

■ Critical Dystopia Reconsidered: Octavia Butler's *Parable* Series and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* as Post-Apocalyptic Dystopias*

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Abstract

This paper calls for a more nuanced assessment of current dystopian literature and questions the feasibility of lumping together all dystopian works after the 1980s under the umbrella term “critical dystopia.” According to current definition, critical dystopia is open-ended, harbors an utopian enclave, and entertains some kind of hope. However, this definition fails to identify crucial aspects of dystopias around the millennium. Octavia E. Butler's *Parable* series (*Parable of the Sower*, 1993; *Parable of the Talents*, 1998) and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) are investigated to pinpoint the limitation of the term “critical dystopia.” Both the diminished utopianism of Butler's *Parable* series and the apocalypse and despair in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* testify that dystopias around the millennium have undergone some significant transformation. They should more properly be labeled “post-apocalyptic dystopias.”

Keywords: dystopia, critical dystopia, post-apocalyptic dystopia, Octavia E. Butler, Margaret Atwood, *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents*, *Oryx and Crake*

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“Critical dystopia” is the label attached to dystopian works after the 1980s. Given its efficacy in articulating the distinctive feature of the subgenre and its difference from canonical dystopia, a need for more nuanced reading of contemporary dystopian texts arises as we become aware that this umbrella term falls short of identifying crucial aspects of dystopias around the millennium, which would be more properly labeled “post-apocalyptic dystopias.” This paper is an attempt at examining the feasibility of lumping together dystopian works after the 1980s under the umbrella term “critical dystopia.” We will first investigate current definition of the term and pinpoint its limitation in either accentuating intrinsic features of contemporary dystopias or comprehensively mapping their trajectory. A critical reading of Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable* series (*Parable of the Sower*, 1993; *Parable of the Talents*, 1998) and Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) will follow to unravel their difference from critical dystopias of the previous decade.

Critical Dystopia Reconsidered

In an essay entitled “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” Lyman Tower Sargent, noting the emergence of works such as Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It* which “undermine all neat classification schemes” by being “both eutopias and dystopias” (7), suggests that “we need to think more seriously about the possibility of a ‘critical dystopia’” (9). This observation soon leads to various attempts at defining the subgenre, among which Sargent’s own definition is a quite classic one. In his 2001 essay “US Eutopias in the 1980s and 1990s: Self-Fashioning in a World of Multiple Identities,” Sargent defines “critical dystopia” as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally included at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopias can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia” (222). Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan further identify open-endedness and genre blurring as two essential features of the subgenre. They argue that, while canonical dystopia is “a bleak, depressing genre with little space for hope within the story,” critical dystopias “allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work” (Baccolini and Moylan 7). They further point out that “critical dystopias resist genre purity in favor of an impure or hybrid text that renovates dystopian sf by making it formally and politically oppositional” (Baccolini and Moylan 7). According to Baccolini in another essay

of hers, “Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopia of Katharine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler,” the hybrid text may contain elements of the time-travel story, slave narrative, survivalist science fiction, the diary, the epistolary novel, the historical novel, and others (13). Ildney Calvacanti, discussing Suzy McKee Charnas’s “feminist critical dystopia,” also draws attention to the “hybrid mode” (65, note 1) of the subgenre.

This line of argument carries weight in at least two important aspects. First of all, it reflects one significant move in current scholarship on dystopia—the desire to explore the distinctiveness of contemporary dystopias as against the much hyped dystopias of Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell. Darko Suvin’s 2003 “Reflections on What Remains of Zamyatin’s *We* after the Change of Leviathans: Must Collectivism Be against People?” is a case in point. Discussing the change of Leviathans as we move from Orwellian nightmares to today’s “global cultural hegemony,” Suvin points out that what characterizes contemporary dystopias is no longer “the *brutal* negative collectivism of mass paleotechnic collectivism” but rather “*emptying* negative collectivism” which “suppresses individuality by brainwashing the disoriented majority into Disneyfied consumer contentment or at least stupefaction” (63; emphasis original). Suvin aptly employs the term “corporate capitalist collectivism” (62) to designate the new Leviathan,¹ whose presence may indeed be detected in numerous contemporary dystopian texts targeting transnational corporate capitalism.²

On the other hand, the discussion of critical dystopia has the virtue of pinpointing the direction of utopian literature after the emergence of critical utopia in the 1970s. Significantly, this conceptual framework helps clarify the somewhat murky sphere of contemporary utopian literature and the transition from critical utopia to critical dystopia. Without this framework, critics may have been left without an adequate tool to deal with the transition. M. Keith Booker’s 1994 “Woman on the Edge of a Genre: The Feminist Dystopias of Marge Piercy” is a case in point. Given his awareness of the divergence of Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and *He, She and It* (1991), Booker nevertheless resorts to the umbrella term “dystopia” to describe the two works due to the lack of a pertinent conceptual framework. While acknowledging that “the latter book

¹ Suvin’s discussion of the new Leviathan is as follows: “For, what is the Leviathan . . . that we are facing today? No doubt, it is again a negative collectivism, but in a different form from the still existing one of the brute militarized State gang that returned from colonial ventures to rule Europe in the industrialized and Taylorized World War I . . . [W]e are today overwhelmingly ruled by the psychophysical alienation of corporate capitalist collectivism” (62).

² The Yakamura-Stichen Multi in Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It* and the Great Joy Corporation in Ursula Le Guin’s *Changing Planes* are two apt examples.

contains a much larger portion of dystopian images than does the former” (37), Booker does not develop his insight into a more informed discussion of the divergence.

Problems arise, nevertheless, when we encounter dystopias around the millennium. Texts such as Butler’s *Parable* series and Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, where there is virtually no “eutopian enclave” and where “hope” is increasingly dim or has all but faded away, suggest clearly that it is not feasible to designate all dystopias after the 1980s as “critical dystopias.”³ In the following sections, then, we will first conduct a comparative study of Butler’s *Parable* series to see how Butler, despite all her efforts at either building an eutopian enclave (Acorn) or instilling a sense of hope via a new religion (Earthseed), can only uphold “a politics of survival” as “the only means of averting the coming catastrophe” (Phillips 308). A reading of Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* will ensue to argue that, in terms of the overwhelming presence of the apocalypse and the lack of open-endedness in the novel, dystopia around the millennium is again “a bleak, depressing genre with little space for hope within the story.”

Butler’s *Parable* Series: Diminished Utopianism⁴

To read *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* together is to witness Butler’s negotiation of utopian possibilities and her eventual withdrawal from utopianism to survivalism.⁵ As the first and representative Black Feminist voice in the science fictional sphere,⁶ Butler aims to explore how gender / racial

³ As late as 2009, it is still the standard practice for critics to lump together late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century dystopias under the umbrella term “critical dystopia.” See, for example, Graham J. Murphy’s entry on “Dystopia” in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, which places Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Gold Coast* (1988), Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It* (1991), Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), Samuel Delaney’s *Dhalgren* (1975), Pat Cadigan’s *Mindplayers* (1987) and *Synners* (1991), and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Telling* (2000) all under the category of “critical dystopia” (Murphy 475).

⁴ This term is borrowed from Jerry Phillips, “The Intuition of the Future: Utopia and Catastrophe in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*,” *Novel* 35.2 (2002): 301.

⁵ “Utopianism after the end of utopia names the project that Butler explores. However, a utopianism that has shrunk to the dimensions of survivalism is perhaps part of the problem rather than its solution” (Phillips 308).

⁶ Samuel R. Delany is her male counterpart. Their contributions to the genre of science fiction have been widely acknowledged. See, for example, the following comment from *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*: “Authors such as Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler, who began their publishing careers in the 1960s and 1970s, have done much to open the field to black authors, readers, characters, and to racial themes in general. Given the popularity and longevity of the genre overall, however, there are few other writers who have been equally successful. The stature of Butler and Delany

politics may help shape an American future. Her protagonist of these two novels is a young black girl Lauren Oya Olamina who, at the age of 18, is the leader of a band of wayfarers trying to find whatever means to survive in the face of a catastrophe that is socially / environmentally / economically induced. Early in *Parable of the Sower*, the dystopia of the novel's present has already produced a shock to readers with its portrayal of every kind of horror, a disaster verging on the stature of an apocalypse:

We rode past people stretched out, sleeping on the sidewalks, and a few just waking up, but they paid no attention to us. I saw at least three people who weren't going to wake up again, ever. One of them was headless. I caught myself looking around for the head. After that, *I tried not to look around at all.* (*Sower* 9; emphasis mine)

Worse for me, they [the street poor] often have things wrong with them. They cut off each other's ears, arms, legs. . . . They carry untreated diseases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores. They don't get enough to eat so they're malnourished—or they eat bad food and poison themselves. As I rode, *I tried not to look around at them*, but I couldn't help seeing—collecting—some of their general misery. (*Sower* 10-11; emphasis mine)

Yet as the initial walled-in security of Lauren is abruptly terminated by rampant violence in Southern California, Lauren can no longer choose to ignore what is happening outside her home. Becoming one of the street poor herself, she is the leader of an ever-increasing group of people who suffer from similar fates. *Parable of the Sower* ends with the group's arrival at a deserted land in the coastal hills of Humboldt County in Northern California, where Lauren persuades the others to establish an isolated community called "Acorn"⁷ or the Earthseed community, based on the new faith—Earthseed—that Lauren preaches. *Parable of the Talents*, as the sequel of *Parable of the Sower*, narrates the group's subsequent life at Acorn as well as its eventual destruction.

Given the semblance of Acorn to a "eutopian enclave" and the fact that it "is a symbol of hope" (Hampton 84), its utopian potential is quite limited in various aspects. First of all, Acorn does not appear in *Parable of the Sower* until the very end, and then it is only in the shape of a wasteland, although a wasteland with the potential for improvement. After a whole book depicting

as science fiction writers is immense; both have received the Hugo and Nebula awards—Butler even was the recipient of a McArthur genius grant—and both have been credited for transcending the genre and becoming 'literary' writers" (Dietzel 164).

⁷ See the following quotation from *Parable of the Sower*: "We can build a community here,' I repeated. 'It's dangerous, sure, but, hell, it's dangerous everywhere, and the more people there are packed together in cities, the more danger there is. This is a ridiculous place to build a community. It's isolated, miles from everywhere with no decent road leading here, but for us, for now, it's perfect'" (319).

every possible human evil—violence, murder, rape, disease, starvation and what not—Butler has her survivors of a holocaust arrive at a place which is less a utopia than a caricature of one:

There was no house. There were no buildings. There was almost nothing: A broad black smear on the hillside; a few charred planks sticking up from the rubble, some leaning against others; and a tall brick chimney, standing black and solitary like a tombstone in a picture of an old-style graveyard. A tombstone amid the bones and ashes. (*Sower* 314)

The limitation of Acorn as a potential utopia is even more conspicuous when a reference is made to Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*. Tikva, the eutopian enclave of *He, She and It*, is very much on equal footing with the dystopian Y-S in terms of the narrative space it occupies and the oppositional stance it assumes. Indeed we will have to perform some Procrustean task to lump together these two very disparate works under the umbrella term "critical dystopia."

Yet surely we may argue that *Parable of the Sower* is quite open-ended, and that open-endedness is a crucial aspect of critical dystopia. There is no denying that Butler deliberately devises an ambiguous, open ending for *Parable of the Sower*. The book ends following a dialogue between Lauren and her newly-wed husband Bankole, discussing the feasibility of Acorn as a utopian experiment. They hold very different views of Acorn's future:

He signed. "You know, as bad as things are, we haven't even hit bottom yet. Starvation, disease, drug damage, and mob rule have only begun. . . ."

"Well, the group of us here doesn't have to sink any lower," I said.

He shook his shaggy head, his hair, beard, and serious expression making him look more than a little like an old picture I used to have of Frederick Douglass.

"I wish I believe that," he said. Perhaps it was his grief talking. "I don't think we have a hope in hell of succeeding here." (*Sower* 328)

This sense of ambiguity—the oscillation between hope and despair—is further strengthened by the Biblical text "Parable of the Sower" (St. Luke 8: 5-8) attached at the very end of the novel. By retelling the story of how seeds may meet different fates according to the places they are sown, Butler seems to leave open the possibility of Acorn as a utopia.

Nevertheless, if we read *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* together, then the possibility of Acorn as a utopia is greatly diminished. It is true that in *Parable of the Talents* much has been devoted to the description of Acorn as a growing community, and Lauren's sense of mission informs the whole project. Responding to her skeptical husband as to her rationale for sticking to Acorn, Lauren elucidates her utopian mission clearly:

“I want us to go on growing, becoming stronger, richer, educating ourselves and our children, improving our community. Those are the things that we should be doing for now and for the near future. As we grow, I want to send our best, brightest kids to college and to professional schools so that they can help us and in the long run, help the country, the world, to prepare for the Destiny.” (*Talents* 176)

Indeed Acorn could have been a utopia⁸ attentive to issues of race and gender. Acorn, first of all, is marked by racial diversity: “We’re you name it: Black, White, Latino, Asian, and any mixture at all—the kind of thing you’d expect to find in a city. The kids we’ve adopted and the ones who have been born to us think of all the mixing and matching as normal” (*Talents* 43). Acorn is also a refuge for women who suffer from persecution by “Christian America,” a totalitarian theocracy dominating the country. May, a resident of Acorn, for example, suffers a piteous fate. Before she joins Acorn, her tongue has been cut off by fanatics as a way to silence her.⁹

Significantly, it is Christian America’s intrusion into Acorn that allows Lauren to reconsider the feasibility of Acorn as a utopian project. Though Lauren and her followers successfully expel the intruders after being tortured by them for some time, Lauren eventually makes an important decision to burn Acorn (*Talents* 261) and send the residents away:

I sent my people away. We survived slavery together, but I didn’t believe that we could survive freedom together. I broke up the Earthseed community and sent its parts in all directions. I believe it was the right thing to do, but I can hardly bear to think about it. (*Talents* 266).

Here what is important, in light of Butler’s utopian discourse, is Lauren’s enlightened awareness of the futility of either maintaining an eutopian enclave or cherishing the hope that the small community can be politically oppositional. Much as she wants to negotiate a utopian possibility via Acorn, midway in *Parable of the Talents* Butler has spelled the death of that possibility.¹⁰ With the demise

⁸ Lauren’s daughter, the main narrative voice in *Parable of the Talents*, gives the following description of Acorn as a possible utopia: “Here was real community. Here was at least a semblance of security. Here was the comfort of ritual and routine and the emotional satisfaction of belonging to a ‘team’ that stood together to meet challenge when challenge came. And for families, here was a place to raise children, to teach them basic skills that they might not learn elsewhere and to keep them as safe as possible from the harsh, ugly lessons of the world outside” (*Talents* 63).

⁹ Here is Lauren’s description of the subjugation of women by Christian America: “I’ve heard that in some of the more religious towns, repression of women has become more and more extreme. A woman who expresses her opinions, ‘nags,’ disobeys her husband, or otherwise ‘tramples her womanhood’ and ‘acts like a man,’ might have her head shaved, her forehead branded, her tongue cut out, or, worst case, she might be stoned to death or burned” (*Talents* 50).

¹⁰ “If *Sower* is a warning for tomorrow, *Talents* represents a likely outcome which appears very distant from any notion of utopia” (*Hampton* 75).

of the eutopian enclave, “critical dystopia” no longer seems an appropriate label for the *Parable* series.

Yet what are we to take of the fact that, after rejecting Acorn, Lauren is dedicated to the preaching of her new faith—Earthseed? And what are we to take of the fact that *Parable of the Talents* ends with the departure of “the Earth’s first starship, the *Christopher Columbus*” (*Talents* 406), which will help propagate the new faith among the stars? Rejecting the stasis of Acorn as a utopian community, Lauren may have envisioned a more dynamic utopian version as Earthseed is to take root not just on Earth but among the stars. This is how critic Ingrid Thaler reads it when she comments that “[a]n alternative to the dystopian future is achievable in outer space by migrating to other planets” (93). However, this very positive interpretation of Earthseed as a viable utopian path is sharply undercut by its abstraction and mysticism. It even carries sinister implication when drawn into comparison with the spaceship INTEGRAL in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s classic dystopian novel *We*, where the spaceship is an emblem of colonizing and imperialistic endeavors.¹¹ The ambiguity of Earthseed is further attested in Lauren’s daughter Asha Vere’s sheer refusal to endorse her mother’s religion and project. Toward the end of the novel, in Chapter 21, the last chapter before the Epilogue, Asha Vere has a lengthy discussion of the religion of her mother, whom she refers to as a “charismatic, dangerous, heathen cult leader” (*Talents* 395). She starts by uttering her dismissal of any religion because “[e]ach denomination seemed to think that it had the truth and the only truth and its people were going to bliss in heaven while everyone else went to eternal torment in hell” (*Talents* 377-78). She further proposes a more viable alternative to Earthseed’s extraterrestrial project: “I thought the best we could all do was to look after one another and clean up the various hells we’ve made right here on earth” (*Talents* 378). A conversation between her and her uncle Marc also reveals her aversion to Earthseed:

“Do you know anything about these people?” I asked Uncle Marc after reading and hearing a few news items about them. “Are they serious? Interstellar emigration? My god, why don’t they just move to Antarctica if they want to rough it?” . . .

“They’re serious,” he said. “They’re sad, ridiculous, misled people who believe that the answer to all human problems is to fly off to Alpha Centauri.”

¹¹ Several lines from the opening page of *We* can attest to the ambivalent nature of an outer space project: “In 120 days from now the building of the INTEGRAL will be finished. Near at hand is the great, historic hour when the first INTEGRAL will lift off into space. A thousand years ago your heroic forebears subjugated the whole of planet Earth to the power of OneState. It is for you to accomplish an even more glorious feat: by means of the glass, the electric, the fire-breathing INTEGRAL to integrate the indefinite equation of the universe. It is for you to place the beneficial yoke of reason round the necks of the unknown beings who inhabit other planets” (3).

I did laugh. “Is a flying saucer coming for them or what?”

He shrugged. “They’re pathetic. Forget about them.” (*Talents* 379-80)

Asha Vere eventually launches her severe critique of Earthseed: “But to tell the truth, the more I read about Earthseed, the more I despised it. So much needed to be done here on earth—so many diseases, so much hunger, so much poverty, such suffering, and here was a rich organization spending vast sums of money, time, and effort on nonsense. Just nonsense!” (*Talents* 380). In the Epilogue, when Asha Vere eventually meets Lauren and confirms her suspicion that Lauren is her mother,¹² she does not waver in her dismissive judgment of Earthseed. She even chooses not to attend the launching of *Christopher Columbus*. Given the fact that Asha Vere is the chief narrative voice of *Parable of the Talents*, her stance is thought-provoking.

Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*: Apocalypse and Despair

If the *Parable* series is characterized by diminished utopianism, the key note of *Oryx and Crake* seems to be despair. It is simply irrelevant to talk of any “utopian impulse” within the work. The predominance of the apocalyptic in *Oryx and Crake*, according to Veronica Hollinger, is a reflection of the “growing tide of eschatological sentiment in both genre fiction and mainstream cultural analysis” (*Apocalypse Coma* 165) at the turn of the present century. Hollinger observes that the apocalyptic and postapocalyptic rhetoric and imagery continue to dominate contemporary critical theory and science fiction despite the antiapocalyptic critique, which is suspicious of essentialism, universalism, and eschatology¹³ (*Apocalypse Coma* 161-164). Indeed there has been a surge of critical inquiry on Apocalypse recently. In his newly published *Living in the End Times*, Slavoj Žižek talks about “three different versions of apocalypticism today: Christian fundamentalist, New Age, and techno-digital-post-human” (336). John R. Hall’s 2009 book, entitled *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity*, “focus[es] on the apocalyptic in relation to modernity” (8). Recent studies of the apocalypse, moreover, have dwelt extensively on how the trauma experienced by contemporary writers has led to the portrayal of a world that is devoid of any meaning. Vita Fortunati,

¹² Asha Vere, originally named Larkin, was abducted as a kid and united with her uncle Marc as a teenager. Her uncle chose not to tell her about the true identity of her mother.

¹³ For Hollinger and others, the refusal of the logic of apocalypse is in line with Jean-Francois Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarrative,” Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive philosophy, and Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” (*Apocalypse Coma* 161-64).

for example, has discussed how modern apocalypse has drastically changed the biblical myth of the apocalypse. While the traditional apocalypse exemplifies “three basic elements of apocalyptic writing . . . : Destruction, Judgment and Regeneration” (83), its modern counterpart is “completely devoid of its cathartic, regenerative significance” (89) and is instead characterized by “utter hopelessness and nihilism” (89). Elizabeth K. Rosen has also drawn attention to the “profound shift” (xiv) of the apocalypse from “the hopeful biblical story of ultimate judgment and reward” (xiv) to “a synonym for the catastrophic or devastating” (xiv), which she labels “neo-apocalypse” (xv). In fact, according to Lorenzo DiTommaso, “[a]pocalyptic science fiction is one of the principle manifestations of secular apocalypticism” (224), which evolves “alongside the older, biblical form” (224). There is surely no coincidence that recent critics start to take cognizance of the “apocalyptic orientation” (Bosco 158) of contemporary dystopian literature. A recent “call for submissions” from the editors of *After NAFTA: Contemporary North American Dystopian Literature* points out that “[a]t century’s end and after, a dystopian mood—what Peter Fitting calls ‘the sense of a threatened near future’—has been evident in daily life and, of course, national literatures.”¹⁴ Thaler’s 2010 book *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions* devotes a whole chapter on Butler, entitled “Dystopian Future and Utopian Vision: Surviving Apocalypse in Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*.” Mark Bosco, S. J.’s 2010 study of Atwood’s apocalyptic imagination focuses on the pertinence of *Oryx and Crake*, as a contemporary dystopian novel, to offer warnings “about continuing on the ‘road we’re already on’ in our contemporary consumer and corporate culture” (171).¹⁵ Discussing “Apocalyptic SF” in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, Aris Mousoutzanis notices the continuous appeal of the apocalypse for science fiction writers.¹⁶ Mousoutzanis especially cites *Oryx and Crake* as a classic case of “viral apocalypse,” that is, “the extinction of the human race by a plague” (459). Atwood’s version of “viral apocalypse,” however, is not natural but technological catastrophe as the disaster is brought about by a mad scientist’s failed attempt at employing biotechnology for various ends.

¹⁴ The “call for submissions” may be seen at <http://www.h-net.org/announce/show.cgi?ID=182164>.

¹⁵ Mark Bosco, S.J. pinpoints the insight of critic Paul Fiddes in Fiddes’s *The promised End: Eschatology in Theology and literature* (2000): “Indeed, Fiddes charts how the contemporary apocalyptic imagination takes as its premise the conviction that time has reached a critical juncture—that there is a unique importance to the present moment, for the nature of things is being transformed into something vastly different. The apocalyptic orientation of contemporary literature thus impels the reader to act, to direct the future by transforming the here and now” (158).

¹⁶ “The appeal of the apocalypse might have been expected to subside after the year 2000. And yet, in the post-9/11 era, catastrophe fiction has hardly lost its popularity . . .” (Mousoutzanis 461).

Much has been made of Atwood's contribution to the dystopian genre with the writing of *Oryx and Crake*. The work has been described as either Orwellian¹⁷ or Huxleyean.¹⁸ Comparisons have been made with her previous dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*, either accentuating common techniques and concerns¹⁹ or pinpointing their divergence. It is surely a pity that, despite the awareness that Atwood's dystopian vision may have darkened significantly,²⁰ the all-inclusive label—"critical dystopia"—is still being adopted. Orwellian or Huxleyean, what is important about *Oryx and Crake* is the fact that it has foreclosed the possibility of hope for a better future; there is virtually no utopian impulse embedded in the text.

Oryx and Crake opens with a bleak scene. The reader is confronted with a Last Man figure in a post-apocalyptic setting on the very first page of the novel.²¹ There seems to be only one battered man—Snowman, or Jimmy as he was formerly called—left in the devastated world, and he can barely survive by scavenging whatever is left of the human civilization:

Then he goes to the other side of the tree . . . and rummages around in the cache he's improvised from a few slabs of concrete, lining it with wire mesh to keep out the rats and mice. He's stashed some mangoes there . . . and a can of Sveltana No-Meat Cocktail Sausages, and a precious half-bottle of Scotch—no, more like a third—and a chocolate-flavoured energy bar scrounged from a trailer park, limp and sticky inside its foil. He can't bring himself to eat it yet: it might be the last one he'll ever find. (*Oryx and Crake* 4)

The whole world, moreover, appears to be a waste land:

After an hour of walking, Snowman comes out from the former park. He picks his way farther inland, heading along the trashed pleebland boulevards and avenues and roads

¹⁷ *Oryx and Crake* offers readers an old-fashioned dystopian warning about the potentially catastrophic effects of unbridled biogenetic engineering and unstoppable environmental collapse. It plays out an Orwellian 'if this goes on' scenario, satirically dramatizing a sociopolitical near-future of fearsome stupidity and corruption—a very thinly disguised version of our own present—that inevitably leads to apocalyptic disaster, to the literal erasure of anything like a viable future" (Howells, "Stories about the Future" 455).

¹⁸ *Oryx and Crake* (2003) returns to her dystopian concerns, but now in a markedly Huxleyean mood. It finds our current vulnerability to unprecedented disaster arises not from dystopian societies with hostile political structures, underwritten by oppressive metanarratives, and established through threat of imprisonment, torture and death, but rather within the qualitative vacuum of a culture that has lost its 'great' narratives" (Dunning 86).

¹⁹ Eleonora Rao's "Home and nation in Margaret Atwood's Later Fiction" is a case in point (108-12).

²⁰ "I would argue that in the period between them [*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*] her own dystopian vision has darkened in a way similar to Swift's" (Howells, "Stories about the Future" 469).

²¹ "In the opening scene, the end-time is symbolized by the end of time, an ironic revision of the classic revolutionary dream of a year zero, a new beginning" (Garrard 237).

and streets. Wrecked solarcars are plentiful, some piled up in multi-vehicle crashes, some burnt out, some standing intact as if temporarily parked. (*Oryx and Crake* 221)

The buildings that didn't burn or explode are still standing, though the botany is thrusting itself through every crack. Given time it will fissure the asphalt, topple the walls, push aside the roofs. Some kind of vine is growing everywhere, draping the windowsills, climbing in through the broken windows and up the bars and grillwork. Soon this district will be a thick tangle of vegetation. (*Oryx and Crake* 221-22)

As the modern version of the "meditation on ruins" scenario, *Oryx and Crake* is a millennium fable about the end of the world, the end of history. There is no eutopian enclave, nor is there any vestige of hope. The artificially created Crakers—a race deliberately designed by Jimmy's scientist friend Crake—indeed points to the elusiveness of any dream of a posthuman utopia.

Through portrayals of Crake's "Paradice Project," which involves the production of Crakers, Atwood attempts to unravel controversial aspects concerning the discourse of the posthuman, pinpointing adverse effects of the recourse to biotechnology to help establish a posthuman utopia. At first sight, Crakers seem to be rather promising as a posthuman race:

That was his first view of the Crakers. They were naked, but not like the Noodie News: there was no self-consciousness, none at all. At first he couldn't believe them, they were so beautiful. Black, yellow, white, brown, all available skin colours. Each individual was exquisite. (*Oryx and Crake* 302)

Later, we learn that many human "vices" have been deliberately eliminated in the creation of the new race:

Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesses. For instance, racism . . . had been eliminated in the model group, merely by switching the bonding mechanism: the Paradice people simply did not register skin colour. Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it. . . . (*Oryx and Crake* 305)

Yet problems arise as we become aware that whatever "virtues" Crakers may harbor, they lack intrinsic human nature.²² "Virtues" and "vices" are irrelevant to them as they are not capable of comprehending either their relative attributes or divergence. "Hopeless, hopeless" are Snowman's concluding remarks about this new race (*Oryx and Crake* 367), a posthuman dream turned awry. As the story draws to its close,

²² "Atwood is at her most Swiftian when she asks the same philosophical question that *Gulliver's Travels* addresses: What does it mean to be human? This becomes notoriously difficult to answer in an era of gene splicing which produces pigoons with human neocortex tissues in their 'crafty wicked heads' and the perfectly formed Crakers from whose brain all negative human impulses have been erased and who smell like citrus fruit" (Howells, "Bad News" 93).

we see Snowman flees them in search of three humans who reportedly appear on the beach—"From tree to tree he limps, white, a rumor. In search of his own kind" (*Oryx and Crake* 372).

Snowman's potential encountering with fellow human beings has been interpreted by Coral Ann Howells as a strategy on the part of Atwood to strike a positive note.²³ A close reading of the ending of *Oryx and Crake*, though, would reveal that any optimistic interpretation is unlikely. Spotting the three humans at last, Snowman ponders on various possible outcomes of their encounter:

What next? Advance with a strip of bedsheet tied to a stick, waving a white flag? *I come in peace.* But he doesn't have his bedsheet with him.

Or, *I can show you much treasure.* But no, he has nothing to trade with them, nor they with him. . . .

Or, *get the hell off my turf before I blow you off*, as in some old-style Western film. *Hands up. Back away. Leave that spraygun.* That wouldn't be the end of it though. There are three of them and only one of him. . . . They'd sneak up on him in the dark, conk him on the head with a rock. . . .

He could finish it now, before they see him, while he still has the strength. . . . Should he kill them in cold blood? Is he able to? And if he starts killing them and then stops, one of them will kill him first. Naturally. (*Oryx and Crake* 373-74)

Throughout all these possible scenarios the keynote is antagonism rather than cooperation, death rather than life, despair rather than hope. It is no wonder that, right after the passages quoted above, the novel should end with Snowman not being able to do anything but just whispering "What do you want me to do?" to the empty air:

"What do you want me to do?" he whispers to the empty air.

It's hard to know.

Oh Jimmy, you were so funny.

Don't let me down.

From habit he lifts his watch; it shows him its blank face.

Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go. (*Oryx and Crake* 374)

As it is, this ending is neither ambiguous nor open-ended. Snowman has decided to go his own way; what keeps him company will be only "the empty air" and

²³ "What do you want me to do?" (*O & C* 432) are his last words, which leaves a 'tiny peephole' (*HT* 31) for optimism in an open-ended situation unlike the ending of *Gulliver's Travels* ("Margaret Atwood's" 169).

“zero hour.”²⁴ With *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood has indeed offered a very bleak portrayal of mankind’s future.

Given the divergence of Butler and Atwood from “critical dystopia,” it will be more feasible if we can consider the possibility of adopting another label—“post-apocalyptic dystopia”—to describe dystopias around the millennium. In fact the most recent issue of *Extrapolation* (Fall 2010) is a special issue on “Post-apocalyptic Utopias and Dystopias.” Its “call for papers” emphasizes the significance to study “work(s) that speculatively present how the destruction of a culture gives rise to a new one that is utopic or dystopic.”²⁵ The opening remarks of its introductory essay by Dale Knickerbocker, entitled “Apocalypse, Utopia, and Dystopia: Old Paradigms Meet a New Millennium,” are about the topic’s importance for the new millennium.²⁶ The ensuing essays deal with works as diverse as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, Bernard Malamud’s *God’s Grace*, Octavia Butler’s *Parable* series and *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, and zombie narrative. Indeed, as Knickerbocker indicates, the topic may cover “media from print to painting to screens small and large” and “genres including science fiction, fantasy, horror, anime, manga, and young adult fiction” (346). My adoption of the term “post-apocalyptic dystopia,” moreover, is based on several considerations. First of all, the use of the term “post-apocalyptic,” instead of “apocalyptic,” suggests that “post-apocalyptic dystopia” portrays not just “the end of the world” but rather, according to Hall, “the end of the world as we know it” (3). In other words, it “extends, along with what remains of humanity, into a post-apocalyptic period” (DiTommaso 4). DiTommaso explains that for traditional apocalyptic narratives the term “post-apocalyptic” would be an oxymoron since “none of these narratives can accommodate a sequel. There cannot be “post-apocalyptic” anything in these ancient texts” (223).²⁷ Nevertheless, as DiTommaso further points out, “post-apocalyptic” is a valid term in the secular context since it “describes a well-defined category

²⁴ Veronica Hollinger’s comment in this regard is quite pertinent: “Snowman’s discovery of three more human survivors just as the novel is ending rather dimly recalls the structural elegance of the ‘Historical Notes’ appended by Atwood to *The Handmaid’s tale*. . . . If Atwood means to suggest a more open-ended possibility for human action than previously seemed available, however, the suggestion is rather too little too late” (“Stories about the Future” 468; note 15).

²⁵ The “call for papers” may be seen at <http://core.ecu.edu/forl/knickerbockerd/cfpExtrapolation.mht>

²⁶ The author gives several figures to substantiate his observation: “[A] subject search of the *MLA Bibliography* yields no fewer than 616 items containing some form of the word *apocalypse* published in the decade between 1999 and 2009. A similar survey offers 1,965 results for *utopia* (1,642) and/or *dystopia* (323)” (Knickerbocker 345).

²⁷ DiTommaso explains: “In the classic apocalypses, the end of history is a literal event, not a literary setting. Time stops forever with the advent of the eschatological age, at which point the resurrection of the dead occurs (Dan. 12:2-3), the New Jerusalem descends from Heaven (Rev. 21:2), or the Messiah appears for the final judgment (4Ezra 12:33-34), and the narrative terminates” (223).

that embraces hundreds of recognizable literary and cinematic examples” (224).²⁸ Secondly, the use of the term “dystopia,” instead of “science fiction,”²⁹ means to pinpoint “post-apocalyptic dystopia” as perhaps the newest phase in the development of utopian literature.³⁰ It also aims to highlight the subgenre’s aversion to any assumption about utopian perfection. Via “the lens of the apocalypse” (Hall 5), post-apocalyptic dystopia teaches us “to become agnostic about any teleology that assumes the movement of history as ‘progressive’ toward some end point of utopian perfection” (Hall 5). In fact, like previous dystopias, post-apocalyptic dystopia offers vital dystopian critique, warnings that are particularly relevant to the new millennium, as in a mere decade one disaster has been superseding another in scope and magnitude—9/11, SARS, Katrina, Indian Ocean tsunami, financial crisis, Japan earthquake and the ensuing tsunami and nuclear crisis, to name but a few.

To recapitulate, this paper calls for a more nuanced assessment of current dystopian literature and questions the feasibility of lumping together all dystopian works after the 1980s under the umbrella term “critical dystopia.” If critical dystopia, according to current definition, is open-ended, harbors a eutopian enclave, and entertains some kind of hope, then the term falls short of grasping crucial aspects of dystopias around the millennium. Both the diminished utopianism of Butler’s *Parable* series and the apocalypse and despair in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* testify that dystopias around the millennium have undergone some significant transformation. They should be more properly labeled “post-apocalyptic dystopias.”

²⁸ Later in his essay DiTommaso discusses especially three examples: Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* (2006), Walter M. Miller Jr.’s novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), and the 1999 cinema *The Matrix*. Roslyn Weaver, another critic interested in the “appeal of apocalypse in literary science fiction,” has more candidates to offer: Ian Irvine’s *The Human Rites Trilogy* (2000-2004), Andrew McGahan’s *Underground* (2006), and Archie Weller’s *Land of the Golden Clouds* (1998).

²⁹ Giuseppina Botta pinpoints Atwood’s aversion to calling *Oryx and Crake* a science fiction: “In *Moving Targets* (2004), while contextualizing the writing of *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood insists on the fact that her novel is ‘a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper . . . [since] it invents nothing we haven’t already invented or started to invent’” (253).

³⁰ In their discussion of dystopian fiction after 9/11, Efraim Sicher and Natalia Skradol situate “end-of-the-world novels,” a prominent type of post 9/11 dystopia, in the lineage of literary dystopia (165-71); Graham J. Murphy concludes his entry on “Dystopia” in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (2009) by saying that “while it is too early to predict the resilience of the dystopia in the twenty-first century or whether a new dystopian form awaits over the horizon, there can be little doubt that the dystopia thrived in the twentieth century and continues to show its health in the new millennium” (477).

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批判式反烏托邦的重新省思： 巴特勒與愛特伍德的末日反烏托邦

摘要

本論文檢視當代反烏托邦文學的流變，認為以「批判式反烏托邦」一詞涵蓋近三十年的當代反烏托邦小說或有值得商榷處。「批判式反烏托邦」是二十世紀八〇年代以來烏托邦文學的重要發展。此一次文類多具有開放式的結局，聚焦於某種「烏托邦場域」如何採行抗拒策略以重燃希望並擁抱烏托邦願景。然而，千禧年前後的反烏托邦小說實已逸出了「批判式反烏托邦」的範疇。奧塔維亞·巴特勒 1993 年的《撒種的比喻》和 1998 年的《才幹的比喻》，以及瑪格麗特·愛特伍德 2003 年出版的《末世男女》，見證了抗拒力道的漸趨薄弱，烏托邦願景的漸次萎縮，以及希望的漸形消逝。千禧年前後的反烏托邦小說多描摹浩劫後的末日世界，或聚焦於一小群倖存者顛沛流離的慘狀，或著墨於眾人皆亡唯某人獨存的淒涼。此等作品或可稱之為「末日反烏托邦」，以與前此之「批判式反烏托邦」作一區隔。

關鍵詞：反烏托邦，批判式反烏托邦，末日反烏托邦，奧塔維亞·巴特勒，瑪格麗特·愛特伍德，《撒種的比喻》，《才幹的比喻》，《末世男女》