

A Guide to Dystopian Literature

Preface

For almost as long as I have had the privilege of reading, I have read dystopian literature. I started with [*Fahrenheit 451*](#) and [*The Martian Chronicles*](#), but I soon rather quickly devoured [*Brave New World*](#), [*Animal Farm*](#), and [*Nineteen Eighty-Four*](#) as well as many of the works of Robert Heinlein, Ursula Le Guin, Arthur C. Clarke, and Isaac Asimov. Insatiably hungry for such stories, I continued with Ira Levin's rather tame [*This Perfect Day*](#) and the rather effete [*Ecotopia*](#) by Ernest Callenbach. From there, I read the post-apocalyptic stories of Nevil Shute, Stephen King, Jerry Pournelle, Wesley Streiber, and Gordon Dickson, as well as the dark graphic novels of Frank Miller and Alan Moore. I came to Margaret Atwood, Philip K. Dick, C.S. Lewis, Vernor Vinge, and Walter Miller while in college and graduate school. Throughout this literary exploration, I also devoured science fiction on screen—everything from the original *Star Trek* and *The Prisoner* to *Planet of the Apes*, from *Blade Runner* to *Dark City* and *Batman Begins*.

Having been born in 1967 into an intensely Goldwater household and coming of age in the 1980s near a number of Titan II missile silos, I was very much a child of the Cold War, adamantly pro-liberty and just as adamantly anti-Soviet. What I read in the science-fiction horrors and dystopian nightmares had already played out in places such as Nazi Germany and Austria, and was playing out as I read in the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Angola, and Cambodia. Relatively secure under the immense skies of the Great Plains of Kansas, I knew that half of the world lived in some form of a toxically-ideological regime, dehumanizing anti-paradises that promoted fear, hatred, and insanity. The music I listened to—by Kansas, Rush, Emerson, Lake, and

Palmer, and Pink Floyd—only heightened my existential anxiety about the world and its countless inhumanities.

The founder of post-World War II conservatism and extraordinary novelist and fiction writer, Russell Amos Kirk, wrote poignantly:

To most observers, T.S. Eliot among them, it has seemed far more probable that we are stumbling into a new Dark Age, inhumane, merciless, a totalist political domination in which the life of the spirit and the inquiring intellect will be denounced, harassed, and propagandized against: Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, rather than Huxley's Brave New World of cloying sensuality.¹

Kirk suggests in the essay that we might very well be heading into J.R.R. Tolkien's Mordor rather than Orwell's Oceania or Huxley's *Brave New World*. Regardless, he fears we might very well abolish what he refers to sarcastically as "the superstitions of the childhood of the race."

The purpose of this *Imaginative Conservative Guide to Dystopian Literature* (of which this essay is the first part) is to think about the most successful and important of the dystopias of which writers have conceived over the past century or so. In doing so, I offer a rather unapologetically Kirkian analysis of the literature, taking it seriously as deep in thought and imaginative in manifestation. As Kirk did in so many things, I look first to the meanings of terms as well as to the context in which they arose. After a longish discussion of ideology, I turn to the great authors themselves, in chronological order: Robert H. Benson; Aldous Huxley; C.S. Lewis; George Orwell; Ray Bradbury; Walter M. Miller, Jr.; and Margaret Atwood. The gold standard of dystopia belongs to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and I have given it the most space for analysis of all the works discussed. The guide, then, concludes with a relatively brief

examination of authors such as Michael O'Brien, Philip K. Dick, J. Neil Schulman, Ira Levin, and Kurt Vonnegut.

Return to Eden

At some fundamental level, every person longs to return to Eden. This is not just due to the happiness we desire that Eden would have certainly provided—which, of course, would have been wonderful. There is much more we crave at the very depths of our souls. It is the order and the surety that Eden offered that we want and desire at our deepest levels. In Eden, everything and every person has its and his place. As with all things in the created order, we would have had and known our place had Eden survived. We would comprehend fully our relationship to God, to the animals, to the plants, to the very earth itself, and, perhaps most compellingly, to one another and to our very selves. It is worth restating: Every human desires to know his place; to know his past; to know his present and to know his future. Whether this desire springs from physiology and genetics, psychology and the intricacies of the mind, or from the deepest imaginings of the soul, we only know that we want Eden, and the surety, the peace, and the happiness it promised.

For most in the Judeo-Christian West over the last two thousand years, Eden has remained rooted—firmly or symbolically—in a past eloquently described in the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis. Its time has come and gone, but its story remains embedded in our cultural life as one of human tragedy and divine outrage. It exists, if at all, only as a memory of the species. Even then, however one takes the story—as wrapped in symbolism, in factual reality, or in some combination of the two—Eden at its absolute best is served merely as a poor shadow, even when it lived in something more than memory. Always, it was a mere foreshadowing of a transcendent and heavenly New Jerusalem, ruled fully by the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings.

An essential caveat remains, however. Though orthodox Christian believers claim that a real Eden will come only at the end of times through the Grace and Will of the Blessed Trinity, though even Jesus does not know the hour or the day, heterodox and heretical Christians have promoted the idea that one could build the Kingdom of God here and now, in this time and in this place. Or, maybe, if they are a bit more conservative in temperament, they have claimed they will build it tomorrow and next door. They have pulled the building of the Kingdom—a perfected Eden—into this world. An important strain of non-Judeo-Christian thought in the West has also believed in the possibility of Eden in this world as well. There is no small amount of irony in this, as the same people who have advocated such an idea have often seen the biblical story of “Eden” as simply a story with no basis in historical reality. Yet these same persons have willingly believed that such a society could be created in a historical moment. In the frontispiece to his 1967 work, [*Utopia: The Perennial Heresy*](#), Hungarian scholar Thomas Molnar wrote:

From time to time the belief spreads among men that it is possible to construct an ideal society. Then the call is sounded for all to gather and build it—the city of God on earth. Despite its attractiveness, this is a delirious ideal stamped with the madness of logic. The truth is that society is always unfinished, always in motion, and its key problems can never be solved by social engineering. Yet, man must conquer, again and again, the freedom to see this truth. In the intervals he succumbs to the dream of a mankind frozen and final in its planetary pride.²

As typical in this world, those who have advanced the cause of the building of a new Eden have not been completely either Christian or secular, but often a blend of each, forming and fusing in ways that seem unpredictable and chaotic at the moment of mixing, but there nonetheless, and somewhat

logical—if not rational—in hindsight. Some have promoted this rather innocently and seemingly anticipating much of Christianity, such as the utopias of Plato and Virgil. Others, such as Joachim of Flora, Thomiso Campanella, and Francis Bacon have used Christian imagery and longings either to bypass or supersede orthodox theology. In his profound play, “The Rock,” T.S. Eliot explained the movement and the fusing of ideas in ways astounding artistically:

But it seems that something has happened that has never happened before:

though we know not just when, or why, or how, or where.

Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before

That men both deny gods and worship gods, professing first Reason,

And then Money, and Power, and what they call Life, or Race, or Dialectic.

The Church disowned, the tower overthrown, the bells upturned, what have we to do

But stand with empty hands and palms turned upwards

In an age which advances progressively backwards?³

In Eliot’s birth country, the United States, religious and political leaders in the early nineteenth century have promoted a uniquely American understanding of a New Jerusalem. Not atypically, John L. O’Sullivan spoke for much of the American republic (such as it had become, fallen steeply away from the visions of the American founding) when he described the country as the “New Church”:

The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of

American greatness. It its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles: to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High—the Sacred and the True. Its floor shall be a hemisphere—its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens—and its congregation the Union of many Republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions, calling and owning no man master, but governed by God’s natural and moral law of equality, the law of brotherhood—of ‘peace and goodwill among men.’

When such imperialist jingoism intermixed with Darwinianism and progressivism, it created something quite deadly at home and abroad.

To be continued....

¹ Russell Kirk, [Redeeming the Time](#), 4.

² Thomas Molnar, *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), frontispiece.

³ T.S. Eliot, “Choruses from the Rock,” in [Complete Poems And Play](#), 1909-1950 (Harcourt, Brace, 1971), 108.

This blog post has been reproduced with the permission of [The Imaginative Conservative](#). The original blog post can be found [here](#). The views expressed by the author and The Imaginative Conservative are not necessarily endorsed by this organization and are simply provided as food for thought from Intellectual Takeout.