

A Sense of No Ending: Contemporary Literature and the Refusal to Write the Future

Introduction

Elana Gomel

Tel Aviv University

Vered Karti Shemtov

Stanford University

NARRATIVE GIVES MEANING TO THE PASSAGE OF TIME by organizing it into a structured whole. The Western concept of historical temporality traditionally implied teleology, or what Frank Kermode called “a sense of ending.” According to Aristotle, “a whole is what has a beginning and middle and end” (*Poetics*, sec. 1450). In his riff on this definition, Kermode insists that duration without closure is psychologically intolerable and philosophically untenable: “the interval between ‘tock’ and ‘tick’ represents purely successive, disorganized time of the sort we need to humanize.”¹ Literature “humanizes” time by generating comprehensive narratives not only of the past but also of the future.

But what happens when literature (and other forms of narrative representation) refuses to engage with the future at all? If a sense of ending fulfills the need for comfort, order, closure, and stability or creates a point from which the events can be seen in retrospect, then what are the implications of “no ending”?

For the last two thousand years, Western narratives of the future were predominantly cast in the literary modality of utopia/dystopia. History was seen as teleological, culminating either in heaven (utopia) or hell (dystopia). But the exact direction of history was, arguably, less important than the notion that the future was qualitatively different from the past and the present. Whether

¹ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 45.

history was believed to struggle toward perfection or toward apocalypse, the important thing was its narrative shape, its inbuilt trajectory toward some sort of closure or ending.

Secular utopias and dystopias are ultimately predicated on the apocalyptic/millennial narrative of Christianity, which presented history as a linear process with a necessary and preordained end.² The post-Enlightenment “belief that humanity was on the brink of a new era was only the most recent version of apocalyptic beliefs that go back to the most ancient times.”³ Christianity, in this view, introduced the very notion of “history as a story with a beginning and an end,” a notion that is lacking in other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which envision time as either cyclical or simply successive.⁴

Despite their ideological opposition, utopia and dystopia are essentially the same genre. Krishan Kumar, in his classic *Utopia and Anti-utopia in Modern Times* (1987), argued that dystopia (or anti-utopia) is a literary response to utopia that mirrors its structure and themes. Utopia and dystopia are two sides of the same structural and ideological phenomenon: modern dystopia is predicated “on the very terms of modern utopia.”⁵ In another article, Kumar calls dystopia “utopia’s alter ego.”⁶ Utopia and dystopia share a dynamic future-oriented modality involving a meaningful change, whether this change is seen positively or negatively. As Ruth Levitas explains in her gloss on Kumar, “utopia is about hoping for a transformed future . . . while fearing the worst.”⁷ In other words, both utopia and dystopia presuppose a teleological narrative of history which culminates in either millennium or apocalypse. In either case, the future is indeed transformed.

Utopias and dystopias of the last century imagined the future as qualitatively different from the present. H. G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and George Orwell’s *1984* (1949) represent a society in which not just social and economic relations but the very idea of human nature have undergone a profound and irrevocable shift. Indeed, the utopian ideologies of communism, fascism, and Nazism are based on the idea of the “New Man”: a utopian subject remade in the violent crucible of revolutionary change, “a politicized version of the archetypal ‘hero myth.’”⁸ It is this radical change that signifies utopia/dystopia’s relation with history. The “New Man” is William Butler Yeats’s “rough beast” of the future, alternately threatening and promising a new reality.⁹ George Orwell’s *1984* is perhaps *the* preeminent example of dystopia and yet, looked at from the perspective of Ingsoc, it is the depiction of a perfect society. Whether the future is a paradise or

² See Norman Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); and John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

³ Gray, *Black Mass*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ Krishnan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 110.

⁶ Krishnan Kumar, “Utopia and Anti-utopia in the Twentieth Century,” 2018, <http://cas2.umkc.edu/ECON/economics/faculty/Lee/courses/488/reading/utopia7.pdf>. First published as a chapter in Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-utopia in Modern Times*.

⁷ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (London: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 167.

⁸ Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 35.

⁹ “The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

(William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” 1919, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming>)

hell on earth largely depends on your ideological position: every utopia may be read as a dystopia and vice versa. In the famous confrontation between Winston Smith and O'Brien in 1984, the latter argues that the totalitarian society of Oceania is, in fact, the best of all possible worlds. For the faithful of the Inner Party, Smith's longings for love, privacy, and freedom are simply incomprehensible. O'Brien tells Smith: "We control life, Winston, at all its levels. You are imagining that there is something called human nature which will be outraged by what we do and will turn against us. But we create human nature. Men are infinitely malleable" (part 2, chap. 3). The inhabitants of Oceania are literally new people in a new world. This is not a future most of us would like to live in, but the important thing is that there *is* a future, so radically different from the present that the basic values and assumptions of our time are no longer relevant.

However, instead of delivering us to heaven or hell, some recent history seems to have become stuck in a limbo. The sociopolitical aspect of this limbo has been christened post-utopia. This term relates to the current geopolitical situation, in which the collapse of communism and other twentieth-century utopian ideologies has left neoliberalism and global capitalism without significant conceptual rivals. David Bell describes this situation as "the supposedly 'post-utopian' here-and-now of capital and the state: a world, in which, we are told, there is no longer any need for utopianism."¹⁰ Post-utopia is what comes after the end of History with a capital *H*: that is, the notion that this process has an inbuilt salvational or destructive directionality. Events, even momentous events such as 9/11, will keep happening. What has ended for some, though, is the belief that these events are inescapably building up toward some preordained goal, whether it be a communist society of equality and plenty or a total collapse of civilization.

The collapse of utopia/dystopia has created the world in which "late capitalism seems to have no natural enemies."¹¹ Apart from its political implications, this foreclosure of utopian/dystopian alternatives paralyzes the historical imagination itself. One of Jameson's most famous essays is subtitled "How Can We Imagine the Future?" and the answer seems to be that we cannot.¹²

But while post-utopia and the end of history have been used as descriptions of the current sociopolitical situation, less attention has been paid to its literary aspect. Yet the structure of fictional narratives is inseparable from culture at large. Seemingly local changes in the forms of literary representations of the future may shed light on such overarching political concepts as globalism, postcommunism, and neoliberalism. A crisis in apprehending history inevitably leads to a crisis of historical imagination.

Some scholars argue that utopia has been supplanted by dystopia. In a typical blog-post entitled "Is Ours a Post-utopian World?" Patricia Vieira writes: "After enjoying great success and spawning a veritable avalanche of proposals for perfect societies in the centuries that followed, utopia has, of late, acquired something of a bad rap."¹³

But how can dystopia exist without a covert utopian potential? How can the apocalyptic "sense of an ending" fail to bring about the sense of a future different from the present? Is dystopia a correct way to describe the current avalanche of literary and cinematic productions

¹⁰ David M. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 115–25.

¹³ Patricia Vieira, "Is Ours a Post-Utopian World?," *Philosophical Salon: Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 28, 2016, accessed October 28, 2017, <http://thephilosophicalsalon.com/517-2/>.

dealing with assorted catastrophes, from repressive social structures to zombie epidemics and alien invasions?

In another article we introduced the notion of *limbtopia* to articulate the narrative form(s) corresponding to the current paralysis of the historical imagination. Here, we would like to look at some specific cases of “no ending.”¹⁴ In part 1, Elana Gomel examines the sense of no ending in contemporary young-adult fantastic fiction, analyzing the specific ways in which this genre engages with the inability to write the future. In part 2, Vered Karti Shemtov analyzes the focus on the present in the particular context of Israeli literature and, more specifically, in the works of the author Etgar Keret. A

¹⁴ Elana Gomel and Vered Karti Shemtov, “Limbtopia: The ‘New Present’ and the Literary Imagination,” *Comparative Literature* 70, no. 1 (2018): 60–71.