

From: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*
by - Tom Moylan

Preface

Hunger cannot stop continually renewing itself, but if it increases uninterrupted, satisfied by no certain bread, then it suddenly changes. The body-ego then becomes rebellious, does not go out in search of food merely within the old framework. It seeks to change the situation which has caused its empty stomach, its hanging head. The No to the bad situation which exists, the Yes to the better life that hovers ahead, is incorporated by the deprived into revolutionary interest. This interest always begins with hunger, hunger transforms itself, having been taught, into an explosive force against the prison of deprivation.

—ERNST BLOCH, *THE PRINCIPLE OF HOPE* (75)

Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination.¹ Although its roots lie in Menippean satire, realism, and the anti-utopian novels of the nineteenth century, the dystopia emerged as a literary form in its own right in the early 1900s, as capital entered a new phase with the onset of monopolized production and as the modern imperialist state extended its internal and external reach.

From that early period, and throughout its varied and shifting history, this negative narrative machine has produced challenging cognitive maps of the historical situation by way of imaginary societies that are even worse than those that lie outside their authors' and readers' doors. In the hands of E. M. Forster, Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, Katherine Burdekin, George Orwell, Ray Bradbury, Margaret Atwood, and others, the classical dystopia flourished in societies besotted by greed, destruction, and death. In the "new maps of hell" that science fiction (sf)

writers in mid-century became so adept at creating, dystopia's negative energies shaped a new critical strand within contemporary popular culture. Most recently, after an interlude of utopian writing in the 1960s and 1970s, sf writers again developed a dystopian textual strategy that spoke to the attenuated and terrible reality brought about by the capitalist restructuring of the economy, the conservative restoration in politics, and the cultural shift to the right that dominated the 1980s and 1990s.

Dystopia's foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic. Its very textual machinery invites the creation of alternative worlds in which the historical spacetime of the author can be re-presented in a way that foregrounds the articulation of its economic, political, and cultural dimensions. Formally and politically, therefore, the dystopian text refuses a functionalist or reformist perspective. In its purview, no single policy or practice can be isolated as the root problem, no single aberration can be privileged as the one to be fixed so that life in the enclosed status quo can easily resume. Indeed, with its unfashionable capacity for totalizing interrogation, dystopian critique can enable its writers and readers to find their way within—and sometimes against and beyond—the conditions that mask the very causes of the harsh realities in which they live.

In the hands of some who react against the present moment in a relatively undialectical manner, dystopia expresses a simple refusal of modern society. Certainly, E. M. Forster's pathbreaking 1909 story "The Machine Stops" takes a stand against the emergent (standardizing, rationalizing, debilitating) technological world, but if its author's humanism challenges the new social logic and begins to locate a basis for dissent and resistance, his abstract analysis offers but a minimal binary of domination and opposition that does not yet delineate the contradictory character of the coming age. With the likes of Zamyatin, Burdekin, Orwell, and Atwood, however, dystopian interrogation begins to sharpen as the modern state apparatus (in the Stalinist Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, social democratic welfare states, and right-wing oligarchies) is isolated as a primary engine of alienation and suffering. Gradually, however, dystopia's critical sensibility is taken up by authors who look beyond technology and the authoritarian state and turn to the especial imbrication of the economy and culture that capitalism has achieved at the cost of diminishing the complexity and potential of all humanity and the earth itself. Within the web of classical dystopias, it is Huxley's work that offers the first thorough critique in this vein, and then in the pages of popular sf the dystopian imagination seeps into the nooks and crannies of everyday life to expose the depredations produced by the strongest socioeconomic force of the century.

Crucial to dystopia's vision in all its manifestations is this ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday lives of everyday people. Again and again, the dystopian text opens in the midst of a social "elsewhere" that appears to be far worse than any in the "real" world. As the mise-en-scène is established in an exponential presentation of the society's structure and operation, the narrative zooms in on one of the subjects of the terrible place. The story line then develops around that alienated protagonist as she or he begins to recognize the situation for what it really is and thus to trace the relationship between individual experience and the operation of the entire system. In some dystopias this narrative runs aground when the power structure crushes the resistant dissenter—ending the text on a note of resignation that nevertheless offers the compensation of an apotheosis of the defeated individual. In others, however, the singular misfit finds allies and not only learns the "truth" of the system but also enters collectively into outright opposition. The conflict may end in another defeat, but it is one that can be remembered by others. Or the outcome may lead to the organization of a resistant enclave, a liberated zone, that sticks in the craw of the hegemonic system; or it may even result in a political movement that threatens to transform the entire order. In some form, a utopian horizon, or at the very least a scrap of hope, appears within the militant dystopia.

Dystopia is thus clearly unlike its generic sibling, the literary *eutopia*, or its nemesis, the anti-utopia. The dystopian text does not guarantee a creative and critical position that is implicitly militant or resigned. As an open form, it always negotiates the continuum between the Party of Utopia and the Party of Anti-Utopia. Iconically immersed in an already oppressive society, the discrete narrative trajectory of a dystopian text plays out on a terrain contested by these historically opposed political tendencies. Texts that adhere to the insistence of the (usually conservative) argument that there is no alternative (and that seeking one is more dangerous than it's worth) run up to the limit of Anti-Utopia and risk transforming what begins as a dystopia into a full-fledged anti-utopia. In contrast, those progressively inclined texts that refuse to settle for the status quo manage to explore positive utopian possibilities by way of their negative engagement with their brave new worlds. In the anti-utopian dystopia, the best that can happen is a recognition of the integrity of the individual even when the hegemonic power coercively and ideologically closes in; whereas in the utopian dystopia, a collective resistance is at least acknowledged, and sometimes a full-fledged opposition and even victory is achieved against the apparently impervious, tightly sutured system.

As dystopian expression spread out from a few texts in the early decades of the twentieth century, it expanded into a negative imaginary that informed pulp fic-