact gives its setting as “England, late 1990s.”) Not only has income stratification joined with genetic engineering to promote social class into something approaching species difference, but, at least in *Cloud Atlas* and *The Possibility of an Island*, digital communications and entertainment technology have become more refined and immersive for those who can afford their “sonys,” as Mitchell calls his all-purpose information appliances. In other words, technological advance continues apace, all things and many persons are for sale—a condition no one any longer recognizes as political—and the state exists only to keep the peace in wealthier districts and ensure the continued functioning

of markets in labor and other commodities (such as organs).

And yet the most interesting anxiety stirred up by these books doesn’t necessarily concern bioengineering in combination with unregulated capitalism. All three clone novels also confront more or less directly the problem human cloning raises not only for society but for would-be lovers. Romantic love, after all, by its nature implies the irreplaceability of one person by another, while the familiar sci-fi theme of cloning virtually by definition evokes fears that a person is nothing if not replaceable, fungible.

Much of the plot of *Never Let Me Go* concerns the rumor, cherished by several young clones, that if a pair of them can demonstrate to the relevant authorities that they are, as one puts it, “really, properly in love,” the couple can win a reprieve of several years from the sequence of organ donations that will bring their lives to an early end. Ishiguro wants to endow his clone characters with enough individuality that the untruth of this rumor can prove an especially cruel deception; but at the same time he has deliberately given his narrator, the clone Kathy H., such a banal and generic voice as to cast doubt on her personal uniqueness.

In a sense *The Possibility of an Island* pursues a similar idea: the threat posed to love and individuality by the use of human beings according to purely biological criteria. But Houellebecq handles the problem differently. After all, the clone Daniel24 is perfectly content with pixilated images of vaginas on his computer screen; he lives a “calm and joyless life.” The failure to love is experienced as an affliction only by contemporary humans like Daniell (as the original is called) and the flesh-and-blood women that he meets. In Houellebecq’s present-day consumer dystopia, where advertising and entertainment establish the tyranny of a pornographic ideal, sexual love cannot withstand the slightest initial sagging of a woman’s breasts: “The disappearance of tenderness always closely follows that of eroticism. There is no refined relationship, no higher union of souls, nor anything that might resemble it . . .” Houellebecq rages hysterically against the soft fascism of the pornographic ideal—“Youth, beauty, strength: the criteria for physical love are exactly the same as those of

Nazism”—and in each of his novels he arranges, in the end, for his alter ego to briefly enjoy romantic love of the old-fashioned sentimental kind. But these dénouements carry none of the conviction of his rants against a deregulated sexual marketplace, where some are attractive or wealthy enough to glut themselves with serial couplings while others are reduced to chronic masturbation, and love is in any case out of the question.

David Mitchell's more conventionally dystopian clone narrative also turns out to be one of failed love. The escaped rebel clone Somni-451 has a passionate affair with her apparent rescuer, Hae-Joo, who makes love to her and pretends to share her outrage over “the tidy xtermination of a fabricant underclass,” only to deliver a copy of her revolutionary *Declarations* into the hands of the police. Hae-Joo, it emerges, was just another provocateur doing the bidding of the “corpocracy,” the irony—not an entirely fresh one in the world of science fiction—being that the dissident clone possesses more in the way of a soul than the compliant mass of biologically “original” human beings dyed through and through with the unanimous ideology.

The possibility of love requires the existence of at least two irreplaceable individuals, a condition that can't quite be met in any of the clone novels. The anxiety dominating each of these books is that a human being might prove perfectly fungible in an emotional and sexual as well as an economic sense, a fear most coherently and angrily expressed by Houellebecq, who may be the living writer best at suggesting the dystopian element in contemporary society. For him the problem lies not only in the liberalized private sector, with its ready disposal of people according to their economic value, but also in sexually liberalized “private life.” Labor has become casualized, we say, when workers can be let go at the sole convenience of employers; and Houellebecq's work implies that terms like *casualization* and *redundancy* might be applied with equal justice to today's personal relationships.

AS FOR THE contemporary apocalyptic scenario, its ideological content—not to be confused with the conscious politi-

cal opinions of the various authors and filmmakers—is both harder and easier to specify than with the clone novel. Superficially, the task is harder because a considerable variety of precipitating causes of the apocalypse are given: the most common culprit is that hoary villain, the Promethean ambitions of science, as in *Oryx and Crake* and *I Am Legend*, where respective efforts to engineer a superior mankind or to design a cancer-curing virus lead to the near-elimination of the species. Alternatively, the fear of a specific contemporary problem, such as global warming or “the war on terrorism” can ally itself with a general skepticism about the wisdom of the European conquest of North America and, by extension, the world, as in *The Pesthouse* and *Jamestown*. Both Crace and Sharpe even sometimes give voice to a pessimism about tool-using humanity per se: “Metal is the cause of greed and war,” one character proclaims in *The Pesthouse*, while in *Jamestown* another blames airplanes for the end of the world, as if the destruction of contemporary civilization were embryonically present in the first smelting of iron ore or the Wright brothers were of Mohammad Atta's party without knowing it. In McCarthy's *The Road*, we can only consider planetary nuclear war in light of the succeeding era of cannibals and assume that innate human depravity ultimately caused the button to be pushed. The most satisfying cause given for the coming collapse is probably the universal suspension of childbirth in *Children of Men*, precisely because this is the least literal and most allegorical of conditions: when the global population has reached six and a half billion, infertility is not a pressing problem, but who can't think of figurative senses in which our society might be considered sterile or barren?

For the diversity of apocalyptic triggers hardly conceals the basic sameness, from work to work, of the apocalypse itself. In almost every case (exception being made for *Children of Men*, where civilization is still intact, albeit along more or less fascist lines), large-scale social organization, including the state, has disappeared; the cumulative technological capability of century upon century has collapsed to the point that only agricultural know-how, if that, is retained; and the global society

we know has shattered into small tribal groups, separate families or couples, and helpless solitary individuals. In such anarchic conditions, without governments to enforce contracts, stable currencies in circulation, or any industrial or transportation infrastructure, capitalism likewise becomes a thing of the past—and yet the contemporary apocalypse, as painted in our collection of movies and novels, illustrates in the most literal fashion possible Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families.

The corollary view holds that "society" is merely the excuse used by tyrannical regimes like the Soviet one to justify the trampling of individual rights—and contemporary apocalyptic works are all but united in stigmatizing any group larger than the family as oppressive and evil. Frequently, collectives are simply occasions for organized cannibalism, as in *28 Days Later*, *I Am Legend*, and *The Road*. Or bands of survivors are fascists at heart: again, *28 Days Later*. Or brigands with the delicacy to refrain from eating human flesh nevertheless press-gang wayfarers into slavery: *The Pesthouse*. Already we've noted the triumph over New York, in Sharpe's *Jamestown*, of the immortal warlord who is the quintessence of history. Granted, in Sharpe's "Indian" tribe and Crace's curious Finger Baptist community (whose holy men refuse to use their hands for any task lest they commit evil, leaving their arms to hang slack at their sides), we find examples of more tolerable social groups, but nothing so attractive that a young couple in love doesn't flee at the first opportunity. The underground revolutionary league known as The Fishes in *Children of Men* at first looks slightly more promising, but it soon emerges that its leaders would use the sole pregnant woman on earth for despicable "political" or propaganda purposes.

It is true that it's customary for the apocalyptic work to gesture, just before the end, to the possible existence of an enclave of just persons committed to the rescue of innocents: this happens at the end of *28 Days Later*, *The Road*, *I Am Legend*, and—more ambiguously—*Oryx and Crake*. But this final hopeful glimpse of a vague pale radiance such as dying people are said to see seems intended to signify something

like "the immortal resilience of the human spirit" rather than any possibility of a decent earthly politics. This makes the neoliberal apocalypse an especially confused and contradictory expression of our times. Its air of plausibility and urgency derives from certain real and serious political problems, easily perceived but difficult to address—yet these apocalyptic narratives are by no means stories of joining or founding political communities dedicated to averting or surviving civilization's collapse. On the contrary, they are stories of love, the strongest of all antipolitical forces, as Hannah Arendt once said.

Sometimes the love is of a doomed sexual kind (*Oryx and Crake* and *Jamestown*), but more often the end of the world supplies the occasion for the coming together of a loving family. So a lone, just father protects the life of his child while otherwise avoiding human beings (*The Road*), or a lone, just stepfather does the same with another man's child (*Children of Men*), or it is instead a man and woman together who are the surrogate parents protecting the innocent child (*28 Days Later*, *I Am Legend*, *The Pesthouse*). The fact that these units are not always biologically linked does not prevent them from being families, any more than Joseph himself is traditionally excluded from the Holy Family.

In short, the contemporary apocalypse pits family values against the cannibal universe—the good guys versus the bad guys, in McCarthy's unironic terms. And so, with the end of civilization, the age-old conflict between sexual love (*eros*) and love of one's neighbor (*caritas*) also disappears; and the grown-up Jesus' exhortation to his followers that they leave their families if they wish to pursue righteousness is as little remembered as among Christian fundamentalists today. No one pauses to reflect that in our civilization, pre-collapse, it was invariably the defense of the individual household that justified a nation's warlike international posture or its profligate use of energy. Nuclear war might be averted, went the insipid Sting hit of the late cold war, if the Russians love their children too. But if global warming is not arrested, it will be because we (and the Russians) want for our children everything we have and more.

TO BE AS schematic as possible: in the neoliberal dystopia a totally commodified world transforms would-be lovers into commodities themselves and in this way destroys the possibility of love. In the neoliberal apocalypse, on the other hand, the wreck of civilization reveals the inherent depravity of mankind (excepting one's loved ones) and ratifies the truth that the family is a haven in a heartless world. Both the neoliberal dystopia and the neoliberal apocalypse defend love and individuality against the forces threatening to crush them; the difference is that the clone novel sticks up for humanity from the standpoint of an implied or explicit critique of neoliberalism, while the apocalypse narrative (whether in prose or on film) tends to reflect the default creed of neoliberalism, according to which kindness may flourish in private life but the outside world remains now and forever a scene of vicious but inevitable competition.

But this is to speak strictly in terms of these works' content. What about the form or generic envelope of these stories? From here on we ignore the B+ movies, which most people know how to enjoy without taking them seriously: but what happens when prize-winning writers with impeccable literary credentials adopt the material and conventions of genre fiction, in this case sci-fi? The books discussed above already reveal the migration of sci-fi material into the literary mainstream; at the same time several notable science fiction writers (William Gibson, Bruce Sterling) have decided that the present era is sufficiently outlandish to allow them to set their futuristic novels in the here and now. One likely reason for this crossover—literature to sci-fi, and sci-fi to literature—is that dwindling readership for both categories of fiction encourages the consolidation of the two markets. A second and better reason is that technology is advancing at an ever more rapid pace even as our world appears to accelerate toward a plunge into chaos more profound than any pre-technological civilization would be able to take. This lends a certain grim plausibility to both the apocalyptic and the dystopian scenarios, and it might not be too much to say that (just as the two scenarios coexist in several of our novels) there are already whole regions of the globe showcasing technological dystopia or

post-technological collapse.

Still, the seriousness of our political predicament doesn't guarantee the seriousness of the novels evoking that predicament. We are confronted, in other words, with the old-fashioned distinction between genre fiction and what was sometimes called serious literature. Most obviously, the "genre" in genre fiction refers to a certain material common to the works within a given category: in the *policier* a murder is solved, in romance a love is achieved, in sci-fi a future society (on earth or another planet) is explored, and so on. Besides, it's enough to mention the names Austen, Dostoyevsky, and Orwell—as the boosters of genre fiction always do—to show that murderers can be found out, lovers united, or a new and terrible society set up without literature having been abandoned. But this only raises the question of what literature, in the case of the novel, might be.

Lionel Trilling thought that when he gave the following description of the literary or art novel he was only repeating a commonplace: the novel, he wrote, was "an especially useful agent of the moral imagination, as the literary form which most directly reveals to us the complexity, the difficulty, and the interest of life in society, and which best instructs us in our human variety and contradiction." Notice that Trilling says nothing about original language, sharp perceptions, or a significant order of events. This is not because Trilling was indifferent to these things, but presumably because he believed they acquired their value in fiction by virtue of revealing the complex moral, social, and psychological realities to which he refers. In this light, genre fiction doesn't exist in contradistinction to literature merely because of stale language, secondhand insights, or hackneyed plots. The larger difference is a failure or—less judgmentally—a simple setting-aside of the moral imagination. The literary novel illuminates moral problems (including sometimes those that are also political problems) at the expense of sentimental consolation, while genre fiction typically offers consolation at the expense of illumination. It doesn't alter this proposition that science fiction and especially crime novels sometimes traffic in the idea that all people

are at bottom equally evil and all history in the end equally nightmarish, since this sort of nihilism moots moral judgment altogether and is therefore its own kind of consolation.

A WORLD OF gleaming predatory corporations or a world of filthy post-technological scavengers would—either one, or both at once—provoke new and real moral dilemmas, as would the effort to avert such disasters by some political means. And if we ask whether such dilemmas are represented or even acknowledged in the books at hand, the clone novel and the contemporary apocalyptic narrative emerge looking slightly different from one another. This, in turn, owes something to the fact that, while both dystopia and apocalypse fall under the heading of science fiction, they descend from different prior novelistic genres. (The confusion between “genre” meaning fiction generally *outside* of literature, and “genre” referring to various fictional forms *within* literature is unfortunate—but seems unavoidable.)

Dystopia, generally speaking, is a subgenre of the gothic or horror novel, in which the hero or heroine discovers a barbaric truth (the nature of society) lurking beneath a civilized facade, and incurs the traditional gothic-novel penalties of madness, isolation, ruin. Never mind that dystopias often propose an antiseptic horror free from the gothic elements of shadows and decay; their atmosphere of cleanliness and rationality only serves, as in a hospital, to underline the ambient dread. The apocalyptic narrative, on the other hand, derives genetically from the historical romance or adventure story; the noble and free hero’s rescue of an innocent woman and/or child from danger has been a staple of such fiction since the time of Walter Scott. The only difference is that the historical romance is set in the past and the apocalyptic one in the future.

Of course the gothic novel may end in the triumph of evil as habitually as historical romance ends in the triumph of virtue—but the gothic has historically been much readier to acknowledge an admixture of good and evil in the hero’s or heroine’s character. This is why the dystopian story so often concludes with the hero yielding up his or her conscience to the

evil society after a failed or contemplated rebellion: famously in 1984 Winston Smith ends by loving Big Brother. The pattern is the same in *Never Let Me Go* (where the gothic inheritance of dystopia is writ large in the device of an accursed and isolated great house: the Hailsham Academy for clones), and in *The Possibility of an Island*. Ishiguro’s Kathy H. finally returns the young clone she loves to the medical facility at which he will resume his fatal sequence of organ donations, never having raised a protest or attempted an escape—while Houellebecq’s Daniel I decides in the end to have himself cloned despite the ratification of his coldness and selfishness this choice represents. In other words, both novels dramatize the final complicity of their heroes with society—as David Mitchell doesn’t do in his clone narrative. Mitchell’s heroine is so purely good, the development of her righteousness so little accounted for, and the rest of society so thoroughly bad that the story loses any moral interest and becomes little more than a suspenseful tale of (failed) escape. But at least his sci-fi dystopia advertises itself as one more pastiche in a novel made up entirely of genre pastiches, and in this way seems prepared to admit its limitations.

Such self-awareness is in short supply in contemporary apocalyptic novels. There self-awareness in general gives way to a savage imperative of survival, and any struggles taking place *within* people are superseded by the struggles taking place *between* them. One effect of this approach, noted above, is that the neoliberal apocalypse abandons the field of competing legitimate claims that is the terrain of politics for a stark flat choice between good and evil or else a reign of uniform cruelty. Still, if we can’t take these books seriously from a political standpoint, and their only real theme is love, do they at least succeed as romances? In a way it has always been a virtue of historical romance that its facelessly beautiful or handsome characters are also morally uncomplicated to the point of vacancy. The same is true of the heroes and heroines of our apocalyptic romances; they possess the sentimental virtue of moral perfection in a world otherwise evil, and the biological virtue of attractiveness in a world otherwise ugly. Their unreality as

characters makes them ideal objects of fantasy—with only the effect of disqualifying them as objects of love or items of literature. This leaves the neoliberal apocalypse with its constitutive contradiction: exalting the sphere of private life—in modern times the arena for the fullest elaboration of individual personality—it promotes a basically zoological idea of humanity, where mating and survival are all that matter, and these efforts are pursued with an absence of reflection tantamount to instinct. Self-preservation and moral life become identical, and differences of character fade into insignificance: at this level we are all clones.

The main formal consequence, then, of a withered moral imagination has to do not with subject matter (love, crime, the future) but with *character*. Fictional character derives from moral choices made, contemplated, postponed, or ignored—morality is the page on which the stamp of character appears—and the signal formal trait of genre fiction is nothing so much as its lack of complex characters. This deficit entangles even an acknowledged generic triumph like Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968, and the basis of the 1982 movie *Blade Runner*) in a certain incoherence. The ironic burden of Dick's novel is to stick up for the warm-blooded humanity of androids (read: clones), and in this way imply the cold-bloodedness of any society that denies fully human status to some category of person. The rub, of course, is that such sci-fi humanism is quickly overcome with another irony, this one unintentional, since it is the hallmark of genre fiction to treat characters instrumentally, putting them through the paces of the plot according to their function as the embodiment of some general psychological or social category and failing or refusing to endow them with the individuality to be found among the livelier inhabitants of the traditional realist novel and, for that matter, the real world.

THIS IS THE highly compromised “individualism” promoted by our collection of futuristic novels: individuality here means escape from the bad collective (cannibals, the corporate state) but does not entail real *individuation*. Our literary sci-fi novels are bereft of strongly individual characters—the

apocalyptic ones even more depopulated than they know, the clone narratives at least bespeaking the anxiety that their characters are redundant—and the ongoing merger of genre fiction (where the reader is accustomed to finding no complex characters) with literature (which no one would think to accuse of being indifferent to individuality) has allowed the liquidation of character to pass virtually unnoticed. And this, it seems, is likely to be among the most accurately futuristic features of the “literary” genre novels: they will have been the harbingers of a literary sea change in which complex characters are rejected by critics and ordinary readers alike as morally unattractive (compared to generic heroes), hopelessly self-involved (because capable of introspection), and annoyingly irresolute (because subject to deliberation). These prejudices are already articulate and operative whenever fiction is discussed, thanks in large part to the incomplete literature-genre fiction merger, and the prestige such prejudices acquire through that merger allows them to be expressed without the taint of philistinism.

In sum, when the contemporary novelist contemplates the future—including, it seems, the future of the novel—he or she often forfeits the ability to imagine unique and irreplaceable characters, can no longer depict love credibly, and responds to political problems by rejecting politics for personal life, albeit one made meaningless by interchangeable characters and a zoological conception of family and love. The result is political novels without politics, social novels without society, and romances free of love, amounting, in the end, to “literature” that isn't.

All of this deprives the resulting books of much political, artistic, or psychological value—but they may at least capture something of our present-day situation in an accidental and symptomatic way. For if lately we find ourselves fearing that the complexity of our civilization is nothing so much as an index of its fragility, the strange character of the neoliberal apocalypse is to placate the very dread that it evokes. There are grounds for fearing that this civilization devoted to private happiness and private gain will end by intruding pain and loss horribly upon our own house-

holds and personal relationships. In the meantime the likelihood of disaster is only abetted by our sense of the hopeless corruption of public life and the need to defend our wealth, our conveniences, and the small happiness of our homes against the sacrifices our governments or our consciences might otherwise exact. In the neoliberal apocalypse, we see the collapse brought about by this approach to life—as well as the eternal triumph of the same approach, at least for those who survive the wars and epidemics and successfully evade the gangs of thugs stalking a devastated planet.

EVEN MORE striking is the way that romantic and familial love are allowed to flourish only on condition of planetary agony and the substantial culling of the human population. It would seem that personal relationships blossom in the wasteland because they are freed from the problems burdening them today: when a couple or a family is bound together by the project of survival, men and women lose their inclination to treat one another as replaceable objects, surmount any differences of outlook or habit, find all the time in the world to spend together, and don't lack for quality time with their children either. There is no choice in any of these matters, and so what are to us the overwhelming problems of lifestyle, vocation, and politics—how should one choose?—as well as what Freud called object-choice, are solved at one stroke.

No real generational conflict survives the apocalypse either, because all that is left of culture or mores is the need to persist in a biological sense. This, too, resembles the lives of nonhuman animals. Animals apparently evade any special anxiety about psychological redundancy or clone-ishness, despite showing less character diversity within a given species than humans do. The fantasy pervading the neoliberal apocalypse is one in which we become as animals and shake off the human burdens of history, society, and psychology. Perhaps the most genuinely frightening thing about the

neoliberal apocalypse is its patent character of wish-fulfillment.

The nineties are well over—that blithe decade—and we are afraid again. Back during what you might call the long nineties (1989–2001), two artists with otherwise very little in common found time to reflect on the emotional fallout of the late cold war. Martin Amis rather melodramatically but with some insight said this: “The children of the nuclear age, I think, were weakened in their capacity to love. Hard to love, when you're bracing yourself for impact. Hard to love, when the loved one, and the lover, might at any instant become blood and flames, along with everyone else.” And Kurt Cobain more eloquently said this: “Everyone's parents got divorced. Their kids smoked pot all through high school, they grew up during the era when there was a massive Communist threat and everyone thought they were going to die from a nuclear war. And everyone's personalities are practically the same.”

If this is right, then the end of the cold war promised not only safety and security but flourishing personalities in place of stunted ones, and love restored to its former power. It was impossible not to rejoice at the apparent withdrawal of the nuclear threat, and even better-informed citizens supposed that global warming would not cause serious problems for some decades. Now we are forced to admit that our own children's capacity to love and flourish may be undermined by the multiplication of new threats. Through the forty long years of the cold war it seemed that civilization might not be long for this world. Now it can seem to us again that we and the people we love (or would wish to love) will have to live with an anxiety every bit as pervasive as the old fear, though perhaps less acute. With luck some novelists will be able to reveal—and not only by accident—what this atmosphere of dread is doing to us. ●

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