Contemporary Literary Dissenters

Re-examining Post-Cold War Perspectives

Derek Maus

2019

Contents

Review of:

Daniel Cordle. *Late Cold War Literature and Culture: The Nuclear 1980s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), xi + 229pp

Sean Austin Grattan. *Hope Isn't Stupid: Utopian Affects in Contemporary American Literature* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2017), ix + 190pp

Heather J. Hicks. *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 208pp

As the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the Cold War approaches, scholars seem no closer to a consensus about how to characterize the period that succeeded the decades-long superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although both Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. president George H. W. Bush spoke of a "New World Order" in the waning years and immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the parameters of what emerged from that far-reaching conflict remain imprecise at best, incoherent at worst. Such varied (and frequently incompatible) concepts as neoliberalism, globalization, nationalism, post-postmodernism and others can all make claims to cultural predominance in the West since the mid-1980s, when Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies and Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in China effectively nullified the Cold War's ideological dichotomies. However, as national security scholar Nikolas Gvosdev suggested in 2016, the "post-Cold War era" label appears to have outlived whatever utility it may once have had, especially in light of the increasingly untenable "belief that the age of nations was passing in favor of greater transnational cooperation."

Although none of the three recent studies under consideration here offers an overarching thesis with which one might (re)characterize the last three decades of American and/or British culture, they collectively present a useful rejoinder to some of the exclusionary presumptions that underlie many of those efforts that *have* tried to affix such totalizing labels. Examining them together, one discovers a refutation of the pervasive notion that a set of socially-conscious and frequently subversive cultural-philosophical modes – e.g., anti-nuclearism, utopianism, post-apocalypticism – became scarce and/or irrelevant in American and British literature in the wake of Reaganite and Thatcherite politics. Not only do these scholars reassure humanistic readers that their worldview is not following in the footsteps of the dodo or the passenger pigeon, but they also undermine the relatively monotonic cultural narratives that sacralize a particular set of centrist, neoliberal Western values as those that "won" the Cold War. Such narratives place these values beyond question, thereby ensuring the continuation of the status quo post (frigus) bellum and the concomitant marginalization of voices that advocate for a different way of organizing society. The studies I consider here reclaim the space for such questions.

Daniel Cordle's *Late Cold War Literature and Culture* begins this subversive process with a simultaneous examination of the anti-nuclear movements in Britain and the U.S. during the early years of the 1980s, a period he characterizes as "radical" by two conflicting definitions: "It was radical in the conventional sense of containing forthright

and generally left wing protest, but it was also radical because it was a period of hard-line reform by governments of the right" (5). Building on the foundation of a "range of important studies [that] have revealed the embeddedness of cultural production in the geopolitics of Cold War confrontation," he contends that real-life anti-nuclear protests such as the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Commons in the U.K. and the Livermore Action Group in the U.S. provided a renewed "nuclear consciousness" that stimulated "a substantial body of literature" (6) throughout the remainder of that decade. Cordle identifies this nuclear consciousness not simply as a vestige of a bygone era of extreme nuclear anxiety, but rather as part of a broader societal debate whose contours have been effaced by the unexpected and mostly peaceful end to the Cold War:

> The neoliberal worldview is now so dominant, so mainstream, that it is hard to imagine quite how virulently contested was this period of its establishment, when opposing, radical visions of society were proposed and fought over by left and right.... That the Cold War's end, though dramatic, did not involve the nuclear conflagration toward which many had long imagined the superpowers to be heading can, in retrospect, give the period a quality of anti-climax, but this is to forget how central and pressing were its nuclear politics – and its politics more generally – and also naively to assume that the "safe" ending of the Cold War was somehow always assured. (5)

This forgetfulness is unconscionable for Cordle not only "because the final decade of the Cold War was the one in which the shape of our political landscape was sculpted," but also "because the glimpses of catastrophic human conflict and the end of the world emerging from nuclear culture also produced alternative visions, imagining different, more peaceable means of existence that have been all but lost...since the Cold War's end" (21).

Cordle's most salient contributions to the scholarship on the anti-nuclear literature of the 1980s involve his choice to discuss numerous works of young adult (YA) and children's fiction alongside canonical works of nuclear-themed film and fiction geared specifically for adult audiences. Each of his thematically-organized chapters contains such an intermingling of works designed for different age-levels of readership. He justifies this approach by contending that the children's and YA books he surveys reflect the desire of anti-nuclear activist movements to mobilize children and adolescents in furthering their cause: "[N]uclear protest groups were particularly successful in recruiting young people to their ranks and we should think of nuclear protest in the 1980s as highly charged by a sense of generational awareness" (8). Although his claim that this makes such books part of the "central canon of nuclear texts" is far from ironclad (especially in light of the mixed evidence that they actually found a wide and receptive audience of young readers), considerable insight into the reciprocal relationship

between activism and artistic production results from his methodology of comparing such grim adult-themed novels as Richard Powers's *Prisoner's Dilemma*, Denis Johnson's *Fiskadoro*, and Maggie Gee's *The Burning Book* to works like Lynne Hall's *If Winter Comes*, Louise Lawrence's *Children of the Dust*, and Jane Langton's *The Fragile Flag* that are targeted towards younger audiences.

The temporal, geographic, and generic breadth of Cordle's survey leads to a relative terseness that may frustrate readers seeking in-depth analysis of exemplary novels. Although he returns frequently and in different contexts to some of his primary texts, no single work receives a particularly exhaustive treatment over the course of the book. For me, this is more than offset both by the richness of his discussion of the social/political/historical context of the 1980s and by the innovative correlations he makes among classes of texts. It is quite possible that Cordle is the only person who has read all the various children's, YA, and adult novels that he surveys, but he makes a compelling case for other scholars to follow his lead.

Whereas such nonfictional refutations of the nuclearized '70s and '80s as Helen Caldicott's *Nuclear Madness* (1978) or Robert Jay Lifton and Peter Falk's *Indefensible Weapons* (1982) have largely become historical artifacts, Cordle attributes a timeless (and, thus, continuing) function to fictional expressions of similar ideas:

> A rich and complex area, with a mindset distinct from the earlier Cold War, [the anti-nuclear literature of the 1980s] challenges some of our critical assumptions about the decade.... [N]uclear literature asks us to confront nature and limits of human experience and to reflect on how our technologies shape our culture and society.... It prompts us to think of our species in the contexts of deep time that have recently attended the rise of the concept of the Anthropocene.... We retain the capacity to inflict horror on our fellow human beings and on our world, through nuclear war, that staggers comprehension" (201–2).

The explicit intention of Cordle's study is to recover these literary alternatives from the rhetorical scrap-heap to which they have been consigned by the dominant cultural narratives of the post-Cold War era. Although he acknowledges that "[n]uclear literature cannot resolve these dilemmas," he also insists that it "makes us aware of them and at its best it challenges us to imagine our possible futures in all their beauty and their horror" (202).

Sean Austin Grattan approaches a similar task along a very different vector in *Hope Isn't Stupid*. Whereas the books examined in Cordle's study are mostly cautionary tales that depict the literal and figurative damage caused by the existence and use (imagined, except for Hiroshima and Nagasaki) of nuclear weapons, Grattan focuses on a more affirmative genre in trying to counteract the "popular story...that the late twentieth century has seen a surplus of dystopian literature, but very little investment in utopian literature" (1). As his title suggests, though, his explicit goal parallels Cordle's desire

to recover anti-nuclear discourses from their undeserved obscurity within post-Cold War cultural memory; Grattan seeks to rescue the concept of utopia from what he sees as its dismissive mischaracterization in recent years:

> Bandied about on both the political left and right as equivalent with shoddy thinking or wild-eyed dreaming, utopia rarely comfortably occupies a space of critical engagement befitting the term's continued existence as marking a desire or hope that the world could look better than the present.... [T]he pleasure of being right, that the world isn't getting better, is both politically disingenuous and dangerous for those who putatively place themselves on the left.

By "contend[ing] that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries the lost art of utopia is very much alive and well" (2), Grattan joins Cordle in attempting to counteract a literary-political truism that he perceives as going dangerously unexamined in contemporary Western culture:

> Utopia, as a genre, calls into question the horizons of social possibility, but with the increased imbrication of capital with social life under neoliberalism those horizons become foreclosed by the logic of neoliberal capitalism.... It is precisely this preponderance of claims on both the conservative right and the progressive left about the impossibility of alternatives that makes thinking about the utopian in a nonreductive and open way crucial for contemporary writers. (8)

Although his critical approach is indisputably Marxist at its core – e.g., "Given the proliferation of capitalist forms of accumulation and degradation, the global economic crisis of 2008, and the resultant revolts, it is crucial to reconsider and reaffirm the need, now more than ever, for the utopian" (9) – Grattan's intentions dovetail with Cordle's inasmuch as both scholars see their work partly as a form of activism recovering a lost or possibly suppressed discourse of protest against the contemporary (i.e., post-Cold War) status quo: "What is at stake...is a reinvigoration of a critique of the world through thinking the utopian; here is another way of resisting left melancholy, and of describing the active forms of resistance utopia might make available" (26).

Grattan's definition of utopian literature builds on the work of such prominent scholars of utopia as Lyman Tower Sargent, Marianne DeKoven, Fredric Jameson, and José Muñoz. However, he also departs significantly from these precursors by incorporating the work of such scholars of affect theory as Lauren Berlant, Eve Sedgwick, and Sara Ahmed in order to redefine utopia in a contemporary context based less on literary tropes and more on the psychological and physiological responses engendered by the experience of reading a hopeful story: "[t]he challenge to feel utopian is, in part, the challenge to recognize landing on utopia's shore, to recognize both the desire and the

need to glance at the map containing utopia, as well as to linger, stare, tarry, and accept the temporal openings that might grow from even the smallest seeds into something that might offer even momentary succor" (18). Although convincingly elaborated, Grattan's highly specialized critical methodology may at times prove daunting to readers not already fluent in the nuances of either of his central theoretical discourses.

Thankfully, Grattan aids his reader by integrating his critical framework fully and immediately into his interpretive discussions of a series of novels linked by his interest in examining "utopias that slip through the cracks, those that hide their utopianism, or those whose utopianism...meets with critical silence" (2). Although each of his first three chapters treats fiction by a relatively canonical author – William S. Burroughs, Toni Morrison, and Thomas Pynchon, respectively – they cover novels that have received relatively little critical attention within those authors' oeuvres. The first chapter inhabits the same historical moment as Cordle's book in examining Burroughs's 1981 novel *Cities of the Red Night*. Grattan claims that this novel's "retroactive" utopianism "conceptualiz[es] utopia in a time when utopia, or at least left-leaning understandings of alternative social structures to neoliberal capitalism, are facing attacks from all sides" (31). In analyzing Morrison's *Paradise*, Grattan reorients the extant criticism of the novel's utopianism toward what he calls its "monstrous" aspect, one that "opens a space for thinking alternative modes of being in the world, modes of being delineated by non-fundamentalist ways of understanding and imagining the world" (52). The chapter on Pynchon is likely of the greatest interest to *Orbit*'s readership, as Grattan examines *The Crying of Lot 49, Vineland*, and *Bleeding Edge* as a utopian trilogy that "trace[s] the emergence and failure of the possibility of alternative political formations in the late twentieth century" (71). Grattan argues that this series of failures does not mark a shift toward the dystopian, but rather a different brand of utopianism predicated on the possibility of divergence from a constrictive status quo instead of the achievement of perfection: "[It] is neither nostalgic nor realistic; rather, Pynchon marks the limits and failures to imagine *another* world. This other world...is not necessarily a better world, but it marks, instead, the possibility of running counter [to] the prevailing norms of mainstream America" (72). The final two chapters are linked by Grattan's attempts to "question the preference of community over solitude" in conventional utopias and thereby to delineate "a role for the solitary within utopian discourse" (29) in the twenty-first century. He examines three relatively obscure texts – Colson Whitehead's debut novel *The Intuitionist* (which has only recently found a wider audience as Whitehead's reputation grows), Dennis Cooper's *Try*, and John Darnielle's *Black Sabbath Master of Reality* – as utopias that occur on an individual scale. He contends that these "small utopian moments...[offer] another way of ordering the world that might be reparative.... [They] foster the hope and potential for something better than what can at times appear unyieldingly and unremittingly impossible: that tomorrow will be better than today" (146).

The fictional works analyzed in Heather J. Hicks's *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century* also propose alternative social structures that might likewise

be termed "reparative." They depart radically from those found in Grattan's book, though, by literalizing the need for repair alongside its figurative usage; the repairs in the novels Grattan analyzes are primarily philosophical and occasionally institutional/societal, whereas in the books that Hicks covers, the physical and sometimes even physiological structures of the world are also in dire need of fixing. Hicks asserts that Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, and Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* series all depict "the end of the world as we know it" (1) in order to question whether the "survivors [of such apocalypses] should move beyond salvaging mere scraps of modernity and rebuild dimensions of it in earnest or...concede that modernity is beyond salvage and attempt to devise something that transcends its historical forms" (3). She situates her discussion of these texts squarely within "a set of historical and epistemological transformations – the globalized economy intensified by the end of the Cold War; the international recognition of the menace of anthropogenic global warming; the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror; the growing disavowal within intellectual circles of postmodernity as a category of periodization; and the international resurgence of the concept of 'modernity'" (2). This catalogue of most of the major developments of the "post-Cold War era" allows Hicks to synthesize Cordle's cautionary tenor and Grattan's speculative idealism in the face of these developments in order to project a more far-reaching and provocative question onto each of her primary texts: "[W]hat should survive and why[?]" (4).

Hicks claims that each of the novels she analyzes contain "striking allusions" (1) to Daniel Defoe's eighteenth-century castaway novel *Robinson Crusoe*, arguing that Crusoe's loss of "his place in th[e] newly modern world" is the "predicament [...that] writers of post-apocalyptic narratives since the Enlightenment have wanted readers to confront" (2). In her view, this fictional confrontation goes through three stages. Defoe and other authors of "modern" post-apocalyptic novels generally lament the loss of modernity's presumed benefits and either seek to recreate or to restore them as wholly as possible. The two more recent stages she envisions both alter this basic formula:

> Whereas postmodern post-apocalyptic narratives written from the 1960s through the 1980s charted characters' departure from modernity into ever deeper aleatory terrain, the characters of many of these new millennial narratives begin in conditions of what we might call postmodern modernity, conditions that break down and from which the characters must then move forward. (3)

The six novels she analyzes invoke several common themes and intertextual references (a detailed taxonomy of which is helpfully included in the book's conclusion) as they "play out a variety of...scenarios [in which] modernity is shut down and rebooted" (16) in order to ask "[w]hat aspects of modernity should be salvaged?" (24).

The intricacy of Hicks's critical apparatus is assuredly not for the faint-hearted. She makes clear in her introduction that her approach is grounded in the work of "feminist,

postcolonial, and Marxist critics, including Walter Benjamin, Wendy Brown, Jed Esty, Marianne Hirsch, Catherine Keller, Esther Leslie, David Medalie, and Franco Moretti" (5), and dozens more economists, social theorists, literary critics, and philosophers inhabit the interstices between her insightful and detailed close-readings of primary texts. Allow me to reassure the leery reader, though, that she unfailingly rewards the trust extended to her as, for example, her lengthy exposition of Benjamin's theories on kitsch and the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 leads to a direct application of those concepts to Whitehead's zombie-novel *Zone One*.

Perhaps belying her aforementioned metaphor about these novels' "rebooting" of modernity in the wake of its apocalyptic destruction (which would involve a wholesale restoration of its original form), Hicks does not claim that they arrive at a cohesive answer to her overarching question. Rather, she concludes only that they collectively affirm the need for their readers "to become Crusoes who are also Fridays, curious agents of a new modernity that has learned from its mistakes" (172). Although one might be tempted to see the absence of a more prescriptive prognosis as a flaw – especially given the elaborately detailed list of common "symptoms" Hicks enumerates across the texts she examines – I find it wholly consistent with the understandably nebulous conclusions of the other two books considered here. The task that faces any individual or group seeking to resist the kind of power capable of bringing about the dire worlds that pervade the novels that Cordle, Grattan, and Hicks survey is potentially overwhelming. One can readily sympathize with these critics' leeriness towards tidy solutions to such massive and systemic dangers. Although they are all clearly infused with a spirit of social and political engagement, none of them explicitly advocates for a particular worldview. Instead, each one makes an ardent case for the necessity of widening our collective perception of the potential options by which the contemporary world might be organized; they do *not* argue for the adoption of any such alternative. For all their urgency and earnestness, these are, after all, literary texts being discussed, not political manifestoes or religious tracts; even while potentially facing what Pynchon called "the last delta-t" (762) on the final page of *Gravity's Rainbow*, they urge far greater consideration of reality, but do not presume to replace the would-be gods whose clay feet they expose.

Because of my own narrative predilection for satirical subversions of authority, I am hard-pressed to find a better analogy for the rhetorical work these three books perform than that exemplified in a scene from Joel and Ethan Coen's 1998 film *The Big Lebowski*. The counter-cultural slacker-protagonist, Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski (Jeff Bridges), is berated by his "establishment" counterpart, a prominent businessman also named Jeffrey Lebowski (David Huddleston), in language that strongly evokes post-Cold War neoliberal triumphalism: "Your revolution is over, Mr. Lebowski! Condolences! The bums lost!... My advice to you is, to do what your parents did! Get a job, sir! The bums will always lose – do you hear me, Lebowski? THE BUMS WILL ALWAYS LOSE!" Even as the ostensible "winner" Lebowski harangues the "loser" Lebowski in this manner, the latter dismissively closes the door on him and proceeds to obtain a

replacement oriental rug from the former's fawningly gullible assistant, Brandt (Philip Seymour Hoffman). The Dude has not overthrown the ruling order, as he claims to have tried to do earlier in life as one the authors of "The *original* Port Huron Statement...Not the compromised second draft." Nevertheless, he has not only invalidated the "big" Lebowski's claims of supremacy, but also achieves the modest goal of justice that he brought to this otherwise unlikely conjunction of cartoonishly archetypal American characters. In less comic (yet no less subversive) ways, Cordle, Hicks, and Grattan each attempt to persuade their readers that there are still plenty of authors presenting literary challenges to the dominant discourses of the contemporary Western world. The point of reading such works is not simply a matter of reversing a binary conception of the world based on winners and losers, but rather to expand dramatically the discussion of how humanity might best survive in an age filled with countless large-scale perils. After all, as Cordle Pynchonesquely puts in in the final line of his book, "[W]e might, still, be between the wars" (202).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Cordle D (2017) *Late Cold War Literature and Culture: The Nuclear 1980s*, London: Palgrave Macmillan

Grattan S A (2017) *Hope Isn't Stupid: Utopian Affects in Contemporary American Literature*, Iowa City: Iowa University Press

Gvosdev N (2016) "What Follows the 'Post-Cold War' Era?" https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffair 2016/follows-post-cold-war-era/.

Hicks H J (2016) *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage*, London: Palgrave Macmillan

Joel and Coen Ethan (1998) *Working Title Films.*

The Ted K Archive

Derek Maus
Contemporary Literary Dissenters
Re-examining Post-Cold War Perspectives
2019

Orbit: A Journal of American Literature 7(1). <doi.org/10.16995/orbit.1349>

www.thetedkarchive.com