

# Cultural Pessimists: The Tradition of Christopher Priest's Fiction

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Science fiction is a capacious category of popular fiction. The only serious survey I am aware of—*New Maps of Hell* by Kingsley Amis—has considerable difficulty in defining it. Cohabiting uneasily with fantasy writing on the one hand and the crazier forms of prophecy on the other, it is “every day losing some of its appropriateness”<sup>1</sup> as *science* fiction—in other words, the gadgetry side of it is becoming less and less important. At its purest, Amis claims, it “presents with verisimilitude the human effects of spectacular changes in our environment, changes either deliberately willed or involuntarily suffered” (p. 26). The more “optimistic” sort of story tends to study willed, even desirable changes; the more “pessimistic”—and to my mind by far the most interesting and significant—deals with developments beyond human control and volition and concentrates on their destructive effects. The common ancestor of books of this latter type—the kind written by two of the leading practitioners of the art, J. G. Ballard and, above all, Christopher Priest—is none other than that (incongruous) classic of our children’s bookshelves, *Gulliver’s Travels*. Lest this remark be thought far-fetched or merely silly, let me quote the German philosopher of history, close friend of Thomas Mann, Erich Kahler:

The third part of *Gulliver’s Travels*, with its descriptions of a miscellany of island peoples, has generally been viewed as an inessential, weaker insertion into the book. To my mind this view is very wrong. The section adds a horizontal dimension to the vertical dimensions in which human limits are exceeded in the other parts. Here Swift selects professional abilities and individual functions out of the human totality and shows how each of these can degenerate. He explores the potentialities of reaching beyond ordinary human lifetimes and human ways, into immortality, to the ghosts of history. This part is, in fact, the most contemporary part of the book for us. It contains astonishing prophecies of some of the most recent experimentation, and of the quantitative approach that is dominant nowadays. There is, first of all, the flying island of Laputa, a kind of satellite on which dwell the mathematicians who rule the common folk on the land beneath. These are beings who have one eye turned inward, the other upward toward the zenith, and who are so absorbed in their meditations that they need an intermediary with a flyswatter to bring about a connection between them and their surroundings. When they are supposed to listen, he swats them on the ear; when they are to speak, he swats them on the mouth. “Their Ideas are perpetually conversant in Lines and Figures. If they would, for Example, praise the beauty of a Woman . . . they describe it by Rhombs, Circles, Parallelograms, Ellipses, and other Geometrical Terms. . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Swift, Kahler argues, used the new modes of perception inaugurated by the era of scientific discovery to reveal the dehumanizing possibilities of science itself in a prophetic fashion; and it is clear that the finest science fiction writers today are not attempting anything very different. The father of

an illustrious line, Swift remains, Kahler concludes, "the earliest and at the same time the most radical of the 'cultural pessimists'" (p. 130). Amis of course also links modern science fiction to *Gulliver's Travels*, which he praises for its verisimilitude and eschewal of the arbitrary, for its "businesslike thoroughness in description [of] a series of satirical utopias" (p. 31).

The feature of science fiction which Amis stresses—and which connects it so firmly with *Gulliver's Travels*, and then later with Voltaire's *Micromégas* (1752), the first account of a visit to Earth by an alien, and with Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), a satirical romance in which names are spelt backwards and common notions like the value of machinery and the appropriateness of legal punishment for theft are set on their heads—the feature science fiction has in common with such works is what Amis calls "social diagnosis and warning" (p. 87), a "didactic and admonitory purpose" (p. 46n). "Its most important use," he writes, "is a means of dramatising social enquiry, as providing a fictional mode in which cultural tendencies can be isolated and judged" (p. 63). While trying first and foremost to entertain, science fiction writers are concerned secondarily to warn us of the dangers of our technology or of the potential hazards of the apparently "safe" world we inhabit. Thus J. G. Ballard compares familiar Shaftesbury Avenue and Holborn in London to "a city of hell" after it has been torn to pieces by freak winds of a strength previously experienced only by those employed to simulate aircraft slipstreams in wind-tunnels.<sup>3</sup> In Ballard's later novel *The Drought*<sup>4</sup> rain is a thing of the past because radio-active waste has prevented the sea evaporating, with consequences which can be imagined. The opposite disaster afflicts the people of *The Drowned World*, also by Ballard<sup>5</sup> and in John Christopher's *The Death of Grass*<sup>6</sup> all civilized qualities are overturned when a mutating virus attacks seed-bearing herbage and robs man of his daily bread in a "silent spring" beyond even Rachel Carson's worst imagining.

"It is a curious paradox" (writes Ballard in the Preface to *Vermilion Sands*) "that almost all science fiction, however far removed in time and space, is really about the present day. . . . Perhaps because of [its] cautionary tone, so much of science fiction's notional futures are zones of unrelieved grimness. Even its heavens are like other people's hells."<sup>7</sup> This is not always true: there is, as I said earlier, a more optimistic vein in some science fiction, perhaps best represented by one of the classics of the genre, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy* (1951-53), in which, against great odds and in spite of near-disaster, the best of mankind's achievements survive the First Empire's collapse into decadent barbarism until eventually the galaxy is made safe for ever.<sup>8</sup> Some science fiction on the other hand involves puzzles or paradoxes, a kind of black surrealist humor such as marks Christopher Priest's first novel *Indoctrinaire* (1970) and his third *Inverted World* (1974) both of which involve distortions of time or space.<sup>9</sup> *Indoctrinaire* tells how a circular clearing of stubble in the middle of the Brazil jungle exists two hundred years in the future: in moving out of the trees onto this plain the characters step across two centuries of time. British scientist Elias Wentik is drafted there in mysterious circumstances and when he returns to England it is to find it in the middle of a war and his family evacuated from London he knows not where. In despair he awaits the nuclear holocaust since in spite of everything he decides not to go back (or perhaps rather forward) to the safety of the future.

*Inverted World*, though Priest's third novel, had been "simmering" in his mind since 1965 and has more in common with *Indoctrinaire* than it has with his second and to my mind finest book *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (1972). The "inverted world" of the title is Earth City. To its inhabitants it is an oasis of peace, order, and civilized values, built on another planet by an enlightened visionary when Earth itself was engulfed in disaster and barbarism

(this is a recurrent theme in science fiction, of course). It is a place where the physical laws governing Earth are inverted—"we live," one of the inhabitants declares, "in a large but finite universe, occupied by a number of bodies of infinite size" (p. 178). This picture they have of their world is put in doubt by the attitude of an intelligent outsider, an English nurse called Elizabeth Khan, to whom the City appears to be "not much more than a large and misshapen office block" (p. 221). Their world view is finally shattered when it becomes clear that it is not the exterior world that is different, but their perception of it. Imprisoned in their inherited and unquestioned beliefs they have for ages been laboriously winching their "city" forward on rails in a continually-frustrated attempt to maintain it near the elusive "optimum" where they claim spatial and temporal distortion is minimal. It comes almost as much of a shock to the reader when he realizes, too, that they have been dragging themselves across Spain and Portugal in a post-"crash" world and, having reached the western seaboard of the European landmass, are about to haul themselves into the endless stretches of the Atlantic. The alternate world view they have lived by for so long turns out after all to have been a mere mathematical abstraction based on a hyperbolic curve, and they are saved only in the nick of time from the suicidal effects of believing in it any further.

In spite of its rather unsatisfying "trick" ending, *Inverted World* is not without disturbing features which link it with the satirical Utopias of earlier literature. I am not thinking of the rather too blatant parallel with the myth of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden when the hero-narrator Helward Mann yields to the temptation of a latter-day Eve (called Caterina) bearing apples, or of a perhaps coincidental similarity with *Erewhon* (in which wealth is measured in horsepower just as in Earth City age is computed in miles). I am referring to the technique of ironic contrast set up between an imaginary or ideal world and our own which is the staple of Swiftian or Voltairean satire and the point of which is not lost even on our hero himself:

Perhaps unfairly, I formed an impression that I should not care to live on Earth planet, as most of its existence seemed to be a series of disputes, wars, territorial claims, economic pressures. The concept of civilisation was far advanced, and explained to us as the state in which mankind congregated within cities. By definition, we of Earth city were civilised, but there seemed to be no resemblance between our existence and theirs. Civilisation on Earth planet was equated with selfishness and greed; those people who lived in a civilised state exploited those who did not. There were shortages of vital commodities on Earth planet, and the people in the civilised nations were able to monopolise those commodities by reason of their greater economic strength. This imbalance appeared to be at the root of the disputes.

I suddenly saw parallels between our civilisation and theirs. The city was undoubtedly on a war footing as a result of the situation with the tools, and that in its turn was a product of our barter system. We did not exploit them through wealth, but we had a surplus of the commodities in short supply on Earth planet: food, fuel energy, raw materials. Our shortage was manpower, and we paid for that with our surplus commodities.

The process was inverted, but the product was the same. (pp. 166-67)

The thrust of that last sentence is reminiscent of many of Swift's best effects when he unveils his meaning directly after an extended development of oblique and rather dead-pan treatment.

I have already suggested that Priest's finest novel is *Fugue for a Darkening Island*. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this is more "prophetic" (at least in the Orwellian sense) than either of the other two, and least like classic science fiction. It is described by its publishers variously as "imaginative fiction" and as "a novel of the future."<sup>10</sup> This particular future, like that of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is not especially remote, in fact it is uncomfortably close to home. The "darkening island" is of course Britain; more particularly, the south-east of England in which the entire action is played out. A nuclear holocaust in Africa has driven millions of refugees to seek asylum elsewhere, and many thousands land illegally in England, provoking racial tension on a scale hitherto unknown. A right-wing government attempts to impose a tough policy of control, opposed by liberal elements (among which the hero Alan Whitman numbers himself). The Africans take up arms to defend themselves; the whites react in kind. Law and order breaks down; atrocity and counteratrocity disfigure community life. Alan Whitman—the epitome of the ordinary man-in-the-street, a modest college lecturer unhappily married with a young daughter—is not much better at coping with this situation than most of his compatriots; perhaps less so, in that he is a moral and physical coward who has opted out all his life from difficult political, personal, and moral decisions. He is the sort of man who, having seduced a girl, blames the sexual failure of their subsequent marriage on her, and takes up with a string of mistresses with whom he is scarcely less indifferent. His only deep relationship is with his daughter Sally: he stays with his wife only on her account. His personal slide into barbarism is precipitated by the one occurrence which can provoke in him a "combination of terror and hatred": the discovery of Sally's mutilated body near a brothel set up by the Blacks for their troops, one of many female victims who have been murdered for failing to cooperate (p. 125).

Consequently, this is a much more unsettling novel than Priest's other books. It is also more insistently and disturbingly erotic: the other two, like much science fiction, are perfunctory in their treatment of sex. There is, too, an uneasy tension between liberal attitudes on the one hand and deep-seated anxieties about racial violence on the other: if *Inverted World* features "tooks," primitive people whom the City exploits with the good conscience Helward comes to see through in the passage I quoted above, it does not betray fear of them in the way *Fugue* does. I suppose what I am saying is that Priest's second novel is less censored by his own enlightened feelings than the other two; and for that reason is a more honest, more disturbing, and altogether more satisfying book. I do not of course imply for a moment that it deserves that ugly contemporary epithet "racialist": just that it is too clear-sighted to suppress the fact that white people in the situation of a "darkening island" would fear mass black immigration, that the blacks would resist measures to expel them, and that if nothing were done to defuse the confrontation the consequences for all parties to the dispute would be ugly and cruel. What Priest is writing about, in a word, is what Ingmar Bergman in one of his greatest films refers to as "the shame" (in fact his movie, *Shame*, may have inspired the book: the imagery of the end is very similar in each case, the refugee boat, the shapeless bodies in the sea, and so on): the shame anyone would experience in a situation of social breakdown for which one would necessarily feel obscurely but acutely responsible.

*Fugue* is also the most interesting technically of Priest's novels. It is narrated by the hero from several temporal viewpoints: Alan's boyhood and precocious sexual experiences, his student days and developing relationship with his future wife, his married life and various mistresses, the worsening political

situation as the African problem grows in menace, the different stages of the breakdown of normal British life; all these diverse moments in time are visited in turn but in no particular order. As in many *nouveaux romans*, the reader is expected to find his own bearings from internal indications alone. None of the resulting sections of narrative extends for more than a few pages. The style, too, resembles the impersonal, inexplicit manner of most experimental writing.

But much as it owes to other contemporary fiction, *Fugue for a Darkening Island* is a genuinely original work of art. It is science fiction only in the broadest sense of the term; like the best of the genre, it transcends definition. But at the same time, it is comfortably at home in a long tradition of moral and didactic fiction, playing Utopia (in this case the town on the south coast, an unnatural oasis of order and calm in a world of chaos, which offers Whitman shelter for a time) against the horrors of reality. A reality that if not contemporary is not unthinkable: it is clear that Priest's consciousness, like that of the rest of his generation—he was born in England two years before Hiroshima—is seared by an awareness of the hydrogen bomb, which casts its shadow not only over the "darkening island" but also over the world of *Indoctrinaire*. "It is one thing to imagine an atrocity," Whitman confides, "it is something else again to witness it" (pp. 84-85). If one of the functions of literature is to warn, Christopher Priest's work fulfills it powerfully; like Artaud in the theatre, Priest no doubt sees his task as being to alert us that we are not free, that the heavens may at any time fall about our ears.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1961), p. 25. Other page references to Amis are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup>Erich Kahler, *The Inward Turn of Narrative*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, with a foreword by Joseph Frank (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 123-24. Other references to Kahler are to this work.

<sup>3</sup>J. G. Ballard, *The Wind from Nowhere* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 62.

<sup>4</sup>J. G. Ballard, *The Drought* (London: Cape, 1965).

<sup>5</sup>J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (London: Gollancz, 1962).

<sup>6</sup>John Christopher, *The Death of Grass* (London: Joseph, 1956).

<sup>7</sup>J. G. Ballard, *Vermillion Sands* (London: Cape, 1973), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>Isaac Asimov, *Foundation Trilogy* (St. Albans: Panther, 1964).

<sup>9</sup>All three of Christopher Priest's novels have been published in Great Britain in hardback by Faber & Faber Ltd. I have used the paperback reprints issued in 1971, 1973, and 1975 respectively by the New English Library, London; all page references are to these editions.

<sup>10</sup>Excerpts from publicity material issued by Faber & Faber, London, n.d.