

Anatomies of future melancholy

DEREK TURNER compares two powerful prophecies in *Quarterly Review*, Spring 2012

(excerpted)

If the attainment of utopia is a recurring pipe-dream, so is its apparent opposite – the dystopian nightmare. For every More, Rabelais or Bacon who describes some ideal city, there are innumerable others who feel the fogs of the future are as likely to conceal demons as delights. Jefferies, Orwell, Huxley, Hartley, Lewis, Golding, Nabokov, Koestler, Zamyatin, Raspail and Burgess are just a few of those who have given gloomy warnings. Some of these have become clichés – *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Clockwork Orange*, *Darkness at Noon*. A few are more forgettable – Lewis’s *Hideous Strength*, Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister* – and some are simply overlooked, often for political reasons – Jefferies’ *After London*, Zamyatin’s *We*, Hartley’s *Facial Justice* and Raspail’s *Camp of the Saints*.

It has been argued that cautionary literature is a fundamentally conservative genre whatever the ostensible politics of its authors, and conservatives have accordingly sought to co-opt Orwell and others as honorary Tories. Yet implicit in every dystopic depiction is the idea that if we start or stop doing something, or do it in a different way, we can avert this otherwise inevitable fate. Why would authors go to the trouble of writing if they did not think (or at least hope) that even now something could be done to avert disaster? Dystopias are really disguised utopias.

But some of the above-mentioned authors did not disguise their political predilections. Both *Bend Sinister* (1947) and *Facial Justice* (1960) targeted what Nabokov christened “ekwilism” – the dull dogma, now practically a religious obligation, that all are intrinsically equal and therefore everyone must be equalized at whatever social cost. In *Camp of the Saints*, Jean Raspail famously telescoped decades of Third World immigration and First World neurosis into a luridly imagined tale of a permanently un-Frenched France. Tito Perdue and Alex Kurtagic are likewise racially-conscious, anti-egalitarian ‘conservatives’ of some kind, sufferers from what Perdue calls “...a spiritual illness in which the victim feels that the West is in worse condition even than yesterday.”...

Many of (Perdue)’s ideals are reprised in the outlook of *The Node*’s unnamed protagonist... “Our bloke” is a “Cauk” (short for Caucasian), once numerically predominant and bristling with confidence, now a neurotic minority resented by the rainbow majority and oppressed by

grotesquely unfair and vigorously enforced equality laws. “Our man’s” America is dysgenic and dysfunctional, with all manifestations of high culture, independence of mind or even education regarded with disfavour. The Yuan-based economy is chiefly devoted to public relations, magazines devoted to the likes of recreational canoeing, advertisements shown on 300 inch TV sets or projected into people’s faces, as well as “...candles, rubber and leather objects, tropical fish with human genes, velvet Elvises, blow-up dolls simulating forty-pound girls, musical roses...rare cheeses and hummingbird eggs.”

Banditry proliferates and pollution levels are so high that rain and sun are things to be shunned. Christianity has been replaced by a variety of anything-but cults, including one rather wonderfully devoted to the Gila Monster (one of the world’s few species of poisonous lizard, indigenous to the American southwest). Cauks are singled out for constant monitoring and harassment, no matter what they say or do to placate government “facilitators” or other groups. Most seek quiet lives by avoiding any kind of corporate assertion or even self-expression, seeking to lose themselves in the sensate multi-melée.

The very few contumacious Cauks risk being scanned by electronic “attitude-analyzers” and removed to giant re-adjustment complexes, from whence not all return. The only answer in that future is to secede into autonomous, undemocratic “nodes” in which high culture can be maintained or recreated and plans drawn up to deliver some segment of the old country from the tedious tyrants. “Our man” becomes one such leader, and in his progress into prominence Perdue honours his own ancestors, homespun tamers of Alabama and gray-uniformed citizen-warriors against Yankee uniformity.

This scanty description fails to do justice to *The Node*’s richness. There is joy and proportion in the author’s references, store of words, manipulation of images, jumbling of tenses and senses, in-jokes, his verbal and even typographical games. Behind his writing one senses the existence of a wide, wild hinterland bordered by volcanoes and with a staffage of perfect people, animals and *cottages ornée*. He never succumbs to portentousness, always a temptation for doomsayers. Even when he describes revolutionary acts, such as the Nodists’ annexation of adjoining territory carried out “in the fullness of crime”, there is delightful self-awareness. The rebels “...sent one of the women forward to snip the fence that separated them from their neighbour’s cattle, an episode remembered in history as The Electrocution of Betty Peal.”

The many humorous asides have the paradoxical effect of making his wider plaint *more* plangent. “Our hero’s” love interest is bound up with his and our civilization’s future, and in the middle of smiling we are brought up sharp with a realization of what we stand to lose, are already losing: “Could he, or not, get from her a renewal of that species, the West made new, a numerous people inhabiting everything between the Rockies and the Appalachian mountain chains?...The resumption of fine literature, star travel, Wagnerian opera houses? Not a chance of that.”

It would be a mistake to see Perdue as mere nostalgist, lost in some reverie of unrecapturable youth extrapolated into Spenglerian teleology. He looks forward almost as often as he looks back, in hope of “a globe of a hundred thousand societies”, in which people “care more about people than stuff”.