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Brno studies in English. 2013, vol. 39, iss. 1, pp. [211]-226

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2013-1-12>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/129160>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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DYSTOPIAN TRANSFORMATIONS: POST-COLD WAR DYSTOPIAN WRITING BY WOMEN

Abstract

Utopian and dystopian writing used to be a male domain until the middle of the twentieth century since when a number of women novelists have contributed to the genre. The article examines the recent shift towards ecological dystopia in three turn-of-the-millennium novels: Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* (1998), Doris Lessing's *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (2005) and Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007).

Key words

Ecological dystopia; contemporary British women writers; Angela Carter; Maggie Gee; Doris Lessing; Jeanette Winterson

Historically, utopian and dystopian writing seems to have been a primarily male domain. Since the mid-twentieth century a number of women writers have stepped in the realm and contributed to the development of the genre, shifting the mindset from the political and ethical concerns of governance rooted in a particular country or part of the world to trans-national, global human concerns.

The paper will examine the transformations of dystopia from stories of ruinous devastation of people and places by a nuclear war produced by the tensions of the Cold War to post-Cold War ecological dystopia imagining a world after an ecological catastrophe. The trajectory will be traced through four novels spanning the decades since World War II: Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969), Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* (1998), Doris Lessing's *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (2005) and Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007). Within their dystopian worlds, the novelists unmistak-

ably also pursue their usual characteristic agendas and while the fantastic elements which in their other writings always have a liberating, even visionary effect, participate here in the apocalyptic vision, they do not leave the grim stories completely devoid of hope.

Our age no longer seems to resonate with utopian visions. The early utopian writing in English or Old English was moral and religious and goes back to medieval dream visions, such as William Langland's allegory *Piers Plowman*, albeit concerned with the Christian rather than earthly Paradise. Ideal worlds as utopian states had of course been imagined long before that by ancient writers, notably Gilgamesh or by Plato in his *Republic* (4 cent. BC). In England Sir Thomas More was the first to use the word *utopia* in the title of his vision of an ideal welfare state, in tune with the religious and moral focus of English Renaissance studies, which he helped to shape. Similarly to other early utopias, More's offered a contrast of some harsh moral laws and social benefits of communal property and free education. Moreover, and of special interest for this paper, Peter Ackroyd traces to More's *Utopia* (1516) the roots of the image of the garden as the "charmed space of the English imagination" (Ackroyd 2004: 412). Not only do the inhabitants of More's ideal community cherish their gardens, but even "More's dialogue is set within a well-kept garden" (412), as Ackroyd observes. Utopian thought and writing flourished in the following centuries, in various genres, including occasional extravagant or satirical ones, but mostly in serious philosophical and political treatises. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the numbers and variety of utopian works increased, inspired by technological development and belief in human progress. Utopian thought also expanded in space – beyond the boundaries of one, often island or city, community or state – to global imagination in H.G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905) with its international government in a world state. Wells, together with Jules Verne, also led the way in literary, fictional cum science-fiction utopia where at the same time the borderline between the utopian fantastic and the real was increasingly becoming blurred, intimating the dystopic warnings to come.

The twentieth century put a rather abrupt end to utopian thinking as the century-long tradition of utopia turned about face into dystopia. Fears of scientific and technological development going out of hand, underscored by fears of political manipulation and totalitarian power crystalized in the works of Karel Čapek, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell to name but three resounding names of the first half of the century. What in all of them stands out is the ideal government of utopia distorted into its anti-utopian converse: the totalitarian regime built on false populist rhetoric and policy of hate and repression. Moreover, Orwell's and Huxley's were strictly urban dystopias with the people herded together, deprived from contacts with nature, thereby also deprived of their own nature. After the Second World War the nuclear threat of the Cold War era shifted the attention from issues of governance to the issue of survival. This shift in the direction of modern dystopia leads to connections with apocalyptic literature, again with roots deep back in medieval doom-laden prediction for mankind. In juxtaposition

with the development of utopia from moral to political to technological concerns, chiliastic literature moves from Christian morality and punishment for human sins against God to the destruction of the planet and human life on it by atomic warfare or technological and eventually ecological catastrophe caused by man.

In the long list of utopian and anti-utopian writers, whether famous or by now forgotten, from antiquity to the mid twentieth century, we do not find any women's names. Reasons there must be galore, both for women writers' absence in the (anti)utopian debate of the past and their decisive entrance in it since the 1960s. It may be that the shift in emphasis from the affairs of rule and government, whether utopian or dystopian, to anti-war and ecological affairs provided the themes that women writers have felt called upon to embrace, or I could offer an image which I borrowed from Maggie Gee's novel *Dying, in Other Words* (1981), of a young woman, a "roof-top scribbler" who wanted "have her name up in the lights one day as a famous writer [whose] thoughts had turned away from [...] men's dusty dreams" (46–7).

In 1969 Angela Carter published *Heroes and Villains* – her third novel – situated in a dystopic setting of a world destroyed by war. At the same time, this is a Carterian landscape, artfully constructed of rich layers of sensual images and ambiguous verbal meanings, allegories and allusions, realism and fantasy, cruelty and comedy. In Britain in the 1960s, the nuclear threat was taken seriously – hence the popularity of post-nuclear dystopias at the time and in the decades to follow. In *Heroes and Villains*, as in most of Carter's writing, the time slips easily between fairy tale and reality and the dystopian world and leaves an unsettling sense of the story unfolding still within the memory of our time and simultaneously several generations later. Carter peopled this post-nuclear world with nomadic, colourful Barbarians living among the ruins of a "pre-war" stately home, with derelict malformed humans surviving in holes, both contrasted with relics of "civilization" in fortified totalitarian villages inhabited by mad scientists. The Barbarians roam around a strangely defamiliarised countryside full of sensually exotic wild vegetation, but also dark, bare, hostile landscapes. There is nothing paradisiac or pastoral in Carterland although a group of characters actually replay the Biblical Expulsion from Paradise story; whether luscious or barren this landscape exudes evil all around. Carter's interest has little to do with the real countryside. Her strange landscapes complement her characters in her feminist and social debate and in the sensuous physical power play of the sexes. And if under the layers of allegories which represent the fantasmagoric post-nuclear world of *Heroes and Villains* we can also see a parody of our contemporary world, it is a hopelessly dark vision.

The dark vision of the late twentieth-century city in Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1992) and Martin Amis's *Money* (1985) and *London Fields* (1989) is read as a kind of urban dystopia by Petr Chalupský in his study characteristically entitled *The Postmodern City of Dreadful Night* (2009), where he also pits the images of the dystopian city against the pastoral relief of the countryside. The pastoral, or at least the country idyll, has probably always been contrasted with the

city in terms of traditional values versus development cum the moral versus the immoral. In this respect, pastoral is in tune with utopia although, as has been outlined above, utopian writing of the past was in fact largely concerned with matters of social and political governance and had less time for idyllic landscapes. On the other hand, what Daniela Hodrová calls the “utopian place” (Hodrová 1989: 32–52) need not be necessarily found in utopian writing only; in her view it is also the space of the medieval courtly romance, the Arthurian legend in particular. Nevertheless, even utopian writing of all kinds has always exhibited obvious connections to reality stemming from undeniable topical concerns for that contemporary reality.

With post World War II dystopia, the landscape comes into the fore, often in two roles: that of paradise lost or that of a scene of destruction. However, the anti-pastoral does not of course only come with dystopia. Terry Gifford traces the tradition of anti-pastoral vision in English poetry from Blake and Goldsmith, with his clearly ecological “protest against inhumane agricultural change” (1999: 122) in the long poem *The Deserted Village* (1770) alongside the social and political protest, to Matthew Arnold’s worries about “a general decline in religious belief at the end of the nineteenth century in the face of Darwinian science, philosophical rationalism, and a disturbing sense of rapid social change” (118). The resulting melancholy and bleak picture of the world characterises poetry from Patrick Kavanagh to Ted Hughes’s unflinching effort “to undercut idealisations of nature” (136) exemplified by, but not only, the harsh “February 17th” (137). In late twentieth-century dystopia the country(side) comes into focus as environment rather than anti-pastoral landscape. This development towards eco-dystopia seems to be unfolding in juxtaposition with the emergence of ecocriticism debating its positions and terminology since the 1990s. Within it, what Gifford calls “the closed circuit of the pastoral [and anti-pastoral, my addition] continuum” (1999: 145) has in Lawrence Buell’s words “begun to shift from representation of nature as a theatre for human events to representation in the sense of advocacy of nature as a presence for its own sake” (qtd. in Gifford 1999: 148). Equally significantly for the development of my thesis here, Gifford points out and endorses Leonard Scigaj’s argument and replacement of Derrida’s *differance* by coining the opposing term *référance* to foster the claim that “in order to discuss environmental degradation we need to see language as actually pointing outwards to material reality” (Gifford 1999: 149). He goes on to pinpoint Hopkins’s verses about the ‘soil’ to mean unambiguously that “we cannot constantly defer our responsibility for our degradation of a real material upon which our lives depend” (150). After all these connections, the knitting together and unravelling of the various strands of utopia, pastoral, anti-pastoral and dystopia, it is tempting and inevitable to look at the three, late twentieth-century dystopias of my choice as ecodystopias using some of the vantage points of ecocriticism. However, not merely for ecocriticism’s sake, but more importantly, because I can read in all three novels what, as Richard Bradford points out, Maggie Gee voices in all of her novels, namely that “fiction should address directly the most immediate, controversial issues of its age” (Bradford 2007: 41).

Since the early 1980s, Maggie Gee has produced literary work of high critical acclaim. However richly varied aesthetically and thematically, her novels invariably prove to be socially and politically committed in a wide range of topics. The Call for Papers for the Maggie Gee Conference in August 2012 lists no less than 18 topic areas in relation to her writing to be discussed, all of them of topical concern to contemporary society – from social inequality to violence, from migration to multicultural Britain. Among the many more themes suggested, we find, not surprisingly, also utopian and dystopian thinking, (post)apocalypse and ecocatastrophe, the environment and new ecocritical directions. This scope of dystopian thought can hardly be packed into the confines of one novel only. Gee's 1998 novel *The Ice People*, which I am going to focus on here, was preceded already way back in 1983 with the apocalyptic ending in a nuclear catastrophe of her second novel *The Burning Book*. Similarly blighted by an impending disaster, this time by the rising sea levels, are the lives of Gee's characters in *The Flood* of 2004, in which she responds to the horror of Nine Eleven (2001) affected by "a fear of the future – by an anxiety that the future promised a destruction more complete, more devastating, than that which had just been experienced" (qtd. in Dillon 2007: 374).

Unlike these two novels of impending dystopian future, *The Ice People* is from the start a fully fledged dystopia set in an apparently not very distant, globally-warmed world. In it, the vicious circle – nature affects culture, culture affects nature – seems to be taking a tighter and faster grip. Only nature, in its Darwinian, not pastoral image, proves to be much stronger against all odds. The story is told by Saul, a young technocrat living in London in the 2020s: "I felt on the brink of owning the world. I was a man, and human beings ran the planet. There were eight billion of us, though numbers were shrinking, but few other animals were left to compete. Insects, bacteria, viruses" (12). Here and there in Europe, the political system and general order are breaking down and it is hot, but Saul, enjoying the technological/electronic wonder of the age, feels "besotted with our cleverness" (13). High-tech all around, it completely governs the public scene and private lives. The electronic culture has devoured nature and human nature entirely. Nobody seems to mind though, because the reliance on the all-knowing science is absolute. When after the hot decades the "overheated planet was at last cooling down, with everyone queuing up to claim the credit, virtuous big business, responsible governments" (60), without the inconvenience of the heat, there is no reason to worry about ecology any more. At this point Gee puts the planet warming versus cooling arguments on standby for a while to pursue another strand of our present ecological fears to a more bizarre extreme. Within another decade of her dystopian world, the human mind and body have undergone marked changes. Emotionally and socially men and women do not need each other any more; the sexes live segregated, women in communes, they no longer desire each other sexually and are mostly infertile, the human race dying out fast. For company and as emotional and sexual pacifiers people have the Doves – feathery robots. For us, Maggie Gee's readers now, they are only semi-science-fiction, with real

enough potential and therefore all the more chilling. Nevertheless, Saul the story teller thinks admiringly “about research in progress on self-replication. *Doves that could reproduce themselves* ... In which case, they’d be better than us” (75). The robots would not be outdoing the failing humans in reproduction only, they are designed to please and surpass humans, because they are their brainchildren: “That was the point; they were better than us. We wanted them human, but better than us, biddable wives, well-trained children, mothers who never got cross or tired. And unlike us they would never die” (90). Saul’s enthusiasm for making the Doves better than humans is widely shared and the hubris of playing God by replacing humans with artificial creatures takes long to ring warning bells. Saul knows and takes for granted “that now nothing was natural [...] that even the hills behind the Northwest Borders, which we could just glimpse from our fourth-floor window, were covered with genetically modified crops” (79). It is only much later that Saul realizes with regret: “My life went wrong when I blurred the line between living and nonliving” (78).

Meanwhile, before Saul’s awakening, which is a long time to occur, the battle between the segregated sexes is raging in the private as well as the public cum political domain and comes to be juxtaposed with the nature versus culture of technology battle. The women turn their Wicca World commune into a political party and their election campaign is a green campaign ridiculed by the men of the Scientists club. Gee allows the fiercely feminist and green women of the Wicca World to win the election, but she makes them none too likeable, even considering the fact that they and their activities and attitudes are filtered for us through Saul’s vision.

With society thus polarized, not only by gender, but also socially divided into the wealthy Insiders and dispossessed Outsiders, it can only end badly. First the Doves are identified as the enemy because of suspicions that they are mutating and could be getting out of hand – “the nightmare of our technodreams” (186). Then the belief that scientists could avert the new ice age dwindles as London becomes ice-logged and the last warm places to live are in Africa. This is where Saul takes his estranged son Luke “to save him from the nanomachines, the thrumming headsets, the speaking buildings and technobirths, the rare sickly children, the lonely sexes” (230). And while Luke has probably gained freedom from the doomed technological society among a horde of wild children somewhere in southern Spain, Saul ends his days in snow-bound England “termed” by the local horde of wild boys when he is no longer able to maintain for them the remaining discarded Doves. In his last moments, Saul, The Teller of Tales, admires “the amazing beauty of the end of the day” and also the birds, thousands of them, coming back slowly (244).

The image of returning birds is not unequivocal. Is it supposed to offer Gee’s glimmer of hope for mankind or does it signify nature’s victory over the much humbled man? No matter which way we turn for the answer, with this ending Gee confirms her kind of science fiction in *The Ice People* to be an ecodystopia. Moreover, ambiguity is nothing new in Gee’s writing or restricted to her dysto-

pia. It may rather be seen as the hallmark of her poetic, fragmented prose style although Abell, with reference to *Flood* accuses Gee of mystifying the reader “with torrents of gushing overwritten prose” and of being “confusingly semi-detached from reality”. This kind of confusing ambiguity in Gee does not seem to trouble Sarah Dillon, who goes to the biblical Apocalypse and the Flood for the sense of a new beginning or suspension of the last judgment (Dillon 377). Nevertheless, *The Ice People*, rather than evoking biblical references, suggests literalness for interpretation, because it feels so firmly rooted in the present world and its culture, science, fears and debates. It has what James Wood calls “life-ness: life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry” (186), which he deems to be the kind of realism that allows all genres and styles to exist. The ubiquitous violence of our age that emerges with lesser or greater force throughout the novel and intensifies towards the end parallels in a way the “final violence” of the nuclear ending in *The Burning Book*, which, as Steven Connor points out, “ends all narratives” (Connor 240). The final violence in *The Ice People* – Saul’s Darwinian death at the hand of the young – ends Saul’s narrative, but does not have the annihilating force of the absolute ending by a nuclear blast.

Philip Hensher claims that “most dystopias are really satirical versions of contemporary society, and not ideas of the future at all”. To a great extent, his assertion sounds true enough of Gee’s *The Ice People*. Saul the narrator is living all the problematic issues of his day, not far distant or different from our days, and appears to be troubled by them: sexual segregation, both emotional and physical, infertility, disintegrated family and disintegrating political scene and climate change while he is not especially worried about ecological issues. In fact he does not waste much thought on nature, him being first and foremost an urban man fully in thrall of new electronic technologies. Saul – a man of our time – is portrayed by Gee much in terms of how poststructuralists view and theorise people, as Sueellen Campbell sums up: “re-examining the idea of the human being as a coherent and self-contained self” (1996: 132). On the other hand, Gee’s perspective on what is happening to nature, on the climate change in her dystopian world is in agreement with what ecologists argue, principally in Barry Lopez’s words: “The Land retains an identity of its own, still deeper and more subtle than we can know” (qtd in Campbell 1996: 130). The natural world exists outside and apart from our minds and will most probably exist even beyond our existence. According to Campbell, poststructuralist theory and ecology, while at variance in many respects, largely agree “that human beings are no longer the center of value or meaning” (133) and thereby she is endorsing Aldo Leopold’s blunt statement that humans are “not the rulers of the earth” (qtd in Campbell 1996: 133). Maggie Gee the novelist and Saul her hero and narrator both show a poignant awareness of that and Gee’s dystopic vision in the novel presents a reflection of and upon this very argument.

Doris Lessing’s *The Story of General Dann and Mara’s Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (2005) is radically removed from our world into an unrecogniz-

able, dystopian landscape and the people who inhabit it make no claims to being the rulers of the earth. For the reader, the question offers itself: is this a post-apocalyptic world? Has the apocalypse already occurred or is there still worse to come? The population of Lessing's novel lives on a desolate, marshy strip of land squeezed between the cliffs of ice covering what is vaguely remembered as Yerrup and what is now sun-seared Ifrick. This fearsome landscape defines their lives. While Bakhtin is still quoted as saying that "much writing today continues to view nature solely as a backdrop to the really important things, which are human matters divorced from a nature that remains 'out there'" (McDowell 1996: 379), in *Lessing* we feel, thankfully only in our mind's eye, that the physical landscape and the concept of environment of the ecological definition are one. Here is cultural ecology at work in fiction smoothly juxtaposed with how it functions in social and anthropological studies as "the study of the processes by which a society adapts to its environment" (Hirst 2012).

In the first half of Lessing's novel, General Dann's perception and reflections are deeply and entirely interconnected with the environment, both visually and emotionally. He is on his way to see the Ice cliffs of Yerrup, which are now beginning to melt. He has undertaken this adventurous and dangerous mission as a kind of pilgrimage and his state of mind and the state of the Earth seem to be one. Except for Dann's constantly recurring memories of his sister Mara now married and lost for him, next to nothing goes back to his legendary "General Dann" past of Lessing's prequel *Mara and Dann* (1999). Instead of fighting, Dann's bravery now turns toward nature exploration and observation. The journey takes him away from the dull, musty smell of the Centre across "the marshy land, all greys and drab greens and the flat gleam of water" (6) to the almost dried out Middle Sea. Old maps showing the Middle Sea full of water have been discovered, but are unintelligible to the finders as other nebulous references to the world of "long ago" – long lost, probably thousands of years, no longer surviving even in stories or legends.

What has not changed much since our time in Lessing's imagination is human nature and people fighting and killing each other: "There is always killing, and people running from wars. And new wars" (14). All the days of his long journey, Dann is walking against a stream of refugees "stumbling past, too exhausted to look up and see him" (28). The dismal landscape and environment also merge in Dann's speculation about how place affects character: "it was a matter of what people were born with. Had Kira been born hard and unkind? If these girls had been born into that city [...], would they have been like Kira?" (71). On the contrary, Dann, General or not, always appears to be kind and emotional. He even cries a lot when he rescues from drowning and then has to leave behind the snow dog puppy Ruff. In the islands of the Middle Sea, endangered by the rising waters, he is much affected by the eerie sight of "the white skeletons of trees sticking up from the sea [...] some still green trees were half submerged, the salt water whitening their branches" (54), and no less so by the magnificent spectacle of masses of ice falling: "As they gazed, a portion of the lower shining

mass groaned and fell, and slid into the waves, leaving a dark scarred cliff which from here looked like a black gap on the white. Although they were far away, the noise was unpleasant and any remark anyone made was silenced by a fresh roar of complaint from the packed and ancient snows" (62). Such sights of troubled landscape portrayed with clearly ecological overtones constitute Dann's environment and underlie his overpowering sense of hopelessness: "Over and over again, all the effort and the fighting and the hoping, but it ends in the ice, or in the cities sinking down out of sight into the mud" (130).

What feels to be in discord with the harshness of the environment, both natural and social, is the oversensitive emotional state of the protagonists. When Dann returns from his lonely Ice Cliffs quest, which took him all of three years, and learns that his sister Mara died in childbirth, he collapses for a protracted period of time and almost dies from grief. Lessing creates very gentle emotional scenes with Mara's daughter Tamar missing Dann's love and getting attached to her teacher Ali who had lost his own children and comes to love Tamar, or with Ruff the snow dog in distress, dividing his love between Dann and Tamar. The second eponymous hero Griot, too, struggles with sentiments. His attachment to Dann dates back to the time when he was a child soldier and absorbed the legend of young General Dann with boundless admiration. Griot keeps watching Dann, worried about his mental and physical health, jealous of others approaching him, but first and foremost wanting him back in his General's role.

The second half of the novel, after Dann's return, largely takes place in the Centre – a strange relic of the past designed to preserve quantities of old records in books in old languages and artifacts of bygone ages, before the Ice came down over Yerrup. The Centre consists of endless rooms, halls and museums now also inhabited by a growing army built up by Griot from refugees camped all around, but dormant due to Dann's lack of interest and purpose. The hopelessness about the future and the day to day battle for survival that characterize the life in Lessing's ecological dystopia are underscored by a total ignorance of the past. Not only do the people know nothing about the past, they do not care or want to know. The human "rule" over the world had crumbled with the loss of superior technological and scientific knowledge. In Lessing's story the knowledge of the lost pre-ice, old world is preserved in a vacuum bubble in a transparent plastic container – ironically not even recognized as plastic, only as "not glass" – alas most of it recorded in texts in long dead languages that no one can decipher. The legendary, though just vaguely rumoured "sand libraries" can therefore hardly give up their secrets. Even seemingly simple concepts are lost together with the languages and cultures: "*Millions* ... we don't know how many a million was" (188). Objects of plastic materials are marveled at and believed to have been made by gods, because they appear indestructible. The process of loss instead of progress continues and last traces of knowledge about things and systems get lost with individual people killed or dying: "there was a thing on the boat that trapped sun. The boat woman knew how they worked. Once sun traps were stuck all around the Centre but no one knew what they were for. The woman on the boat

was killed and that knowledge went with her. It must be happening all the time” (178). Lessing’s chilling reflection of loss and devastation never ceases to remind us that all of it is the aftermath of the ecological disaster. An old account of what happened when the Ice started coming down from the North has it that refugees from Urrup built replicas of their city centres in northern Afrique (sic) which were later abandoned and then sank into the waters from melting ice.

Eventually, at the end of the novel, the ecological element and purpose comes full circle – from the desolation and hopelessness of the marsh to the hopeful landscape of Tundra, which sounds like the promised land, with trees and forests, no marsh and water, slime and wet. Dann’s army’s progress through it is like a pageant, not an invasion, and Tundra soon becomes prosperous and in Tamar’s view “a good place” (281). Fiona Becket fittingly labels the novel an “environmental fable”, though with a question mark. Nevertheless, the moral of Lessing’s fable is not primarily environmental or ecological. We and the protagonists never hear any speculations about the climate change and the possible human role in it. Against the dystopian setting, and no matter how much in tune with it, come the same problems that plague Lessing’s characters in her other novels, in whatever time or continent they are situated. On the other hand, to quote Lidia Vianu: “Everything she writes is both dystopic and displaced: nobody feels at home or safe from danger. Lessing’s fiction is a space of threatening exile from whatever may be familiar, reassuring” (Vianu 321). Dystopic elements have already been noted much earlier in Lessing’s *The Four Gated City* (1969) in allusions to a possible nuclear and ecological catastrophe and also in the heroine Martha’s perception of humans: “an extraordinary race, or near-race of half, uncompleted creatures” (506), “enclosed inside their hideously defective bodies [...] inside a net of wants and needs” (507). The post-apocalyptic Appendix, allegedly of archives spanning the years 1968–1997 forms a bridge between Lessing’s realistic novels and her science-fiction phase to follow in the five volumes of *Canopus in Argos*.

With this shift, it can, however, be traced through Lessing’s writing since the 1970s that the wants and needs of her protagonists have been moving away from ideology and drive for radical change towards improved individual and familial relationships and reconciliation. Vianu, writing on Lessing’s *The Sweetest Dream* (2001) claims that it “discards political utopia” (322) and shows Lessing’s “sympathy with the disabused not with the changers” (335) and eventually hails Lessing’s turning to love as “the only refuge from dystopic solitude” (338). Following much the same trajectory in terms of love and reconciliation, *The Story of General Dann and Mara’s Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* echoes and moves forward many other preoccupations of Lessing’s thought. As Peter Briggs asserts, “her fiction has always been dominated by a powerful and often inchoate vision of the human situation and that vision has always been flexible [including] a growing awareness of the potential for ecological disaster” (28). In *General Dann* Lessing clearly still develops what Brigg identifies in her earlier work as inclusion of “the elements from the head of political, psychological and ecological science, plus those from the heart of humanity represented in the Sufi holistic vision of

human evolution. She needed to find a way to establish the unity of a grand and complex design” (29–30). It is to be found already in the first short story of Lessing’s “space fiction” (“Report on the Threatened City”, 1971) that the people and their society are “totally governed by their war-making functions” (qtd in Brigg 2002: 35) – the image of total warfare still pervasive in Dann’s world, just like his mental disturbance and states of fighting his dark alter ego echo Lessing’s testing “the possibility of states of mind which are superior to the normal but are defined as insanity” (Brigg 2002: 38). Last but not least, what Lessing says about science and scientists in *Shikasta* (1979), the first volume of *Canopus in Argos*, has come to pass in *The Story of General Dann*: “Not long ago, a ‘scientist’ knew he was the great culminator and crown of all human thinking, knowledge and progress – and behaved with according arrogance. But now they begin to know their smallness, and the fouled and spoiled earth itself rises up against them in witness” (qtd. in Briggs 2002: 48). In Dann’s time all the achievements of science are gone and forgotten. With the very concept of science non-existent, this dystopia cannot qualify as science-fiction and can be more conveniently labeled ecological dystopia with resonances of ecological hopes for sustainable development.

It appears to be the hallmark of Jeanette Winterson’s writing that she breaks up the dividing lines and boundaries of all kinds, particularly of time and gender. Her purpose is multiple: literary experiment and participation in the postmodern debate, in tune with its rejection of traditional authority in various senses, but with a strong moral message. In *The Stone Gods* the ethical side to ecology comes to the fore as the novel shows dystopia in the making: the people of Planet Red know where they and their high-tech lives and culture are inexorably heading and still they relentlessly pursue their course bent on disaster.

Stuart Sim points out that Jean Francois Lyotard, already in the late 80s, blamed ‘techno-science’ for “attempting to hijack the course of human history by preparing for the end of life on Earth [...] gradually eradicating humankind from the picture, by developing ever-more sophisticated computer technology with the ability to reproduce itself and to continue existing elsewhere in the universe when the Earth dies” (Sim 2001: 10–11). More recently, ecologists, even irrespective of technology, point to the separation of people from nature or as Sueellen Campbell puts it, “ecologists also see an experience of lost unity and a desire to regain it as central to our human nature” (134), “because we live apart from the natural world and deny our intimacy with it” (135). Winterson’s dystopia resonates both with Lyotard’s theorizing ‘techno-scientists’ as authoritarian and with ecologists’ critique of the loss of unity of humans and nature. What is more, Winterson joins the contemporary ethical ecological debate head on, undisguised by the dystopian fantasy. On the contrary, her experimental, postmodern treatment of time, in this dystopia time permeable through millennia and interplanetary space, aids the urgency of her arguments by reinforcing the repetitiveness of human hubris and folly. Winterson’s preaching talents have been widely acknowledged since her first novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985). *The Stone Gods* leaves us

in no doubt that Winterson deems the message of the novel necessary and with more confidence in its impact than we can find in other writers. For instance, Ian McEwan raises ethical questions about climate change in *Solar* (2010) while, in Thomas Jones's words in the review of the novel "pointing out the fruitlessness of attempts to tackle climate change through art". Outside the arts, the battle between, and even among, ecologists and their opponent techno-and-market scientists rages over the ethical issue whether we should be trying to save the planet or whether it is unnecessary or futile.

While in her other novels Winterson creates her stories largely from the standpoint of a moralist of love, only vaguely political or antiauthoritarian, in *The Stone Gods* she is scathingly critical about our high-tech, over-sexed, excessively and falsely and damagingly "human rights" society with totalitarian rather than democratic features. Her dystopian universe of a sequence of planets at different stages of development and destruction makes a very direct accusation of man's conduct. We get a chilling glimpse of the burned out Planet White, "white like a shroud" (51). Despite evidence of oceans and cities once existing on it, now "there was no future in this bleached and boiled place. Nothing [...] could begin life here again [...]. The experiment was done" (52). The story of *The Stone Gods* is situated on a high-tech Planet Orbus, where, the narrator tells us, "we are a success story of the universe [...] but we have taken a few wrong turnings. Made a few mistakes" (4). It is, however, politically correct to insist that "Orbus is not dying. Orbus is evolving in a way that is hostile to human life" (7). In private the plan is "to leave this run-down rotting planet to the Caliphate and the SinoMosco Pact [and] ship civilization to the new world" (7). This new world, to which they are confidently heading, is Planet Blue: "The planet is pristine ..." (49); "Monsters will be humanely destroyed, with the possible exception of scientific capture of one or two types for the Zooeum" (5).

Winterson's notion of permeable, eternal time comes into its own here among the planets and gloriously so in the sense of Bakhtin's dialogical *chronotope*. Winterson's times and places in *The Stone Gods* are engaged in a perpetual dialogue mysteriously meandering across millennia and interplanetary space. While Planet Blue corresponds to our planet in its prehistoric age, the people on the dying Planet Orbus make frequent references to names and events from our history although the name of Planet Earth is never mentioned. The devilishly ingenious plan how to do away with the "monsters" on Planet Blue to make way for the evacuees from Orbus plays around with the scientifically still unresolved reasons for the extinction of the dinosaurs on Earth. Only as usual, this kind of playing God goes badly wrong and more life gets extinguished than was imagined: "The creatures whose world we had interrupted sought the sun [...] bellowing and crying through this fading light" (80). The prehistoric setting and modern, high-tech meddling in it echoes the ecologists' sobering reminder "that the world is much greater and older than normal human perception of it" (qtd. in Campbell 1996: 133) and also, "that landscape is a continuous history, never quite completed" (Howarth 1996: 76).

Another layer of Winterson's continuous, but haphazardly ordered dystopian history tells the story of the Easter Islanders in 1774 felling their last palm tree (101). In her rendering of it, it was the making of the Stone Gods that required the destruction of the palm forests thereby turning the island into a dry desert (110). A valiant effort to return unity and trees and life is marred by human hate and senseless drive for power (115). The story of the Easter Island Stone Gods is inserted in the very centre of the novel as if dreamed or imagined by Billie the narrator triggered off by James Cook's record of his approaching Easter Islands on 13 March 1774, Cook's *Journals* unaccountably surfacing in the possession of the voyagers from Orbus to Planet Blue. Apart from fitting Winterson's dystopian ecological agenda, the story also fits the Wintersonian artistic design of storytelling as referred to refrain-like in her fiction. Here it says: "This is one story. There will be another" (93).

The story to follow tells of the Post-3War world where there are ecotricity tramlines, but also the Wreck City "where you live when you can't live anywhere else", where "the bomb damage hasn't been cleared" (151). Despite the health hazard, the Wreck City spells freedom for its inhabitants, away from the dictatorial over-technologized mainstream society. Much like Carter's Barbarians and Gee's Wild Children or Orwell's outcasts, they have "no laws, no rules, no quotas" (153) and appear to be happily liberated from "the ugliness of what we had built, the ugliness of how we had destroyed it, the brutal, stupid, money-soaked, drunken binge of twenty-first-century world" (164). These are strong and sharp words that Winterson uses to describe and bluntly argue against our current global ecological and political situation, but her novel is never in danger of becoming a mere political tract; it is imaginative, fantastic, ethical – never afraid of moralizing – in the best visionary manner.

Winterson does not tell a story of the end of the world such as A.S. Byatt in *Ragnarok* (2011) – retelling a North myth of the world – but she tells of the ruin of our modern world – no less terrible a myth to contemplate, albeit without the finality of an ending. Winterson's several strong images of pleasant, even pastoral countryside contrasted with the Dead Forest inhabited by radioactive creatures follow an ecological thread:

Beech trees are easy to climb, and in their tops is a green and secret world. At their bottoms, underfoot is the crunch of the sharp-shelled beech nuts, and a different world, lower, mysterious, the micro-tunnels of mice and weasels.

These worlds need nothing from us, except that we leave them alone – but we never do (169).

Still, the open-endedness of Winterson's novel and her narrator's suggestion that *The Stone Gods* is about "a repeating world" (146), may in turn be viewed in McDowell's ecocritical words as "the willingness to be taught by the ways of the natural world [...] to suggest not only a sense of the writer's humility but also an ethical stance" (McDowell 1996: 376).

In conclusion, returning to the trajectory of utopian and dystopian writing from the past to the present, there is little doubt that at the turn of the third millennium, the central idea and principle concern of the genre emerges in the shape of ecological dystopia. In their different ways, the three turn-of-the-millennium novels discussed here reflect the real world and its moral condition, which increasingly and urgently also includes its ecological condition. A wide variety of theoretical concepts as available in the debate are applicable in reading the novels from the vantage point of ecocriticism: the nature vs culture dichotomy, the ethics of technological progress, dystopian fantasy, whether social, political, technological or ecological, whether theorized as “speculative fiction” or “possible worlds” or some other such term. In other words, other than ecological aspects of the novels could easily be foregrounded. Nevertheless, the authors’ ecological purpose appears to be undeniable in their dystopian setting emphasizing the climate change, in a dystopian though possible world of climate change. The ecocritic has an easy task to find both the traditional images of man and nature, in contrast or in harmony, and the more recent fears and apocalyptic visions of a natural catastrophe with man as the victim, but also as the cause. Humans shown as polluters, blinded by their technological dreams and achievements, and nature as a victim portrayed as ruined landscapes, poisoned and deathly – a burned-out planet – or, alternatively, humans, humbled and fighting for survival, shown at the mercy of the power of nature in the course of climate change.

Maggie Gee’s *Ice People* describes a dystopian future only a few decades away, the vicious circle of culture affecting nature and nature affecting culture taking a faster and tighter grip. Her globally warmed, high-tech world begins to cool down quickly and the largely infertile humans start dying out, their robots – their pride and pleasure – dying with them and their culture. The ending in the narrator’s death, together with the death of his culture, and the image of birds returning seems to imply hope for the planet rather than for mankind.

Doris Lessing’s dystopia *General Dann and Mara’s Daughter; Griot and the Snow Dog* is situated in some future millennium, at the end of an Ice Age melting the ice cliffs of what is known as Yerrup. A country called Tundra, with trees and farmland appears to be the Promised Land for the people from the Centre, mostly refugees from the many wars in all the known, remaining parts of the world. The wet and marshy Centre and its museums and texts of bygone ages in long dead languages are being abandoned to the encroaching waters from the icebergs. Lessing’s people, with no conception of science and technology and exhausted by the ravages of warfare, look to Tundra for a merely life-sustaining future.

Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* tells the story of places and planets ruined by man, the story spiraling back and forth through millennia in a sense of repeating worlds. The burned out Planet White – “the experiment done” (52) is followed by Planet Red (Orbus) with superbly high-tech life on the brink of disaster followed or preceded by the pristine, prehistoric Planet Blue. The Wintersonian time is permeable and love is offered as the one and only panacea: “Love is an intervention. Why do we not choose it?” (205). Nevertheless, Winterson’s choice

of dystopia does not suggest much hope for mankind although she is clearly not giving up to despair with her strong moral appeal.

The three dystopias, written within the span of a decade, share almost uncanny similarities in the novelists' imagination of their fantastic worlds. The ravages of climate change, whether heating or cooling the planet, are devastating for life as we know it, both animal and human. Gee's and Winterson's robots, the cuddly Doves and the super-intelligent Robo Sapiens respectively, designed to be better than humans fail to survive them. All three novelists seem to view mankind critically, as incorrigibly given to strife and warfare or similarly lethal activities, but portray individuals with empathy, thereby allowing a measure of hope against annihilation. In this respect all three novels remain open-ended though differently so: Gee's ending feels ambiguous, Lessing's tentatively hopeful, while Winterson's sounds skeptical, however disguised in poetic artfulness. I do not think one should read their open-endedness as a relativising postmodern ploy though, but as a sincere and realistic way of looking at the moral issues of human nature and our chances of survival on the planet, because this is the point the dystopian tradition has reached in our time and age.

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