

# *A Sense of No Ending, Part 1 Never Grow Up: Narrative Formlessness and Ideological Stasis in YA Fantastic Fiction*

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**ABSTRACT:** Narrative gives meaning to the passage of time by organizing it into a structured whole. The Western structure of temporality traditionally implied teleology, or what Frank Kermode called “a sense of ending.” For the last two thousand years, narratives of the future employed two generic templates: utopia and dystopia. Utopia, a literary depiction of an ideal society, and dystopia, its dark double, postulated a historical teleology in which the future was qualitatively different from the past and the present. In my essay I argue that we have entered the period of post-utopia, characterized by the sense of a continuous present, nostalgia, and narrative formlessness. Even those fictions that seem to represent a dystopian or apocalyptic transformation of the present are, in fact, articulations of the refusal to imagine the future. And this refusal is a symptom of a general paralysis of the historical imagination whose repercussions go beyond literature. The essay discusses the genre of young-adult (YA) fantasy and science fiction as highly symptomatic of the post-utopian trend in literature today. Though YA fantastic fiction is often described as dystopian, I argue that this is a misnomer and that such texts as *Hunger Games*, *Maze Runner*, *The Giver*, and other popular YA fantasies are, in fact, post-utopias and post-dystopias, characterized by specific narrative and thematic features that I describe as *subversion of the bildungsroman*, *narrative circularity*, and *history as trauma*.

**O**NE STRIKING EXAMPLE of literary refusal to write the future is the flourishing genre of young-adult (YA) fantasy fiction. Young people are naturally future oriented, and literature written for them would be expected to be animated either by utopian hopes or by dystopian apprehensions, or both. Indeed, most YA future-oriented fantasies have been described as dystopias. I will argue that this is a mischaracterization. What has been called the YA dystopia is, in fact, a teenage limbotopia,<sup>1</sup> reflecting neither hope nor despair but rather a collective bafflement in the face of history.

### BACK TO THE FUTURE, FORWARD TO THE PAST

The avalanche of YA doom and gloom has flooded the market. So popular has the genre become that YA “dystopias” have been outselling most other kinds of genre fiction.<sup>2</sup>

There have been several sociopolitical explanations of why teenagers living in one of the safest and most prosperous periods of history should be fascinated by endless depictions of disaster. In a review of the genre, Constance Grady argues that YA dystopias, “books that just a few years ago appeared to grant publishers a license to print money,” are a response to 9/11 and that the election of Donald Trump has plunged the YA book market into an even gloomier moment centered on teenage suicide as the ultimate “no escape” topos.<sup>3</sup> This seems to me a rather narrow view. First, the trend started before 9/11, as the celebrated novel *The Giver* (1994) by Lois Lowry (discussed below) demonstrates. Second, we are talking specifically about *fantasy* fictions, whose popularity, while fluctuating, can hardly be undermined by the competition from *Thirteen Reasons Why* and other realistic depictions of adolescent angst.<sup>4</sup>

There is, however, a clear trajectory of deepening darkness in the genre itself. In the last three decades, YA fantasy novels have been competing as to whose future appears to be less appealing. Obligatory zombies aside (in series like Ilsa J. Bick’s *Ashes*; 2011), there have been elaborate scenarios of future societies with gladiatorial games (Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games*; 2008–10), cloning (Dan Wells’s *Partials*; 2012), concentration camps (James Dashner’s *Maze Runners*; 2009), or eugenics (Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*). Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry argue that these dystopian visions reflect the psychological crises of the millennials.<sup>5</sup> But the most striking thing about YA dark futures is precisely the extent to which they are *nonmillennial*. Instead of extrapolating the dangerous trends of today, they are replaying the stale catastrophes of yesterday. The future is made in the image of the past.

<sup>1</sup> Vered Shemtov and I have defined limbotopia as “the genre of the present continuous,” “in which stale traumas of yesterday are replayed with only minor variations, leading neither to a final apocalyptic collapse nor to a utopian salvation.” Elana Gomel and Vered Karti Shemtov, “Limbotopia: The New Present and the Literary Imagination,” *Comparative Literature* 70, no. 1 (2018): 62. Limbotopia is the genre of the unending present, of “being stuck,” of the ending infinitely deferred. Things happen but nothing really changes. If utopia is modeled on the Christian notion of heaven, and dystopia, on hell, limbotopia is the secular equivalent of limbo.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Boose, “Are Dystopian Novels Here to Stay?,” *PW*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/76201-are-dystopian-novels-here-to-stay.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Constance Grady, “The YA Dystopia Boom Is Over: It’s Been Replaced by Stories of Teen Suicide,” *Vox*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/10/18/15881100/ya-dystopia-teen-suicide-13-reasons-why-hunger-games>.

<sup>4</sup> *Thirteen Reasons Why* is a 2007 YA realistic novel about teenage suicide by Jay Asher made into a Netflix series in 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

The representative texts I will discuss here are YA limbotopias, borrowing certain features of the traditional genre of utopia/dystopia in order to express the loss of futurity. I will call them post-dystopias, by analogy with post-utopias, as they mirror (sometimes quite consciously) the current paralysis of the historical imagination and the concurrent loss of ideological narratives that used to chart the future direction of history. Since my basic premise is that structural and thematic features of literary narratives correspond to larger ideological and cultural trends, I will focus on several salient aspects of the representation of temporality in YA post-dystopias. These aspects are *subversion of the bildungsroman*, *narrative circularity*, and *history as trauma*. I will argue that these formal and thematic features are intimately connected to the general malaise of the historical imagination in the age of post-utopia. Of course, this list is not exhaustive. But I will argue that these features converge to create what I term “narrative formlessness”: that is, the subversion of the sense of an ending both on the macrolevel of imagining/representing a future radically different from the present and on the microlevel of providing a satisfactory closure for the individual protagonist.

I refer almost exclusively to literary texts rather than to movies, games, or other forms of the visual media. Of course, many novels analyzed here have been made into successful movies. These movies follow their literary antecedents in devising strategies to evade the future. But the visual media have their own poetics, which is beyond the scope of this essay. My goal is simply to point out the relevance of certain features of YA fantasy fiction to the broader cultural thematic of post-history and post-utopia.

## THE PETER PAN REVOLUTION

It is striking how many YA novels substitute pastiche for extrapolation. Their future catastrophes are blow-by-blow replays of the past. The uprising in *Hunger Games* is a re-creation of the American Revolution. The escape from the labyrinthine jail of *Maze Runners* is a rehash of the escape from Sobibor. In Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, the eugenicist community is a mishmash of Nazism and Communism.

The goal of the protagonists in these novels is not to build a new future but to re-create the world as it used to be. In Sara Crossan’s *Breathe* (2012), for example, in which the ecological crisis has left the atmosphere severely depleted of oxygen, a group of young people are trying to survive outside the protection of a domed city and to bring back a breathable atmosphere. And when an old-timer who remembers that the past was not a bed of roses points it out to them, they become angry: “It strikes me that Alina wouldn’t want to know if the world as it existed before the Switch were ugly: the idea of a world with breathable air in it is the paradise she is trying to rebuild. If that were anything but perfect it would make Alina’s struggle less important somehow.”<sup>6</sup>

In Dan Wells’s *Partials*, in which civilization is destroyed by an artificial virus, initially meant to kill genetically engineered humans (Partials), the handful of survivors think of the past as the “Golden Age of Mankind.”<sup>7</sup> Even while they are trying to make common cause with the Partials, the teenaged protagonists are inspired by their knowledge of the American Revolution rather than by any alternative vision of the future.

The immensely popular *Hunger Games* trilogy, which has spawned a cinematic franchise, is a rewriting of American history, in which the totalitarian reign of the Capitol is overthrown to

<sup>6</sup> Sara Crossan, *Breathe* (New York: Greenville Books, 2012), 194.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Wells, *Partials* (New York: Balzer and Bray, 2012), 55.

bring back an idealized version of small-town America. The ending of Collins's trilogy reverberates with implicit and explicit references to historical repetition and recycling. The revolution is followed by "that sweet period where everyone agrees that our recent horrors should never be repeated." But, of course, they would be since we are "fickle, stupid beings with poor memories and a great gift for self-destruction."<sup>8</sup> It is not simply the weary cynicism of this statement, strangely out of sync with the supposedly uplifting ending, that feels unusual but rather the underlying assumption that these horrors will not even be new. When the grown-up heroine Katniss is haunted by memories of the uprising, she consoles herself by looking, not to the future, symbolized by her two children, but rather to the same past that will not let her go.

That's when I make a list in my head of every act of goodness I've seen someone do. It's like a game. Repetitive. Even a little tedious after more than twenty years.

But there are much worse games to play.<sup>9</sup>

There is neither heaven nor hell in this YA dystopia but rather an obsessive return to the stale horrors and equally stale delights of the past. This mood of weary resignation would be unusual even in a classic "adult" dystopian text, most of which have concluded with a striking image of either total apocalypse or, occasionally, timid hope (think of the unforgettable last line of 1984). But in YA fiction, it seems positively jarring. Aren't adolescents supposed to be prey to extreme emotions? Why would a best-selling YA novel offer nothing better to its readers than a dollop of nostalgia?

In her discussion of *Hunger Games*, Susan Tan suggests that an adolescent heroine such as Katniss dramatizes the possibility of social rebellion by virtue of her liminal state: not-yet-an-adult, already not a child. "Teenagers are radical in their freedom, in the very fact of where they fall in the process of 'becoming.'"<sup>10</sup> This may be true in general, but contemporary YA dystopias demonstrate that even socially radical teenagers, such as Katniss, fail to embrace the newness and open-endedness of their age. Even more surprisingly, their acceptance of the social status quo goes hand in hand with a peculiar short-circuiting of their individual development. The worlds of YA dystopias are populated by Peter Pans of both genders who either refuse to grow up or, if they do, settle into strangely restrictive and lackluster social roles, the way Katniss does.

In the traditional bildungsroman, the growth and development of the adolescent protagonist culminate in the "definitive stabilization of the individual and of his relationship with the world"—maturity, in other words.<sup>11</sup> It is possible to liken the profound ontological and psychological transformation that occurs in the bildungsroman to the emergence of the New Man in the classic utopia/dystopia. The bildungsroman, of course, is a conservative genre, in the sense that the social world is taken for granted, and it is the protagonist who needs to undergo a radical change in order to fit in. Utopian bildungsromans, however, are not unknown: Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) follows the psychological growth of its protagonist Shevek as he becomes a full member of his anarchic utopian society, while Samuel Delany's *Triton* (1976) ends with the

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<sup>8</sup> Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, vol. 3, *Mockingjay* (New York: Scholastic, 2010), 235.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>10</sup> Susan S. M. Tan, "'Worse Games to Play?': Deconstructing Resolution in *The Hunger Games*," in *The Politics of Panem: Challenging Genres*, ed. Sean P. Connors (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2014), 42.

<sup>11</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 2000), 27.

pathetic failure of its protagonist to adapt to the unlimited freedom and fluid gender roles of his “ambiguous heterotopia.” Classic utopias and dystopias, insofar as they adopt the narrative strategies of the bildungsroman, link the psychological and physical maturation of the protagonist to the overall transformation of human nature that these texts envision.

But in modern YA dystopias, while society changes for the worse, human nature remains the same. If these texts functioned as metaphors for coming-of-age, one would expect precisely the opposite: what is a greater ontological change than adolescence? And yet the protagonists of these texts reject the bildungsroman formula, in which the psychological growth and physical maturation of the protagonist are reflected in his or her changing narrative voice. The married Jane Eyre and the grown-up Pip in Dickens’s *Great Expectations* differ drastically from their childhood selves. In the *Hunger Games* trilogy, Katniss at the end is no different from Katniss at the beginning, despite all the tribulations and life changes she has undergone in the middle, including leading an uprising, marrying, and having children. The *subversion of the bildungsroman* in YA fictions is one of the ways in which the teenage limbotopia distinguishes itself from the utopian/dystopian paradigm of the creation of a New Man.

### ALWAYS COMING HOME?

*Narrative circularity* is a structure of the narrative chronotope in which repetition becomes the main organizing strategy on all levels of the fictional world. In *The Generations* trilogy (2015–17) by Scott Sigler, circularity shapes both the individual plot of the protagonist and first-person narrator Em and the overarching representation of the novel’s future history.

Em is an antibildungsroman heroine whose heroic fight is literally with herself: her older, mature self represented as a monster. Her rebellion is the refusal to grow up; her victory is also her defeat. The premise of Sigler’s trilogy is that a generational starship is being lured by an alien signal to a violence-torn planet in the guise of a religious pilgrimage. But violence also erupts on board the ship itself, disrupting the transference of memories and personalities into the new cloned bodies of the crew. Em is a clone of the ship’s leader but she wakes up as an amnesiac teenager, together with others in a similar predicament, and has to fight her way through the ship’s (and eventually the planet’s) many dangers, while staving off the encroachment of her older self, who wants to merge with her.

The chronotope of *Generations*, which is more science-fictional than *Hunger Games*, involving aliens, generational starships, and cloning, offers a startlingly explicit representation of the logic of repetition involved in so many YA post-dystopias. The religious crusade that lures Em’s ship to the planet is a replication of an ancient historical pattern programmed by the wily aliens into many different species. When the ship finally arrives, the teenagers discover that they are fighting a battle that has already been fought countless times. And their struggle with the monsters who have taken over the ship turns out to be literally a struggle with themselves:

The monster is me. I am the monster.

I want to shout out that this thing is a liar, but there is no point. At the core of all that I am, I know she is telling the truth.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Scott Sigler, *Generations*, book 1, *Alive* (New York: Del Rey, 2015), 276.

Em's entire narrative is structured by the logic of repetition, both on the collective and on the individual level. As a member of the human species, she discovers that she is fated to repeat the meaningless bloodshed that the aliens have programmed into our genes. As a person, she discovers that she is neither unique nor special: her identity has already been written, so to speak. Indeed, she is obsessed with the philosophical problematic of the relationship between individual and collective to a degree unusual in a YA text. She wonders, for example: "But is that what life is like for everybody? Can a person truly make a life of their own, or can they only continue the culture into which they are born?"<sup>13</sup>

At the end, it seems that continuity, of one kind or another, is the only option: Em fights off the alien compulsion only to be absorbed by her older self and write her own memory/history as the book we have just read. Instead of opening up into the future, the narrative turns circular, with the protagonist becoming the antagonist at the end, fated to run in the hamster-wheel of her struggle with herself without ever breaking free.

Em and her friends are born from the "coffins"—cold-sleep pods—where they, or their older selves, also return.<sup>14</sup> In some sense, the narrative logic of *Generations* may be seen as a dramatization of Nietzsche's aphorism 341: "The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" Whether one considers the philosophical implications of the eternal return to be pessimistic or not, the structure of temporality inscribed in the notion of the "eternal hourglass of existence" is very different from the open-endedness of both the bildungsroman and the classic utopia/dystopia.

Read as a science-fiction text about the future, *Generations* inscribes a sense of history as a circular pattern of repetition. Read as an antibildungsroman, the trilogy presents maturation and adulthood as a psychological and narrative death. The adult Em at the end is the enemy whom the young Em has been fighting from the beginning. Having been subsumed by her older clone, she writes her story as a narrative of defeat. Like many YA texts, *Generations* uses a present-tense narrative voice, which creates a sense of immediacy but also obscures the troubling implications of a retrospective narrative, in which protagonist and antagonist are the same. But it is clear from the ending that the narrator is, in fact, the "mature" Em: that is, the trilogy is essentially a post-humous narrative, caught in a loop of both collective and individual repetition.

Just as in terms of their historical trajectory, many YA post-dystopias aim not at a revolution but rather at restoration, the personal trajectory of their protagonists peters out in an endless prolongation of adolescence or, worse, acquiescence in the roles prescribed to them from the beginning.

## HISTORY AS TRAUMA

In their introduction to the collection of essays on utopias in children's literature titled *New World Orders*, the authors argue that "in contrast to the general tendency in literature to locate utopian communities out of time and space . . . a noticeable trend in children's literature since 1990 is that the utopian imaginings of ideal communities have been largely supplanted by dystopian visions of dysfunctional, regressive and often violent societies whose deficiencies nevertheless open up a space of utopia, in that by negative examples they gesture towards transformed world

<sup>13</sup> Scott Sigler, *Generations*, book 3, *Alone* (New York: Del Rey, 2017), 384.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Sigler, *Generations*, book 2, *Alight* (New York: Del Rey, 2016), 37.

orders.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, they implicitly endorse the view that dystopias contain utopian potential precisely by virtue of imagining the future (or an alternative timeline) as different from the present. But I would argue that in contemporary YA fantastic fiction, this space of utopia is foreclosed by collapsing the distinction between past and future and “here” and “there.”

Perhaps the best example of this is afforded by Lois Lowry’s celebrated YA novel *The Giver* (1994), which preserves the narrative form of the conventional utopia/dystopia with one striking difference. Addressed to young audiences, *The Giver* is part of a four-novel cycle. But though the last novel of the cycle, *The Son*, comes back to the utopian community of *The Giver* and offers information on its protagonist’s ultimate fate, *The Giver* can be read on its own as a meditation on the interchangeability of utopia and dystopia and the fate of both in a posthistorical world.

*The Giver* depicts a regimented and regulated world, in which all differences are smoothed away by a combination of social engineering and biomedical intervention. Names, occupations, spouses, and children are assigned; every citizen goes through predictable and uniform life stages; sexual desire is tamped down by medication; and a form of eugenics is practiced, in which less-than-perfect babies and old people are “released” into Elsewhere or, in less euphemistic terms, killed by a lethal injection. The short novel is narrated from the point of view of a young boy, Jonas, who gradually realizes the horror of his society and escapes with a baby, Gabriel, whom his ostensibly caring and nurturing father is about to “release.” The ending of the novel is ambiguous, as it is not clear whether Jonas and Gabriel die in the snow or indeed reach some better destination.

The subtlety of Lowry’s novel lies precisely in her emphasis on the positive aspects of the utopia of Sameness: the elimination of pain, suffering, and inequality. In that respect, it is significantly different from *Hunger Games* or *Generations*. The realization of the price paid for this perfection comes to Jonas (and the reader) only gradually; the novel, thus, has much in common with such classic utopias/dystopias as Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, in which the reader is invited to make a final judgment on whether the society in question is to be evaluated positively or negatively. But the most interesting aspect of the chronotope of *The Giver* concerns the role of history and memory.

Instead of being simply repressed, as in 1984, history is entrusted to a single individual called the Receiver whose role is to advise the Elders of the community on the basis of the knowledge derived from the collective memory of the past. Jonas is appointed the Receiver-in-training, absorbing memories of the past through physical contact with the previous Receiver, who, therefore, becomes the Giver.

History in the dystopian imagination is often represented in the form of records: the old photographs and newspaper articles that Winston Smith falsifies in 1984 or the burning books of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. But in *The Giver*, history is intensely physical. Not only does it have to be held in an individual’s memory as an actual recollection, but it is passed on by touch. History is literally a disease. And like any disease, it causes pain.

The memories that the Giver passes on to Jonas through the laying on of hands are not tidy narratives or general facts: they are raw emotions and sensations. When Jonas absorbs memories of war, he does not learn the dates of famous battles but experiences the death of a soldier on the battlefield: “From the distance, Jonas could hear the thud of cannons. Overwhelmed by pain, he

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<sup>15</sup> C. Bradford, K. Mallan, J. Stephens, and R. McCallum, *New World Orders in Contemporary Children’s Literature: Utopian Transformations* (London: Palgrave, 2008), 9.

lay there in the fearsome stench for hours, listened to the men and animals die, and learned what warfare meant.”<sup>16</sup>

The previous Receiver-in-training, the Giver’s daughter, could not stand the pain of history and asked for euthanasia. The Giver tells Jonas: “I couldn’t bring myself to inflict physical pain on her. But I gave her anguish of many kinds. Poverty, and hunger, and terror” (130).

History is not something you teach but something you give, rather like flu. And while the Giver is wracked by remorse about the death of his daughter and Jonas’s pain, he is also convinced that this is something that needs to be done. If historical memory is not contained in one person, it will spill into the community at large, contaminating and infecting everybody. The physicality of history is such that it sparks corporeal changes in Jonas. Released from the pill regimen of the community, he goes through puberty. And in addition, he begins to see colors. The inhabitants of the utopia perceive everything in black and white, while Jonas acquires color vision. This is emphasized in the rather pedestrian movie based on *The Giver*, in which the splash of rainbow colors on the gray screen makes the audience accept Jonas’s transformation as wholly positive. But the novel is more subtle in this regard. Jonas is happy to see that apples are red and grass is green; but he is also aware that his “heightened feelings” include rage, mood swings, and grief (120).

Jonas’s near-suicidal escape from the community is powered by his desire to save Gabriel, whom he regards as his brother. But it is also the result of his wholesale rejection of the utopia of Sameness: “the orderly disciplined life he had always known. . . . The life where nothing was ever unexpected. Or inconvenient. Or unusual. The life without color, pain, or past” (152).

The ambiguity of the ending, however, emphasizes that the alternative is not another form of perfection that embraces all that his community has rejected while offering the same safety and equality it provides. The alternative to utopia is history; and history is filled with suffering.

You have never been starving, he had been told. You will never be starving.

Now he was. If he had stayed in the community, he would not be. It was as simple as that. Once he had yearned for choice. Then, when he had had a choice, he had made the wrong one: the choice to leave. And now he was starving. (158–59)

But history in *The Giver* is not a comprehensive narrative of the past and/or the future. It is a chaos of painful sensations, spilling over into the narrative present. Jonas is not experiencing historical memories in any kind of sequence; indeed, it is impossible to reconstruct the backstory of his community from the glimpses of the past he receives. We are not given dates, names, or any kind of information about his visions of war, famine, and hunting or, conversely, of happy family meals. They all come at once, intensely personal and intensely vivid, a series of flashbacks over which he has no control. For Jonas, history is PTSD.

In their discussions of traumatic memory, such scholars as Cathy Caruth and Laurence Langer point out that trauma generates a sense of present continuous, making it impossible to distinguish between recollection and experience.<sup>17</sup> Trauma is antithetical to narrative.

<sup>16</sup> Lois Lowry, *The Giver Quartet Omnibus* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 110. Hereafter, page numbers for quotations will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>17</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

It short-circuits the capacity to represent history, whether individual or collective, as a story. Trauma is always “now.”

The chronotope of *The Giver* is a vivid embodiment of the subversion of the sense of the future in YA fantastic fiction. The ambiguous ending is perfect for a novel in which time itself becomes an infection. Whether Jonas, along with baby Gabriel, survives or dies, his utopia of Sameness can only exist suspended in the endless moment of the traumatized present.

### THE STASIS OF FORMLESSNESS

More examples of the refusal of the “sense of ending” in YA dystopias can be adduced, but the question is how to characterize what takes its place. Here, perhaps, Richard Sakwa’s notion of stasis may be helpful. Sakwa describes stasis in relation to the social and cultural conditions of post-Soviet Russia, where the loss of utopia has led to political paralysis: “The present historical situation can be characterized as ‘formlessness,’ where the great structuring ideologies of the past have gone. Instead fragmented identitarian politics are pursued with an intensity that continues to degrade public discourse.”<sup>18</sup>

Narrative formlessness and ideological stasis go hand in hand. YA dystopias are seldom traditional novels with a beginning, middle, and end. Instead, they are either trilogies or longer series whose proliferation is checked only by external constraints: loss of readers’ interest or the exhaustion of the central plot device. Otherwise, they may go on indefinitely or be abandoned and then taken up again. Instead of the Aristotelian formula, we are stuck in Kermodé’s “interval between ‘tock’ and ‘tick,’” in the “purely successive, disorganized time” of history with no direction.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of chaos or formlessness as the only possible way to imagine the future is vividly dramatized in Chris Wooding’s unusual YA fantasy *Storm Thief* (2006). The novel is quite different from the run-of-the-mill teenaged post-dystopias of the *Hunger Games* variety in that it is more interested in the structure of its chronotope than in the emotional tribulations of its young protagonists Rail and Moa. It takes place in an island city, isolated from the rest of the world (which may not even exist anymore), where the totalitarian Protectorate rules heavy-handedly over the socially stratified population. The city, Orokos, is periodically struck by “probability storms” that wreak havoc with its infrastructure and inhabitants, occasionally turning people into monsters or objects or unleashing the plague of energy Revenants. Rail and Moa, ghetto kids, eventually manage to find their way to the heart of the Fulcrum, which generates probability storms and where they learn that their dystopian island is, in fact, the heir of a utopian project of creating a perfect society. But the dystopia is not the result of a corruption of utopia: dystopia *is* utopia.

We were so content that we became bored. You see, we are meant to struggle. It’s in our blood. We’re not supposed to live our lives to a plan. But that’s what happened. We piled law upon law, rule upon rule, until the state told us what we should and shouldn’t be doing. . . . We couldn’t even be decadent. . . . We had put ourselves in a prison, and even our jailors didn’t realise it. . . . We came to Orokos long ago to escape the disorder of the world, to build ourselves a society that would be perfect in itself. But we became stagnant.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Richard Sakwa, “Russia’s Many Futures,” *Telos*, September 22, 2017, <http://www.telospress.com/russias-many-futures/>.

<sup>19</sup> Frank Kermodé, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Chris Wooding, *Storm Thief* (London: Scholastic, 2006), 280. Hereafter, page numbers for quotations will be given in parentheses in the text.

Probability storms were deliberately created to introduce chaos and disorder into this stagnant perfection. But they backfired, since the world after the Chaos Engine is not sufficiently different from the stratified, orderly utopia of its inception. The scientist from the past explains to the teenaged protagonists: “We failed. We hoped that things would turn out differently if we wiped the slate clean, but they have turned out the same” (283).

Caught in the loop of repetition, Rail and Moa unleash the ultimate probability storm, which will not simply introduce a modicum of chaos into the social order but will scramble both the social and the ontological foundations of their world: “All of Orokos will be utterly changed. Perhaps it will become a palace of glass, and all the people will be mice. Perhaps it will be a terrible slag-heap haunted by six-legged things the size of buildings. It could be a paradise of flowers and harmony. The possibilities are limitless” (284).

If people being turned into mice is seen as a preferred alternative to a social order of any variety, history has indeed bogged down in the chaos of formlessness.

### ZOMBIE HISTORIES

In Ilsa Bick’s *Ashes*, two teenagers escaping from a zombie horde debate the best strategy of staying safe. One of them has a winning argument as to why roads are to be avoided: “Yeah, but remember that Spielberg’s movie *War of the Worlds*? Remember that happens when they try driving past all those people without wheels? They nearly get killed.... That’s how the real world is, Alex.”<sup>21</sup> This is the apocalypse feeding upon itself, just like zombies (who, in this novel, are not dead but rather incapacitated by an electromagnetic pulse) feed upon humans. History has been tied into a knot of secondhandedness, self-referentiality, and pop-culture clichés. H. G. Wells’s original *War of the Worlds* (1898) has been seen as a foreshadowing of the disastrous future of worldwide conflagrations. Now a nostalgic movie based upon previous cinematic interpretations of the nineteenth-century classic is presented as an infallible guide to future catastrophes.

YA post-dystopias are escapes from history. Whether by their subverting of protagonists’ maturation, circularity, or narrative PTSD, they try to forestall the frightening alterity of the future. The “rough beast” whose advent Yeats foresaw at the beginning of the last century turns out to have been stillborn. A

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<sup>21</sup> Ilsa J. Bick, *Ashes* (New York: Egmont, 2011), 182.