

*Ectopia: The Family Bible* and the play of history in  
Dystopian Fiction

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Ph.D. submission, Lancaster University  
January 2007

*This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy.*

*I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted elsewhere*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis considers the role played by history in *Ectopia: the Family Bible*. It considers the intrusion of the personal histories of authors into earlier works of dystopian fiction, and highlights ways in which *Ectopia* seeks to stay true to its apparent provenance within a bookless world by using filmic rather than literary reference points. It considers the effects of the personal histories that are brought to the book by its characters, its author, and its readers. It observes the ways that ‘action research’, the process of reading other books so as not to replicate them and to build on their achievement, supported the book’s development. It charts the manner in which the book was brought to a resolution.

## Introduction

Science fiction writers tend to inhabit their genre quite exclusively. They welcome dystopian writers into their fold then find their guests soon escape again. Margaret Atwood, Anthony Burgess, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Kazuo Ishiguro are among the luminaries who have written dystopian novels, yet whose writing remits stretch way beyond dystopian fiction. *Brave New World*, *1984*, *Clockwork Orange*, *The Handmaid's Tale* are perhaps the most celebrated of their authors' works, and presumably met some creative need in the writers. In writing *Ectopia: The Family Bible*, a dystopian novel that finds its unique slot among my own non-dystopian books, I studied these and other dystopian works so as to become conscious of the creative forces that coalesced in order to bring them into being. Consciousness of those forces would then affect the creation of my own novel.

Lynan Tower Sargent offers the oft-cited definition of dystopia as 'a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to consider as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived.'<sup>1</sup> This definition identifies dystopia, a word based around the Greek root of 'topos' meaning a place, as in fact being not a place but a 'society', a non-existent one at that.

This focus on society separates dystopian fiction from science fiction. Science fiction plays out the possibilities of the changes that might be meted out by the application of science. Such changes wrought by science are likely to feature as the backdrop to classic dystopian literature, but a more significant interest is in how mechanization can be deployed in the service of a totalitarian standard that obliterates

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<sup>1</sup> Lynan Tower Sargent, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', *Utopian Studies* 5:1, (1994), p.9

possibilities of individual human expression. Science as the tool deployed by society is not of as much interest as the society itself.

Each society belongs to a period of time as well as place, and the laws and ways of that society stem from an understanding of the past and aspirations for the future. Though set largely in the future, dystopian fiction reaches back into history in many ways. Each section of this thesis considers different aspects of this historical outreach.

I open with an appreciation of the way writers use dystopian fiction to dramatize the situation of a creative artist whose work is disregarded by a hostile society. The writers' histories of interaction with the commercial world, their sense of their own status and vulnerability, are projected onto whole imagined societies. I shall examine how *Ectopia* both fits into this pattern yet breaks from it. Previous works all stem from a literary culture and their lead characters display overtly literary pedigrees. Steven in *Ectopia* inhabits a future world where the book is no longer primary so that the references are filmic rather than literary.

In the same way that dystopian novels tend to magnify the creative writer's fears about the perils of their existence in a commercial world, they might also be rooted in the vocabulary and linguistic patterns of the author's lifetime. I examine such historicity of language, and look at ways *Ectopia* sought to bypass it.

*Ectopia* is set seventeen years into a future in which no females have been born and the English landscape has become a dustbowl. This survey of how historical perspectives affect novels looks at the historical episodes of my own life played out across the globe, and considers how those periods helped provide the book with its detail and atmosphere.

Such historical episodes included experiencing the landscapes and political climates of Berlin, China and Saudi Arabia. A more personal, secret history is

acknowledged to fuel fiction—the emotional history of the writer. Since Steven is gay in the book and I wanted him to live out his own life rather than a fantasy version of my own, I took time to explore gay fiction. An element of this exploration stems from my understanding that an early draft of a novel may focus on pleasing the novelist as its sole reader, a journey of investigation as well as creation which seeks to bring the novelist some fresh understanding of his or her place in the world. For a writer to feel such a need for a book, and go to the immense trouble of writing it, it makes sense to explore the realm of books already published in the area to ensure the need the writer is seeking to fulfil has not already been met elsewhere. My own focus in this regard involved reading the works of James Purdy, the contemporary novelist whom I most admired and who also happens to be gay, before interviewing him on two occasions in New York. A little of the material from those interviews is given here. Studying the works of Purdy involved a shift of perspective out of dystopian fiction. This digression found direction through following the ‘ectopic’ element of *Ectopia*, ‘ectopic’ suggesting a study of life lived on the edge. This is typical of gay fiction, and also of American fiction that reflects the pioneering nature of that country. James Purdy’s works illustrates how emotional history and particularly interest in one’s upbringing can be a honeypot for writers, which attracts them yet in which they might also get stuck. In appreciating the strengths of Purdy’s fiction, I also note that such themes as chasing a character back into the arena of his childhood have been exhausted in his work. I note how Steven represents an archetype that does appear in Purdy’s fiction yet whose story is pushed to the margins. As a consequence of noticing this, I note that *Ectopia* changed direction, so that the trajectory of that character’s journey away from the family setting became its principal focus. The combination of Malik and Karen in an engineered ‘Eden’ eventually offers Steven an

alternative family setting, so he has to choose for or against the concept of a ‘family setting’ for himself rather than just escaping the model he was born into.

For a future world to be credible it needs to come with a history attached, to answer some of the question, ‘How did we come to this?’ I suggest how the future is extrapolated from the present so that the present becomes historical, and consider how dystopia relates to the known worlds of the reader, so the history of that future world must relate to the reader’s own. Most specifically I consider the decision to locate *Ectopia* in an identifiable landscape. I also consider how the use of dialogue, and the addition of chapters in the voices of other characters, gives the reader a broader worldview than could otherwise be carried by Steven’s first person singular narrative. A further consideration is how readers bring with them to their reading of *Ectopia* a personal history into which females have always been born, and then become engaged in the creative process of bridging their known world with the world as presented by ‘Bender’s Book.’

The action of *Ectopia* is contained within a short timeframe, yet even within that timeframe, memory of a period of days is lost for a while. I consider shifts in the narrative voice of *Ectopia* that reflect Steven’s quest to recover personal history, shown in changes of tense and voice. His fierce need to track back from his preference for running in the present, his steady pursuit of the recent past and all its details, affirms that a central part of the novel is the primacy and ownership of the narrative.

Once a book is cleared as far as possible of authorial conditioning and of the need to round it off with a preferred moral tone, it is free to find its own ending. Ending a book does plant it in history to some extent, and resolving a book does so more completely in that issues and questions do not remain for the author to address

in future writings. The author steps clear of the work. This final section looks at how to end a book, particularly a dystopian novel, and how this pertained to bringing *Ectopia* to its conclusion.

# 1. Authorial Representations in Dystopian Fiction

However much dystopian fiction anticipates the future it also comes charged with a historical thrust. Raffaella Baccolini has noted: dystopia ‘is immediately rooted in history. Its function is to warn readers about the possible outcomes of our present world and entails the extrapolation of key features of contemporary society... It clearly appears as a critique of history—of the history shaping the society of the dystopian writer in particular.’<sup>2</sup> Dystopian fiction has a tendency to project the writer’s condition into a universal dystopian condition. I shall start by examining this tendency, since my growing awareness of it became fundamental to the creation of *Ectopia*, and specifically its central character Steven.

*Ectopia* starts on ‘education-and-reporting night. The light from the vidscreen makes our faces shine like we’ve rubbed in radiation.’ (p18) Dystopian fiction till now has been written in an age of books. It is now easy to speculate a bookless world, certainly in terms of bound volumes made of paper. If vidscreens rather than books form your culture, you have different terms of reference to anyone who grew up in a literary culture. It is inappropriate for a writer to project bookish longings onto a youth of a bookless future.

Writers are natural outsiders. Dystopian societies are conjured by writers who may well view the world as being something alien. Usually sidelined in the ‘real world’, a witness from the margins, one likely projection for writers is to fuel the hero / heroine of their novels with their own sensibilities. Society seldom grants heroic

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<sup>2</sup> Raffaella Baccolini, ‘Memory and Historical Reconciliation’, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Tom Moylan (ed.), (London: Routledge, 2003), p.115

status to its writers, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, so it might be seen to have an empowering effect for writers to cast themselves as heroes inside their own literary creations. This is no gung-ho heroism of course, but stems from a more artistic mission of maintaining sensitivity and personal values inside a world that has become increasingly bleak, sterile and technocratic. The dystopian future is a writer's projection of how the world might turn out should what the writer considers to be its uncaring nature go unchecked. Such fiction at its strongest is deemed to be a powerful, near-omniscient prophetic warning about the state of the world. Writing a novel, however, has a more solipsistic phase so long as the writer is seeking to achieve something other than entertainment or didacticism. In this phase the writer is not focused on a wider readership. He is writing for himself as a reader, often providing reading material that is unavailable elsewhere. The writing process in this phase is one of intense personal discovery. In dystopian literature one likely journey of such investigation is into a writer's sense of alienation.

Writing for oneself as a reader is of course a handy way of also reaching out to one's audience, since this audience necessarily consists of readers. We are familiar with the term 'lost in a good book'. That is society's term, in which the act of reading is both appreciated and diminished, 'lost' being a negative word perhaps even used by readers who have adapted themselves to the societal view. Reading in such common parlance is also seen as being an 'escape', that combination of 'lost' and 'escape' indicating that society is the true reality yet is deemed by readers to be unpleasant. Reading can translate us into a context that coheres with our sense of what is important. A good novel can call on its reader to hear, see, smell, touch and feel the world around them, to enter and inhabit life experiences and perspectives utterly different from their own, to enjoy emotional responses that have nothing to do with

self-interest. Seen in that light, reading a novel becomes a very physical act. It is not an escape from the material world, though it is possibly an escape from materialism. The person who 'retreats' into a good book is very likely someone seeking affirmation for an innate set of values that do not sit comfortably with the values or priorities of that person's immediate society.

Readers, of course, are likely to be dipping into a book as a way of refreshing themselves, as a way of balancing the more arduous or tedious aspects of their lives. For the writer as reader of his own ongoing work the situation is different. At some point the writer, to maintain any semblance of being professional, needs to switch from writing for the audience of himself as reader, to writing for a wider readership. This means achieving consensus with some publishing corporation. Since the writer is not promoting the values of hard work for material gain and community sustenance which is often the driving force of a corporation, his writing may have little attraction for the publisher, and so the writer's sense of rejection which led him to read and ultimately write is affirmed. This can show itself at its most stripped and unguarded in dystopian fiction.

Dystopian fiction is striking in the way it concretises a writer's mood. That mood is one of despair, a sad vision of what seems like an inevitable decline in human standards at a societal level. Writing a novel is a sustained action resulting in considerable achievement, so the process itself runs counter to despair. It may well also serve the process of universalising personal despair and so freeing the writer into a sense of being a spokesperson for some element of his / her community.

Jules Verne, writing in 1863 when aged 35, envisaged a time when art would be crushed by machines. The theme is a threnody that would run through dystopian literature for 130 years before the eventual publication of that first novel of Verne's,

*Paris in the Twentieth Century*. The lament belongs to the future, but also to the present of so many writers who fear that the world is too austere to accept their exquisite sensibilities. When Jules Verne projects Paris into a dystopian future, we see it through the eyes of Michel: ““A poet, my friend! And I wonder what in the world he can be doing here in Paris, where a man’s first duty is to make money!””<sup>3</sup>

Michel’s uncle, locked in a small book-lined room, senses the perils facing his nephew in the sterile yet powerful workplace. ‘The old scholar sought to smother just those tendencies he most admired in the young man, and his words constantly betrayed his intention; an artist’s situation, as he well knew, was hopeless, déclassé, impossible... “Literature is dead, my boy.”’<sup>4</sup>

Desperate for recognition and the start of his writing career, Jules Verne would file this novel away for his lifetime. Set in the future, it spoke of the present, the eternal present, in which ‘true artists’ follow a ‘vocation’ and bewail the cheap successes and acclaim won by those who wield sensation rather than insights. This is my first example of a dystopian future warped out of a writer’s sense of a world hostile to artistic endeavour.

The narrator D-503 in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* is a mathematician whose ‘pen, accustomed to figures, does not know how to create the music of assonances and rhyme’. He attempts ‘merely ... to record’. Yet immediately the act of writing opens him up to perilous forces, to the possibility of seeing into the nature of the machinery of power and thereby transgressing its rules. ‘I write this and my cheeks are burning. This must be similar to what a woman feels when she first senses within herself the pulse of a new, still tiny, still blind little human being, It is I, and at the same, not I.’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jules Verne, trs. Richard Howard, *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), pp.77-78

<sup>4</sup> Verne, *Paris*, p.48

<sup>5</sup> Yevgeny Zamyatin, trs. Mirra Ginsburg, *We*, (New York: Avon Books, 1987), p.2

In *Ectopia* Steven, like D-503, finds himself pregnant, though this is far from being a metaphorical pregnancy. He is not pregnant with a literary creation or birthing a book. Unlike D-503, Steven does not ‘get off’ on being a writer. Books hold meaning for the Council of Women, who gave the title ‘Book’ to the various elements of *Ectopia*; who are the ones who conceived of it as a Bible; and who mention ‘this book’ twice in their own brief ‘Book of Women’. Bender speaks of a book only in terms of the lack of one that is of any use to him: ‘There’s no handbook for empaths.’ You just do what seems right.’ (p.44) Karen, who has been forced to spend most of her life stuck in her bedroom, has some affinity with reading for she claims, ‘I can read Mom through her eyes like a book.’ (p.116) Bender notes how his mother loved to garden till the garden died, when ‘She pressed its last flower, a yellow weed, between the pages of a book, and hasn’t come outdoors much since.’ (p.20) The book has moved into history, squeezing the juice out of a weed, the final vestige of the natural world. Karen packs her mother’s suitcase with scraps of nostalgia, including: ‘A dog-eared paperback called Women Might Fly.’ (p.117) ‘You’ve packed nothing but crap,’ (p.118) notes the father, with which Karen agrees, while noting the suitcase contains ‘all the things she cares for.’ (p.118) Books are part of a previous, earlier world and as such are redundant to Bender. He never shows any affinity with books. He has never been a reader.

How does this square with his effectively composing *Ectopia*? I have shown how Steven’s reference points are filmic rather than literary. Indeed he uses the term ‘film’ twenty times in ‘Bender’s Book’, with many more references to the likes of cameras and vidscreens. At this juncture I wish readers to consider the difference between reading and watching a film. Reading is generally solitary and secret, for anyone viewing the activity from outside can only guess at what is on the page. On the other

hand watching a film is often a shared activity, and the content of the experience is displayed for anyone who cares to take a look. Text as well as film can be accessed on a 'personal' computer but that 'personal' applies to ownership, and each member of Steven's household has allotted time on a computer rather than ownership of one. Users of computers become adept at keystrokes that hide what they are viewing from passers-by, yet the machine keeps a 'record' they have read which others can later track. Computers are not about privacy, as Paul quite clearly demonstrates in *Ectopia* by accessing Steven's narrative. The experience of finding affirmation of alternative values in a book, of 'escaping' into a good book, is not part of Steven's history. Remember, he is sixteen turning seventeen, and the first boy born into a world in which no more girls are born. This is a brand new order of world. It has no apparent future beyond his lifespan. No book has been written to reflect his experience of the world he was born into.

As with writers who write the book that is not available to them as a reader, essentially the book drawn from their own life experience, Steven does turn to narrative. He becomes a storyteller so as to come to an understanding of the situation of his life which he cannot find told elsewhere.

To the reader of *Ectopia* Steven may be seen to have literary antecedents. In his own world, he has none. Whereas, when we feel misplaced, we might find reference points outside of our society inside a book, Steven has no reference points outside of boys of his own age. Only such boys have the experience of being born into a world deprived of fresh females. With books available he might have found refuge in their pages, sitting in some solitary space. The lack of such books makes Steven a different narrator to any that may be found in a novel in which a literary culture still has value. He has no literary reference points. Of course, novels exist aplenty in which narrators

do not indulge in literary reference. In this account I am considering a tendency by writers of dystopian fiction to use the genre to explore the alienation felt by the artist in a materialistic or mechanical society. Steven is an empath. He is gay. He is an articulate observer of his society with a need to understand it. Such needs and sensibilities have him set up to be a writer, only he lacks the writing model. He has never been a reader because he has no books that offer a worthwhile reflection of his life.

As an author I can fit Steven into a literary lineage: Winston Smith in *1984*, for example, whose first transgression is to set words down in a diary. ‘Suddenly he began writing in sheer panic, only imperfectly aware of what he was writing down.’<sup>6</sup>

Winston’s government job involves filleting unwanted facts out of the news, revising the past to accord with the latest propaganda offensive, converting the old language into Newspeak, but as a colleague remarks of him: ‘In your heart you’d prefer to stick to Oldspeak, with all its vagueness and its useless shades of meaning. You don’t grasp the beauty of the destruction of words... By 2050—earlier, probably—all real knowledge of Oldspeak will have disappeared. The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed.’<sup>7</sup>

Winston lacks definition. He is struggling to discover some individual identity in a society which has as its ideal ‘a nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting—three hundred million people all with one face.’<sup>8</sup>

Yet he is a writer to the extent that his society has any use for the word. And ‘literature’ is being driven to extinction. Orwell could have chosen any other

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<sup>6</sup> George Orwell *1984*, *Complete Works Vol 9*. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1997), p.10

<sup>7</sup> Orwell, *1984*, pp.55-56

<sup>8</sup> Orwell, *1984*, p.77

profession for Winston. In selecting ‘writer’ in its debased form, he is dramatizing the writerly condition, the sense of a writer giving his life to determine ‘truths’ even if such truths contradict society, for ‘being in a minority, even a minority of one, did not make you mad. There was truth and there was untruth, and if you clung to the truth even against the whole world, you were not mad.’

Like Winston, Steven is alert to discovering the ‘truth’ even if that sets him against the whole world. Being a teenager and still working on defining his own identity, he is quite fairly more concerned with how that truth affects him rather than society. Lacking Winston’s affection for Oldspeak or a tradition of literary values, his truth is more visual, a case of believing one’s own eyes. Steven stares at the sun in order to learn for himself whether it’s dangerous to do so. ‘Staring’ is a constant throughout the book. The word ‘stare’ appears in some form ninety-nine times. Steven’s will to maintain truth through what he sees is shown when Doc Lester has him strapped into an ambulance, forced to look out through the Doc’s eyes. Steven deploys his own way of seeing:

The camera’s working to grab your attention, to show you something else, but you say fuck it. Fuck your entertainment schedule. I’ll see what I want to see. So you focus on some little scrap the camera’s just passed by. You screw attention to a touch of world they expect you to ignore. You decide what’s special. You make something special just by seeing it. That makes you special too. I’ve watched movies that way. It works. You get a buzz of creating something instead of just a brainwipe. (p.283)

He is thus explicit about a different way of seeing as being a creative act. Though he is without literary reference points, it becomes natural that he should seek the ‘buzz of creating something’ in his new form of oral storytelling. *Ectopia* is clearly delivered into a literary canon which I as author am aware of, but it was my job to shield him from such knowledge and its effects. If I force onto the character

experiences outside of his experience, he would become more like the author and less like himself.

As contrast I offer a prime example of a dystopian novel steeped in its author's literary passions. Somewhat like Steven, Offred, the narrator of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, has been selected for her breeding potential in a world in which breeding has gone awry. She is a woman, a mother, a lover, and now as a Handmaid on active service, a recipient womb – but above all else she is a creature of words. Her last job in her previous life had been to work in a library, transferring words from books to discs. She is a being whose real worth and sensitivity are rejected by society. Listen to her description of the garden where she is stationed. 'There is something subversive about the garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, as if to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently.'

That last sentence, the silent clamouring when silenced, is a mission statement for an alienated writer seeking to be heard through words placed on paper. The passage continues: 'A Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid, the return of the word *swoon* ... The willow is in full plumage and is no help, with its insinuating whispers. *Rendezvous*, it says, *terraces*, the sibilants run up my spine, a shiver as in fever.'<sup>9</sup>

This is a sensuous hymn to the power of words. Latin phrases found in a cupboard, roughly translatable as 'don't let the buggers grind you down', carry power for the very fact that they are words. Women's magazines seem to steam with pornographic heat merely because they contain text. Offred is called in to the Captain to engage in the most deliciously subversive act possible. This is not some weird form

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<sup>9</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (London, Virago, 1987), p.161

of sex. It is a game of scrabble. Atwood's dystopia is an expulsion from the Eden of words.

In prophetic terms, it might be seen that Atwood is foreshadowing the end of literary culture. This grew from the age of Caxton, and reached its apogee some time in Atwood's childhood when television was already nudging literature to one side. Digital media keep finding new ways of pulsing information and entertainment to the brain. *Ectopia* is set seventeen years into a future. Whatever my own authorial longing, Steven did not have a literary background. Tennyson has no part in his frame of reference. From the opening of his narrative we are inside a world of film references, not literary ones. 'I call my film *Fuck All*, coz that's what happens at home. I hate watching it but it's teensquad's favourite. They outvote me every time and set it running.' (p.18)

However much Steven is removed from the literary world, *Ectopia* posits itself to be a book by him. It suggests a commitment to casting the present into historical record. One way of dealing with that irony was to make him a 'scribe', an admittedly old-fashioned word, the intention being that he does not seek to write down his own experience but to relate the deeds of his teensquad. 'One of my jobs as empath and mainbrain and now scribe is putting stuff into words that don't make sense without em.' (p.104)

He does not in fact 'scribe' but speaks to voicecard. The future carries the assumption that voice recognition software would be far advanced, and also allow for greater individuality of expression than is currently accepted. It would be sensitive enough to pick up the vocal inflections that indicate direct speech. Punctuation, a literary device, is not placed in the text by Steven but is assigned by the voice recognition software. Instead of double apostrophes serving as speech marks, which

would have presented a standard English literary form on the page, a devised and consistent system of dashes and line-breaks again worked to move the book away from standard book presentation. Consistency was the main standard of punctuation, spelling and new word forms.

For a time, sections of ‘Bender’s Book’ carried chapter titles. These were minimally intrusive, such as ‘New Day 1’. However the very existence of titles betrayed some consciousness in Steven that he was delivering a book, in chapter form, and therefore too self-consciously a literary historical record. Those sections are now numbered in the way that they might be by a software program—and also in a way that does relate to the numbering of sections in the Bible. After starting at 0.00 a switch is made to 1.00 as Steven emerges from Cromozone, and again to a sequence starting at 2.0 after the holocaust at the family home. The numbering relates to transitions of Steven’s own being.

The book is delivered as a myth by the Women, not by Steven. It is the Council who declares it is an ‘origin story. From this tale you, the reader of the future, will learn of your own makings.’ (p.2) The Council of Women downloaded the reports from Steven’s voicecard, and it was they who compiled this into a ‘book’. The inclusion of separate ‘books’ from other family members allowed this to become a ‘Bible’, to be read by future generations. The myth is not set in place by Steven but by the Council of Women, who placed Steven in what they termed ‘Project Naamah’ after Noah’s wife. They relate it to the tale of Eve, ‘who was drawn from a man’s body to become the ancestral mother of every girl and boy born on Earth.’ (p.3)

They imply that the female embryo implanted in Steven is destined to become the mother of all future generations. The way we might all trace our ancestry back to Lucy in Ethiopia, or a more mythical Eve, future generations may look back to

Steven's child, to Wanda. In that she is a new hope for the world, the Council's assembly of extra family narratives into the book and their naming it a Bible places Wanda in a messianic role, leaving Steven in the role of a Virgin Mary. Future possibilities are conjured out of the past, from our knowledge of Lucy in Ethiopia and of the biblical story.

Far from writing for the future Steven generally takes comfort in denying it: 'You stupid fucking breeders. Don't you get it? It's over. Now's now and then it's gone and then that's it. / This is it.' (p.153) Steven is talking to those who have arranged for him to record accounts of his days, presumably to transfer the vocal recording to written text. He is directly addressing his 'readers', alerting them to the fact that reading is now history because everything written about is passing from record. The past was seen as building towards the future but with the lack of females the future is now history, the present has nothing to learn from the past which has brought people to the verge of extinction, and so the present is to be lived as itself, unrecorded as history, one moment passing into the other, always alive, until the end.

He is as specific as he can be about his own non-role as a literary being, reader or writer:

I'm scribing for the future. There is no future. So scribing's pointless. Life's pointless.  
So scribing is the meaning of life.  
Reading this is the most redundant activity in the world.  
You'd be better off doing what I'm going to do now.  
Run. (p.23)

Yet the more he denies the meaning of scribing, the more he scribes. He maintains an antagonistic stance towards his statesquad audience, while delivering what they want. It would be hard to find a more dogged commentator on his own life than Steven. While his opening paragraph expresses his wish that he be seen by his

teensquad peers, that they turn their attention to him, he accepts that this cannot be so.

Instead he takes full use of the opportunity of being heard.

## 2. The Historicity of Language

The language of a novel is likely to display aspects of the author's own literary pedigree, and one job of the novelist is to avoid such literary flourishes when they are inappropriate to the novel. In a similar way, language can root a book in a temporal period inappropriate to that book's setting, one that reflects a period in the author's own history. This grows into a more profound hurdle as the author grows older, especially if that author has spent decades honing a particular voice. Younger writers enjoy a demotic that is naturally closer to a young readership. When older authors introduce teenage characters they are liable to betray speech patterns applicable to the author's own teenage years. I sought to create Steven's language as some accurate voice of a youngster in a world of the future. In this section I shall focus on the techniques and logic that went in to creating Steven's voice.

Steven is a teenager. He isn't particularly fussed about maintaining a worldview. In some ways he is in accord with Kazuo Ishiguro's stated intentions for his novel of clones *Never Let Me Go*. As with *The Handmaid's Tale*, this opens in a boarding school. Ishiguro chose such a location because 'it struck me as a physical manifestation of the way all children are separated off from the adult world, and are drip-fed little pieces of information about the world that awaits them, often with generous doses of deception - kindly meant or otherwise.'<sup>10</sup>

Steven's goal is seeing through that deception to his own truth.

Kazuo Ishiguro set this dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go* in the past, for as he explains:

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<sup>10</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, 'Future Imperfect', (London: *The Guardian*, 25/3/06)

Personally, I don't find futuristic landscapes very enticing. I don't have the energy to imagine all those details - what cars or shops or cupholders will be like in the future. And I didn't want to write anything that could be mistaken for a "prophecy". I wanted my novel to be one in which any reader might find an echo of his or her own life.<sup>11</sup>

The historical perspective of *Never Let me Go* is such that I suspect few teenagers will discover echoes within it. A teenager's self-definition is to be found in the newness of his/her own world, not in an echo of an old one. Ishiguro's setting in a damp grey England of the 1970s, where a significant quest is for an audio tape in a second hand store by the seaside, is more alien to a teenager than any future landscape. Ishiguro is writing for the antique teenager who was once himself.

Anthony Buckeridge's Jennings novels are period pieces, but in his decision to invent new schoolboy slang for his characters he rescued them from the warp of time, so that the schoolboys managed to maintain their fictional schooldays through the forty years in which Buckeridge kept producing their tales. Sooner than draw on the latest teenage slang I followed the Buckeridge line of inventing new terms that should never lose currency, new coinages largely to name items which are not yet in existence (for example 'slipcart', 'qual', 'teensquad').

One challenge of acquiring a teenage voice is to also achieve a broad emotional range. I have found myself braced by the opening voices of the likes of Chuck Palahniuk in *Choke* and D.B.C. Pierre in *Vernon God Little*, but soon wearied of the unrelenting aggression and anger loaded into every line. *Choke* attacks the reader from line 1: 'If you're going to read this, don't bother'<sup>12</sup>. *Vernon God Little* introduces us to 'snotty old Mrs Lechuga' in his opening paragraph and closes with 'what fucking life is *this*?'<sup>13</sup> Such language and attitudes are spiky, and generally offer an intriguing point of view that can keep the reader alert. Steven is not free of

<sup>11</sup> Ishiguro, 'Future Imperfect'

<sup>12</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Choke*, (London: Vintage, 2001), p.1

<sup>13</sup> D.B.C. Pierre, *Vernon God Little*, (London: Faber, 2003), p3

such sentiment. For example Day 3 closes, ‘Dad begets Paul. Paul begets the whole fucking universe. / I get to teensquad. / One more day not worth a repeat.’ (p.33)

Jamie O’Neill’s *At Swim Two Boys* provided me with an alternative model to the callous aggressive youth of Palahniuk and Pierre. This begins: ‘At the corner of Adelaide Road, where the paving sparkled in the morning sun, Mr Mack waited by the newspaper stand. A grand day it was, rare and fine.’<sup>14</sup>

*At Swim Two Boys* showed me the strength of maintaining a positive vision throughout a book, even though this one was set in Ireland during the in the turbulent run-up to Easter 1916, would end in death for the principle character, and featured a young gay relationship that was doomed. This model of a compassionate narrative, combined with the snap and bite of the prose style of Palahniuk and Pierre, was one I sought to achieve. That same outlook on beauty achieved in *At Swim Two Boys* was harder for Steven to achieve, for the stark and sterile landscape of his life is far removed from the beauty of Ireland in 1916. However he does seek to find what beauty there is. It exists in his engagement with his surroundings, for example in his appreciation both of dust and of running:

Dust is the future. It’s lying to be kicked. We take it in turns to run at the front. From up there our soles are the first to spit the dust. For forty paces we stare into burnt sky. The dust is on the ground and not in the air, our lungs are clear. Then two from the back peel round the sides and take their place at the front. (p.101)

To illustrate the mode through which a more compassionate voice was achieved, I offer this example of an earlier draft in which the women of the neighbourhood were subjected to a Sunday herding by teensquad:

They used to herd loose women on foot, before our day. Then the bloat started and it was two or three to a cart. Now to get just one of em in it’s a squeeze, a push and shove. Once she’s in, half of us pull ropes at the front, three push from behind, and the rest flank.

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<sup>14</sup> Jamie O’Neill, *At Swim Two Boys*, (London: Scribner, 2002), p.7

You get no sense out of em. Where are you going? we ask. Wobbling fat and full stircrazy, the word ‘where’ is like a fly. Their eyes flick round their sockets, looking for where it’s gone. We prod em into the cart and lock em in.<sup>15</sup>

The narration was preening itself, finding the women ugly rather than unfortunate. The version that replaced it bothers to inhabit the story of those women a little, offers a touch of empathy instead of vituperation. It does not in itself read as an overtly compassionate piece, but the cumulative effect of going for this tone rather than the ‘Wobbling fat and full stircrazy’ model, in passage after passage, changes the nature of the book. It opens the way for compassion at the ending:

In their own homes these women make some kind of sense. Out on the streets all they want to do is talk. They stare and they talk. Their brains migrate to some distant past when bodies were normal and life went on.

– Up you go, we tell em, and steer em into the carts.

They stare through the bars and often sing as we steer em through the streets, not made-up songs like Mom’s but songs they used to dance to when they were young enough and slight enough to see their feet. One of us guides the front and at least three of us push from the rear. (pp.63-64)

The excised passage is the sort of stuff teenagers might say to each other when together, callousness being a sign of bravado, but in this vocal diary form Steven can get to being much more reflective, allowing his empathy some space to run. In terms of maintaining a fresh narrative voice for Steven, it was also important that he did not follow such obvious routes as puns, which might be typical of a young teenager but as such amount to cliché. Instead of exploring character, such lines leave character development stuck at the level of linguistic play.

I found a similar problem in another section that seems fine out of context.

Steven and Karen are discussing her disappearance for the girls’ day out:

She took photos of me once and beamed em round in girltalk.

- You’re only chatstuff, she says – You’re the face of the enemy. Do you think we’d waste nonensor time on you?

- It’s bugged. Betcha your meeting’s bugged.

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<sup>15</sup> Early draft manuscript, author’s own archive

- Yeah, they sneak video footage too. We girls play to camera. We get naked, rub each other up on mats, and scream obscenities on orgasm. It's cool stuff. You'd like it.
- Do you get copies? I could market em. Go halves.
- You believed me? Christ you're sick. Go jerk off in your own ear, cheesebrain. Outta my way. Here's the bus. This girl's got to plot a revolution.<sup>16</sup>

This was cut because, like the 'being shafted' line, it was too obviously adolescent. The adolescent mind of Steven is giving Karen her dialogue, whereas in fact it must be her own voice and intelligence coming through. The final version is more complex, it opens Karen up a little more (even though it gives her less dialogue). We learn from Steven that waiting for her day trips out with the girls does make her nervous. 'Wit fails her sometimes. Her days out don't do her any good. They give her something to hope for then phut, it's gone. She knows it and it makes her vulnerable. She goes on the defensive. Oh well. She's not at her sharpest but at least I've got her talking.' (p.56)

The use of 'at least' shows Steven 'strutting his stuff' a little. It might be deemed that he is caring for his sister, anxious that she should stir herself from silence. The phrase could also betray some arrogance, implying Karen is vulnerable where he is not, and while Steven cannot make her sharp he at least has the power of stirring her to speech. In fact this is a rare, and fleeting, moment of Steven claiming some safe vantage within the protection of his narrative, of passing comment from a position of smugness rather than his usual mode of commentary, in which he is assessing a situation in which he is at a disadvantage in order to invert it and so be able to continue running on his own terms. And of course this momentary smugness is soon punctured as the scene continues and Karen assumes the upper hand:

- Do you think I'd tell you what we girls do, what we girls talk about? Do you think your tiny prick-focused brain could even begin to think wide

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<sup>16</sup> Early draft manuscript, author's own archive

enough to imagine your way into a girl's being? Out of my way, pussy breath. I've got to go. We girls have got a revolution to plan. I guess I was wrong. Karen never was the vulnerable type. (p.55)

Remember that the whole scene comes in Steven's presentation of it. When he voices the 'at least', and mentions Karen's vulnerability, he already knows the direction in which the scene will turn. He is preparing us for the 'I guess I was wrong' punchline. In so pacing and presenting his tale, which often includes such episodes with a final narrative punch, he is displaying himself as a storyteller.

Relaying such stretches of dialogue, often as in this section without any verbal reference to who is speaking, suggests a fierce ability in Steven to assume different voices. While I trust that Steven assumes such strength as a character that such feats might not be beyond him, I have not bothered to claim as much for him. Steven was not writing a book, but I was. I cover a lot of bases to give credibility to Steven's authorship, and have to hope that this wins me the reader's grace for passages such as these. Steven did not seek readers for his book, I have had to engineer it toward a readership, so the fact that this book is presented to the reader at all earns me a little credit. The intention, of course, is that clean prose and a strong narrative line draws the reader along without too many questions being asked. Such is the perfect situation for Roman Ingarden, who sees the reader actively forming an expectation of the next sentence from the current one, and 'if by chance the following sentence has no tangible connection whatever with the sentence we have just thought through, there comes a blockage in the stream of thought. This hiatus is linked with a more or less active surprise, or with indignation. This blockage must be overcome if the reading is to flow once more.' For Wolfgang Iser 'it is only through inevitable omissions that a

story gains its dynamism'<sup>17</sup> and the process of having one's anticipations met is tedious, the reader needing surprise to keep on going. Surprise is such a constant feature of *Ectopia*, Steven informing us what has surprised him and consistently coming up with his own variant commentary, readers having to work to supply a bridge between their own known worlds and Steven's, that it was not necessary to deliver further surprise through distorting the sentence flow. It was more useful to establish the reader's faith in Steven's narrative line. Where that narrative is suddenly altered, for example where Steven is suddenly talking to a voice in his head, or adopting the third person voice or past tense in speaking of himself, readers are then able to see that something has happened to Steven's own established norm, and be concerned not just for the story and their continued reading experience, but for Steven.

The extent and manner of my authorial layering is, of course, considered before it is applied. A lot of the need for it stems from my decision to gift the bulk of the narrative to Steven's first person singular account. This limits it to his perspective, but the continual shifting and strengthening of that perspective is a purpose of the book and so the limitations must be worked with. The inclusion of dialogue brings in the perspective of other characters, often (as in the section with Karen discussed here) to Steven's surprise. It broadens the range of the book.

I have occasionally assumed that the voicecard might have been left playing, snatches of dialogue preserved as a consequence. Since the conversation in this case is relayed in the present tense, but Steven pauses it for the input of his commentary, the explanation that the voicecard has been left running does not work. Let's accept that the texture of this piece, its presentation on the page as live dialogue with Steven's

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<sup>17</sup> Roman Ingarden, *Vom Erkennen des literarischen Kunstwerks* (Tubingen, 1968) p32, as quoted then discussed by Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader*, p279-8

own running commentary, is my own authorial doing. To what extent have I hijacked the tale through this authorial intrusion, and weakened Steven's autonomy?

My first defence is a reiteration of the point that my essential role is one of engineering, presenting Steven's account with enough context (drawn from my own omniscient authorial overview otherwise hidden from the reader) that the reader, for whom Steven's account was not otherwise destined, has some access to it.

My own third person narration of the tale would have been thoroughly acceptable in terms of the canon of my literary culture, as with any other authorial intrusion. As discussed earlier, Steven's arrival as the twin of the last girl rendered his literary inheritance meaningless to him. His drive throughout the novel is to achieve authorship of his own life, good or bad. It is my duty to allow that to happen. I attempt to make my authorial engineering as transparent as possible, so that the tale that comes through remains Steven's. In that regard, the commentary that is interlaced with the dialogue is Steven's own, and not his author's. It could be seen as capturing his thought process as the dialogue unwinds.

The dialogue presented is always said in Steven's presence (and in the vicinity of his voicecard), and while it often includes information that is useful to the reader in terms of supplying context, it also contains material that is of interest to Steven. Information that we receive through Steven must be worth his recalling it. If I am to be spared the accusation of unwarranted intrusion in Steven's narrative the inclusion of this passage with Karen must be justifiable in his terms. It must be of use to him.

Why do I say 'of use to him'? Because Steven does not believe in recording his story for posterity, since he knows there will be no posterity. He has no especial interest in entertaining readers, because he anticipates no readers other than statesquad functionaries (who he may seek to impress rather than entertain). He does not need an

extra page for his book, because he has no expectation of books. His own storytelling has that solipsistic nature of a writer's first draft in which he is the sole reader. He is telling his tale in order to come to some understanding of it. For Steven this is no 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' but a training in survival. His telling of the story is contemporaneous with the story. He is not recounting his passage through the story, but telling it into being.

This process will become more conscious once he emerges from Cromozone and realizes that consciousness of several days in his life has been ripped away from him. History for Steven, though, on account of his psychic flashes, always includes some element of the future. He has already seen the flames surrounding his father. He has already embarked on a journey to discover his own truth.

Thus the lesson in this section is vital to him. On home territory, the safe ground of Karen's bedroom, where he felt comfortable enough to release his smug 'at least' for a moment, he learns that nowhere can be considered safe. He repeats to Karen all the tales he has heard from her about her girls' days out, and hears her deny them. 'But you told me ...' he says. 'I lied,' she assures him. (p.55)

If Karen had lied to him, then lies surround him more completely than he ever thought. It is a useful realization that is vital to him in his journey toward his personal truth. As such, it is worth recalling in detail.

That 'at least' as part of his own presentation of the story to himself, setting himself up for a tumble, can be read as an ability to make fun of himself. Through this the reader might perceive his potential for humour were his situation not so black.

The transparent authorial overlay, the arrangement of dialogue and commentary on the page, might now even be considered acceptable delivery from Steven. The material is worth his recall. He re-enters the recent past, in the same way that as an

empath he can enter the future, and speaks out the dialogue so as to think his way through it, his commentary coming from reliving the action as in the present. His purpose is to understand why it is important to him. Imagine the scene run without line breaks or any form of punctuation and see how hard it would be to make sense of. Steven seldom bothers with the ‘I say’ ‘she says’ modes of presentation because he does not care whether he is understood or not. He is speaking for himself. It is the Council of Women, in their urge to bequeath future generations a book, who have bothered to tabulate the voice recognition software’s rendition of his spoken voice and give us paragraphs and a form of punctuation, and so make Steven’s personal flow of voice intelligible.

As author I was conscious of holding Steven’s voice in check, trimming it of language patters that were more likely to have been assumed through reading literature (outside of Steven’s actual experience) than from his street life with teensquad. This is not so much a matter of restricting Steven’s voice as of protecting it from my own, knowing that my own is inappropriately coloured by literary allusion. Occasional turns of more poetic diction do come through, as in the passage: ‘Sun leaks through to light the runner in front but nothing else is seen. You’re held and running inside teensquad’s dustbody, running inside the skin of a cloud, coasting inside run’s thunder.’ (p.101)

The verbs ‘leaks’ and ‘coasting’ are extravagances. ‘Leaks’ could be ‘gets’, and ‘running’ could be repeated instead of ‘coasting’. However all the vocabulary is well within Steven’s range, and as simple a phrase as ‘skin of a cloud’ allows the reader to share Steven’s elemental sense of the sheer animal nature of teensquad running. It also shows Steven beginning to discover the same freedom in verbal expression has he has already discovered in the physical act of running – relevant here in that it is in

describing that act of running that his language begins to take flight. This transition into an occasionally more rhapsodic form allows for the ultimate translation of the character from someone who runs to someone who is maintaining the forward thrust of his life by means of a continuing yet silent inner commentary.

### 3. Application of Historical Events

Accepting that the world of dystopian fiction is extrapolated from the author's own history in the world, I now give consideration to how historical episodes were transmuted into the landscape of *Ectopia*.

Steven lives in a world of dust. In my writing I have long followed the rule that I use a place and time that I know and let the fiction flow through that world. Clearly that rule has been broken here, in that the time is the future and the setting is a desertified England. I do however recognize the landscapes of *Ectopia* from the insides of my own experience.

Cromozone stems from my experiences of living in Berlin in 1975. An element of that time buried itself in my unconscious, and indeed emerged in one form in my first novel *On Bended Knees*: the Berlin Wall was guarded like the wall around Cromozone, its innards of tank traps, barbed wire and mines was a vast rabbit warren, rabbits too light to detonate the traps yet safe from the bullets which could explode the ground. No rabbits in *Ectopia*, just the insects.

Those insects were akin to the flying cockroaches, inches long, like steady birds droning through the forty-two degree heat of the encampment where I was housed in Saudi Arabia. Insects become the dominant life form in the desert, and hence are the creatures that survive and threaten to dominate the world of *Ectopia*. When I moved into my Saudi house, its windows were covered in pages of newsprint to prevent the outside world from peering in at the occupant's wife. The supermarket on site was filled with men pushing carts through the aisles, perhaps with a single can of tomatoes in the base, seeking the place's only glimpse of a woman. Saudi was a radical experience of a world without women, supported by further work and travel

experience in the Middle East. *Ectopia* makes no statement about any possible Islamization of Europe, a current fear in the western world, but its reflection of a world in which women are withdrawn to the domestic margins draws from experience of living in an Islamic Arab world. The book's major societal statement is the horrors born of a patriarchal culture, and Saudi Arabia is such a patriarchal culture in the extreme. The barber in the town of Yanbu cut my hair in such a way that blood poured down my back from my neck, a xenophobic gesture the father in *Ectopia* would surely enjoy practising on Malik. Men chased me from the old quarter, pumping their legs inside their long white robes, screaming curses at the infidel. Back in 1982 that fenced-in camp was a twisted form of haven in a realm barren of women, ripped apart from all that was familiar about life.

It has blended somehow with that Berlin experience, most particularly a vision of Berlin as seen across the fields from the East, a city captured within its walls and sprouting ever higher while the fields I was in were still ploughed by horses. This is the version of the city which Steven looks back on. Perhaps memories of Eastern Europe from that time fuel the creation of *Ectopia's* Eden.

And somewhere in the mix is China of 1984, a China where cars were yet to make much of an appearance. I voyaged among a herd of cyclists, unlit shadows in the darkness of night. Travelling out in the Gobi desert, children would shriek in fear or rock with laughter when they saw me. I was a white ghost with a huge nose. Adults stroked the hair on my arms and emptied the contents of my bags on the floor to marvel at all that was there. This was no journey into the future, but a journey into a desert in which I was deemed the alien element.

And time and again my travels have taken me into the emergency rooms of hospitals around the world. Diagnosis came in languages I did not understand. I took

pills and potions that promised remedies or lay still as drips dropped fluid into my veins. As with Steven and Cromozone, the world outside these hospitals was burnt dry in the crucible of summer. I like he was left to wander, my body healing itself while I picked up and reassembled pieces of my English identity which had come apart in my foreign adventures.

These personal historical episodes and others feed into the landscapes of *Ectopia*, and the way in which these landscapes are peopled. Since dystopias come replete with social commentary, how is that aspect of authorial history reflected in the novel?

The profits from oil led men to urbanize the Saudi Arabian desert, air conditioners battling to maintain an artificial environment. The desert world blasted by heat offers scope for an ironic commentary on the environmentally devastated world which the lust for oil is bequeathing to the planet. Such environmental devastation is the backdrop to the novel.

Berlin was a city distorted by ideology and war. In the 1970s it was bankrupt, sustained by millions of dollars pumped in from outside, its streets of department stores and entertainment palaces deliberately stocked to render the city 'a showcase for capitalism'. This was an ectopic city, growing fat yet unable to feed itself from within its tight urban parameters. A road and rail line preserved its ectopic existence by attaching it to the western world of consumerism. When those arteries were blocked, that world gathered together the 'Berlin Airlift' to maintain the flow of nourishment. The city of *Ectopia* is like Berlin with the plugs pulled, the aeroplanes grounded. It has been living an ectopic existence on the planet, draining it of its resources, unable to sever the umbilical cord and achieve its own birth.

China is the ultimate model of overpopulation, and a most striking example of a world that has been engineered to be short of women. Its ‘two children per couple’ policy resulted in girls being abandoned, killed or slaughtered and has led to an imbalance between the genders that is not as total, but for individual groups of men as extreme, as that depicted in *Ectopia*.

The novel could not have been written without that authorial experience of those very alternative social models. Those historical periods have been snatched out of time and cast onto a future English world. Only that relocation belongs to an imagined future. The rest is history. The fact that it is history makes it recognizable to readers as something that is present, just as it is the present in Steven’s life. Young males rampaging over a devastated planet is a perception that is available for everybody.

Just as my own history as author feeds the book, so does the reader’s. We all bring our histories with us as reference points from which to understand the different world of a novel. *Ectopia* starts from a point seventeen years ahead of our own present. It is interesting to consider where this places readers in the context of Steven’s experience of life.

What has been shifted into history by the time of Steven’s teenage years is happiness. Steven’s father makes one last attempt to trigger his wife back to normal consciousness, showing her a picture of when she was young and smiling. Steven cannot believe the picture is his mother, and presumes it has to be some digital remastering. ‘Shut it, Steven,’ his father tells him. ‘We’re looking for happy times, your Mom and me. That’s got nothing to do with you.’ (p.93)

This signals one of the primary sets of contrasts which drives the book forward. The father knows that happiness, exemplified in a loving relationship, belongs to the past. He separates Steven from all knowledge of the condition, saying it has ‘nothing

to do with' him. Steven has no such memory of happiness. Happiness exists for him as some sort of genetic imprint, still recognizable but only by its lack. The father is propelled by a historical drive, building a fortress of his home, preserving shreds of a sweeter time, intent on destroying the future as it encroaches in the form of Steven's teensquad. Steven, for all his talk of living in the present, is driven toward the future, because his 'present' in which he is running exists beyond his home which he is set on escaping. He will ultimately turn down Malik's offer of friendship because it does not complete the template of love which he carries with him.

Steven's father directs the boy's attention to the scene surrounding the picture of his mother when she was young (curiously the father training the son in exactly the way of looking at the peripherals of a screen image which Steven will use when hooked up to Doc Lester's imaging apparatus):

- What's that? Dad asks, and touches the screen.  
It's part of the background to the picture.
- The sea.
- You ever been to the sea?
- Course not. They wired it off years ago. That doesn't mean I don't know what it looks like.
- You know so much. You tell me this is a picture of Karen. So tell me how come she's standing on a beach? Out in the open? Full grown? In a bikini? How long would a girl last in the open dressed like that? She wouldn't be smiling. She wouldn't be innocent. She'd be stripped and raped and left as a carcass on the sand. (p.91)

For Steven, his father's lesson is an education in reaching understanding by putting together what he sees and what he knows. For him, it isn't new information. For us, the readers, it is. Steven tells us that the sea is inaccessible, that it is wired off. This is a fact. He has already given us his stereotypical description of a woman: 'A big woman. Vast. Legs like trees. Face like a beachball. Answers to the name of Mom.' (p.65) For Steven a beachball is a grotesque relic with no connotations of play.

His mother is a woman like any other, and cannot be recognized in the image of a fresh young woman laughing in a bikini.

The father's memory of the seaside and his young happy wife is a bubble of happiness from which Steven is excluded. Steven has no way of finding emotional resonance with the memory, and so he has no access to a sense of loss. 'You know so much,' his father tells him, but with sarcasm rather than praise, for the father retains history as his secret.

The father ridicules his son for his ignorance rather than seeking to open him to the emotional resonance of loss. The divide between father and son has no way of being bridged within the novel. Yet it is bridged. The bridge is a contribution added to the book by its readers. In *Ectopia* readers are given no opportunity to alter the plot, nor can they reconcile father and son. The bridge they can bring is awareness. Where Steven sees as ridiculous his father talking his mother through the history of a screen image, the reader has access to the father's sense of poignancy. Where the father ridicules the son, the reader has the scope to pity the boy.

It would have been possible to have started the novel eighteen years earlier than when it does start. This would have located it entirely in the readers' own worldview, and outside of Steven's. Readers could then have followed the story through all of its geopolitical, economic, social, climatic, physiological and familial changes, as the world shed familiar vestiges and became the norm of Steven's young life. Instead readers are asked to compose their own versions of that prequel, the story of those eighteen years, while reading *Ectopia*. They can do so because the father's worldview from before that time is their own. His history is their history. His previous norm is their norm. They need to raid the story of *Ectopia* for clues from which to form the tale of how the world has changed from the world that they knew. Readers come from

the same time as the father and so share his history, while they have to imagine their way into Steven's world.

Of course the father is a monster, and is hardly written so as to gain the readers' sympathies. This scene is one where his guard comes down and we can glimpse a time when he and his wife were relatively normal and happy, taking time out by the seaside. The space for sympathy does not remain for long. Even as he is recalling his wife's beauty, the physical comparisons with his daughter begin to take on a sexual tone: 'Your own son mistakes you for his sister. You see it? That same red hair. Same cheekbones. Same teeth. You're trim but not skinny, the pair of you. Same full breasts. Amazing how those tiny green straps held em in place.' (p.92) Another such scene is the father's preparing to celebrate Paul's achievement on the boy's sixteenth birthday, only to find the boy's neural capacity being uploaded. For a while his distress turns to tenderness, and he cleans the boy in the bath. We later see this tenderness transmute into sexual abuse. Is a shared history really enough basis on which the reader can identify with this depraved figure? Should the reader not be given more inroads into the last seventeen years of the man's disappointments in life, and the brutalizing effects of a world deprived of new females, so they can appreciate all that has brought him to his current state?

The father represents the old world order, in its death throes, a world of which the reader has a complicit part. We readers are ever more aware of the loss of biodiversity and the effects of global warming for which the actions of our species (the father is a lumber merchant) are responsible. Bender's world is the world we have left him to inherit. In *Ectopia* we read that world as an alternative version of the future, one which we still have some capacity of preventing coming about. From within the book the demise of the planet is a fact that stems from our history.

The reader brings history to the book. Older readers might remember times when the shoreline was wired off. Others might simply know such facts from history and be able to read into that snippet of information a whole background of countries at war or protecting their boundaries. Younger readers who have not as yet accessed such historical information at least have a history of being in a world with eggs, with pet dogs, with birds, with baby girls. They share that history with Steven's father, not with Steven.

Readers also bring with them an emotional history. They have looked around and recognized a propensity for age to be accompanied by disappointments. The past becomes golden and change is a threat. Steven does not challenge the father's theory that a girl in a bikini would be raped and slaughtered. Young men do rampage the streets in *Ectopia*, even if it is by way of imposing order. We see Steven's teensquad slaughtering Jan Stovok. The father is not naïve in protecting himself. His extended rant against the members of teensquad, baiting them so they will break into his garden and the holocaust he has prepared for them, is an understandable broadside of anger. We do grow to fear the future and arm ourselves against it. We do anticipate threats to our children and work to protect them. The father is not alien to us. He is our history, defending its ways.

And Steven is a product of our history too. He has no access to that history, he cannot appreciate the extent of all that has been lost in the way the reader can, but he has been marked and conditioned by it. However intensely he runs he cannot run the world to rights. Readers are taking steps away from their own history in the act of following Steven. No more girls are born. This signals a death of the old ways but it is also a new beginning. As Steven adapts to a changing world and plots his own true course, the reader emotionally engages with Steven's continued act of deconditioning

himself. Unlike Steven, we can look into history and find elements we wish to protect and preserve. Like him, we can learn how history has not necessarily set us on a good course, and work to act in a conscious mode that does not respond to the mechanical triggers of our conditioning.

## 4. Creation and Emotional History

Many of my authorial interventions in the novel were to allow for Steven's autonomy as a narrator. However that autonomy was limited by the fact that I, his creator, made him gay. My solipsistic draft of the novel in which the writer has himself as a reader, embarking on his own journey of discovery, required that degree of self-identification with the 'hero'. A gay life in a straight world is an ectopic one, born to it but lived on the edge. I wished to uncover the nature of this. I also saw that part of a novelist's drive in writing for 'himself as a reader' is to provide a book which is otherwise unavailable for him to read. It therefore made sense to turn to the living 'gay' novelist whom I most respect, to read and re-read all of his work, and to discover the extent to which my own needs as a reader had been met by novels already in existence. I might then also perceive a gap in the field, an area of gay fiction which I wanted to read but had not found sufficiently explored elsewhere. The novelist I chose was James Purdy, and this section explores something of my search through ostensible gay literature in order to refine the demands of my own novel.

James Purdy rejects the tag of 'gay writer', a stance that found recent support from Gore Vidal:

"Gay" literature, particularly by writers still alive, is a large cemetery where unlike writers, except for their supposed sexual desires, are thrown together in a lot well off the beaten track of family values. James Purdy, who should one day be placed alongside William Faulkner in the somber Gothic corner of the cemetery of American literature, instead is being routed to lie alongside non-relatives.<sup>18</sup>

Purdy would likely resist the 'somber Gothic corner' more shrilly than the gay one, where companions might be more fun. Gore Vidal is one of a list of celebrity

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<sup>18</sup> Gore Vidal, 'James Purdy: the Novelist as Outlaw', (New York: *New York Times*, 27/2/05)

literary figures who have championed Purdy's work; add Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Paul Bowles, Edith Sitwell, Angus Wilson, Francis King. This isn't so much a question of a gay cabal supporting its own<sup>19</sup>, simply gay writers acknowledging a masterful representation of a sensitive, marginalized existence. The suppression of the sexual force of one's own being leaves a mighty reservoir of feeling which books can barely contain inside the tracery of a formal narrative structure. Since the gay condition is denied to mainstream society, heterosexual readers might well lack direct access to the source of Purdy's creative world, in the same way gay readers might struggle to appreciate the universal relevance of Philip Roth's novels. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, indeed all of the century in some States, homosexuality was a criminal act. Scorned as a sickness, it is reasonable for a person to lose sense of their identity and come to think of themselves as not truly 'there'. Purdy denies any comparison with the works of his friend Paul Bowles, but connection can be made. Bowles, as did Henry James before him, found his drama in the lives of young Americans rubbing up against alien cultures, a clash which can lead towards their own extinction.

The writings of Bowles and James are fuelled by the expatriate nature of their own biographies. Purdy's subject is 'entirely' America, he told me at our first meeting, 'Nothing else.' Unlike Bowles and James he did not need to emigrate to gain a perspective on his subject, for the peculiar sense that 'I was never here to begin with. How could I leave when I wasn't here?'<sup>20</sup> This is a statement of an ectopic sense of being.

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<sup>19</sup> Any notion of such a 'gay cabal' also needs to take into account the opposite forces at work, out to block work deemed to be gay. In recorded conversation with myself, Purdy blamed his failure to be published in 'The New Yorker' on the fact that, 'William Maxwell was a gay who had married and rejected everything that might make people think he was gay.'

<sup>20</sup> Conversations with the author, November 2004

I first met James Purdy in his apartment on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2004. George Bush's re-election had been confirmed moments before, and James Purdy had just returned from hospital. His blood pressure had shot dangerously high. 'America's all lies,' he assured me. 'It's totally lost.' Something of a charmer, he praised me for my eyes before inviting me to sit opposite him. Sitting erect on a wooden chair he engaged brightly with the interview process, despite the roar of hydraulic drills hammering the sidewalk outside. His answers were often visual flashes of memory, and scraps of distant conversations delivered in his mid-western lilt. Nostalgia for his personal history was woven together by spurts of rage against the current regime and social climate in America. He claims to be 'not here', but his nostrils are at work as regards American history. 'It's the stench, the smell. America saps people. It's not easy to live in America. But you have to go on with your own work or you'd go mad.'

Perhaps this is where Purdy goes when he is 'not here' in America; into the land of story, discovering no-one is how they were presented, freeing his characters from the strictures of society's views of them so they can begin again, coming to know themselves, purging themselves of guilt, and since the fiction is also his self-proclaimed autobiography he is presumably working similar feats of understanding and expiation on his own life.

Self-knowledge, the 'drug' that Purdy claims writers ought to take, is the holy grail of Purdy's fiction. The *grand guignol* nature of Purdy's imagination, the daring of his inverse morality in which wickedness often seems the most blessed of courses (like a home-on-the-range Jean Genet), the gorgeous bible belt passion of his language, always provide a glorious carousel on which a reader can enjoy going round and around. His works do a splendid job of spiralling a character back down the whirlpool of family history. I recognized a tendency in *Ectopia* for Steven to orient

his own search for truth back through his childhood. Purdy has written those books for me, so having read them closely I did not need to write the same book for myself. I began in subsequent drafts to steer Steven elsewhere.

Purdy is also magnificent, in such novels as *In a Shallow Grave*, *Narrow Rooms*, and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, at depicting two men at odds with their society whose relationship flares into simultaneous salvation and damnation. Steven is young, as much a boy as a man, and has no-one within his novel with whom to form an equal relationship. Malik is a good friend, not homophobic, but straight. Purdy covers his ground well, but Steven was heading in a different direction.

Purdy cites Cervantes's *Rinconete Y Cortadillo* as a core text in understanding his own work, feeling it could have been written by himself. The two young scamps of Cervantes's work are on a daring, picaresque move from one act of thievery to another. They are beings that Purdy is in love with, and indeed they make their appearances in his novels, but nearly always with tragic consequences. These boys and young men are often likened to birds, such as Luigi in *Out With the Stars*, 'called the Chimney Swift in Italian. The boy really could fly. They claim he was an acrobat for a while in Italy.'<sup>21</sup>

His young friend and male lover Val said of him, 'I knew he was going away from me. I knew too he had never belonged to me, and yet I belonged only to him. Out of all and everybody I had met or been with, Luigi was the only other soul I belonged with, and he desired only one thing, to leave me. His vocation was desertion.' And one day, 'the big window was wide open'. Luigi, the chimney swift,

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<sup>21</sup> James Purdy, *Out With the Stars*, (London: Peter Owen, 1992), p.161

had flown. Val looked down and ‘recognized his own bathrobe draped over the only one he had ever loved, and whom now he saw he had lost forever.’<sup>22</sup>

Purdy’s fiction often aches with the loss of such young beings, who either ‘fly’ or somehow get caught in the fly-paper of emotional domestic drama. Steven in *Ectopia* has been strengthened as a result of my study of Purdy. He is the one who flies, or in his case runs, and for whom return is not an option. Nearing his end, Karen recognizes this shift of Steven into flight. ‘They’ve left me morphine. I’m glad of that. He likes running. Maybe with the morphine he can run until he flies.’ (p.317)

In a Purdy poem, ‘Do You Wonder Why I Am Sleepy?’

Paul a young hustler barely 19  
but with  
body and face of a 14-year old  
stood on my threshold.

Purdy (one presumes such is the narrator) was never the boy’s client. Their ‘relation is tense and tentative’. The boy caresses his legs and feet:

There followed a deep all-encompassing silence.  
Suddenly without warning he flew away  
like a little bird.  
He was afraid  
because I asked nothing of him.<sup>23</sup>

We are left with the poignancy of loss which may or may not pass for wisdom, but the characters that enchant Purdy in Cervantes are not inclined to stay or survive in his own work. Steven is my response to my wish to follow Purdy’s ‘bird boys’ in their escape.

In his fiction Purdy retains an authorial viewpoint, that of a witness, on the outside looking in. Frequently his central character is a biographer, trawling through life in order to assemble material for a book. Life is as lived elsewhere, the author’s

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<sup>22</sup> Purdy, *Out With the Stars*, p142-3

<sup>23</sup> R.S. Fone, (Ed.), *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p.724

role (as exemplified by Eustace Chisholm) an ultimately futile one of seeking to grasp and comprehend it. A 'biographer' frequently appears in Purdy's novels, collecting facts about characters in preparation for telling their story. Purdy reckons he collected scores of characters out of his time in Chicago, without knowing their source when he was writing them into being in his tales. In *The Nephew* (1960) an old woman is writing the biography of her nephew, lost in a war. 'The old woman is trying to chronicle what everyone knows,' Purdy told me, 'but instead she falls into the unconscious of what no-one knew about the boy. She didn't quite get all of it, but at least she didn't just think he was like what other people thought. She discovered about herself. And she was purged of her guilt.'

*Ectopia* contains no biographers, for as discussed before books are not a part of Steven's world. But discovering about himself and his relation with the world is the essence of his journey. Biographers in Purdy's world strive to contain life as it swarms around them, but ultimately that world can never be contained in books. That truth is acknowledged in *Ectopia* by having Steven begin his own journey in a bookless world.

Following Steven's trajectory as a 'bird in flight' is of brief and transitory interest for the 'novelist as reader of himself' if the bird is a feathered arrow sent out from the novelist's bow. The character needs his own life, needs the power to make his own decisions. I chose to make him gay, but he needed autonomy beyond that point in order to be of interest, in order to keep me alert and surprised and reading.

I received an early lesson as regards the possibilities of a character's autonomy from a talk James Baldwin gave at the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow in 1985. He told how the characters of *Another Country* grouped together to ask him to remove a character from that novel, one who had entered it with such brightness they were all

rendered dull by comparison. They felt their novel had been hijacked. Baldwin agreed, and this character, Giovanni, was moved to a novel of his own, *Giovanni's Room*.

Giovanni was thus my early model of a young gay character with true autonomy. Autonomy was possible. As with a parent who creates a child, Steven comes complete with my DNA. This rendered him gay. However I subsequently chose not to follow one possible parental route of wishing my child to be like me. I took the decision never to disapprove of what he was doing, never to censor him. His environment is drastically different from mine. It was my job to throw events his way. He was free to react to them in whichever way he chose. If he could surprise me he could surprise other readers and keep them engaged. I was an adult and he was the youngster. It was my job to maintain boundaries, not to force my words and language, my culture and history, my memories and experiences, onto his. He has my DNA. I recognize him. But my history was over the moment he was born, in a world rendered utterly different from my own. He starts at the point where I finish.

## 5. Giving History to the Future

Dystopias are usually sited on a recognizable version of planet Earth. The impact of dystopian fiction comes from a distortion of what is known, rather than a replacement of it as might happen in science fiction. One element of this is a reader's need for a historical perspective in the future world, which connects that world back to the reader's own time. One of the reader's first questions is likely to be, "How did my world come to this?" This was indeed a significant and persistent question brought up as part of the Ph.D. process, and one which subsequent drafts sought to address. As part of our examination of the historical load carried by dystopian fiction, we therefore come to see that some future history needs to be created to give that future world credibility.

Discussed earlier is the role of the reader in composing the 'prequel' to this book, assembling a credible backstory that links the reader's known world with that which we meet at the start of 'Bender's Book'. I have already noted how dialogue provides the opportunity for characters to relay information which Steven has no interest in supplying, since while it is new to the reader it is a fact of life that he was born to. In this way the fact of no girls being born is reprised in the Sunday breakfast table conversation, with each family member supplying further material relevant to the fact. The father starts us off with the fact that started my own speculation, a report in a *New Scientist* revealing that alligator eggs were sexed according to the heat that surrounded them after they were laid. ' - Global warming. It's the heat that does it. Every damn fool knows that. Alligator eggs don't start off sexed. They heat up, they turn male. They cool down, they turn female. It's the same with the goddam world.' (p.59)

We also learned about the characters themselves from the fact or opinion they chose to divulge. We learn of the mother's regard for Jesus, for example; that there are such things as 'newstext settings' which she has tuned to food items; and that eggs are no longer in existence—implying that the lack of females stretches outside of the mammal world.

Anthony Thwaite considers the matter of setting as regards Kobo Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes*:

Living in a country which is beautiful but also ungrateful, subject to the furies of typhoon, flood, fire and earthquake, the Japanese have an ambivalent attitude towards nature. One side of them seems to regard the Japanese as not only uniquely responsive to nature but even to be 'part' of it in some mystical way; but another side seems instinctively and silently to acknowledge that it is against them.

England's nature is very seldom threatening. At its fiercest it is still relatively benign. Anthony Thwaite's reading of a Japan affected by severe and sudden changes in climate is not true of the contemporary British landscape, spared the likes of typhoons, volcanoes and earthquakes, but has become more so by the time of *Ectopia*. For a time I wanted to keep the geographical situation loose and leave the readers to set the story in the American Midwest if they so chose. In Anthony Thwaite's words again:

It is the intense, hard-edged realism of detail that helps to give *The Woman in the Dunes* its authenticity. At the same time, what one might call its 'indefinite location' gives it a universality which is rare in Japanese fiction. Japanese novels tended to have a strong sense of place, of precise location, which is perhaps partly why they have not always found a very ready audience abroad (the Japanese, incidentally, are inclined to say the same thing about many English novels, which they find too laboriously set in their topographical backgrounds.)<sup>24</sup>

I was seeking some combination of specificity and universality of location. However I realized there was a disturbed English quality to *Ectopia*. One common

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<sup>24</sup> Kobo Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes*, (Oxford: OUP, 1987), pviii

subject of my writing is Englishness, and whilst that topic is more buried in this book than in others it is still implicit, in the same way I consider Shakespeare's principle theme to be the challenges of living on the small island of Albion. Britain is the island of *The Tempest*. *King Lear*'s tragedy is that Lear cannot release his own sense of the importance of his native land. Cordelia escapes, her banishment seeing her flourish in France. Blinded Gloucester yearns to leap off a cliff and into the sea, while the play ends with Cordelia's return, but the return kills her. Her corpse lies in her howling father's arms. Britain, like Stephen's father's garden surrounded by its trenches, is a restricted land bewildered by its self-importance. Intuition suggests a bigger world elsewhere, and madness builds defences to keep intruders out and the restless in.

In keeping with the sense of Englishness, names are Anglo-Saxon but for the consciously Indian name of Malik. The terrain of low hills and plains fits the area around Heathrow to the west of London. Use of an airport also allowed for the effects of global warming—air traffic is becoming recognized as one of the great contributors to global warming and it can be assumed that air travel is not only impossible due to an oil shortage, but unnecessary due to the global impact of the loss of females. The sudden availability of a disused airport also created the right geographical opportunity of an open space for the building of Cromozone on the edge of a large urban community.

The use of a famous location name with some resonance for readers also allowed the chance to show that such names, such notions of geography, are meaningless to Steven. The names locate the reader in Steven's world, while showing how far he is removed from the reader's experience of that world. 'Heathrow. They think they mean something when they say it. They think they're conjuring something

up into existence just by using the name. They're not. They're lying. The meaning's dead. All their words, all their memories, are lies. All their meaning is dead.' (p.100)

*Ectopia* gains much of its future-historical reference from an assumption that the world is currently aware of the impacts of global warming, that we are on a planet doomed to some form of dystopian future. The choice of a role in the lumber industry for Steven's father brings global devastation into the equation early on, and places the father on the side of those who seek to ravage the planet of its natural resources. 'Dad made money in lumber. He worked in the timber industry, before trees were protected and when they still grew. A statesquad inspector came and drew the white cross on our tree's trunk. It's officially dead. Dad can chop it down.' (p.19)

As Steven notes about him, 'He doesn't know trees. He knows killing trees. / He says it's the same thing. He's making a killing.' (p.62)

After fleeing Cromozone Steven takes refuge in a forest, though the attempt involves another attempt at ectopic living—we don't live so that we are safely contained in the Earth, we cannot return to nature as to a womb, we live on the outside, draining it. 'I'm in a forest. It's still standing. No-one really wants the lumber I guess. Who needs wood? Who needs to make things? Who needs to burn up heat in this weather? The trees have no leaves but the deadwood gives shade.' (p.150)

This state of global warming is an extrapolation of contemporary culture, casting it into the future, and not something that needed too much historical setting.

Whilst many of the clues which a reader might utilize to construct a backstory to 'Bender's Book' were included in the dialogue, the process of Ph.D. supervision showed that readers still had insufficient material for them to make sense of how the situation had come about. I attempted to solve this by grafting further details of the geo-political climate onto Steven's narrative, but the grafts remained sorely obvious.

My objective of making my authorial intrusions into Steven's narrative as transparent as possible was failing.

The solution came in two stages. The first was the addition of what now stands as the opening of 'Bender's Book' (0.00). My writing in recent years has meant developing books somewhat like onions, realizing the need to add extra layers, the book growing out from its beginning as well as towards its end. The second solution to the difficulty of needing to feed more background information to the reader than Steven's narrative could bear the weight of involved the addition of the 'Books' in the voices of other characters. I shall start by viewing the effects of those books, in order, and then see how the new opening chapter of 'Bender's Book' completed the desired effect.

The short opening 'Book of Women' acknowledges that the reader comes from a literary culture. Whilst directly addressing the reader, the reader also has to adjust to the fact of being cast into the future. 'Our history is nearly over. For you, we are prehistoric.' The reader is also set a task. 'From this tale you, the reader of the future, will learn of your own makings.' The task is set in the context of what is known: 'This is a time of emergency. Ours is a time of mass extinction,' is a conceivable extrapolation of current planetary concerns. It is followed immediately by a new factor: 'For seventeen years no females have been born to mammals.' This is so startling a fact that it needs stating boldly, especially since in the narrative of Steven the fact is not startling but assumed. We then learn of a fact that is unknown to Steven for much of the book: 'This is the tale of one small project that attempts to seed the future.' (p.2) Readers will learn from Steven, but also start with knowledge that is beyond Steven's. This allows readers to picture the world as delivered by Steven but not to rely on it, for having extra information means having to adapt what they find to

what they already know (as they are already doing by bringing their personal history to the reading). As they come to realize that the ‘small project ... to seed the future’ implicates Steven, and as they come to care somewhat for Steven’s predicament, they are also allowed that *frisson* of anticipation in which you see something bad coming and are unable to prevent it. To peak their interest, readers are informed that the tale is ‘disgusting’. ‘Disgusting’ might appeal, and even if not the fact that the Women seem rather lost in their situation and admit that they ‘have nothing to teach’ invites readers to come up with their own moral judgment.

‘The Book of Women’ forms an explicit welcome to *Ectopia: The Family Bible* as a book, and a closing invitation gives readers the freedom to ‘Do with it what you will.’ (p.3) The next chapter, ‘Karen’s Book’, shifts perspective in that the reader is no longer being addressed directly, but it still takes place in the context of a literary culture. It takes the form of a competition essay, written for the now familiar ‘Council of Women’, and being designed to win a prize it is also designed with an audience in mind, out to win their approval. Beyond being reader-friendly, literary to the point of providing an untranslated quotation from the text of Brahms’ ‘Lullaby’, Karen’s piece locates the reader with the sense that the characters they are set to meet were once recognizable in the reader’s own terms. Her parents ‘had their understanding and they lived their disappointment and that was OK because that’s what people did but they weren’t yet Mom and Dad.’ (p.5) (Her written style is an unlettered one of simple language and occasional long compound sentences.) She has never been in sympathy with her father though her mother’s reminiscence of the man’s earlier love for wood alerts us to softer qualities in the man. ‘The feel of oak made him teary with nostalgia, the grain in walnut made him poetic, mahogany and teak made him speechless though I don’t know why.’ (p.6) When readers encounter the man, they will bring with them

this retrospective insight that allows them to see that his monstrous nature was in part a reaction to the brutal facts of his time, that once he had human frailties and sensitivities akin to their own. More importantly, we have a sense of the mother. ‘Mom’ has little to say in *Ectopia*, her most extended comments being lyrics that only tangentially touch on the rational, her earth mother figure soon being wired into the technocracy of Cromozone. Karen records for us a time when ‘Mom’ was recognizably ‘one of us’, a mother we readers might relate to.

The Mother’s own book is subsumed into ‘The Book of Women’. The next book in the sequence, ‘Paul’s Book’, titled by a winking smiley face with its smile inverted, ;-), is a page of binary code. Meaning will come retrospectively, should readers notice that Paul wrote it after the download of his neural capacity. The chapter is also a shift away from the readers’ literary heritage, delivered in code rather than words while the whole page is a visual rather than a verbal experience. Readers are being moved into a world in which their old reference points may no longer apply.

‘The Father’s Book’ is an interrogatory that calls on active participation by readers, who have to supply the questions which have drawn these answers from the man. Coming up with those questions such as ‘Did you fuck your own son Paul?’ requires readers to actively engage in forming their own opinion of the man. This ‘Book’ ends with a sustained introduction by the father of the son, beginning: ‘You want a father’s testament about Steven? Steven’s a lying little prick. Words from his mouth are like pus from a boil.’ (p16)

The battleground becomes one of truth. Given the man’s racism, his near confession to sexual abuse of his son, his apparent arrest and involvement in some scene of mass killing, readers are not likely to be inclined to side with the father. Since, however, a standard assumption about adolescent males is that they might be in

some phase of teenage rebellion which offers an unbalanced view of the father, it was necessary to give readers some unprejudiced view. This clinical view from a cell, presented only in the man's own words, puts the father under the spotlight for readers. It also deals with a problem raised during supervision of the novel's creation, where my supervisor Graham Mort recognized that the father disappeared from the scene of the holocaust too quickly, and felt the need to know where he was going.

Retrospectively the reader now has that need met.

The father is in a cell. While the authorities imply that Steven is seeking him in order to get his revenge, and the reader must carry such anticipation through to the close of the book, the fact that the father is secured within a cell freed Steven from one possible plot drive, of seeking revenge on the father in what for quite a while I expected to be a 'guns at dawn' finale. However the addition of the next chapter, the opening of 'Bender's Book', has already diffused that possibility. The original start of the whole book was 'Bugger Dad' (p.24). The immediate ground would thus have been established as one of father-son rivalry. Instead we have the opening chapter in which Steven introduces the reader to his world. In showing us his world, he also shows us his ectopic nature. 'Best would be to get a ladder and perch behind the vidscreen. I could look down on em. See their faces pale with longing. Pretend they're looking up at me. I don't though. I join in.' (p.18) Joining in is a pale substitute for being seen. Steven talks us through the film he was forced to make about his family. It's Steven's film, but teensquad has distorted it into pornography. '*Fuck All's* a hit. It's a film about my life and I'm not even in it.' For all that he uses visual imagery Steven is preparing readers to accept that, whatever he presents to us as it is presented to him, the primary truth of the situation will rest in his commentary. From the opening 'Book of Women' readers have been steered towards the primacy of Steven's

commentary, supplied with its context, and are hopefully able to pursue it to its destination.

## 6. The Recovery of History

As dystopian fiction moved towards the millennium the genre was seen to proceed from ‘classical dystopia’ to ‘critical dystopia’. Peter Fitting notes that ‘the adjective *critical*’ in critical dystopia ‘implies an explanation of how the dystopian situation came about as much as what should be done about it.’<sup>25</sup> Raffaella Baccolini notes that ‘in the critical dystopia the recovery of history is an important element for the survival of hope.’<sup>26</sup> *Ectopia* does not especially seek the recovery of history at the societal level, in the critical dystopian sense of perceiving where society has gone wrong and projecting some suggestion of a cure into the future. Its principle concern in such terms is the individual’s recovery of personal history. This has kinship with the psychotherapeutic view of a patient recovering memories of personal trauma in order to deal with them and so move on in life, except the reader is not asked to accept that the root cause of action inside the novel stems from actions that preceded the narrative, such as in the early childhood of its characters. Action is presented to the reader as it happens, with minimal history attached. The history of the novel is Steven’s own narrative as it unfolds. The future flashes into Steven’s present in the form of psychic flashes but though he foresees things he is unable to prevent them, only live his present till the future manifests itself in the proper course of time.

Steven’s present is, however, predicated on a continuous sense of history. The theft of several of his days when he is taken into Cromozone forces him from the present into a historical perspective. He was rendered unconscious for a while and so has to tread back into his past in order to reclaim it. He is reclaiming lost narrative for

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Fitting, ‘Critique and Utopia in Recent SF Films’, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Tom Moylan (ed.), (London: Routledge, 2003), p156

<sup>26</sup> Baccolini, ‘Memory’, in *Dark Horizons*, p115

himself and also for the reader, who until Steven's entry into Cromozone has followed a day-by-day account of Steven's life.

To regain the chronology of his narrative Steven breaks the pattern in his narrative voice and shifts from the present into the past tense. This is first signalled by the sentence: 'They gave me a chicken.' (p.153) The past is interspersed with the present as Steven is interpreting the past from the present. 'The bird was one special project, and I'm another.' (p.154)

As well as his shift in tense, Steven also shifts his narrative from first person to third person. 'It's his story. Steven's story, Bender's story.' (p.154) Wolfgang Iser notes how Esmond in Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* similarly utilizes the third person in his 'autobiography': 'the resultant distance from self brings two things to the fore: the relative and temporary nature of the standpoints which conditioned earlier attitudes and events; second, the fact that in the meantime the faculty of conscious self-assessment must have developed considerably, since now it can view its own past with such detachment.'<sup>27</sup>

Steven is evidently also achieving enhanced powers of self-assessment, but in his case the development is necessary to keep pace with changes being made to his self. He has been forced by his society, by the massive intrusion into his body by Cromozone, to come to a clear view of himself. However that view can no longer be the clear view of someone who was left unsullied. It is a schizophrenic view, consisting of a before and after being. 'Steven was sixteen turned seventeen. He was a runner. He was me.' (p.155)

The role of Steven, and the purpose of the new narrative, is somehow to fuse those two beings back into one. In addition to this shift from first person to third

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<sup>27</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974) p130

person, Steven also adopts a second person voice. 'Sorry to be pissed at you. You had a lot in you. I was hoping for more, that's all. I'll let it go. / Just like you did.' (p.157)

Steven has become objective, recognizing that the passage of time and events has shifted him away from being the person he was. He has a new perspective, but does not yet know what that perspective will show him.

Steven filters his story slowly. He is a victim who is refusing to blame his victimhood. Psychologizing is not relevant. All he is in control of are his own actions. He needs to see how his actions worked against him in the past so as to survive on his own terms in the future. The internalisation of the story, hearing the voice planted inside Steven's head, coming to see the actions through that commentary, strengthens this notion of the whole book being a recording of Steven's words. 'Who the fuck are you? What kind of voice is that? / - What do you think, Steven? Think. Think for yourself.' (p.151)

Steven's voice record becomes explicitly a dialogue. It is also then a dialogue which Steven is having with himself, with his younger self, educating himself into his new existence as Bender. He declares his own sense of himself as storyteller. He's not storytelling for others. He's maintaining his own narrative so as not to have it stolen and warped, so that he lives his own life and not life as dictated by someone else. The difficulty of distinguishing between life as dictated to you and life of your own volition, the ability to do so and then live accordingly, and the knowledge that this is worth doing no matter the consequences, is *Ectopia's* principle concern. This is the point where Steven fights to establish such an independent narrative, recognizing that it has been stolen from him:

You think I talk my secrets into voicecard? Fuck you. This is no secret. It's just my life. Just a story. A short fucking story. No-one steals days out of my story. I'm getting em back. Getting em back so I can use em. You think you know my future? You think you've implanted it? Stupid fuckers. You're

dying. You're passouts. I'm not your future. The young are not your future.  
There is no fucking future.  
We're now. (p.153)

## 7. The Future as History

Writing a novel set in the future requires propelling its readers even further into the future, from where they can look back on the novel as they complete it. In this final section I shall look at the manner of bringing *Ectopia* to both a conclusion and a resolution.

Use of an epilogue was considered for *Ectopia*, in which academics of the future had found Steven's text and had recognized it as the *Urtext* of their own civilization. Finding that a similar notion was used to conclude Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* helped steer me clear of such a device. A narrative weakness of *The Handmaid's Tale* is its inability to embrace the reason for its own existence, and answer the question of how the narrator came to be writing this book. It is written not with the voice of Offred, but with the voice of Margaret Atwood, of a mid-20th century lady trained and enraptured by words. It is possible to set aside the conflict and simply enjoy the effects of Atwood's voice. However the postscript from 2195 and the conference of Gileadean Studies is a trick that comes from outside the thrust of the novel. It purports to deal with the origin of the book, to make sense of its construction, yet fails to do so. We hear that this work was recorded on tape at some time subsequent to the events as described in the book, and 'research' shows us some interesting extra snippets into the lives of the characters, but the chronological inconsistencies within the book are never ironed out. For example, near the opening of Chapter Three we hear, 'We stood face to face for the first time five weeks ago, when I arrived at this posting.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*, p.23

Clearly with ‘this’ and ‘ago’, we are to understand that the book is being composed as the action progresses. The mixture of present and past tense narratives also supports this sense of the novel being narrated as the action progresses, and not till later do we get a sense of it being composed reflectively for an audience (most clearly in the tale of Moira).

The use of a future narrative to authenticate a separate narrative set earlier in the future is a technical ploy. *Ectopia* does adopt such a conceit for itself in the form of ‘The Book of Women’, written in Cromozone by the Council of Women and directed at readers of the future. It sets the book in terms of myth, relating it to biblical myths but appreciating that the Bible may not have survived. It suggests that *Ectopia* is the seeding of a new Bible for an unknown future human race, whilst acknowledging the irony that *Ectopia* is far from holy yet sacred texts have done nothing to protect the planet from environmental degradation. ‘It is not a holy tale. We find this story disgusting in many of its aspects. However our sacred manuscripts have offered inadequate guidance for our own attempts at managing life on Earth. This pitiful story is your inheritance. Do with it what you will.’ (p.3)

This ‘Book of Women’ was kept brief, serving as an emotional rather than intellectual setting for the book. It once contained details such as how the book was preserved, buried at the site of the conflagration at Steven’s house, recorded in many different durable forms and languages, to be located through the addition of a radium pellet. Whilst interesting enough this was a surface quality that might impress the reader with its cleverness but engaged the brain and diverted the reader from a more emotional engagement. Coming at the start of the book this preface, as discussed earlier, establishes contact with the reader. A trouble with the Gilead material appearing as an epilogue in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is that the novel is not left to

resonate at an emotional level because the reader's brain is diverted by the narrative switch.

Margaret Atwood chose to end her death-of-mankind epic, *Oryx and Crake*, by posing a question in the minds of the reader. The survivor Snowman comes across some remaining humans. Should he befriend them? Blast them from existence so they will never threaten him? "Should he kill them in cold blood? Is he able to? And if he starts killing them and then stops, one of them will kill him first. Naturally. "What do you want me to do?" he whispers to the empty air.'

Snowman is moving outside the frame of the book, addressing the reader directly. 'Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go.'<sup>29</sup>

The final words, the end of the show, the book is over. What will he do? What should he do? What would we do? The reader is left to decide, and assume responsibility for the character's actions.

It is a reasonable route to take, effective in its way, but it is also an abnegation of responsibility. Atwood *could* have continued her book. She knew her character, knew what he would do. One more hurdle to leap, one more final effort, and she could have presented us with the climax. Instead we have the novelist achieving a feat of avoidance. Closure is painful.

Toward the close of her novel *Beyond Black*, Hilary Mantel forms a philosophical statement around the quest for personal history. 'At some point on your road you have to turn and start walking back towards yourself. Or the past will pursue you and bite the nape of your neck, leave you bleeding in the ditch. Better to turn and face it with such weapons as you possess.'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2003) p.374

<sup>30</sup> Hilary Mantel, *Beyond Black*, (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p.418

Hilary Mantel's notion that 'you have to turn and start walking back toward yourself' suggests that much of a novel involves characters moving away from themselves. Such is one way of gaining perspective. Closure, the moral rounding, comes from turning and facing that version of oneself left lurking in the past. The past is fierce, with teeth to bite and leave you bleeding. The confrontation is to be a battle.

Outside of his recovery of the days lost in Cromozone, Steven has less sense of a need to reclaim himself from his history. The history with which we are presented is largely his own narrative, and his main goal is sustenance of that narrative in its purest form, purity being that it is his own narrative and not one implanted in him by some other person or agency. Some might contend that it is the author rather than the narrator who keeps the character to its narrative line, even when the character is the supposed narrator of the tale. Whether illusory or not, for this author an element of creation involves giving autonomy to a character. It starts from recognizing that characters come with a history separate to the author's own, and that all of their actions are in ultimate accord with that history. Through draft after draft the author discovers a voice that is unique to a character, and subsequently signs off from further interference, letting that voice speak for itself. In metaphorical terms, it is like building a yacht, learning to sail, manoeuvring the vessel into the trade winds, raising the sails. When characters have history and voice the sails are set, and it's a matter of the novelist keeping on course.

With 'The Second Book of Karen' the author, being myself, resumes control. The narrative contains a correction to what has gone before, though since the story is continuing and we are about to learn the fate of the principals I doubt many readers will afford time for the retrospective correction.

‘The last time he spoke we got his words on record,’ Karen tells us. ‘His body was wrecked but he thought he was fit, he thought he was leaving. He ran through the fence and away.’ (p.318)

Did Steven actually run through the fence and away, or was this simply his spoken narrative as he sat in his chair? Karen clarifies the situation for us, relating Dr Drake’s advice: ‘Empaths do that sometimes. They see the future, and when it happens and it’s too sick to bear it’s like they change channel. They don’t live in the world any more but they’re still living. Life’s still real for them. I like to think Steven’s still running. I blow soft air onto his forehead and cheeks sometimes, like it’s the wind of running against his face.’ (p.318) She is blowing air across his face, entering into what she imagines to be his continuing inner narrative.

Did Steven really run through that electric fence, one which Karen notes has already killed two people? His tale of doing so fooled me for a while. A little rational consideration makes it clear, however, that he did not. The young man has been through physical trial after trial, has only just come around after days of unconsciousness having once run through the fence, and is in little condition to walk let alone run. As Karen reports, ‘We change his clothes. We bathe him. We feed him. He lies down, sits up, and can walk some steps when we guide him.’ They have no need to do such things to a character who has just told Cromozone, ‘Can you really see through my eyes? Is that true? Then you see this earth coming to life. You see the dust speed toward my feet.’ In Steven’s tale the authorities turn off the power in the electric fence and he is fine to ‘live and fight and fuck and sleep and rise just where the running takes me.’ (p.315)

Steven’s last words were a lie. He has had an ambiguous relationship with his storytelling from the start: ‘I’m scribing for the future. There is no future. So

scribing's pointless. Life's pointless. So scribing is the meaning of life.' (p.23) This is so twisted as to be open to different readings, but it can be read to state that life has no meaning other than what storytelling, or 'scribing', can bring to it. He later defends his right to tell 'my life. Just a story. A short fucking story. No-one steals days out of my story. I'm getting em back. Getting em back so I can use em.' (p.153)

In the wake of the holocaust, down in the cellar, Karen tries to stop Steven recording into his voicecard. At this point we realize the transmission has gone live. 'Shhh. Here. I'm bathing your eyes. Go quiet, Steven. You've said enough. Let's have some quiet. Stop recording. I'm turning your voicecard off. Come on, give it here. Let go. Let me have it.' (p.274) In a time of great trauma Steven holds on to his narration, pulling himself along. Despite Karen's best efforts, Steven's recording continues. He follows Malik's' notion that 'now's fucked' and searches for somewhere else.

I dream up a blue sky. Plant a branch across it and coat it with green leaves. Have the leaves dapple the sunlight so I get both brightness and shade. Try for the touch of cool breeze, some scent of living flowers.

Maybe that's how I'll go when I die, snatching up scraps of nature like this, kidding myself that life was worth living. Maybe I'll give in at the close like everyone else and end on a lie. (p.275)

Steven's refusal to surrender the narrative, his practice of dreaming himself into a preferable world, his recognition that he can invent his own realm before death as a lie to soothe him, prefigure how the book will close.

Steven died on a lie, but did at least achieve the ultimate storyteller's art of making his fiction more believable than the truth. They took away his body but through his development of the storytelling art he was able to continue setting his own terms, to continue running, to take his 'readers' with him. 'Don't pen me in again, OK? No more of that electric fence stuff. I'm a runner. I'll get this out and you won't see me for dust.' (p.316)

One factor of my previous books has been leaving matters unresolved, as though begging a sequel. I accepted it as part of my own development that I would overcome that preference with this book, and bring it to a resolution. I listened to Steven. I took account of the various external factors in his world. I had worked hard to make the ectopic pregnancy believable, but it was not credible that a character as enfeebled as Steven would survive the surgical removal of the foetus. Also society had too much at stake in bringing the baby 'to term'. I had taken on the mission to focus on one of the 'bird boys' from the peripheries of James Purdy's fiction but my own 'bird boy', Steven, like Purdy's, simply ran towards his own extinction. Steven lacked an ability to compromise. I couldn't save him. In some ways he got to run at the end. At least, as Karen says, 'His legs kicked but he smiled so I think he was running. It was hard at first with his muscles tensing. I didn't expect spasm. Then he was still.' Malik takes morphine and lies beside Steven, possibly to share in the final journey before returning to Karen. And the baby arrives. Wanda's body may simply be bloodied, or is more likely dark. Dark like Dr Lester Drake. It seems likely that the doctor's sperm fertilized the egg that was attached to Steven's stomach lining. Common sense suggests that a combination of different races would strengthen the gene pool.

Who wants to bring Steven back to an existence of such calculation and conjecture? He has ridden the tale of his life into oblivion. That's probably the highest form of achievement that was available to him. As such I am glad for him, I grieve for him, and I let him rest.

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