Dystopian Fiction East and West
A Universe of Terror and Trial

Dystopian Fiction East and West suggests that the utopian pursuit of "the best of all possible worlds" is driven less by the search for happiness than by a determined faith in justice. Conversely, the world of dystopian fiction presents us with a society where the ruling elite deliberately subverts justice. In fact, twentieth-century dystopian fiction can be seen as a protest against the totalitarian superstate as the "worst of all possible worlds," a universe of terror and rigged trials.

After an original and comprehensive analysis of the tragic and satitical patterns underlying dystopian classics that warn against the possible emergence of a totalitarian state in the future (*We, Brave New World, Nineteen Eight-Four, Fahrenheit 451, Player Piano,* and *The Handmaid's Tale*), Erika Gottlieb explores a selection of about thirty works in the dystopian genre from East and Central Europe between 1920 and 1991 in the USSR and between 1948 and 1989 in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Written about and under totalitarian dictatorship, in these countries dystopian fiction does not take us into a hypothetical future; instead the writer assumes the role of witness protesting against the "worst of all possible worlds" of terror and trial in a world that *is* but should not be.

ERIKA GOTTLIEB is the author of *The Orwell Conundrum* (1992) and *Lost Angels of a Ruined Paradise: Themes of Cosmic Strife in Romantic Tragedy* (1982).

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Universe of Terror and Trial

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To Paul, Peter, and Julie

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Contents

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INTRODUCTION

Dystopia West, Dystopia East

Dystopian fiction is a post-Christian genre.

If the central drama of the age of faith was the conflict between salvation and damnation by deity, in our secular modern age this drama has been transposed to a conflict between humanity's salvation or damnation by society in the historical arena. In the modern scenario salvation is represented as a just society governed by worthy representatives chosen by an enlightened people; damnation, by an unjust society, a degraded mob ruled by a power-crazed elite. Works dealing with the former describe the heaven or earthly paradise of utopia; those dealing with the latter portray the dictatorship of a hell on earth, the "worst of all possible worlds" of dystopia.

Even a casual reading of such classics of dystopian fiction as Zamiatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, or Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* will make it obvious that underlying this secular genre the concepts of heaven and hell are still clearly discernible. In fact, the post-Enlightenment author's vision of a collective hell for society is not that far removed from Dante's medieval dream-vision of Dis, the city of hell. As for the function of hell in the overall framework of *The Divine Comedy*, we should remember that the purpose of the narrator-protagonist's entire journey in hell is to serve him – and his readers – as a warning to avoid the sin that condemns the sinner to eternal damnation, and to pursue instead the ways up to heaven: Beatrice, who watches over Dante from above, sends to him Virgil, the voice of reason, to lead him out of the Forest of Error – the pain and confusion caused by his sinful state. Under Virgil's guidance the narrator-protagonist has the unparallelled privilege of travelling through the nine circles of hell unscathed in order to witness the endless suffering of all those who died as sinners. Beatrice makes Dante confront these horrors in order to warn him about the possible consequences of his own erring ways and thereby to encourage him *not* to end up in hell.

The strategies of Zamiatin, Huxley, and Orwell are also significantly the strategies of warning. As readers we are made to contemplate Zamiatin's One State, Huxley's World State, and Orwell's Oceania, each a hellscape from which the inhabitants can no longer return, so that we realize what the flaws of our own society may lead to for the next generations unless we try to eradicate these flaws today.

The correspondence between religious and secular concepts in dystopian fiction is still so strongly felt that, if we examine *Nineteen Eighty-four* closely as the prototype of the genre, twentieth-century dystopian fiction reveals the underlying structure of a morality play. Orwell's protagonist, a modern Everyman, struggles for his soul against a Bad Angel; he struggles for the dignity of the Spirit of Man against the dehumanizing forces of totalitarian dictatorship.

The parallel could be carried further. While the medieval morality play implies that the fate of the human soul will be decided at the Last Judgment, the modern dystopian narrative puts the protagonist on an ultimate trial where his fate will be decided in confrontation with the Bad Angel in his secular incarnation as the Grand Inquisitor, high priest of the state religion and God-like ruler of totalitarian dictatorship. Given the injustice endemic to the "bad place," this decision will invariably be in the negative: in Zamiatin's *We*, D-503 is sentenced to lobotomy; John Savage in *Brave New World* to madness brought on by loneliness and ostracism; Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-four* to a transformation of the individual personality until it embraces all it abhors, a state worse than the effects of lobotomy. The sinister and irrevocable transformation of the protagonist represents the irrevocable damnation of his society. It is one of the most conspicuous features of the warning in these classics of dsytopian fiction that once we allow the totalitarian state to come to power, there will be no way back.

As for the origin of the term "dystopia," we find it of comparatively recent coinage. In his 1946 preface to *Brave New World* Huxley still refers to the bad place as a utopia, using the term he felt stood for any speculative structure taking us to the future. It was only in 1952 that J.Max Patrick[1] recommended the distinction between the good place as "eutopia" and its opposite, the bad place, as "dystopia."

In discussing a selection of Russian novels written since Stalin's death and critical of the Soviet regime's allegedly utopian purpose, Edith Clowes borrows Gary Morson's term of "meta-utopia" – that is, a work that is "positioned on the borders of the utopian tradition and yet mediates between a variety of utopian modes." To distinguish these books from what she sees as the far more limited scope of dystopian fiction, she argues that meta-utopia represents a "much greater challenge to current readers … than dystopian novels do" because it "refers

to a social consciousness involving social and cultural pluralism." By contrast, according to Clowes, dystopian novels advocate a "nostalgic revision of the past age" and "deconstruct utopian schemes, only to abandon the notion of a beneficial social imagination," thereby embodying a "nihilistic attitude toward both the present and the future, closing both off to a new imaginative possibility."[2] But is her definition of dystopia valid if we examine it in the light of such classic examples of dystopian novels as Zamiatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*? And is the meta-utopia of Tertz's *The Trial Begins* or Daniel's *This is Moscow Speaking*, included among Clowes's examples, indeed all that different from the intentions, attitudes, and narrative strategies of these three classics of dystopian satire? This study will answer both questions in the negative.

As for a thematically more neutral definition of this "bad place,"[3] Lyman Sargent suggests that we look at dystopia as a social structure that is worse[4] than the present social system. If, however, we listen to postmodern criticism, relying on thinkers like Foucault, for example, any society functioning at the present time (or possibly at any other time as well) could be regarded as such a "bad place."[5] Although I believe that the postmodern critic's overly broad use of the notion of dystopia is counterproductive to a clear definition of what is unique about dystopian thought or dystopian fiction, I also believe that Professor Sargent's definition of dystopia as a system worse than our own probably does not cover all works with a dystopian impetus. In fact, if we take a look at works of political criticism produced in Eastern and Central Europe commenting on the injustice rampant in the writer's own society during periods of dictatorship and terror, these works are still clearly expressive of the dystopian impulse, although they deal with the writer's own society "as is." In other words, there are historical phenomena that create societies that should be described as dystopic, societies where the literary imagination refuses to envisage a world worse than the existing world of reality. Therefore, before we are to arrive at a comprehensive delineation of the salient characteristics of dystopian fiction as a genre, maybe we should also define the characteristics of a society that is dystopic.

It has been said by Hungarian essayist Béla Hamvas that the modern age has been spent "under the aegis of the tension between Messianism and dictatorship."[6] Throughout the nineteenth century the world awaited a secular Messiah to redress the ills created by the Industrial Revolution in a double incarnation: first as science, which was to create the means to end all poverty, and second as socialism, which was to end all injustice. By eagerly awaiting the fulfilment of these promises, the twentieth century allowed the rise of a false Messiah: state dictatorship.

It may not be unfair to speculate that the oscillation between the mask of the Messiah and the cruel face of an all-powerful Dictator behind the mask is what delineates the parameters of dystopian thought and creates the suspense in dystopian fiction of the protagonist's nightmare journey to "unmask" the secrets held by the "High Priest" of the political system. In Zamiatin's *We*, *Huxley's Brave New World*, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* this nightmare journey ends invariably in the protagonist's trial, followed by retribution tantamount to his destruction or, even more horrifying, to his sinister transformation.

In the context of the Soviet experiment of building socialism, Koestler and Orwell were certainly not the first, although they were among the best-known thinkers in the 1940s who decided to show the real face of dictatorship behind the Messianic mask. This effort at "unmasking" was not well received by their confrères, the leftist intellectuals in the West, whose virtually religious infatuation with the Soviet Union as the only country in the world that was building socialism started at the time of the 1917 revolution. For some this infatuation was sustained through Stalin's show trials in the 1930s and into the early 1950s; for many, probably right up to the violent overthrow of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, and for still others right up to the crushing of the Prague Spring by Soviet tanks in 1968.

At these various junctures in history the leftist intelligentsia in the West was confronted with the disheartening fact that the Messianic promise of the age-old utopian dream of socialism as a cure for the clearly obvious pathologies of capitalism had merely led to new pathologies in the form of the virulent psychoses of totalitarian dictatorship.

What should these new pathologies be attributed to? Stalin's pathological personality? To the fact that the young Soviet Union had to struggle with potentially overwhelming external enemies? Or to the historical irony that made the Bolsheviks successors of an autocratic regime that had created a tempting precedent? Perhaps to the fact that Stalin's revolution (or counterrevolution) in 1929 gave rise to a ruthlessly self-serving new bureaucracy – a new ruling class? These are not the questions to ponder at this point. Maybe one is left frustrated discussing the flaws of socialism because, as Chesterton said of Christianity, it is something that has never been tried yet. Thus, in the case of Stalin's regime, one could argue that the slogans ostensibly drawing on Marx's theories of socialism were nothing but a camouflage for Russian nationalism and imperialism, or simply for Stalin's and his self-serving elite's thirst for power.

Other historians and political analysts, of course, concentrate on elements in Marxist theory that they see as conducive to the development and legitimization of a totalitarian regime. Some ponder whether

we should not relate the terror and coercion of Stalinism to the intellectual coercion implied by Marx's notion of historical determinism. Others raise the question whether the Party's oppression of all opponents and its disregard for the universal principles of human justice are not the consequences of Marx's failure to provide a sufficient model for a political process of persuasion and for a juridical system based on respect for human rights. Marx did make the assumption that once the proletariat came to power and established socialism, the very notion of political and legal mechanisms that had been necessary to resolve conflicts created by the economic injustice inherent in a class society would become superfluous.[7]

Be that as it may, in the field of history the shocking reversal between high utopian expectations and deep disillusionment with the Soviet attempt at socialism has been central to the nervous vacillation of the utopian-dystopian axis of our times, demonstrable not only in the more abstract realm of political thought but also in the internal and external politics of individual nations or entire power blocs.

In the realm of literature it has been a task worthy of the greatest of political satirists to comment on this reversal as having revealed the cruelty of dictatorship under the false Messiah's mask of hypocrisy, and to exhort the reader to see beyond the mask. At the same time it has also been a task awaiting the pen of the tragedian to express the emotional charge of the loss of faith and the disillusionment over what Camus called "the tragedy of our generation … to have seen a false hope."[8]

Exploring this double impetus of satire and tragedy in the plethora of dystopian fiction in the twentieth century, this book asks three fundamental questions:

First, what are the most salient characteristics of dystopian fiction if we concentrate on such well-known representatives of this speculative genre as Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*? All these works are political satires, projections of the fear that their writers' own society in the West – a term confined here somewhat arbitrarily to Great Britain and North America – could be moving towards a type of totalitarian dictatorship already experienced as historical reality in the USSR and in Eastern and Central Europe. Although written in Russia, Zamiatin's *We* also belongs to this tradition by virtue of its undeniable influence on Orwell and the likelihood of its direct or indirect influence on Huxley. Written in 1920, only three years after the revolution and almost a decade before the Stalinist consolidation of terror, *We* also projects its writer's fear of a fully totalitarian rule almost ten years ahead of its realization;

undoubtedly, at the time of writing the novel Zamiatin still believed he could warn his contemporaries that such a system could take hold in the future.

But if fear of the emergence of a totalitarian regime is the major component of the dystopian impulse, can we still speak of dystopian fiction in the Soviet Union *after* Zamiatin and in the satellite countries *after* 1948? (The East is confined here, for the sake of space, to the USSR between the 1920s and 1991, and to Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989.) Can we speak of dystopian fiction in a society where the "greatest fear" so typical of this speculative, quasi-prophetic, exhortatory genre has already been fulfilled and become a fact of life, in the form of the State's "totalist" control through censorship, propaganda, intimidation, and indoctrination?

Finally, if we agree that works of dystopian fiction indeed emerged in the USSR and in the three satellite countries in the periods of dictatorship, how do these works differ from their Western counterparts, whose aim it was to warn against and *prevent* the coming of the nightmare state?

DYSTOPIA EAST AND WEST

The West

Let us begin, then, with our first question about some of the more general characteristics of dystopian fiction in our selection. Zamiatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* constitute a clear counterpoint to utopian fiction; in addition, however, we must realize that the dystopian novel itself demonstrates the push and pull between utopian and dystopian perspectives. To a significant extent, each of these novels makes us ponder how an originally utopian promise was abused, betrayed, or, ironically, fulfilled so as to create tragic consequences for humanity.

THE PUSH AND PULL BETWEEN UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN PERSPECTIVES If we begin with *We*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-four*, it becomes obvious that each dystopian society contains within it seeds of a utopian dream. These are articulated by the ruling elite's original promise when its new system was implemented, a promise that then miscarried (in *We*); was betrayed (in *Nineteen Eighty-four*); or was fulfilled in ways that show up the unexpected shortcomings of the dream (in *Brave New World*).

The inner contradiction between utopian dream and dystopian reality was, by the way, also a significant element of specifically anti-fascist

dystopias, such as Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here,* and Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night*. However, the fascist utopia, even in its original promise, carried only limited appeal for humanity as a whole, since it was not only an elitist utopia designed exclusively for a master race but also a dream envisaging the elimination or domination of "inferior races" – the larger portion of humanity. The fear that such a "dream" might still have its followers in the West motivated Lewis and Burdekin, as it did Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, which could also be read as some kind of non-fictional dystopian warning against fascism, exploring the potentially fascist elements of the patriarchal society of 1930s England.

In contrast to fascism, the age-old dream of socialism was a utopia incorporating the universal premises of humanism and therefore had an extremely wide appeal. Through the works of Marx, Engels, and the explication and analysis of their work, socialism became the foundation of one of the most comprehensive and compelling thought-systems ever created. The spectacle of this utopian aspiration buttressed by such a powerful theory turning into dystopian societies of terror and dictatorship produced a veritable onslaught of dystopian fiction in our century. The greatest fear of the authors of such fiction was that the totalitarian dictatorship operating in the Soviet Union and later in the Soviet bloc could too readily be condoned in the West precisely because the Western intelligentsia could not, or would not, recognize that it was terror that this allegedly socialist regime shared with its allegedly greatest opponent, fascism. Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four* are among the most widely known works that articulate this fear.

In dystopias like *Fahrenheit 451*, *Player Piano*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* the new American ruling class does not start out with a consistent utopian ideology; it promises only to deal with an emergency situation, to find an allegedly efficient solution to a crisis. This "solution," then, becomes a modified system of a quasi-utopian ideology expressed through a limited number of slogans of the state religion. However, none of the High Priests – Bradbury's Fire Chief Beatty, Vonnegut's Papa Kroner, or Atwood's Commander – feels it necessary to justify his own role or to cover up for specific elements of totalitarianism such as denunciations, oppression, and the lies of propaganda, elements borrowed – without the coherent ideology – from both Stalinist and Hitlerian models of dictatorship. (I tend to think that the dystopias of Anthony Burgess's *Ripening Seed* or *1985* could probably also be classified as such "emergency" dystopias, where, except for unleashing the mass hysteria of violence against a specific group of scapegoats, the elite does not even pretend to offer the population a comprehensive faith or utopian ideology to believe in.)

Undoubtedly, *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Player Piano*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* are addressed primarily to the Western reader; their most specific aim is to explore the social-political pathologies of capitalism in the context of Britain or North America. Nevertheless, the intensity of the "greatest fear" that drives the visionary aspect of Western dystopian fiction happens to be the fear that by falling for the seductively utopian promises of a dictatorship hiding behind the mask of the Messiah, Western democracy could also take a turn in the direction of totalitarianism, following the precedents of historical models already established by fascist and communist dictatorships in Eastern and Central Europe.

THE DELIBERATE MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE: THE PROTAGONIST'S TRIAL The next common characteristic of the six works also follows from the conflict between the elite's original utopian promise to establish a just, lawful society and its subsequent deliberate miscarriage of justice, its conspiracy against its own people. The mystery of this conspiracy and of the elite's self-justification will be revealed to the protagonist at his own trial, followed by inevitably harsh punishment. The experience of the trial is imbued with the nightmare atmosphere typical of dystopia. We become aware of the duality of law and lawlessness, and the contradiction between advanced technology and a psychologically, spiritually regressive mentality at the heart of the regime. In this study I suggest that the protagonist's trial as an emblem of injustice is a thematically and symbolically central device of dystopian fiction. The structural and thematic importance of the trial is probably most conspicuous in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, where in the course of Winston's trial, which takes up one-third of the novel, in the very process that systematically deprives him of selfhood, consciousness, loyalty, and memory, the value we set on selfhood and consciousness are made fully apparent. The protagonist's trial plays a similarly significant role in *Brave New World*, *We*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Player Piano*, as the central scene that juxtaposes the protagonist's belief in individualism with the elite's ideology, aimed at the elimination of the individual. (In *The Handmaid's Tale* the ruling elite of Gilead no longer stages either public or secret trials: the recurring theatricals of "salvaging" combine the process of interrogation, trial, and execution within the same horrifying ritual.)

A BARBARIC STATE RELIGION – NIGHTMARE VISION The next characteristic of these six works still follows from the experience of the trial, where the protagonist recognizes that instead of the rule of civilized law and justice, dystopian society functions as a primitive

state religion that practises the ritual of human sacrifice. It is here that the reasoning that motivates the dystopian state's dualities of law and lawlessness, propaganda and truth, advanced technology and regression to barbarism is revealed to us, and this revelation further contributes to the nightmare atmosphere of the dystopian novel. Orwell's Oceania is ruled by hatred, fear, and treachery; Bradbury's world by firemen who do not extinguish fires but set fire to books, houses, and people; Vonnegut's Ilium by robots and computers that make human beings feel superfluous; Atwood's Gilead by men who use women as baby machines, eventually to discard them to die of the consequences of cleaning up nuclear waste. We are faced here with societies in the throes of a *collective nightmare*. As in a nightmare, the individual has become a victim, experiencing loss of control over his or her destiny in the face of a monstrous, suprahuman force that can no longer be overcome or, in many cases, even comprehended by reason. Beyond the sense of displacement typical of nightmares, we also become aware of the peculiar logic of a mythical, ritualistic way of thinking in dystopian societies, not unlike the logic inherent in obsessive-compulsive disorders and in what Freud observed as the coupling between megalomania and paranoia.[9]

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S PRIVATE WORLD What looms large in these six writers' greatest fear of totalitarian dictatorship is the particular horror of the monster state's propensity to combine the spirit of a barbaric state religion with advanced technologies capable of spreading propaganda and indoctrination by electronic means and through the use of mind-altering drugs. The power of the modern state not only to control action but also to enter what Orwell called "the few cubic centimetres" within the skull makes it capable of achieving total domination over the individual's private self, family feelings, sexuality, thoughts, and emotions.

In effect, the destruction of the demarcation line between the public and the private spheres is one of the most striking common characteristics of the societies depicted by the six novels in question.[10] In Zamiatin's One State the inhabitants live under a glass dome within ultramodern glass cages. In Orwell's Oceania, Big Brother's eyes follow Winston mysteriously in every situation, even in his dreams. In Huxley's World State people are never left alone. It follows from this emphasis on public exposure that even the most intimate personal relationships are prescribed and controlled by the state: in Oceania males and females are to deny their sexuality; in the World State and the One State they have to abide by the rules of state-enforced promiscuity. In *Fahrenheit 451* human relationships are so depersonalized

that husband and wife simply do not remember any distinctive event from their private lives together; in *The Handmaid's Tale* sexual relationships are regimented and supervised by the ruling elite, ostensibly in the interest of producing the maximum number of children for the state but actually mainly to eliminate chances of forming personal relationships and private loyalties. The state's intent in all five novels is to deny the bonds of private loyalty and thereby to enforce not only uncritical obedience to the state but also a quasi-religious worship of the state ideology. In accordance with the same intent, the bond between parent and child is also radically broken: in Oceania children are trained to denounce their parents; in the One State and the World State there are no families. The overall effect is that actions and emotions that were previously associated with the individual's private world suddenly become public domain, fully under the punitive control of the state machine.

Even more important, by breaking down the private world of each inhabitant the monster state succeeds in breaking down the very core of the individual mind and personality – what remains is the pliable, numb consciouness of massman. Zamiatin, Huxley, and Orwell, as it were in unison, warn that once *we* accept such a process, it could become world-wide and irreversible. Ultimately, by being relentlessly bombarded by state propaganda while also being deprived of privacy and intimate relationships, we may be deprived of the core of our being, our personal memory of the past.

THE PROTAGONIST'S PURSUIT OF HISTORY: THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF A RECORD OF THE PAST Consequently, probably one of the most typical "messages" of dystopian fiction is that access to the records of the past is vital to the mental health of any society. Living in a nightmare world of mythical thought approaching the logic of a mental disorder that no longer differentiates between present and past, cause and effect, or lies and truth, each protagonist is eager to obtain and hold on to a genuine record of the past, a past the totalitarian regime would like to distort or deny completely. In order to create or obtain such a record, the protagonists in *We*, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* decide to keep a diary. In *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Nineteen Eighty-four* the protagonists pursue what each considers the most important books from the past: Shakespeare and the Bible in *Brave New World*; the Bible and the classics of nineteenth-century fiction in *Fahrenheit 451;* and Goldstein's Book in *Nineteen Eighty-four.* It is through these diaries or these books that the protagonist wants to break the isolation the dictatorship has created by cutting

off man from woman, parent from child, friend from friend, the present from the past, and the world within from the world outside the regime.

DYSTOPIA AS A NO-MAN'S LAND BETWEEN SATIRE AND TRAGEDY The next two common characteristics of the Western model of dystopia relate more directly to the structural features of genre (although, naturally, the thematic and generic characteristics are closely related). Generically speaking, all six novels so far examined occupy some kind of no-man's land between tragedy and satire. The protagonist's experience and fate is tragic in the sense that it deals with irrevocable loss on the personal level: he or she loses his position, his beloved, his freedom, and in the first three examples faces a loss possibly even worse than the loss of life: the loss of his private, individual identity.

Yet the tragic elements of the protagonist's fate nothwithstanding, the overall strategies of the dystopian novel are those of political satire. The writer offers militant criticism of specific aberrations in our own, present social-political system by pointing out their potentially monstrous consequences in the future. The function of the message is that of a warning, an exhortation. "Should you not recognize these specific aberrations in your present, and should you allow them to go on unchecked," the writer can be heard to say to us, "you will no longer be able to prevent the development of the horrifying nightmare system of London 651 AF, Oceania, or Gilead, in which the protagonist's tragic fate will have become simply inevitable." Indeed, different as these six works may be from one another, they have this common generic denominator: each is a tragedy, but a somewhat unusual form of tragedy that also accommodates the didactic strategies of satire, a tragic story within the framework of an exhortation, a tragedy in the conditional mood only.

But let us take a closer look at the relationship between tragic and dystopian perspectives. Clearly, if we think of *Oedipus Rex* or *Hamlet*, it becomes evident that great tragedy touches upon the essential elements of the utopian-dystopian discourse. As long as that incestuous parricide, Oedipus, is basking in the false security of his kingship, the polis of Thebes turns into a dystopic nightmare society of illness, corruption, and paralysis. The plague-stricken society cannot purge itself or renew itself (babies are stillborn) until its ruler undertakes to administer justice by seeking out and punishing the criminal who upset the legitimacy of the social-political order by murdering Laius, king of Thebes.

The concept of utopia as a well-run model of an ideal state of justice, and its nightmarish reversal as a systematic miscarriage of justice in dystopia, play an equally important role in many other tragedies. In

fact, utopia and dystopia could be defined as the mirror-images Hamlet holds up to his mother in the famous closet scene in order to make her recognize the right moral course she should be taking. Hamlet forces Gertrude to look at the images of two brothers: "Look here upon this picture and on this / The counterfeit presentment of two brothers" (III.iii.53–4). The first picture is the portrait of Hamlet's father, the model of the good king, the legitimate ruler who assures justice and harmony in society, a structure that (except for the pastoral retreat from politics in the Forest of Arden and the retreat into magic on Prospero's island) comes closest to Shakespeare's notion of utopia. The second picture is the portrait of Claudius, the ruler who came to the throne by breaking a law based on the universal concept of justice and who, if he wants to maintain his ill-gotten power, is obliged to keep on lying and committing one act of injustice after another until the entire state of Denmark comes to mirror its ruler's corruption and is led to its disintegration. (In his 1996 film version Kenneth Branagh directed *Hamlet* as such a political parable of dystopia. After Hamlet's death the troops of Fortinbras hurl themselves at the glass doors, meeting no resistance at the fortress of Elsinor, which has been left weak and defenceless by the corrupt king and his intrigues against his own people. Branagh adds a final touch of dystopian violence: as the troops take over, they knock down the statue of Hamlet's father, the reminder of the good king's rule of justice.[11]) How readily the characters of Claudius, Edmund, Macbeth, or Richard III lead us to smile in recognition as they prefigure the virtually unstoppable spiral of deceit and violence familiar from the workings of modern dystopian societies, where "what deceit wins, cruelty must keep" (Yeats), so that the original act of violent injustice is bound to breed further and further deceit and further and further violence.

Much as we acknowledge the utopian/dystopian propensities of tragedy, few of us can read such classics of political satire as *Gulliver's Travels* or *Candide* without experiencing occasionally something of the tragic shudder of Sophoclean irony, the ultimately tragic fate of man's ambition to reach perfection of self or society. Both tragedy and satire are capable of staking out the extremes of the human predicament: not only *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* but also *Gulliver's Travels* and *Nineteen Eighty-four* make us ponder such ultimate questions as What does it mean to be human? Is there a point at which we could be made to lose our humanity?

Still, we should recognize the fundamental difference between tragedy and political satire. Unlike tragedy, dystopian satire is not satisfied with asking questions, and the questions it asks are not directly about our place in the universe and the limits of our free will in the face of

suprahuman forces. Dystopian satire focuses on society, not on the cosmos, and it has a primarily social-political message, a didactic intent to address the Ideal Reader's moral sense and reason as it applies to the protagonist's – and our own – place in society and in history.

THE PROTAGONIST'S WINDOW ON THE PAST: TWO TIME-PLANES Ultimately, by recognizing the vital significance of a truthful approach to history in the protagonist's life, readers become increasingly aware of the important distinction between the two time-planes inherent in the structure of these dystopian novels. The protagonist's tragic fate is in the conditional mood only: how it plays out in reality depends on whether we come to understand the historical process that could destroy our society, so that we may break the impasse of the historical prediction. Here we come to another salient characteristic of dystopian satire. However compelling the protagonist's personal fate in the novel, as Ideal Readers we eventually have to recognize our distance from him or her: he lives on a time-plane different from our own; he exists in our hypothetical future. In fact it is crucial not only that we identify the difference between his time and ours but also that we recognize that these two time-planes are joined in a cause-effect relationship. Each of the six novels that we have chosen to represent the Western model of dystopia contains what I would call a "window on history," a strategic device through which the writer reveals the roots of the protagonist's dystopian present in the society's past. Of course, what the protagonist defines as the past happens to be the present of the Ideal Reader to whom the exhortation is addressed at the time the satire is written: "Beware: the protagonist's present could become your future." Consequently, it is in our world of the present that we should fight the specific trends that the satirist suggests could, but should not be allowed to, develop into the monstrous nightmare world of the future.

Each writer focuses on a different trend he finds threatening. In *Brave New World*, for example, we hear about the premoderns of the 1930s – "our" time, that is, the time of the writing of the novel – who were first faced with the challenge to distinguish between two alternatives: use the machine to serve humanity, or enslave humanity in the service of the machine. The world of 651 AF reveals the consequences of the premodern's failure (our potential failure) to rise to this challenge.[12]

In *Nineteen Eighty-four* the butt of the satire is probably more specifically focused. It is the satirist's Adversary, the Western intellectual of the late 1940s, who accepts and condones the totalitarian methods of Stalinism. Orwell's point is that the Adversary's condoning of Stalinism as a representative of true socialism is based on the Adversary's readiness to worship the God of Power. It is this totalitarian

mentality in the West in the 1940s that could lead to the horrors of Oceania, a state consciously modelled on former totalitarian regimes such as Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. That the transformation of the West came from within and not from a foreign power is demonstrated by the perfect equilibrium that exists among Oceania, Eastasia, and Eurasia in 1984.

Since Winston is probably a far more psychologically compelling character than any of his fellow protagonists from the other novels, as readers we need a more complex distancing mechanism in order to be able to disassociate ourselves from the character's tragic fate while decoding the satirist's social-political message to us. Orwell achieves this distancing by introducing two "books within the book," Goldstein's Book, which describes how the past of the 1930s and 1940s led to the world of Oceania in 1984, and the Dictionary of Newspeak, which draws attention to the possible future of Oceania in 2035. Urged to contemplate the distance between these different time-planes, we are also expected to realize that Winston's fate is acted out not in our present but in our hypothetical future. The catastrophe responsible for his tragedy is still a catastrophe that we could help to prevent. (The conference of the historians after the fall of Gilead – the appendix to Atwood's novel – serves the same purpose of emotional distancing between the reader and the protagonist, and to the same effect.)

Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1951), Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952), and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) are just as consistent in establishing the relationship between what the author sees as the flaws in his or her society in the present and the monstrous consequences of these flaws that could result in a nightmarish state in the future. In *Fahrenheit 451* the author lets the protagonist find out that the monstrous regime in his present could come about only because of the negative trends rampant in the early 1950s: the acceptance of political censorship in the McCarthy era, and the shift from the reading of the classics in favour of reading the *Reader's Digest* or watching television. In *Player Piano* we find out that it was the atrophy of the humanities and the worship of the machine, particularly the computer, in the early 1950s, together with the acceleration of technology after a Third World War, that prepared the monster world of the Ilium of the future. As for *The Handmaid's Tale*, the fundamentalist, anti-feminist military dictatorship of the Gilead of the future could come to power only as a result of our political sins of the 1980s: the effects of fallout following nuclear experiments; the rise of fundamentalism, with its anti-feminist backlash; and our inadequate resistance to these phenomena. The writer of dystopian fiction offers in each novel a warning against a future that could and should still be avoided by the Ideal Reader's generation.

It is only when we recognize the distinction between these two time-planes as well as their cause-effect relationship that we can proceed to decode the specific targets of the dystopian satire. This distinction between the two time-planes that forms an essential characteristic of the Western tradition of speculative fiction is conspicuously absent from the dystopian works written under the totalitarian dictatorships of Eastern and Central Europe.

The East: The USSR, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia

Having observed the interaction between some characteristic structural and thematic elements of the dystopian genre in six representatives of its classic Western model, I turn to my second and third questions. If the central impulse behind dystopian fiction is the writer's warning against the emergence of the monster state of totalitarian dictatorship in the future, can we speak of a genre of dystopian fiction in the Soviet Union between 1920 and 1991 and in what used to be the Soviet bloc between 1948 and 1989? If there are indeed expressions of the dystopian impetus in fiction here, do these works show a significant difference from their Western counterparts, and if so, what is the nature of their difference?

To narrow down the vast material relevant to this question, parts 2 and 3 of this study concentrate on a selection of works of fiction written under various phases of totalitarian dictatorship in the USSR, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, dealing with the deliberate miscarriage of justice. After a brief examination of the Guidelines of Socialist Realism, which prescribed how writers should sing the praises of the "best of all possible worlds" of the state utopia, we look at a selection of political novels that demonstrate the reality of a dystopic nightmare beyond the facade of the state utopia, a genuinely dystopic society that complies in its essential features with most of the characteristics we have just delineated in the hypothetical societies of the Western classics of dystopian fiction.

The central thesis of this book, then, is based on the observation that in those works that the Western reader tends to regard as the classics of dystopian fiction, authors envisage a monster state in the future, a society that reflects the writers' fear of the possible development of totalitarian dictatorship in their own societies. By contrast with this body of literature, after Zamiatin the Eastern and Central European works of dystopia – written about, against, and under totalitarian dictatorship – present us with a nightmare world not as a phantasmagorical vision of the future but as an accurate reflection of the "worst of all possible worlds" experienced as a historical reality.

Because the political criticism behind the dystopian impulse in the East in this period deals with various phases of the nightmare of historical reality, the works to be explored will be arranged in chronological order according to the historical period they deal with. Part 2 concentrates on the period between 1919 and the 1950s. We begin with three accounts of the nightmarish phases of revolutionary terror in Russia between 1919 and 1921: Victor Serge's *Conquered City*, Vladimir Zazubrin's "The Chip," and Alexander Rodionov's *Chocolate*. We proceed to fiction dealing with the Stalinist revolution of forced collectivization, forced industrialization, and the Moscow show trials of the 1930s in Andrei Platonov's *Foundation Pit*, Anatolij Ribakov's *Children of the Arbat*, and Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. We turn then to novels about the frightening rise of Russian chauvinism during the Second World War and a return to terror in the post-war years, in Vassily Grossman's *Life and Fate,* Abram Tertz Sinyavski's *The Trial Begins,* and Juliy Daniel's *Moscow Speaking*.

Part 3 deals with the experience of four countries in the Soviet bloc up to the late 1980s. The years of terror in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia between 1949 and 1953, and during the recurring crackdowns of the post-Stalin era, are represented by Jerzy Andzrejewski's *Inquisitors* and *Appeal*, Marek Hlasko's *Graveyard*, by the short fiction of Ladislav Fuks' *Mr Mundstock* and *The Cremator*, and by short stories and *feuilletons* of Istvan Örkény, Ludwik Vaculik, and Slavomir Mrozek. Three plays from Czechoslovakia represent the public theatricals of show trials and the satirical treatment of these trials on the stage, in Ivan Klima's *The Castle*, Petr Karvas's *The Big Wig*, and Vaclav Havel's *Memorandum*. The spiral of entropy that follows the spiral of terror is represented in Hungarian Tibor Déry's *Mr G.A. in X*, Polish Tadeusz Konwicki's *A Minor Apocalypse*, and Russian Alexander Zinoviev's *Radiant Future*. Finally, we look briefly at the reappearance of dystopia as speculative fiction with its futuristic structure of two time-planes in Vladimir Voinovich's *Moscow 2042* (1987), Vassily Aksyonov's *The Island of Crimea* (1983), György Dalos's *1985* (1990), and György Moldova's *Hitler in Hungary* (1972, 1992).

No doubt, all these are works of dystopian fiction because they display most of the thematic and generic elements we have observed in the six classics of the genre; they describe a hell on earth, an absurd, death-bound social-political system where the elite deliberately conspires against its own people, against the most universal principles of justice, with emphasis on nighmarish rigged trials, with make-believe accusations followed by all-too-real sentences to hard labour or death. There is also an interaction between utopian and dystopian perspectives within the same work, as the writer – up to the 1980s, a critic

from within – struggles to maintain his faith in socialism against an allegedly socialist system. We also detect, in many cases, the interaction between satirical and tragic perspectives.

There are, however, four striking differences between the Western classics of dystopia as a speculative genre and the dystopian fiction of the East.

THE FATE OF THE WRITER AND THE MANUSCRIPT The first difference relates to the fate of the writer and the manuscript. Many of these works revealing the shocking reality behind state propaganda were suppressed for decades; they could not be published unless the authors managed to publish them underground (samizdat) or abroad (tamizdat). Some of the authors were sent into exile; others were imprisoned, sent to labour camps, or even executed.

THE VANISHING OF SPECULATIVE FICTION WITH THE TWO TIME-PLANES The second thing that strikes us immediately in this body of literature written under dictatorship is that for over sixty years – that is, between Zamiatin's *We*, written in 1920, and Aksyonov's and Voinovich's novels, written in the 1980s – the dystopian impulse did not seek its expression through works of speculative fiction. What are the reasons for this conspicuous absence of the Western model of the futuristic-speculative genre, with its distinction between two time-planes?

The first and most obvious reason is Stalin's "fantasectomy," his banning of works of speculative literature after 1929. As Zamiatin anticipated this in the "fantasectomy" of his protagonist at the end of *We*, as soon as "Stalin consolidated his power as the only legitimate source of utopian thought, he undertook his 'anti-fantasy project.'" His role as the Masterbuilder of the New Man was parallelled by that of the Masterdreamer, for "a crucial element of the cult of Stalin was his alleged ability to see far across the land and into the future. How could mere writers share his vision?" (It is interesting to note that at the emergence of another omniscient dictator, Hitler, speculative literature in Germany, including science fiction, "went through an almost identical transformation at the same time."[13])

But does such a political climate provide sufficient explanation to our question about the paucity of works with a futuristic structure in our period? We should first of all rule out the hypothesis that this paucity could have anything to do with national temperament or the literary traditions in these countries to which Philip Roth has referred as the "other Europe."[14] Prior to the introduction of Stalin's totalitarian rule, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia had a rich tradition of futuristic speculation or fantasy.[15] As for Russia, when Zamiatin wrote *We*, he

had already completed another speculative novel with a futuristic structure and was also in a position to have read numerous other Russian novels of the previous generation that demonstrate this structure.[16] However, when a Russian translation of *We* appeared in Czechoslovakia in 1927, although without the author's consent, Zamiatin aroused Stalin's relentless anger against any kind of speculative literature as inherently subversive to what Stites calls Stalin's own "anti-utopian utopia." In 1931 Zamiatin was sent into exile: other writers of speculative fiction were punished more severely.

Yet Stalin's ban on the publication of speculative literature does not fully explain why writers stopped writing in this mode. After all, speculative literature was not the only type of literature suppressed by Stalin; any work that could be construed as directly or indirectly critical of the state utopia could come to the same fate. As we can see from the fate of the writers in our selection, works of the dystopian impetus *without* the futuristic time-frame were also repressed, their writers persecuted, and yet there was no dearth of works of this nature.

To find a second and probably equally important reason why no dystopias with a speculative, futuristic structure were written in the period in question we should probably assume that the imaginative process functions in a certain way when projecting the fear of catastrophe into the future, and in a different way when responding to catastrophe experienced as reality. After the 1920s the nightmare in the dystopian fiction in the East is no longer connected with a terrifying future that an author could warn readers about: it is simply a statement about the way things are, rendered most of the time through emotional understatement. In other words, at a time when an entire society seems to be labouring in the throes of an enormous fantasmagoria about the future, it may be quite natural that the writer's criticism of this society avoids the form of speculative fantasy, advocating instead the truthful examination of the flaws of the present and the past.

A DYSTOPIAN IMPETUS COMPATIBLE WITH SEVERAL GENRES While the dystopian impulse in the Western tradition has been framed by the novelistic tradition of speculative fiction, the dystopian impulse in the Soviet bloc in this period was not bound by any particular genre. One finds significant presentations of dystopian themes in grotesques and allegories as well as in realistic fiction, and these may take the form of novels, short stories, *feuilletons*, cinema, and drama. In fact, in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland the dystopian impulse in drama seems as strong as if not even stonger than in the novel; see, for example, Mrozek's *Striptease* or *Tango*, Rozewicz's *The Old Woman Broods*, and Istvan Örkeny's *Family Toth*, or *Pisti in the Torrent of Blood* –

probably a subject rich enough for an independent study. This study, however, examines three representatives of the "Kafkaesque" theatre of the absurd in Czechoslovakia, one of the countries where "the absurdist playwright is the true realist, while it is the playwright of 'socialist realism' who deals in grotesque dreams."[17]

THE REPRESENTATION OF MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS IN DYSTOPIAN FICTION Finally, another interesting difference between these two bodies of literature is in the different significance the writer attributes to romantic love in the protagonist's predicament. In the Western model Zamiatin, Huxley, Orwell, and Bradbury present the protagonist's awakening to the dystopic nature of his society through his awakening to a kind of love forbidden by the regime. Falling in love with a woman who offers affection, passion, or simply an intimate bond is essential to the protagonist's awakening to his private universe, an essential step in building resistance against the regime. That such a dystopian romance is doomed to failure by the regime is an essential feature of the plot in the classics of dystopian fiction. By contrast, sexual love or a search for greater intimacy does not seem to play a significant role in our selection of dystopian works from Eastern and Central Europe in this period. It seems here that the protagonist's (and the writer's) central, almost exclusive passion is political. Also, unlike the literary developments in the West, dystopian fiction in the Soviet bloc seems an almost exclusively male-centreed genre; female-centred or feminist dystopias appear only after our period.[18]

Further questions arising from the comparison between the dystopian perspectives in these two bodies of literature are explored in the detailed studies of individual works. As I assume that the dystopian works written under dictatorship are less well known to the Western reader, the six Western classics are discussed in two chapters in part 1, while the discussion of works from the East is considerably longer, taking up parts 2 and 3.

Before embarking upon the detailed juxtaposition of these two bodies of literature, let us turn to what I introduced as their first common characteristic: the notion that a dystopian novel reveals, within its own framework, the push and pull between utopian and dystopian perspectives. In the eloquent words of Krishan Kumar, anti-utopia or dystopia "is one side of a dialogue of the self within individuals who have been indelibly stamped with the utopian temperament."[19] Kumar does not go into detail about this temperament, and there is, most likely, a whole range of characteristics one could deduce by examining the works beginning with Zamiatin, Orwell, and Huxley and ending with Voinovich.

Within the framework of this study, however, the next two chapters concentrate on what I suggest are probably two of the most prominent characteristics of this utopian-dystopian temperament: a passionate, quasi-religious concern with the salvation of humanity through history, and an equally passionate preoccupation with the concept of the utopian pursuit of justice and the radical reversal of this pursuit in dystopia.

Part One

Dystopia West

Aldous Huxley

Yevgeny Zamiatin

George Orwell

Fodor Dostoevski

Margaret Atwood

Kurt Vonnegut

Ray Bradbury

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