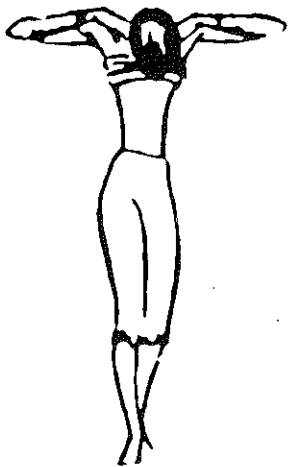


THE DECLINE OF THE FEMINIST UTOPIAN NOVEL

"Although Margaret Atwood is very aware of the problems and pitfalls of modern society, she offers us little inspiration. She has been "political" for years, yet her politics still lack focus and vision.... Have we not been subjected to enough dooms-day scenarios, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*? ..." F. de Jong, Letter to *Now* magazine (Toronto), 6-12 Nov 1986.



HIS LETTER'S complaints about the pessimism of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* sum up my own first reactions and, on reflection, my response to what seems to be a larger retreat from the feminist utopianism of the 1970s. For most reviewers, establishing a literary context for *The*

Handmaid's Tale involves mentioning *Brave New World* and/or 1984, rather than acknowledging the feminist derived revival of utopian fiction in the 1970s. While such a development may seem understandable in the age of Mulroney and Reagan, it needs some further discussion. In this essay I will briefly describe both the original utopian movement in feminist fiction, as well as the retreat from that position, as a prelude to questioning the relative merits of the implicit political strategies in the two positions. Of course asking such questions implies that as a critic I have the right to talk about works of popular fiction as having a political function. If that isn't what critics should be doing, the goal of social transformation is a dead issue and we might as well join the Conservative Party and start building our bomb shelters. As for taking these novels in such a literal or political way--the opposite of how we are taught to read--it seems foolish and obtuse to ignore the deliberate engagement of these works with feminist issues.

I. THE UTOPIAN MOMENT

The classics of the feminist utopian revival of the 1970s were largely written within the generic boundaries of science fiction and fantasy, and include: Suzy McKee Charnas, *Motherlines* (1979); and Sally Gearhart, *The Wanderground* (1978); Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Dispossessed* (1975); Marge Piercy, *Woman on The Edge of Time* (1976); and Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1975). To these should be added two utopian novels written by men with feminist overtones, Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia* (1975) and Samuel Delany, *Triton*, (1976).

Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, Sally Gearhart's *The Wanderground* also portrays a backlash against the growing strength of women and gays. But here the backlash prompts "the revolt of the Earth herself": outside the city men suddenly become impotent, while machines and mechanical devices no longer function. Although the men establish a patriarchal police state in the cities, the core of the novel is the evocation of a utopian world of the women in the countryside. This focus on the depiction of new societies organized around egalitarian and cooperative principles is characteristic of all of the above novels, although some go further than just describing the utopian society by raising questions about the possibility of utopia (in Delany and LeGuin), or by concentrating on the transition to the new society (in Russ, and in Piercy).

Because they emphasize the changed lives of their characters and describe the alternate societies which would make new patterns of behaviour and interpersonal relations possible, these works provide the reader with an experience, however limited, of what a better world, beyond sexual hierarchy and domination, might look and feel like. It is worth mentioning, too, that their political effectiveness is enhanced for the very reasons that they are often ignored by mainstream critics. Written primarily within the context of popular fiction, they are able to reach beyond the already converted to touch a wide audience.

However, with one exception to which I shall return, this utopian moment seems to have ended. More recent fictions no longer give us images of a radically different future in which the values and ideals of feminism have been extended to much of the planet, but depressing images of a brutal re-establishment of capitalist patriarchy.

II. THE RETREAT FROM UTOPIA

ATTENTION ALL MEN:

The Patriarchal Network is where (straight) men learn about:

* *The growing movement of heterosexual men who are refusing to be ripped-off by scheming feminist-golddiggers in palimony, alimony, paternity, property division and child custody & child support schemes (The Men's Rights Movement).*

* *The International Patriarchy*

* *Patriarchal Spirituality*

* *Guidebook to Brothels (Whorehouses) around the world (Live with a foreign girlfriend-for-hire in an apartment for a week or longer).*

DON'T SUBMIT TO A FEMINIST-LESBIAN TAKEOVER. RESIST !!!

Don't delay. Take a Tab and send for Free Information Today"

(Poster removed from telephone pole at the corner of Bush and Fillmore in San Francisco, October 1986)

The transition from utopia to dystopia can be seen in Zoe Fairbairn's novel *Benefits* (1979), which was written in Britain at the end of what I am calling the utopian period. It is set in the near future in the context of Britain's worsening economic plight. All social welfare programmes are suspended except for the equivalent of the "baby-bonus": a "Benefit" which will be paid directly to the mother, but only to mothers who do not work outside the home. However, rather than leading to a strengthening of the family and its traditional values (as intended by the right wing Family Party), the benefit has two related effects which lead the government to conclude that it is a failure: on the one hand, lower income families "breed" as a way of increasing their income; on the other, many women are able, thanks to the Benefit, to live, with other women, outside the system and its embodiment of the nuclear family.

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The government then announces that the Benefit will be withdrawn from "unfit" mothers, namely those who do not live according to traditional family norms. But as Britain's economy continues to worsen, European planners help to implement even more drastic "social planning" experiments: the widespread--and often forced--placement of "contraceptive pellets" in women. When women find ways to remove the pellets, the planners put a contraceptive in the water supply. Women deemed "suitable" for motherhood are to apply at a Women's Centre for an antidote, but the antidote reacts with the contraceptive, producing massive deformities and rendering British women "unsuitable as vehicles for carrying unborn children."

This is not, however, the end of the novel. Although there is a possibility that it may be generations--or never--until British women are again able to bear children, a younger and more militant generation of women argue that this is their chance:

Why should we not build a society in which love and respect are--so to speak--negotiable currency? We have a lot of time, sisters. We have all the time we once spent on our domestic duties. Think of what that means! We have the ultimate bargaining weapon. We will have babies again when we are good and ready; when our society is a fit place to bring them.

From this catastrophe emerges an even stronger commitment to the utopian goals of a society which will finally be "a fit place to bring [babies]."

Benefits is certainly not a utopia; but it does not end in despair either. It demonstrates an increasing bitterness towards the continuing exploitation of women--particularly their unpaid labour in the home--and to governments attempt to control their fertility: "Our women are going to be the first to find a style of life that isn't defined by men having power over us because we have children."

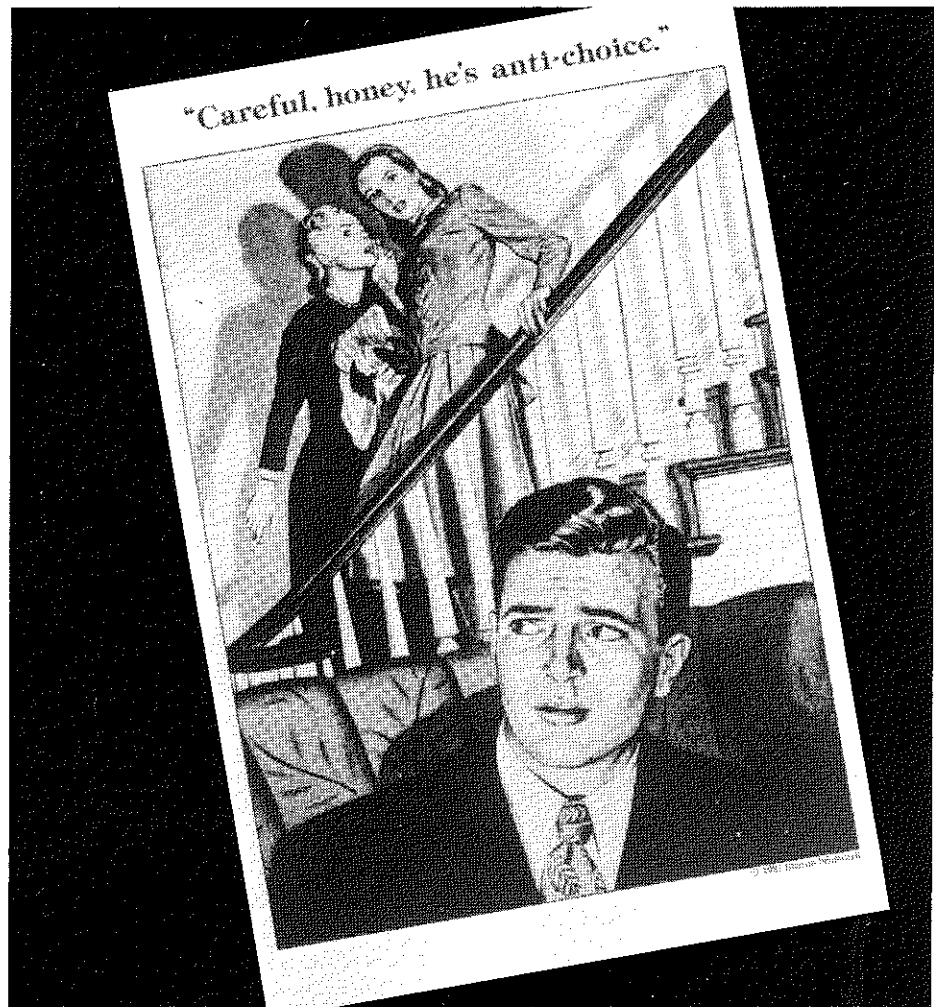
While I cannot adequately review here the various manifestations of the state's attempts to regulate sexuality and fertility, it is increasingly apparent that the struggle of women to gain control of their own bodies and their own fertility is perceived as a critical threat by the Christian right. Even as I write, a number of Conservative MPPs in the Ontario Legislature are opposing legislation which would prohibit discrimination against homosexuals because, in the words of the Rev. William Davis (Scarborough Centre), "the value of the family is being threatened."* The right's preoccupation with protecting "traditional values" at the expense of individual rights and freedoms is explicitly linked to fertility in the comments of another MPP (Noble Villeneuve) who stated that "a ban on discrimination against homosexuals in Quebec has led to a fall in the province's birthrate" (*Globe & Mail*, 27 November 1986).

The attitudes expressed in that debate are central to *The Handmaid's Tale*. There, in a near future in which people have become increasingly alarmed by a declining birthrate (explained in the novel as being caused by the various forms of pollution to which we are exposed as much as by conscious decision), the Christian right stages a violent takeover and establishes a theocratic "Republic of Gilead" throughout much of the US. The renewed regulation--"for breeding purposes"--of women's bodies marks the triumph of the Moral Majority and its "family protection" agenda. The "traditional" values of the nuclear family are forcibly reestablished, while

always means worse for some..." may explain the enthusiasm for this novel expressed by many of its mainstream reviewers who ignored the outpouring of feminist utopian writing a decade earlier.

Susan Elgin's science fiction novel *Native Tongue* is set in the more distant future of the 23rd century, although its starting point is also the contemporary attacks on women's efforts to obtain social and political equality. Here the reaction leads to the appeal of the 19th amendment (which gave women in the US the right to vote), and a new amendment to the US Constitution

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divorce, birth control, homosexuality, and the other manifestations of the "permissiveness" and "moral decay" which characterized the 1960s and 1970s are brutally repressed.

Atwood's bleak vision is tempered, as she has been quick to point out (*New York Times*, 17 February 1986), by Offred's eventual escape; and by the inclusion of a "transcript of the proceeding of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies" held more than a century later. These "Historical Notes" are meant to reassure the reader that Gilead will not survive and that North American society will return to something resembling the present. However while the present may be good enough for Atwood, it is not good enough for me, nor for those few dissenting reviewers who have pointed out that the sexist banter of the male "keynote speaker" at the conference is a depressing, and perhaps inadvertent reminder of what is wrong with contemporary society. Atwood's apparent willingness to hold up the present as 'better' than any other future (as the commander tells Offred, "Better never means better for everyone. It

(ratified in 1991) according to which "all citizens of the United States of the female gender shall be deemed legally minors." In the future of the novel, the Earth has contacted and now trades with other planets--a development which has led to the rise of a small elite group of translators (called "linguists") made up of twelve families who, because of their discipline in teaching their children to master languages from infancy, have a virtual monopoly on handling negotiations between the Earth and its alien trading partners.

Within this futuristic context, the novel describes life in a linguist family where the women lead an even more exaggerated version of today's double duty: even though they are legally minors and depend on their fathers and husbands, the women are skilled translators with busy professional lives. At the same time, because the linguists are anxious to preserve their monopoly, the politics of reproduction is significant. The linguist women are compelled to marry young (by the age of sixteen), which "[allows] the husband to space his children three years apart and still see that the woman bears eight

infants before the age of forty." What distinguishes this novel from the dystopian future of *The Handmaid's Tale*, at least to many of feminist readers, is that despite this repressive situation the women linguists have developed in the privacy of their "Barren Houses" (where no-longer fertile, they live communally), a uniquely women's language, one which they hope will change the world by changing the way that women look at and construct reality.

Written and published as science fiction, this novel's serious intentions can be seen in the "Editor's Note" at the beginning about the availability of information about the women's language invented in the novel: "We are informed that an early grammar and dictionary of Laadan are available to those interested. For further information, write to Laadan, Route 4, Box 192-E, Huntsville AR 72740, and be sure to enclose a stamped self-addressed envelope."

Although not everyone may agree with my insistence that these three novels are overwhelmingly pessimistic, we can at least agree that their futuristic visions illustrate a frightening and depressing reaction to the gains won over the past two decades. Written from three relatively different literary contexts and from three different countries, they mark an end to the feminist utopianism of the 1970s. There is one significant exception-- Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*. But in an entirely different way, it too demonstrates that retreat.

For those of you who are familiar with Le Guin's work, *Always Coming Home* is a return to her roots, both in the sense of her anthropological origins (her parents were anthropologists and her mother, Theodora Kroeber, wrote *Ishi: The Last Stone Age Man* which played an important part in the utopian rediscovery of North American indigenous cultures in the 1960s); and in the sense of similarities with the organization of her earlier *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). *Always Coming Home* is 525 pages long, and includes a cassette of the music and poetry of the Kesh people. The reader enters the book with a narrative--Part I of the "Stone Telling" (the three "Stone Telling" sections total just over 100 pages)--but this story is soon replaced by the bits and pieces of Kesh oral and verbal culture which make up the book. These include poems, maps, legends, autobiographies, drawings, music, jokes, plays, a glossary and even some recipes. Rather than construct this society using a narrative, *Always Coming Home* is a non-linear collection of information which it is up to the reader to put together, in the manner of a kit.

At the same time, like *The Dispossessed*, the intentions of this book (it is hard to call it a novel for all of the reasons I am describing), the implied reasons for wanting to describe a "people which might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California," are clearly utopian. Moreover, the happy, pastoral society of the Kesh is contrasted to a

patriarchal, militaristic Condor People who can be seen as a figure of our own society and its course toward destruction.

In a lovely valley the Kesh people live and work close to the natural in a way which is obviously satisfying and culturally rich. But this account of their lives is restrained. Le Guin's modest utopianism is unclear about how such a wonderful new Northern California came to be, or what happened to the rest of the world. While this may be quibbling, the earlier 70s utopias I referred to--particularly those of Piercy and Russ--not only depicted the entire planet, but also addressed the issue of how we got there from here. While there is certainly much that is valuable in Le Guin's vision, I prefer novels which answer those questions.

III. UTOPIAN/DYSTOPIAN STRATEGIES

If we don't call the post-feminist bluff we might someday face a situation where NAC and other mainstream women's organizations feel compelled to back-pedal on their support of gay rights and other issues deemed too radical. Perhaps even abortion. It might come one day to be a flagrantly anti-social act for women to wear long hair and pants. The Handmaid's Tale anybody?

Susan Crean, "Post-Feminism and Power Dressing: Who Says the Women's Movement Has Run Out of Steam?" in *This Magazine XX, 4* (October/November 1986)

In the closing years of Reagan's second term there are increasing attempts to roll back the gains of the 70s--developments which may touch us all--despite Atwood's wishful insulation of Canada from the rise of the right in her novel. While it is easy to equate the apparent decline in utopian writing with larger events and to see the novels I've described as ominous signs of what may lie ahead, my concern here is not with the accuracy of such visions, but with their impact: what effects do these more pessimistic works have on readers, particularly when compared to the utopian writing of the previous decade? What are the political strategies which are implicit in works which depict the future and the struggle of women in a pessimistic or cautionary way, as opposed to earlier visions of a future structured by feminist principles and ideals? More bluntly, what serves the building of a new society best? The evocation of images of a better future along with indications of how we get there? Or, at a time of increasing threats, does it make more sense to try to warn people that the battle is far from won?

The argument that we need cautionary tales resembles the familiar critique of utopianism. The move away from utopian writing and the turn to more realistic visions of the future is a way of maintaining our vigilance and anger. The building of a better society does not need images of a better world, this argument goes, but the energy, anger and strategy to change this one. Utopian visions too quickly skip to the alternative, and too quickly forget the intermediate fight.

The very question of reading novels may seem for many activists far removed from the concerns and demands of political struggle. This should not be the case. First of all, because we are all too caught up in the struggles around a single issue, we may in fact be losing touch with larger goals we are working towards. The utopian novels of the 1970s can help to restore that vision. Moreover, in addition to helping focus on our own sense of where we are going, these scornfully overlooked science fiction novels--as opposed to the 'high art' veneer and readers of Atwood's novel--reach a broad spectrum of people, indeed the very people our political activities are designed to touch, as opposed to the "already converted" who are all too often our only audience.

These are the horns of my dilemma, and I have not resolved them for myself. I am not calling for more utopian writing, but for an awareness and attention to what has already been written. On the other hand, I cannot simply dismiss these bleaker visions. In reading them, let us keep in mind the larger threats, and the necessity of resisting the ever more attractive temptation to ease off on our commitments. Let these works, in their bitter reminder of what the future holds for us if the Christian right is able to realize its agenda, help us find the energy to continue our political work and perhaps to go to yet another meeting or demonstration.

* Since this article was written Bill 7 was approved in the Ontario Legislature despite the persistent opposition of most Conservative MPPs.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985.

Elgin, Suzette Haden. *Native Tongue*. NYC, New York: Daw Books, 1984.

Fairbairns, Zoe. *Benefits*. London: Virago, 1979.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Always Coming Home*. NYC, New York: Harper & Row, 1985.

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