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The Future-As-Past in Dystopian Fiction

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In my haste, I swept off the manuscript, the pages scattered, I would never be able to collect them in order again. And even if I did, there would be no real order; some gaps, some obstacles, some X's would remain.

Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*

Abstract

Twentieth century dystopian fictions such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* (1955) strongly adhere to a generic convention by which they project forwards into a narrated future in order to look back critically towards the present. In the course of this focus on the past, such dystopias include slivers of contested and incomplete accounts of how the dystopian state came to exist. I term these fragmentary narratives *future histories*. Such accounts exist within a timeframe that runs from the authorial present to the point in the future at which the main narrative is set. In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example, this period covers the years from 1949 (the publication date) to 1984, in which the main story occurs. I term the timeframe between the authorial present and the future temporal setting of the main story world the *future-as-past*. This article explores the development of the complex temporality of dystopian fiction from the early to mid-twentieth century. Discussion focuses on the manner in which the fragmented future-as-past is employed critically in relation to the story world and to historical reality. The article concludes that by providing scattered hints from which further information

could be deduced or inferred, often but not always with the help of contextual knowledge, this temporal narrative strategy invites the reader to actively participate and politically engage in the reconstruction of future histories. Such future histories can never be completed or fully mapped as dystopian fictions are usually less specifically predictive than they at first appear.

Keywords temporality, genre, political fiction, the state, the reader

Introduction: Developing dystopian temporalities

The plots of dystopian fictions from the mid-twentieth century such as Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* (1955), strongly adhere to generic conventions.[1] Several scholars have mapped the similarities that many of the settings of such novels share, such as Sargent (1994) and Kumar (1987). Others, including Moylan (2000), have highlighted some of their shared thematic concerns, for example with history. Here, I concentrate on the question of narrative structure, which has been less well explored.

The writers I discuss here all demonstrate awareness of writing into the genre. A frequent means by way this awareness is signalled is through direct or indirect references to other writers associated with the utopian/dystopian tradition. Thus in Huxley's *Brave New*

[1] The development of the dystopian genre was first charted in works such as Kingsley Amis *New Maps of Hell* (1975 [1960]), Chad Walsh, *From Utopia to Nightmare* (1962) and Mark Hillegas, *The Future As Nightmare: H. G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians* (1967). As Fitting (2010) notes, such works displayed "a tendency to conflate anti-utopia and dystopia, describing science fiction as predominantly pessimistic" (141). While Krishnan Kumar (1987) still used the term "anti-utopia" rather than "dystopia", attempts at more precise and usable definitions are developed in Lyman Tower Sargent (1994) (and see also Sargent (2010)), who concentrates on ideational content rather than form or narrative. Further important work on definitions and development can be found in Keith M. Booker (1994); Fredric Jameson (1994) and (2005); Tom Moylan (2000); Philip E. Wegner (2002); and Gregory Claeys (2010). In addition there are several useful chapters in the Moylan and Baccolini (eds) volume *Dark Horizons* (2003) including (but not limited to) those by Darko Suvin (187-201), Peter Fitting (155-166), and Philip E. Wegner (167-185). Another recent intervention of note is the volume edited by Eckart Voigts and Alessandra Boller (2015).

World, for example, Fanny Crowne informs her friend Lenina, "I've been feeling rather out of sorts lately […] Dr. Wells advised me to have a Pregnancy Substitute" (2005: 44). Alternatively, we may only learn of this intended interaction through comments elsewhere in their work or in personal correspondence.[2]

We also see generic influence at work at the structural levels of the plots of these novels, however. Hence, as Moylan has noted, dystopian fictions typically open *in medias res* in a future setting, and tell the story of a character or small group of characters becoming alienated from an existing state of affairs and rebelling against it (2000: 148). Their relative conventionality in generic terms allows dystopias to engage with a number of inter-related themes. Such fictions have been used to explore issues across science, politics, economics, and philosophy, which range from the viability of liberal humanism in an age characterised by industrial warfare and Social Darwinism to mass production and moral autonomy under the expanding reach of the state into the life of the individual. Dystopian fictions typically project their treatment of these issues forwards into a narrated future in order to look back critically toward the (authorial) present in fragments littered throughout the story. Through this narratological manoeuvre they present contested, ironic accounts of how the prospective dystopian state came to be. These fragmented narratives of how the prospective dystopian state came to be may be termed *future history*. Concomitantly, the temporality of the period between the authorial present and the future fictional world (i.e. the period within which *future history* lies) may be referred to as the *future-as-past*. Thus in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four*, the years between 1949 (when the novel was

[2] Thus Orwell discusses Zamyatin's *We* in Orwell (1998, vol. 16, 99) (and see also the recollection of his correspondent Gleb Struve [1971: 50]). The fact that Orwell sent a copy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to Aldous Huxley on its publication suggests he was conscious of some similarities with *Brave New World*. Likewise, in an article written the year before he published *The Chrysalids*, John Wyndham called Burdekin's novel "remarkably perceptive" (1954).

published) and 1984 (when the action is principally set) form the *future-as-past*. Specific events within the timeframe 1949-1984 comprise points of *future history.*

In this essay I explore the development of the complex temporality of dystopian fiction from the early to mid-twentieth century. The novelty of my approach lies in my concern for how narrative structure is generative of the political content of these novels. I pay especially close attention to the manner in which the fragmented future-as-past is employed critically in relation to the story world and to historical reality. The significance of this approach is further underlined in the comparison of well-known texts such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, with novels including John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* that have received scant critical attention. While the future histories of these novels can be suggestive, they are never complete. Through contextual knowledge the reader may fill in some of the gaps and omissions, but many others require guesswork, which draws the reader into creative reconstruction of the future-as-past. As with imperfect re-ordering of "scattered pages" which Zamyatin's character D-503 attempts in the epigraph above, such reconstructions remain provisional and flawed. Hence, in this task (to borrow from Zamyatin), "some obstacles, some gaps, some X's… remain."[3]

An early and important example of a dystopian future-as-past that is littered with obstacles and gaps that disrupt the reader's ability to reconstruct a narrative of future-history is E. M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops" (1909). Not only is Forster's story an "early example of the dystopian maps of social hells" (Moylan 2000: 112) of the twentieth century, it is one of the first dystopias to exploit the fragmentation of future history for the purpose of drawing the reader into creative re-construction of the past. Vashti, the story's protagonist, is citizen of a far-future fully automated world. She lives in

[3] There are a variety of translations available of Zamyatin's *We*, including several published more recently than Mirra Ginsburg's edition, which I quote. However, as I also refer to Ginsburg's translations of Zamyatin's essays in this article, for the sake of consistency I use her translation of *We* too.

a beehive-like cell underground, one node of the worldwide living infrastructure "system" known as "the machine," which ordinarily sees to her every want and need, from nutrition to communication. Forster's story is highly satiric, and allusions to the future-as-past often serve comedic purposes in which such historical periods, which lie between the authorial present and the time in which the story is principally set, are juxtaposed with this age of "the machine". Hence, we learn that Vashti,

> had studied the civilization that had immediately preceded her own – the civilization that had mistaken the functions of the system, and had used it for bringing people to things, instead of for bringing things to people. Those funny old days, when men went for change of air instead of changing the air in their rooms! (1954: 115)

The "old days" here lie in the future-as-past, and the specific content (going for a "change of air") is an example of a small detail of "future history." The effect of this detail is to estrange the future storyworld of "the machine." In the process of estrangement, a social element of Vashti's society is revealed and satirised through comparison to a historical past (the future-as-past) in which "the system" did the bidding of men who were still independent of the machine. In Vashti's present, humans are wholly reliant on the machine for the basic necessities of life, and as Moylan notes, Vashti is a "perfectly constructed subject of [this] automated society": toothless, hairless, and conditioned into both agoraphobia and pseudo-religious reverence for the machine (2000: 113).

As an exemplary subject of this automated society, Vashti's occupation is typical: she is a historian (of sorts) who broadcasts her work in 10-minute lectures to friends in similar cells around the world. Importantly, as she never leaves her cell she never meets those she

lectures to face-to-face, and her knowledge of the past is likewise far removed from any direct empirical observation. Consequently, the snippets of opinion that Vashti reports as historical knowledge are laughably inaccurate and inane. But just as she spurns direct observation and empirically grounded knowledge in her study of the past, Vashti also carefully avoids direct experience of the outside world above ground in her daily life. The farcical orthodoxy of the age of "the machine" is later expressed in a lecture thus: "First-hand ideas do not really exist. They are but the physical impressions produced by life and fear, and on this gross foundation who could erect a philosophy? Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far removed from that disturbing element – direct observation" (135). In the age of automation, there is a sort of economy of ideas, which are bartered and exchanged as the only thing humans still produce. But the most valued of such "ideas" are in reality merely re-readings and syntheses of ideas of the past: without direct experience this society produces no new knowledge. The past is therefore not valued as an object of study in itself, but only in how narratives about the past can be used to reinforce the hegemonic ideology of the present. Just as her agoraphobia makes Vashti scared of direct observation of the world beyond her walls, direct evidence of a past society that lived in plain sight of the sky would be "disturbing" to her worldview. Hence, when Vashti's son Kuno contacts her and asks her to travel across the globe to visit him by airship, in Forster's schema the trip represents a link to the past because it involves direct experience of the world beyond the cell she inhabits.

The intellectual poverty of this turn away from direct experience for study of the past and understanding of the present alike is demonstrated in an ironic event during Vashti's voyage via airship to see her son: "In the evening she looked again. They were crossing a golden sea, in which lay many small islands and one peninsula. She repeated, 'No ideas here,' and hid Greece behind a metal blind" (122). For all that Vashti claims to study the

past through secondary works, her rejection of empirical evidence serves to indicate that, ironically, she in fact knows very little about it. Forster here sets a trend that will become a generic convention for dystopian fiction, in which principal characters are obsessed with historical periods about which they know very little and lack both the skills and empirical evidence necessary to discover anything further.

As I shall show below, the loss of memory and history is a recurring theme in the development of dystopian fiction and the future history at which Forster frequently hints is full of uncertainties. For example, Vashti gives a lecture on historical "Australian music" in which she "describe[s] the great outburst of song that followed the Chinese conquest" (113), but the reader gleans no more details about either the music or this conquest, and the subject is never mentioned again. All that the reader knows for sure is that the domination of The Machine is a consequence of over-mechanisation at some point in the future-as-past. Forster's story establishes the importance of unrecoverable details in the creation of an imaginary future; as we shall see, the idea of an unrecoverable past was further developed by later dystopian fiction.

Dystopian Temporality and H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*

A central contention of my argument is that this sort of interest in a (future) past which is not fully recoverable is characteristic of twentieth-century dystopian fiction. This is one of several structural features that distinguish modern dystopias from utopias. The name "dystopia" suggests how closely the two genres are bound together: "dystopia" (from the Greek, "bad-place") is derived as the antonym for "utopia" (a pun on *eu*-topos, good place, and *ou*-topos, no-place). However, it would be incorrect to deduce from this etymology an oversimplified binary opposition between the two terms. Significantly, as a structural

characteristic the future-as-past demonstrates that the relationship between utopia and dystopia has become more nuanced.

A corollary of this development is that the modern dystopian genre can be distinguished from previous iterations of this relationship between Utopia and its negative or critical "Other." In making this claim, I draw upon Gregory Claeys in arguing that Forster's short story forms one node of the "dystopian turn" at the turn of the twentieth century. As Claeys notes, this "turn" contains echoes of the "barrage of fictional satires" that followed the French Revolution roughly a century earlier (2010: 110). But moving beyond Claeys, I argue that a distinction between earlier negative utopian literature and twentieth-century dystopias can be most clearly seen with regard to specific structural concerns with the future-as-past. Perhaps the most important single author to this "dystopian turn" is H. G. Wells, whose proto-dystopian "scientific romances" of the fin-de-siècle (e.g. *The Time Machine* [1895]; *The Island of Doctor Moreau* [1896]; *When the Sleeper Wakes* [1899]) achieved wide circulation and a lasting popularity.

As his audience grew, Wells became more confident in his predictive abilities and more confident that the human race had the ability to overcome the social ills with which his scientific romances dealt. For Wells, humankind had the educational, technological and scientific means to found a utopian World State over the course of the twentieth century, and in *Anticipations* (1901), *Mankind in the Making* (1903) and *A Modern Utopia* (1905) he outlined what such a world would look like. Elements of "The Machine Stops" such as governance by committee and worship of the Machine may be read as satirising Wells as a utopian socialist and technophile. Indeed, in the 1947 introduction to his *Collected Short Stories* Forster claimed that "The Machine Stops is a reaction to one of the earlier heavens of H. G. Wells" (1954: 6). Yet other elements in Forster's story, such as physical degeneration, may be seen to borrow from Wells's proto-dystopian visions rather than his

utopias. For example, when we are first introduced to Vashti she is described as a "swaddled lump of flesh" (109), comparable to some of the specialized, underground-dwelling selenite lunar inhabitants of Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* (1901).

Forster became one of many authors of dystopian fiction to respond both directly and indirectly to H.G. Wells: in *Brave New World*, for example, the appearance already cited above of "Dr. Wells" as a physician recommending a "pregnancy substitute" is one of many ways that Wells makes appearances, and as I argue elsewhere, H. G. Wells was an important touchstone for John Wyndham's avowedly "Wellsian" postwar fiction (Stock 2015). If the future-as-past played an increasingly important role in such authors' responses to Wells, it also became increasingly central to the underlying discussion of social and political ideas in their fiction more generally, whether through the voice of a third person narrator or as mediated through characters. Thus Yevgeny Zamyatin expressed cautious reservations in his admiration for Wells, stating that the latter's utopian novels and scientific romances were "almost exclusively instruments for exposing defects of the existing social order, rather than building a picture of a future paradise," and as such could be regarded as "social tracts in the form of novels" (1970: 286). The social and political content of Zamyatin's own dystopian novel, *We*, is more subtle and ambiguous than Wells's open didacticism. Yet the temporal estrangement of the novel's storyworld into the 26th Century CE similarly attempts to expose current issues in newly Bolshevik Russia and the industrial production methods in Western countries alike. As Patrick Parrinder (1973) has shown, the direct influence which Wells's fiction had upon Zamyatin was due not only to the latter's admiration of the former, but also to the fact that he translated and edited both the 1919-20 three-volume Russian collected of Wells's work and the later twelve-volume edition (Hutchings 1981-2: 83).

Wells's utopian politics became a target for satire or criticism in dystopian fiction, and yet as Krishan Kumar has suggested, there remains a sense in which twentieth-century dystopian fiction became "a case of Wells *contra* Wells" (1987: 225). But while Kumar is concerned only with the political content of imagined societies, I argue that in his scientific romances from *The Time Machine* onwards, Wells showed the power of an imagined future to critique the present social reality, a method of critique which would prove invaluable to writers of dystopias in structuring the complex chronology of their own fiction.

In *The Time Machine*, the Traveller begins with a brief experiment in which he travels forwards in time five and a half hours, during which he sees his housekeeper Mrs. Watchets slowly cross the laboratory, although to him "she seemed to shoot across the room like a rocket" (Wells, 2005: 18). The Traveller moves begins to accelerate his machine, and "As I put on pace, night followed day like the flapping of a black wing," and he sees "the moon spinning swiftly through her quarters from new to full." Increasing the pace, he sees "huge building rise up faint and fair, and pass like dreams. The whole surface of the earth seemed changed – melting and flowing under my eyes" (ibid: 19). Finally, he brings the machine to halt in the year 802,701 – at which point he meets the Eloi and the Morlocks. After his adventures in this future setting he accelerates much further into the future, to around 30 million years from his own birth, when he watches the slow death of the planet Earth as the years flit by in their thousands. The "politicised configuration of social reality" in the framing narrative contrasts markedly with these imagined futures (Smith 2012: 87). By having the Time Traveller traverse time at multiple speeds, Wells uses the passage of time itself as a means of social and political commentary: the Traveller experiences time first at a pace at which he can observe seasonal change minute-by-minute, then the rise and fall of civilisations, then – moving beyond anything a single human could witness in their own lifetime without the aid of a Time Machine -- biological evolution in the creatures around

him and then finally at a pace at which even cosmic change is directly observable. This passage of time on evolutionary and cosmic scales estranges the reader from anthropocentric conceptions of time, while the Time Traveller remains focused on anthropologic description of the creatures he encounters, especially how they interact and communicate both with himself and with each other.

In the Time Traveller's narrative, the anthropologic descriptions of Eloi and Morlocks are firmly linked to the social structures of Wells's own day: at one point, the Traveller states with reference to the Morlocks, "Even now, does not an East-end worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth?" (2005: 48) The splitting of *Homo sapiens* into two new, antagonistic races is based upon an exaggeration of late-Victorian economic and social divisions, in which the urban poor of the East End "abyss" were viewed as the degenerate "hapless spawn of diseased humanity" in George Gissing's (1889) words, whose lifestyle the pioneering empirical sociologist Charles Booth (1889) had compared unfavourably with "savages" (quoted in Chinn 1995: 120, 128). In *The Time Machine,* the act of skipping across countless blank years to create a new past that belongs to the future serves to underline another feature of late-Victorian degeneration anxiety: the failure to comprehend the scale on which evolutionary forces operate.[4]

The future-as-past and future history

The influence of Wells on later dystopian authors is in this respect slightly paradoxical: while his later utopias such as *Men Like Gods* (1923) often contained exhaustive social detail, Wells's earlier proto-dystopian scientific romances like *The Time Machine* clearly demonstrated that a cogent critique of both a future fictional society and authorial historical

[4] Having trained with T.H. Huxley in the mid-1880s, the biologist often known as "Darwin's bulldog" for his ferocity in debates, H. G. Wells understood this issue better than most.

reality could be achieved by skipping over time periods and leaving carefully selected historical details out of the narrative altogether. Yevgeny Zamyatin, who both admired and criticised Wells for his futurological imagination, was especially attuned to the potential of such techniques, and further developed them in his novel *We*.

As Parrinder succinctly puts it, "Wells's concern is with *facing* the unknown, Zamyatin's, with being the unknown" (1973: 20-21, emphasis in original). In other words, if for Wells the challenge is to make man take the difficult stride forward to achieve the greatness for which he is destined as a species, then Zamyatin wanted to demonstrate just how strange the experience of a "splintered and blinding" reality would be to someone in the present. For Zamyatin, Parrinder argues, this is achieved through the defamiliarizing effects of modernist experimentations with language.

Such experimentations are usefully mapped by Kern, in his discussion of the formal techniques by which Zamyatin achieves his "futuristic" language. Zamyatin's syntax is highly idiosyncratic, eliminating many grammatical elements and eschewing lengthy sentences containing multiple subordinate clauses. Zamyatin, Kern claims,

> sought to reproduce what he called "thought language" (*myslennyi iazyk*) – the speed language of "pieces, fragments and additions." The reader is thus given only the guidelines to the action: faced with incomplete sentences (aposiopesis), changes of construction (anacoluthon) and bare allusions, he is forced to fill the missing links, to think, and, in a sense, to create with the author (1988: 120).

The combination of future setting and fragmented speech ("But now… Yes, precisely: I feel some alien speck in my brain, like the finest eyelash in the eye" [Zamyatin 1999: 32-33, ellipsis in original]) contributes to the creation of what Victor Shklovsky termed a

defamiliarizing effect (1965: 12).[5] The fast pace and use of irregular pauses and ellipses create sharp contrasts, reinforced by the frequent references to clashing bright colours. Characters' motivations slip between these ellipses and dashes too: the narrator, D-503, fails to understand either his own psychic life or that of others ("this is precisely why – precisely why I…" [72]) and the plot of *We* is thereby destabilised and full of unresolvable ambiguity. It is impossible to know whether I-330 really ever loves D-503, for instance, or, as is hinted more than once, if she is merely using him to gain access to the *Integral* spaceship that she attempts to hijack.

To broaden Kern's argument, these gaps and missing links extend from the level of syntax and imagery to details of the plot and characters, the role of the diary in the production of the narrative which it itself records, and then finally to the temporal setting of the narrative itself within an imagined future. As D-503 gradually loses control over his life and his reason fragments, the diarist often finds time to reflect on the process of writing. D-503's penchant for addressing his imaginary audience directly ("you, the unknown readers to whom the *Integral* will bring my notes" [10]) has itself a defamiliarizing effect, reminding the reader that not only the content of the novel but its premise too is fantastic, and thus preventing the "automatism of perception" from developing (Shklovsky 1965: 12-13). But this technique also draws attention to the artfulness of the diary; D-503 is not only an adventure-story writer but a writer experimenting with the process of writing. Zamyatin turns the traditional pattern of the "scientific romance" (as Wells termed his early works) on its head: instead of someone like Wells's Time Traveller coming back from the future to the

[5] Zamyatin and Shklovsky disagreed politically and it is unlikely that Zamyatin would strive to consciously follow Formalist theory, but his prose does widely use techniques with which Shklovsky was concerned, such as "wordplay, deliberately roughened rhythm, [and] figures of speech" (Lemon and Reis in Shklovsky, 1965: 5). Shklovsky's review of *We* condemned Zamyatin's "one-sided ability" and with pointed irony threw Zamyatin's image of the aeroplane as a symbol of freedom back at him, referring to him as a plane that had reached its "ceiling". (Shklovsky, 1988: 49-50).

present to relate future events, D-503 is a writer from the future writing *as if* his readers are from the past (our present). This is why he comments:

> I am confident you will understand that it is far more difficult for me to write than it has been for any other author in the history of mankind. Some wrote for their contemporaries; others for their descendants. But no one has ever written for ancestors, or for beings similar to his primitive, remote ancestors (23).

While D-503 emphasizes the "ancient" and uncivilised mind-set of his future fictional "unknown reader[s]" in his diary, he also comments on the value that his own society places on certain artefacts and thinkers from the novel's *real* contemporary reader's time, such as the railway timetable and the methods of Frederick Winslow Taylor. For the most part, however, the events of the years between the twentieth-century reader's present and the consolidation of the One State are glossed over by off-hand references to the "Two Hundred Years' War." The reader learns little about this war because D-503 implicitly assumes that she is familiar with its official state history and is therefore able to make connections between seemingly disparate events. On occasions when he does provide historical details, they are no more reliable than his sycophantic descriptions of the One State: when in the third entry, for example, he writes that "During the Two Hundred Years' War, when all the roads fell into ruin and were overgrown with grass, it must at first have seemed extremely inconvenient to live in cities cut off from one another by green jungles" (1999: 11), he is wholly ignorant of the existence of the Mephi, people who live beyond the One State's Green Wall. Only later in the novel when he becomes aware of the existence of the Mephi is the full irony of this comment revealed.

These scattered hints invite the reader to participate in creating a future history, then, but prevent the reader from ever gaining more than a limited understanding. Nevertheless, the investment of the reader in such acts of creation is important both in *We* and in dystopian fiction more widely. The production of future history is a central site of this creativity, and one that involves the use of a particular structural manoeuvre tying Zamyatin's *We* to other dystopian writers from the mid-twentieth century such as those discussed below: these fictions project forwards into the future, but within this framework they also obliquely look backwards towards the contemporary reader's own present and near-future. In other words, dystopias self-reflexively pose the question "how did humanity get here?"

Counterpoint

A strikingly clear example of this manoeuvre can be found in chapter three of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Here, Huxley uses a technique which he had previously explained using the character of novelist Philip Quarles, in the novel *Point Counter Point* (1928). Quarles's intention in his work, his notebook reads, is to achieve a "musicalization [sic] of fiction. Not in the symbolist way, by subordinating sense to sound… But on a large scale, in the construction" (1928: 408). This "counterpoint" or "contrapuntal narrative" is a sort of narrative montage, in which several scenes take place simultaneously. Each new paragraph indicates a shift between different scenes/conversations, but as these shifts do not follow a regular pattern, the only way to decipher which character is speaking is through the content of their speech. The frequent shifts give the reader only partial, fragmented access to each conversation. Yet the juxtaposition of these scenes invites the reader to infer additional information, creating a wider and more complex narrative.

Thus, on the lawn of the London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre, Mustapha Mond, the World Controller, joins the Centre's Director to give a group of students a history lesson. Inside the building meanwhile, a group of alpha and beta workers coming off shift are getting changed. In the female dressing room, Lenina Crowne is talking with her friend Fanny. Their conversation revolves around fashion, sexual relationships, and in particular Henry Foster (whom Lenina is dating) and Bernard Marx (who has asked her to visit a New Mexico "Savage Reservation" with him). In the male changing rooms, Henry Foster, ignoring Bernard Marx, is talking to the Assistant Predestinator about the "[w]onderfully pneumatic" Lenina Crowne, and suggests that he "try" her (Huxley 2005: 49). Bernard Marx, who is besotted with Lenina in a most unconventional (and hence socially unacceptable) way, fumes silently to himself as he eavesdrops: "'Talking about her as though she were a bit of meat.' Bernard ground his teeth. 'Have her here, have her there'" (51). Back in the conditioning rooms, the hypnopaedic indoctrination of children continues: the ideological orthodoxy of the adults is underscored by the insertion of consumer slogans amid the adult conversations. (For the child, this "hypnopaedic" indoctrination continues until "at last the child's mind *is* these suggestions, and the sum of the suggestions *is* the child's mind" [36)]. The focalization and scene changes gradually accelerate towards a climax in which single lines and half sentences are interpolated:

> "It's an absolute disgrace – that bandolier of mine."
>
> "Such are the advantages of a really scientific education."
>
> "The more stitches the less riches; the more stiches the less…"

"The introduction of Our Ford's first T-Model…"

"I've had it nearly three months."

"Chosen as the opening date of the new era" (Huxley 2005: 57).

As Quarles comments in *Point Counter Point*, "[t]he abrupt transitions are easy enough. All you need is a sufficiency of characters and parallel, contrapuntal plots" (Huxley 1928: 408).

The plotlines developed in the novel's third chapter deftly expose the brutal foundations of the future World State. The London location provides a clear link to Huxley's present, and points satirically to cultural, scientific and intellectual trends of the 1930s. Yet the counterpoint technique emphasizes not the social reality of the contemporary reader's present nor the fictional future of the year 632 A. F. (After Ford), but rather the near future between these two: the years of the "great Economic Collapse" and anthrax bombs, of the "British Museum Massacre" and cultured "simple lifers" reading Shakespeare. Whilst almost every sentence is satirical in itself (for instance, "Liberalism, of course, was dead of anthrax, but all the same you couldn't do things by force"), the critical force of each statement is multiplied by its juxtaposition with others (the anthrax bombs dropped in the Eighth Arrondissement are paired, for instance, with Lenina's desire to "see a Savage Reservation").

Fragments of the "black amalgam"

The contrapuntal narrative skips between conversations on different subjects, and additionally between discourses, switching frequently and abruptly from the banality of sexual gossip to the absurd presentation of an authoritative scientific account of terror by a

man who paradoxically claims that the success of the World State is in part due to the suppression of any knowledge of, or relation to, the pre-World State past. Huxley gives the reader just enough information to piece together an idea of how the World State came into being, without laying out a causal or even coherent sequence of events: there are glimpses of increasing disorder, war, and economic collapse, yet none of these are fleshed out. We do not discover, for example, who the belligerents were in the "Nine Years' War," or how the use of anthrax against civilians was justified. Huxley guides the reader to fill in blanks between snippets of conversation to create a meaning beyond (or more accurately *between*) the words on the page themselves. A history of the period that precedes the temporal setting of *Brave New World* and lies in the contemporary reader's future is only partially revealed. The restricted revelation of Huxley's dystopia contrasts with the more expansive – and frequently utopian – prophecies of contemporary future histories by Wells (such as the final chapter of the 1923 edition of *An Outline of History*, or his *The Shape of Things to Come* [1933]) or Olaf Stapledon (such as his *Last and First Men* [1934]), as well as earlier pre-modernist future-set utopias like Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1887) or Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890).

In the case of *Brave New World*, to creatively co-produce a future-history the reader needs to be familiar with the historical conditions of the 1930s in which the work was produced. Huxley's novel engages with science and politics at a time of turmoil, and with modernist aesthetics and the ascendancy of mass media forms such as the "talkies" during a period of far-reaching social and cultural upheaval. Dystopian fiction, in the words of Chris Ferns, "posits a society which – however outlandish – is clearly extrapolated from that which exists" (1999: 107), and the "black amalgam" of the 1930s, to borrow Raymond Williams' phrase (1979: 60), infects both the themes and plot of *Brave New World*. Mustapha Mond skips between various scenes and events in world history, giving an

impression of overwhelming change through a handful of scattered details; events are skimmed over so rapidly that the gaps between them seem to blur by. Yet these gaps represent important (and missing) processes of historical change, and allow Huxley to play with a variety of contemporary social and cultural anxieties. Hence, when Mond tells the students that the Nine Years' War witnessed "fourteen thousand aeroplanes advancing in open order" over Paris (Huxley 2005: 53), this both tests the limits of credulity and draws upon existing fears of the devastating impact of aerial bombardment in future European conflict. Such terror becomes comprehensible (first to the fictional audience of students in the story, then to the narrative audience of readers) as just a story – exotic, distant, and significant not in terms of its direct consequences but rather in the message that it conveys. What appear to readers (though not to characters within the future "storyworld" [Herman 2009: xvi]) as prophecies of future terrors are hereby consigned to the narrative of history, a stable object of knowledge located in the far past.

It is instructive to look at just how fragmented Mond's history lesson is by stripping away the voices and information of the other juxtaposed scenes which split up his speech over the course of two pages:

> "Then the Nine Years' War began in A.F. 141."
>
> …
>
> "Phosgene, chloropicrin, ethyl iodacetate, diphenylcyanarsine, trichlormethyl, chloroformate, dichlorethyl sulphide. Not to mention hydrocyanic acid."
>
> …
>
> * * *

> "The noise of fourteen thousand aeroplanes advancing in open order. But in the Kurfurstendamm [*sic*] and the Eighth Arrondissement, the explosion of the anthrax bombs is hardly louder than the popping of a paper bag."
>
> …
>
> "The Russian technique for infecting water supplies was particularly ingenious."
>
> …
>
> "The Nine Years' War, the great Economic Collapse. There was a choice between World Control and destruction. Between stability and…"
>
> (Huxley 2005: 52-53).

The listing of chemicals here seems to confer the authority of scientific discourse on a historical narrative, but the text undermines any notion that such a history, especially when provided by a World Controller, could be more than empty propaganda and ideologically-charged clichés masking a brutal reality. Furthermore, and as already intimated, an awareness of the contents of the "black amalgam" of the 1930s reveals the novel to be rather more specifically predictive than it at first appears. Huxley plays on commonly-held beliefs of the early 1930s, such as a presumption that civilians would be targeted in bombing raids, or the expectation that the chemical and biological weapons which had crept into the trenches of World War I would be widely used in future conflict.

It is here that the truly black humour of Huxley's satire emerges. The cheerfulness with which Mustapha Mond delivers his lecture minimizes the cost at which the stability of the World State was bought: as he physically "whisk[s]" away cultural achievements of the

past with a wave of the hand (41), he also deliberately underplays the human cost of the Nine Years' War. The interpolated conversations underline the fact that it was precisely through the violent deaths of untold millions that the founding of the World State eliminated suffering and war and instituted stability and material well-being – the "deathlike stasis" that to Adorno "makes [this future] a nightmare" (1967:112). As Adorno puts it, "Huxley projects observations of the present state of civilization along the lines of its own teleology to the point where its monstrous nature becomes immediately evident" (ibid.: 99). As a rhetorical device, Mond's fragmented lecture reveals that the World State is more concerned with the instrumentalized means of science than with the human consequences of their use. Indeed, as Adorno again notes, "'History is Bunk,' an expression attributed to Ford, relegates to the junkpile everything not in line with the most recent methods of industrial production, including, ultimately, all continuity of life… The blame rests with the substitution of means for all ends" (102).

"The smallest fragment of the truth of history"

Huxley's experimentation with a "contrapuntal" method of writing provides a clear example of how the play on contemporary anxieties together with the use of elliptical references to the future-as-past can combine to help the reader reconstruct a future history. However, in *Brave New World* the status of this historical knowledge may be more problematic than it at first appears. Mustapha Mond is teaching history to students who are unable "to perceive or think anything unlike themselves" (Adorno 1967: 102), and who naïvely assume that the historical narrative he weaves is accurate and unbiased. His intellectual equals John Savage and Helmholtz Watson never question his authority, and only fragments of Mond's account are communicated to the reader. The only voice that remains able to question the accuracy of Mond's version of the past is that of the narrator,

who remains silent.

In contrast to Huxley's dystopia, Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937) is set in a far future Nazi empire, where historical knowledge is remarkably unstable. Officially, the Nazis have proscribed history and in its place a patriarchal and misogynist religious mythical past is ceaselessly proclaimed. Daphne Patai explains that the novel "extrapolates from the Romantic and medieval longings of such Nazi ideologues as Alfred Rosenberg"; a "cult of masculinity governs life, and sheer ignorance is combined with brutality to form the main instruments of control" (1984: 86). To the reader, it is obvious from the first page that this "spurious Germanic mythology" (ibid.) is a dangerous and bizarre revision of the empirical reality of the future-as-past, when Adolf Hitler is presented as a messiah "*not begotten, not born, but Exploded!*" (1985: 5, emphasis in original). The reader quickly learns that the Hitlerian dogma masks a very different reality even within the future in which the novel is set: women, who are kept like animals in cages, are exhorted to have male babies but for unknown reasons the female birth rate has dropped dangerously low, putting the future of the Empire at risk. The subjugation of women in *Swastika Night* becomes all the more terrifying when viewed as an extrapolation from its own historical context: Debra Shaw contends that in Hitler's Germany women had "already begun to relinquish any autonomy they might have gained under the Weimar Republic" and were consigned to a role "that would cage them within the home and remove their influence entirely from public life" (2000: 46). Kate Holden, meanwhile, reads *Swastika Night* in the context of a gendered English culture in which fascist impulses "[formed] part of the contradictory forces associated with early 20th century modernity" that writers like Woolf, Burdekin and Rhys all "confronted and negotiated" (1999: 143).

The role performed by Friedrich von Hess, the Nazi "Knight of Hohenlinden" in the context of his own society is somewhere between that of Helmholtz Watson and Mustapha

Mond in Huxley's World State: von Hess is an alpha plus male in a position of patriarchal privilege, but while outwardly he dutifully performs the role expected of the Nazi hereditary elite, he hides his inward opposition to hegemonic power structures. This opposition is based principally on a secret book he holds which was written by his ancestor and which purports, imperfectly and partially, to recount a truer history of the past from the time of the novel's contemporary readers (starting with a "Twenty Years War") up to the point in the future-as-past at which, having consolidated their empire, the Nazi leadership chose to destroy all traces of pre-Hitler civilization. The thrust of the narrative centres on von Hess, who has no living sons of his own, passing on the illicit book to an Englishman named Alfred, and his loyal but "slow-brained and bucolic" German lover Hermann (Burdekin 1985: 18).

While Alfred can tell Hermann that there is "a great darkness surrounding our origins" (26), he – unlike the rebels of *Brave New World* – is a properly historical subject. The Nazi myth of its own holy origins is central to the hegemonic religious power of the Hitlerian Church. Yet simultaneously, the mythic past undermines the divine status of the religious empire due to the structural necessity of unknown elements in the religious narrative it propagates. From the Nazi point of view, the past must be shrouded in darkness to protect the established Church from inquiries into the obvious inconsistencies of its doctrine. But the very incompleteness of this narrative leads Alfred to question whether it masks a rather different history. Hermann repeats to Alfred the orthodoxy that "Blood is a Mystery, and a thing no non-German can understand. It's ours" (28). This is a wholly insufficient explanation for Alfred.

Shaw states that Alfred, "by reading a forbidden text, is able to analyse the inherent weakness of Nazi rule and to understand the importance of the status of women to the possibility of a non-violent revolution" (2000: 43), but Alfred's consciousness is not raised

by the book itself. Rather, his critical awareness prefigures his reading of the book, which does not occur until near the novel's climax. Indeed, by the time he and von Hess discuss the history of the Reich, Alfred has already guessed aspects of the history of his own nation. Thus, Alfred deduces that an English-speaking empire probably pre-dated the German Reich from the existence of English speaking communities around the world, while the Empire's official line is that the English were barbarian before German conquest. Unusually for a non-German, as an airplane mechanic Alfred is literate and has studied the Hitler Bible "very carefully,"

> with a mind unclouded by belief in it as divine. It's quite obvious that a lot of the teaching has been put in later. And even all the Blood stuff, you don't know whether that was Hitler himself or a lot of people. It's an unsatisfactory book. Something wrong somewhere. It leaves you empty (29).

Likewise, when the Knight says to him "Women *are* nothing, except an incarnate desire to please men; why should they fail in their nature…?" Alfred replies "There's something wrong somewhere… I don't know what it is yet. I'll have to think it out" (82). Alfred's quest is not only to discover what truth he can about the past, but also to establish a set of working methods for gathering and interpreting evidence of past civilization. Following this conversation, he thinks about the question of women "unsexually and objectively," eventually hitting upon an idea that "had no holes, logically, it was merely quite fantastic and impossible" (98). Alfred uses empirical evidence when and where it is available to him, but with regard to the question of women there is precious little evidence beyond a photograph of the Knight's showing the real Hitler (not a blond seven-foot god as he is

represented by the Empire) with his arm around a beautiful sixteen-year old girl quite unlike the shaven-headed, caged women of Alfred's own day. His theory about the necessity of female emancipation for a wider non-violent revolution relies on some educated guesswork, and there are many questions that, even with the help of von Hess and the book, he is unable to answer. This again prevents the reader from gleaning a comprehensive account of the future-as-past.

Moreover, most of the reader's insight into the book's contents is mediated through the Knight. As George McKay points out, "the few odd sentences that are quoted or reported from [the von Hess book] tell only of [the writer] Friedrich's own emotions" (1994: 306-7). We learn that Alfred reads the book to his son, but we only learn about its contents indirectly through the earlier dialogues between Alfred and the Knight. Indeed, as McKay makes clear, while the existence of the book "functions to destabilise subjectivity" (1994: 306), it is through these dialogues that Alfred really rediscovers the past. He is an able interlocutor for the Knight, who gives him a far more detailed portrait of the future-as-past than Mustapha Mond gives to his students in *Brave New World*. However, the mingling of confused details from Burdekin's interwar present with not-quite complete summaries of the future history serves to veil some of the most troubling details of the future-as-past. In Shaw's words, "Although the book recounts the destruction of all other historical records and charts the beginning of the process which has perpetuated the idea of Hitler as a god and the German people as superior to all other races, it is, itself, a mixture of fact and conjecture" (2000: 44).

The book's writer is open about his own limitations, inscribing in the front, "*though what I have put down here is but the smallest fragment of the truth of history, yet I swear that, to my poor knowledge, it is all true*." The Knight further informs Alfred that the writer is "always in despair – 'Here my memory fails me,' or 'Here I have alas no further

knowledge.' He was patient and thorough, a good German worker, but he was no scholar'" (74, emphasis in original). In contrast to both the unquestioned authority of Mustapha Mond's history in *Brave New World*, and Vashti's understanding of the past which is as far removed from direct experience as possible in Forster's story, here history as an object of knowledge is destabilised and seen as provisional and inherently problematic. Despite an exposition of future history which is more detailed than in many dystopias of the period, the future-as-past is veiled both by disinformation and by shortcomings in knowledge. Moreover, the book has not been updated with a "true history" of the Empire since the first von Hess wrote the original. According to the Knight, his book describes how the Jews were "either absorbed into other nations or wiped out," and details massacres by Germans and other Europeans "both during and after the Twenty Years' War" (148). But "the last remnants" of the Jewish people were still alive in the first von Hess's time, and the current Knight states that, "The end of the Jewish tragedy is in the gulf of our darkness" (149).

Forbidden books and the problem of history

To Patai, the central place accorded to von Hess's book and the way in which characters interact with it is a key means by which *Swastika Night* anticipates Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Patai points out that

> Winston and Alfred each attempt to teach a lover/ friend (Julia; Hermann) about the past by reading from the book, but meet with resistance or indifference. In both cases, a curious detail occurs: Julia and Hermann sleep while the secret book is read, a mark of their lack of interest and intellectual development. (1984: 86)

Yet while in *Swastika Night* the reader encounters the book indirectly through the dialogues between Alfred and von Hess, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the situation is reversed: almost thirty-four pages are devoted to an extract from the book itself. In keeping with the problematizing of the notion of truth throughout *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the authorship of this text is contested: Winston Smith's torturer O'Brien later claims to have penned it, but there is no way of knowing for sure (Orwell 1989: 274), and while it is he who gives Winston the book the reader learns almost nothing about its contents from him. Patai's comparison of "the book" in *Swastika Night* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can thus be pursued a stage further: both fit into a wider convention of constructing and then destabilizing historical knowledge within dystopian fiction.

While the von Hess book is written with gravity and sincerity as a "faint will-o-the-wisp light in the darkness" (Burdekin 1985: 74), there is a satirical edge to the heavy rhetorical style of *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, a work of political economy supposedly written by Oceania's arch-enemy-within, Emmanuel Goldstein. Notwithstanding this however, the truth claims of Goldstein/O'Brien's text do seem to accord with Winston's understanding of the past: the book, he reflects, "had not actually told him anything he did not know… already" (226). Significantly the focus of the extract is not upon the future-as-past, and much of the future history remains unknowable. Instead, it offers a very general historical narrative, critically analysing the interwar years ("by the fourth decade of the twentieth century all the main currents of political thought were authoritarian" [213]), and goes on to describe conditions circa (the fictional future year of) 1984. Remarkably little space is devoted to the gap between these periods. Although this era is alluded to on several occasions (for example, "the ravages of the atomic war of the nineteen-fifties have never been fully repaired" [197]), the longest continuous passage on

the period is under a page. Even here, references to events in the future-as-past somehow slip sideways out of the text:

> The earthly paradise had been discredited at exactly the moment when it became realisable. Every new political theory… led back to hierarchy and regimentation… tolerated and even defended by people who considered themselves enlightened and progressive.
>
> It was only after a decade of national wars, civil wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions in all parts of the world that Ingsoc and its rivals emerged as fully worked-out political theories. *But they had been foreshadowed* by the various systems, generally called totalitarian, which had appeared earlier in the century, and *the main outlines of the world which would emerge from the prevailing chaos had long been obvious* (Orwell 1989: 213 *emphasis added*).

As with Mustapha Mond's history lesson, the phrase "had long been obvious" is an invitation for the reader to draw these outlines for herself or himself. This applies both to Winston, reading the text to a dozing Julia *within* the narrative, and to the reader of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The book places Winston's childhood memories within a historical context so that he starts to perceive himself as a historical subject. But for everything we learn about the exact makeup of the future world of Oceania, there is little beyond the ominous reference to "atomic war" to indicate the mechanisms by which the postwar world morphed into the world of the year 1984. Elsewhere in the novel, Winston remembers his

own deprived childhood as comprising such events as scavenging for food, taking shelter in a tube station during an air raid, and stealing his dying sister's chocolate. There are a few references to specific historical events too – including an atomic bomb landing on Colchester, one of the oldest towns in Britain. But no more details are given, and the mechanics of the link between atomic warfare and the final consolidation of Oceanian power are only implied. Much as in Huxley's *Brave New World*, then, the details of the near future, the precise locations of the ominous threats, are avoided as if taboo. Institutions such as Hate Week and the Two Minutes' Hate demonstrate how submission to the power of the Party is now constantly re-inscribed, but the Party's desire for ever-increasing power does not tell us anything about how they were able to gain power and solidify their position in the first place. These changes and the question of why they were ultimately successful slide into the background as a well-worn list of "national wars, civil wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions" underpinning what is, in the eyes of Goldstein/O'Brien, the more important business of analyzing the political economy of the present. For all that the reader may reconstruct the history of the period from 1948 to 1984 from clues in the text, there are points at which the gaps and omissions make full reconstruction impossible.

In common with both *Brave New World* and *Swastika Night*, there are both contextual and structural reasons for this narrative strategy. The language, tone and rhetoric of Goldstein's text suggest that a central target of critique in this section is the American ex-Trotskyist turned conservative James Burnham.[6] In *The Managerial Revolution* (1940),

[6] Orwell addressed Burnham's work in his journalism on several occasions: in 1944 he used his *Tribune* column to take Burnham to task over the failure of his prophecy in *The Managerial Revolution* and a week later gave *The Machiavellians* (1943) a terrible review for *The Manchester Evening News* (Orwell, 1998, vol. 16:60-64 and 72-4). Whilst in his essay of October 1945 "You and the Atom Bomb" Orwell found some broad and very general truths in Burnham's argument (ibid. vol. 17:320), his longer essay in May 1946 "Second Thoughts on James Burnham" again damned him for his "worship of power" and "cowardice" (ibid. vol. 18:268-84, here 278). Yet in his 1947 review of *The*

Burnham argued that a new managerial class already held the global balance of power, and would soon become the globally ascendant social class. To Burnham, Marx's polarization of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie into antithetical forces had proved false. Instead, the increasing specialization and technological complexity of the twentieth century had led to the emergence of a new and powerful social class of managers between capitalist and worker. Goldstein/O'Brien calls this class "the new aristocracy," which

> was made up for the most part of bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organisers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists and professional politicians. These people, whose origins lay in the salaried middle class and the upper grades of the working class, had been shaped and brought together by the barren world of monopoly industry and centralised government (Orwell 1989: 213).

This is precisely the group of technically-skilled professionals that Burnham had labelled the "so-called 'new middle class'" (1962: 55-56). He argued that their ideologies were still being worked out, much as the ideologies of capitalism were not fully mapped by the early bourgeoisie. As a ruthlessly efficient and organized class, however, their ideologies would not be either humanist or democratic; they would be dictatorial and aggressive. Goldstein's text, pursuing Burnham's logic, likewise argues that from the early twentieth century onwards global war has been, and will continue to be, the engine of historical change.

In *Swastika Night* it is the Hitler Bible, rather than the von Hess book, which provides the account of the transition to the new (dystopian) world order. As Patai indicates, the ideas attributed to the central character in the production of the religious myth of Hitler, von Wied,

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Struggle for the World (1946) Orwell praised Burnham for his "intellectual courage" (ibid. vol. 19:99). We may conclude that although he took Burnham seriously, Orwell regarded him as a man whose "picture of the world is always slightly distorted" (ibid vol. 19:104).

> closely resemble those of the pre-fascist Viennese ideologue Otto Weininger who, in his 1903 book *Sex and Character*… sees the male principle as active, as form, while the female is mere passive matter, a nothingness that needs to be shaped by man, hence women's famous submissive 'nature'… Women use their sexuality to come into existence, for it is only in sexual union that women are given form by men… Weininger concludes that fecundity is loathsome and that the education of mankind must be taken out of the hands of the mother (1984: 90, n. 3).

The replacement of history by a pathological Weiningerian mythology of sexual disgust is a process that requires the consent and active participation of the upper echelons of the Nazi order at the time of the first von Hess. In seeking to combine the power functions of the priestly caste and the imperial state, the Romanticist leanings of Nazis like Rosenberg are again foregrounded and the new Nazi society constructed according to a vision of a remote mythologized past which denies the persistence of historical change. The result is that, like Huxley's World State and Orwell's Oceania, the Nazi Empire of *Swastika Night* strives for permanent stasis and the End of History.

The attempt by Burdekin's Nazis to replace history with a fundamentally distorted account of the past finally founders, because they fail to prevent the development of a mode of thinking in which historical questions can be asked. Their vision adheres to Romanticist notions so closely that a properly modern and totalitarian suppression of historical enquiry – which would prevent people like Alfred from thinking of asking these sorts of questions in

the first place – is impossible. Books and churches could easily be burned, and commonly were by Nazis and Spanish anarchists respectively at the time Burdekin wrote. But through the passing on of cultural heritage, a sense of identity rooted in an historical notion of national collectivity persists. This is clearly visible in the widespread knowledge of resistance music, for instance. Alfred's knowledge of forbidden songs is far more extensive than Winston Smith's search for the missing lyrics of "Oranges and Lemons." In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the past is ceaselessly altered and re-constructed, so that it becomes impossible to cling to fixed concepts of history. The only constant is the mutability of the past. This limits the ability of subjects like Winston Smith to form historical questions. As O'Brien puts it, "The command of the old despotisms was 'Thou shalt not'. The command of the totalitarians was 'Thou shalt'. Our command is '*Thou art*'" (Orwell 1989: 267). In *Swastika Night*, the past is seen through the framework of a mythology that is both unalterable and full of inexplicable "mysteries". The regime hopes that historical enquiry will disappear simply through neglect; Alfred and von Hess both give the lie to this hope by interrogating the inconsistencies of Nazi mythology.

Mutating Christianity

Burdekin posits a future centred on historical regression that faintly echoes the evolutionary "regression" in Wells's *The Time Machine*. This echo of Wells's regressive future is one of several important links between *Swastika Night* and John Wyndham's 1955 novel *The Chrysalids.*

Wyndham had read *Swastika Night*, and early drafts of what would become *The Chrysalids* suggest that it exerted an influence upon him, particularly with regard to some of the social elements of his imagined society (Wyndham, 1954). The novel's protagonist-narrator is a teenager called David who lives in the small, subsistence farming community

of Waknuk, Labrador, a thousand years after a nuclear holocaust. Genetic mutation is relatively common as a result of the persistence of radiation, and the community wages an unrelenting war against it, an obsessive dream in which religious salvation is closely tied to the ability to decontaminate one's whole environment. Mutant livestock and crops are destroyed; children born with even a slight deviation from a tightly proscribed norm are sterilized and cast out or else killed. David is one of a group of youngsters with a new, unseen mutation – he is a telepath. The plot charts the development of these abilities and the subsequent persecution of the telepaths until they are eventually rescued by a woman from "Sealand" (New Zealand).

Central to Wyndham's dystopian imaginary is an ideal of purity that is latently present in the other dystopian texts I have discussed. In *The Chrysalids*, purity links the imposition of theocratic power in a post-apocalyptic future with the imposition of secular power by authoritarian and totalitarian governments in the author's contemporary world. Moreover, Waknuk is othered as a dystopic "no-place" by the similarities between the authoritarian form of the post-Christian religion practized there and the New England Puritanism of the first American settlers in the early modern period.[7]

David's and his friends' telepathic abilities are not compatible with their society's understanding of the world or its tightly defined social and religious norms. They are "deviations" from the Waknuk dream of purity, which places strict requirements on knowledge claims to fit within an existing order of what is "known," circumscribing how and what people can inquire about the world by terming original ideas heretical. David's Uncle Axel, an unorthodox man sympathetic to his nephew's plight, risks quoting to David from a journal banned for heresy which offers an alternative theory of the relationship of

[7] Indeed, the similarities are so marked that critics including Aldiss (1973: 294); and Bleiler (1982: 221) have mistaken the setting for New England. Rowland Wymer, meanwhile, points to significant similarities between *The Chrysalids* and Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible* (1992: 29).

the inhabited areas of Newfoundland to the "badlands" seen by passing ships which are "a kind of jungle of Deviations" (Wyndham, 1958: 59) and "The Black Coasts… [which] are entirely barren, and in some regions known to glow dimly on a dark night" (60-61). The journal's author, Marther, implies that "deviations, so far from being a curse, were performing, however slowly, a work of reclamation. Along with half a dozen more heresies it landed Marther in court, and started agitation for a ban on further exploration" (61).

Marther's work is threatening because in inverting existing understandings of the world it undermines the precarious stability of Waknuk. But like the early modern Church which serves as Wyndham's analogue, Waknuk cannot be wholly successful in crushing heterodox inquiry because, as with the Nazi Empire in *Swastika Night*, their view of the past is too full of mystery and they lack the state apparatus of the properly modern, totalitarian regimes of Huxley's World State and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The invasive capabilities of the modern state are necessary to prevent citizens from learning how to enquire more successfully about the world – particularly in relation to the past and historical change. According to their orthodox beliefs, Waknuk knows next to nothing about what occurred before the holocaust they term "the Tribulations":

> there was no telling how many generations of people had passed their lives like savages between the coming of Tribulation and the start of recorded history… the past, further back than three recorded centuries, was a long oblivion. Out of that blankness stretched a few strands of legend, badly frayed in their passage through successive minds (Wyndham 1958: 39).

The Chrysalids here provides an interesting counterpoint to other dystopian novels as the demolition of the future-as-past is not – as far as the reader can establish – an intentional achievement of the hegemonic power, but rather the necessary corollary of the total destruction of the author's present. Moreover, the reader can immediately infer greater knowledge about the reason for this destruction than the characters in the story could ever know themselves: the story is littered with indirect references to a nuclear holocaust.

Within the storyworld, the primary means by which the past is explored (and through which something approaching future history is generated) is two religious texts: the Bible and a book written several hundred years after the Tribulations called "*Nicholson's Repentances*." The insular, inward-facing society is based, ironically, on a mutant form of Christianity. As such, knowledge is generated primarily through custom, tradition and myth. The community's religious "knowledge" is linked to fears for survival in a brutal realm of contaminated nature. The past is magical, a time of divine forces and wild, uncontrollable powers. Their catechism "Blessed is the norm" is a call to praise the known and therefore controllable, in a chaotic, largely unknowable world beyond human control. Unlike the all-powerful regimes of Zamyatin's, Orwell's and Huxley's dystopias, the patriarchs of Waknuk cannot ultimately control access to the "long oblivion" of the past: they instead try to present it through post-apocalyptic religious myths, and to suppress alternative means of historical inquiry. But without the communication systems of a modern state, this attempt to crush all heresy is destined to failure.

David learns at school that

> The world… was generally thought to be a pretty big place, and probably round. The civilized part of it… was called Labrador… Round most of Labrador there was a great deal of water called

> the sea, which was important on account of fish. Nobody that I knew, except Uncle Axel, had actually seen this sea because it was a long way off, but if you were to go three hundred miles or so east, north, or north-west you would come to it sooner or later. But south-west or south, you wouldn't; you'd get to the Fringes and then the Badlands, which would kill you (Wyndham 1958: 38-39).

The deadly, blackened Badlands are obviously sites of nuclear explosions. Similarly, the "deviations" that Waknuk decries as impurities are genetic mutations whose prevalence can be attributed to high levels of radioactivity. But, as with the other dystopias discussed earlier, few details are provided. The narrator's rudimentary schooling, as expressed in his view that the sea is "important on account of fish," gives the reader little inkling of the process of catastrophic reversal through which the future comes to resemble the remote past. The events of the future-as-past remain shrouded.

Significantly, the telepathic youngsters learn no more about the past from "the Sealand woman." "Sealand" (New Zealand), a country full of telepaths, retains at least some twentieth-century technology such as the aeroplane in which the telepaths are rescued, in addition to advanced weaponry. Yet the telepaths are also unable to achieve a comprehensive account of the thousand years comprising the future-as-past. Whilst the technology of these city-dwellers indicates a firm link to the pre-Tribulations past, the Sealand woman does not contradict Waknuk Tribulations mythology. On the contrary, her social Darwinist belief that the telepaths represent the dawn of "*homo superior*" (Wyndham 1962) is cast in terms of a succession in which the Tribulations retain their mythical importance.

War, History and the future-as-past

The contents of dystopian future histories are partially hidden from view. Under the guise of contested historical knowledge, unknown elements of the future-as-past hide as if redacted in black marker pen. As with any redaction, the very act of hiding foregrounds the created space as an anomaly in the text. Unknown elements are thereby invested with the mystery and power of taboo.

From Zamyatin's *We* onwards, the most important event of the future-as-past in the texts I have discussed is a catastrophic war (the Two Hundred Years war in *We*, the Twenty Years' War of *Brave New World*, the Nine Years' War of *Swastika Night*, the continual conflict from 1948-1984 in Orwell's dystopia, and the nuclear conflict in *The Chrysalids*). All of these texts feature a conflict so traumatic and damaging that it is impossible to reconstruct a full history.

Forster's text stands alone as one that celebrates the physicality of war. In the final apocalyptic scene, The Machine breaks down irrevocably, killing an undifferentiated mass of people. Vashti and Kuno's deaths are singled out from the lifeless bodies around them as glorious. As Kuno declares, "we die, but we have recaptured life, as it was in Wessex, when Aelfrid overthrew the Danes" (1954: 146). Interestingly, this is the same legend which the character Alfred in *Swastika Night* cites in opposition to Nazi rule. But while Alfred's historical investigations reveal to him the problematic potential of myths to play a role in cementing cultural imperialism and inequality, Kuno celebrates the myth of "Aelfrid" unreflectively, as the marker of a romantic and recoverable past. For Kuno, dying in the death of the Machine is an active means of participating in a greater cultural death through which the "nobility" of humankind may be recovered, and life itself re-invigorated.

Dystopian fiction is always extrapolative, but the positing of an imagined future involves leaving out crucial details concerning the future-as-past. The presence of these gaps and omissions invites the reader to participate in the reconstruction of future histories which can never be complete. Knowledge of both contextual and historical issues on the one hand and generic conventions on the other is necessary to this process of reconstruction. If dystopian fiction is, as Tom Moylan puts it, "largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century" (2000: xi) then the narrative strategies I have discussed involve the reader as an active participant in thinking through some of the implications of these terrors. The gaps and omissions also enable the texts' engagement with contemporary issues to have meaning beyond the narrowly predictive, and to demonstrate that the cultural fears and anxieties which they map in relation to the future are a result of both the known and the unknown in the present.

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