
Patrick Parrinder. *Utopian Literature and Science: From the Scientific Revolution to Brave New World and Beyond.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, ix + 222 pp., £ 55.00/\$ 90.00.

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Patrick Parrinder's study of the intersection of science and utopia ties into the lately revived two cultures debate, collecting three new and eight revised essays previously published between 2005 and 2012. The tripartite study covers

“Sciences of Observation and Intervention”, “The Human Animal”, and “Modern Utopias and Post-Human Worlds”, exploring a wide range of primary works, ranging from Plato and Socrates to Thomas More and Francis Galton; from Mary Shelley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Samuel Butler, Edward Bellamy, and William Morris to Franz Kafka and the inevitable H. G. Wells Parrinder has studied widely in his academic life; to Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Yevgeny Zamyatin, Margaret Atwood, Karel Čapek, and Olaf Stapledon. Undeniably, Parrinder’s erudite study, occasionally verging on the eclectic, covers a broad spectrum of canonical utopian literature indeed ranging from the Scientific Revolution to *Brave New World* (1932) and beyond, yet Parrinder’s beyond ends with the 1980s leaving out the more recent developments of the late 20th and 21st century. As much as the study excellently addresses early and classical texts and their shared themes and intertexts in relation to science, it pays little attention to works by female authors or writers of colour. Exactly because Parrinder is such an astute critic, the inclusion of works beyond the well-trodden path, e.g. by Margaret Cavendish, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ursula K. Le Guin, or Kim Stanley Robinson (the latter two get at least a cameo; Robinson for utopian demilitarization [cf. 142–143]; Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* for its ambiguous social order [cf. 144–145]), Octavia Butler, Larissa Lai, Kazuo Ishiguro, or Atwood’s more recent *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003–2013), would have been desirable and, in fact, obligatory. Moreover, given the scope and extraordinary richness of the study, some glaring omissions of established scholarship – e.g. Martin Willis’s eminent work (see 2006, 2011) on literature and 19th century science (vision, medicine, and machines in particular) or Roslynn D. Haynes’s seminal study of the mad scientist, *From Faust to Strangelove: Representations of the Scientist in Western Literature* (1994) – come as an additional surprise.

The introduction posits the book’s key question whether science and utopia are compatible and what science’s place is within utopia as depending on the very definition of utopia. Following Wells’s differentiation into classical and modern utopia, Parrinder stresses that while classical utopia expresses a desire for perfection and thus stasis where a potentially subversive science (like art) intent on probing the yet unknown is “a potentially destabilising force” (2), the modern utopia of dynamic progress is “kinetic” (3), to use Wells’s term, and “depend[s] on specific scientific discoveries and their technological application” (6). While classical utopias privilege space, modern utopias necessarily futurize time, Parrinder contends, and are “strictly speaking, uchronias” (4), oriented towards “disseminat[ing] the good society as widely as possible” (4). Without further ado, Parrinder sidesteps then the usual genre trouble, “the awkwardness and hybrid nature of the utopian genre” (6), with his claim that the “modern literary utopia is [...] a branch of prophetic fiction or futuristic fantasy, merging in

the later twentieth century with science fiction” (4) and then uses the terms speculative, dystopian, anti-utopian, utopian somewhat interchangeably. Importantly, Parrinder questions the notion of utopia as an essentially open construct and – aligning “both arts and sciences [with] [...] the responsibility of expressing humanity’s eternal discontent” (20) – assigns a continuous and insatiable desire for change to science (and the unruly arts) instead, whereas “utopia involves the closure of avenues of possibilities that science would in principle keep open” (20). Overall, the study explores the general relationship between sciences – understood “as a social practice and cultural presence” (7) – and utopianism in connection with the hence ingrained conflicts of power and knowledge epitomized, according to Parrinder, in the scientist’s drive (“scientific heroes” [7] of idealistic science mythology) towards forbidden, potentially revolutionary knowledge – reminiscent of the alchemist’s or the Virtuosi’s dabbling in magic or amateur sciences – and the failure to anticipate imminent risks.

Part I, “Sciences of Observation and Intervention”, traces the history of observation, the scientific gaze, its subsequent journey inwards, and the resulting desire for creation in science’s dialogue with utopian literature. Where the telescope as a “metaphor for utopian longing” (24) promises other worlds and planets in outer space, the microscope probes the previously invisible, “the sordid [...] world of dirt” (37), the ‘filthy creation’, offering “the ultimate voyeuristic experience” (43), and Parrinder illustrates how both perspectives are readily explored and expanded in the utopian imagination of the time. Here, he locates the rise of the “sorcerer” and “mad scientist” as “the scientific world chooses to dismiss the effects of the quest for forbidden knowledge as ‘mad’, rather than confronting its demonic reality” (47). The literary texts reflect the triumph of the new sciences over magic in the figure of the scientist – demonized for lusting after illicit knowledge – turning into “a new form of hero” (47) as science’s growing glamour rubs off. Early scientific romances capture this inherent ambiguity by splitting the figure of the scientist into that of the amoral secretive outsider and of the morally sound scientist who questions and resents the unlawful experiments. For Parrinder, the fictional scientist’s turn from observation towards unnatural pro-creation, to perfecting humans and assuming a god-like position and creating new species, exemplifies a destructive, ‘satanic’ and thus rebellious act where knowledge leads to immense power and potentially uncontrollable consequences and heralds the bell for the utopian turn to human nature, “eudemonics” and “eugenics” (67), in short, the human/animal and human/posthuman frontiers addressed in Part II and III.

Does the utopian desire “to imagine a better society”, however, stringently require the dream “to create better people” (67)? Is utopia thinkable without the desire to perfect humans, as the utopian dream always already confronts us with

an at least more perfect existence, “so that at first meeting [utopia’s citizens] we are conscious of our own inferiority” (68)? In Part II, Parrinder sets out to sketch the ambiguous utopian/dystopian literary history of eugenics, creating a fruitful dialogue between Francis Galton’s fragmentary and sparsely received *Kantsay-where* (c. 1911) and well-known modern utopias by Grant Allen, Edward Bellamy, H. G. Wells, and William Morris. 19th century satirical utopias (Samuel Butler, Bulwer-Lytton, W. H. Hudson) introduce the non-human element and reproductive questions, which then push the (later dystopian) question of human animality and “human-to-animal metamorphosis” (116) into the limelight (reading Wells and Kafka comparatively against the grain). While Parrinder cogently connects the 19th century texts with Darwin’s *Descent of Man* and Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, the scientific discourse on degeneration, devolution, and speciesism for logical reasons, the focus remains an anthropocentric one where, for instance, the lens of 21st century Critical Animal Studies might have provided further insights that go beyond a nod, “[r]ecent philosophers have emphasized how far our understanding of what it means to be human is premised on the separation of human from animal” (116), and an acknowledgement of an increased blurring of the human/animal divide (cf. 118–125).

Part III turns to the question whether modern utopia – understood as a “utopia of mobilization rather than a utopia of perfection” (130) where utopia’s egalitarianism verges on dystopian totalitarianism – can “accommodate present-day human beings, or [...] depend[s] on the emergence of a post-human society” (17). Accordingly, this last part first analyses (in varying depth) the cross-cutting issues of mobilization, war and peace, societal organization, and the desire to mould humans in both utopias and dystopias (Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* [1888], Zamyatin’s *We* [1924], Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* [1985]) and then swiftly turns to Vernor Vinge’s concept of singularity and the creation of the post-human, using Čapek’s *R.U.R* (1921) and Olaf Stapledon’s work as touchstones for human self-transcendence. Once more, a refraction through the lens of, for instance, Ray Kurzweil’s radical predictions in *The Singularity is Near* (2005) or the virulent debates in the field of Critical Posthumanism would have been expedient. Ultimately, the “technological supersession of humanity” (148) and thus “species extinction” (175), Parrinder argues with Stapledon, is inevitable. In the last chapter and simultaneously his closing statement, Parrinder investigates the role of the poet as the scientist’s ‘sibling’ of sorts sharing the endeavour for imaginative and intellectual enquiry in utopia. Therefore, both scientist and artist “represent different, though closely related, types of intellectual dissent” (181) and pose a threat to both utopian and dystopian systems. As Parrinder highlights, the poet as “shape-shifter [...] challenges the notion of fixed personal identity and therefore undermines the ethical doctrines

of philosophy” (179), e.g. the social stability with fixed social functions. With their ambiguity and propensity for imitation, the claim to divine inspiration or proximity to madness, the thus potentially immoral poets represent a moment of destabilization for the utopian (or dystopian) system, entering a “conflict between two incompatible modes of power, the power of the intellect [...] and the power of the oppressive state” (180). Ultimately, Parrinder concludes, utopia’s relation to science (and the arts) thrives on a paradox: scientific ‘imagineering’ drives the utopia the artist envisions while the humans inhabiting the imagined utopia “must be redefined and redesigned in a way that wholly or partially excludes us” (188). With this academic ‘cliffhanger’ Parrinder’s rich study points towards an important future field of study: how speculative fiction of the 21st century explores these issues and whether there might be new venues for (critical) utopia, dystopia, and science, perhaps, via ushering back in the expelled artist as Atwood seems to suggest in the *MaddAddam* trilogy.

Works Cited

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