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“To Be Made Perfect”: Transformed World Orders in Gloria Whelan’s *Fruitlands* and Lois Lowry’s Giver Trilogy

To account for the range of topics, the shifting boundaries, and the changing status of children’s literature is to write a history of the social processes of the past fifty years. Examples can be found of novels that address issues of globalization, mass communication, multiculturalism and specific social, ethnic and national identities, pressures on families and communities, and authoritarian systems of control, among others. But alongside this response to contemporary experience, there have been shifts to a concern with the ongoing pressure on the present of historical contexts that inform the way in which identities are constructed, guarded and negotiated. Accordingly, part of the millennial focus of the American children’s novel has been to reinvest in the texts and discourses of the past, continuing a trend in post-war children’s literature visible especially from the 1960s onwards. Here, the recovery of memory — individual, collective and cultural — and the articulation of identity have become important as a source of personal as well as public history.

This paper argues that the concepts and vocabulary of the national mythologies of the United States are central to Gloria Whelan’s and Lois Lowry’s novels, making them a serious commentary on the recurrent themes of American political and social discourse. It proposes that the texts’ concern with questions relating to representation and power is neither accidental nor insignificant. More specifically, it aims to foreground detectable dystopian elements, many of which are revisions of an earlier, idealistic version of American exceptionalism. A close reading of the novels demonstrates how contemporary children’s literature may respond to American politics in its construction of utopian communities, and why such narrative response is important. *Fruitlands* and the Giver trilogy, it is claimed, are works with a transformative purpose.

For an understanding of the concept of dystopia I am indebted to Tom Moylan's 2000 *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* and to Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini's 2003 *Dark Horizons*. According to the authors, what has come to be known as *critical dystopias* are texts that "maintain a utopian impulse" but at the same time "open a space of contestation and opposition for those collective 'ex-centric' subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule" (Moylan and Baccolini 2003: 7). Although the term *dystopia* has typically been used to refer to representations of the future best described as "new maps of hell" (Amis 1960), Moylan's proposal for a generic conception of works of this kind allows, as Fredric Jameson notes, for a theory which "distinguish[es] various kinds of negativity from one another," emphasizing the persistence of utopian ideals from which dystopian texts derive their "politically enabling stance" (Jameson 2005: 198). At its most basic the concept characteristically shares with *eutopia* "the general vocation of utopianism" that Lyman Tower Sargent identifies as "social dreaming" (Moylan and Baccolini, 5). But *dystopia* achieves this effect through specific narrative devices that are very different from those of the literary utopia. Unlike the utopia proper with a traveller's guided tour of the utopian society, complete with an explanation of its social, political and religious institutions, the dystopian text opens *in medias res* within the dysfunctional new world. Since the protagonist is always already immersed in the tradition in question, Moylan observes, cognitive estrangement is initially "forestalled by the immediacy and normality of the location" (Moylan and Baccolini, 5). Soon, however, the protagonist moves from full contentment to a position of isolation and defiance, a reaction triggered in resistance to the power of totalizing or homogenizing systems and to a customary order of some kind.

It does not take much to see that Whelan's and Lowry's novels constitute excellent examples of the critical dystopia. In all four novels, the catalysts for change are young protagonists constructed as the major focalizers — a strategy that resonates with Fredric Jameson's identification of dystopia's literary concern for what "happens to a specific subject or character" (Jameson 1994: 56). Their common theme is the self-alleged omnipotence of a monolithic, totalitarian society or culture that demands complete obedience from its members, waving the banner of universalizing categories and embracing sameness as the ultimate slogan. In *The Giver*, a repressive state drawing on the epidemic, apocalyptic rhetoric of the Cold War era makes citizens believe that they form a part of a utopian community where poverty and inequality have been eliminated. Instead, its members are trapped in a genuine totalitarian dystopia which raises questions about the possibility of attempting and achieving utopian ideals. *Gathering Blue*, reflecting on the major social antagonisms of the 1990s, is set in a period of time characterized by anxiety, uncertainty and economic hardship occasioned by natural and social disasters known as "the Ruin, the end of the civilization of the ancestors" (Lowry 2000: 21). The communities of the two novels are, in fact, very much alike in that the authorities in both

societies retain their power by the mass manipulation of its members' tastes and desires and by the obliteration of cultural memory. In *The Giver* innumerable regulations determine what is regarded as culturally central, what is meant by cultural formation and what certain events might mean for the group's present tasks as well as future prospects, whilst in *Gathering Blue* the ideology consists in a range of rituals serving the authorities and the ends of survival and reproduction. In addition, as Bradford et al. argue, there is another literary device, that of the impending death of a child character so different from other members of the utopian society as to represent a threat to the stability and sanctity of the utopian order (Bradford et al. 2008: 111). Whereas in *The Giver* Jonas escapes from the community when little Gabriel, who does not fit easily into a space of the collective, is marked for death, in *Gathering Blue* Kira's neighbour Vandara asks the ruling group to condemn Kira for her physical disability.

Interestingly, Lowry does not feel tempted to trace the construction of an ideal community. In *The Giver* and *Gathering Blue*, the authorities can only *impose* their utopian vision upon others; in *Messenger* the utopian state is nostalgically recalled but already disintegrating under the competing demands of its members. The society referred to as "Village" in *Messenger* is the "Elsewhere" the protagonist seeks in *The Giver*, a place painfully aware of the value and significance of difference and otherness. But if those cast out by communities like that of *The Giver* or *Gathering Blue* are gladly received in the "Village," the utopian social order of the community is threatened, not only by all the non-utopian forces of the outside world but, more importantly, by the selfish demands of the villagers. The result is that the citizens close their community to the less fortunate, and "radically less perfect" (Suvin 2003: 189), who look for a place that retains, and indeed celebrates, difference and plurality. And this seems to be the case for all utopian enclaves in Lowry's trilogy, which are not represented as evolving systems: thus the narrative mechanism whereby so radically different a society can only be imagined, desired or (in *Messenger*) referred to in retrospect.

Whelan's *Fruitlands* is another notable example of a narrative in which a community, ostensibly designed to show how utopia should be constructed in the first place, in reality secures the ongoing presence of repressive patriarchy intended to serve the interests of those in control. The novel's opening line, "We are all going to be made perfect," ties together utopianism and identity politics: if subjectivity is constituted through one's engagement in social and discursive practices, a would-be utopian community can be interpreted in the light of its social implications and can be expected to allow new forms of agency to develop within fairly narrow parameters. After all, as Bradford and her co-authors notice, "being 'made perfect' presupposes a particular concept of perfection" (Bradford et al., 19). The ideological significance of Whelan's historical novel is therefore produced in the tension between the individual and the social with its institutions of repression and discipline. Feeding into Moylan and Baccolini's discussion of the critical dystopia is

the structural strategy of narrative and counter-narrative in *Fruitlands*. This strategy plays out by way of juxtaposing entries from the two diaries young Louisa May Alcott keeps: one to be read by her parents, the other to be used to express her more scathing comments on the utopian experiment. Consequently, the same event is presented twice, first through the lens of the official, parentally approved diary, and then through the lens of the private one. Hence an interrogative mode established by contrasting points of view. With regard to the linen clothing forced on his fellow members by Charles Lane, the official diary reads:

Mr. Lane has kindly drawn up patterns for our clothes. Mama has made them. They are not cotton, for that would be unfair to the slaves in the South who are forced to pick the cotton in the terrible heat. Father said the clothes must not be made of silk either, for silk comes from making the poor silkworms work long hours. Our garments are made of homespun brown linen and are very plain. When our shoes wear out, Mr. Lane will tell us how to make shoes from canvas. (Whelan 2002: 14–15)

The secret diary, on the other hand, reads:

Lizzie, Anna, and I nearly collapsed with laughter when we saw ourselves dressed in Mr. Lane's costumes. The men are in floppy trousers, long coats, and hats as big as platters. I think Mr. Lane must hate women, for it is the female clothes that are so hideous. We wear voluminous pantaloons, so large we might easily hide a cow in each leg. Over these monstrosities go long tunics. Little Abby May looks like a laundry bag tied in half, and poor Mother shed tears when she saw how she appeared. All these hateful garments are in coarse linen. They itch and are so stiff that when you sit down, they don't sit with you. (Whelan, 15–16)

These remarks, amusing as they may be, can be interpreted as illustrating a different, unsatisfactory aspect of the Fruitlands community. If Louisa expresses her “concern about the body, especially her appearance” in the clothes selected by Lane, she also has a “need to have and maintain a private space,” a wish that is at the same time “recorded in and embodied by her secret diary” (Bradford et al., 19). It seems that all political and social ideals of the community simply mask a contempt for ordinary people and their everyday lives, which are to be transformed by the utopian project. In addition, there is an extended critique of earlier versions of American exceptionalism. *Fruitlands* is “overtly about a failed utopia,” Bradford et al. claim, “an attempt to realise one of the recurrent metaphors of American political and social rhetoric, that of the city built on a hill” (Bradford et al., 18). In fact, the unique value — and the structural defect — of the community lies in its isolation from the surrounding social space and in strict religious doctrine affirming its moral superiority:

All I see is a large old house on a hill with acres of wood and meadow ... Father sees what the future will bring ... As he stood there telling us of his dream for Fruitlands, I was sure that others hearing of our way of life will be eager to join us. We shall build cottages for them on the hill. (Whelan, 8–9)

The failed utopia is thus closely bound up with a resolutely American sense of noble mission (Bradford et al., 18). *Fruitlands*, though, makes it clear that

the critique of arrogance and hypocrisy in general and of the American national character in particular is both a cultural and a political act: on the one hand, it provides self-knowledge about American vices and follies; on the other, it demands qualitative social change. "Fruitlands/America," Bradford and her co-authors continue, "offers hope for humanity, grounded in comity — a balance of community and individual interests governed by personal and economic freedom" (Bradford et al., 19). Fruitlands fails, however, because of its patriarchal, authoritarian structures not explainable by American social values; this is registered in the official diary's entry in which Louisa attributes the departure of its community members to the abuses of the two leaders, her father and Lane.

As modern examples of new world order narratives, Whelan's and Lowry's novels belong with a group of recent texts for a younger audience strongly marked by what Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel call "utopian feelings of possibility" (Mickenberg and Nel 2008: 1): thus the child readers are defined in terms of what they will become, to use M.O. Grenby's words, "the citizens of the future," and not as beings who should be cut off from the social and political realities of life (Grenby 2008: 73). "[The] ability to envisage and engage young readers with possibilities for new worlds and new world orders," as Kimberley Reynolds notes, is

central to the transformative power of children's literature, both socially and aesthetically. The stories we give children are blueprints for living in culture as it exists, but they are also where *alternative* ways of living are often piloted in recognition of the fact that children will not just inherit the future, but need to participate in shaping it. (Reynolds 2007: 14)

The visions of these new world orders, as Bradford et al. put it, rest on reformulations of ideas "about power and identity, community, the body, spatiotemporal change, and ecology" (Bradford et al., 2). Indeed, Bradford and her co-authors identify many examples of children's texts with "a pervasive impulse towards what can be termed 'transformative utopianism,' " which project "fictional imaginings of transformed world orders" and use certain "utopian/dystopian themes and motifs which propose new social and political arrangements" (Bradford et al., 2–3). Such novels are dissimilar from traditional utopian literature in that they locate transformation in the present, rather than in the future, and employ " 'an emancipatory utopian imagination' which breaks away from the restrictions of the traditional utopia while preserving these texts' ability to challenge and resist dominant ideologies and social practices" (Bradford et al., 4). Transformative utopias can be both progressive and regressive with regard to the ideological systems that inform them and they may refuse resolution to the utopian visions that they project. But then, they can also "imply new social and political arrangements by imagining transformed world orders" (Bradford et al., 6), and empower their child characters, if only for a brief time.

As regards the notion of individual and communal well-being that is problematized in Lowry's and Whelan's novels, the "transformative purpose" of the books seems obvious. Through a system of habits and rules of conduct the protagonists

are cocooned from the true state of affairs, benefiting from inequalities of power and position of which they are ignorant. However, the worst features of the dystopian system — its everyday prejudice or acts of violence against the elderly, the sick, and the disabled — serve to mobilize the child characters' political radicalism. The scenes in which protagonists are prevented from challenging the ideological and economic underpinnings of the cultural practices that govern their lives point, according to Bradford and her co-authors, to other areas, like "the rights of citizens to interrogate, criticize, and oppose authoritarian rule" (Bradford et al., 112). The critical dystopia, in the generic definition proposed by Moylan, "self-reflexively takes on the present system," but what it offers are not only "astute critiques of the order of things" but also "explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration" (Moylan 2000: xv). This announcement of the richer human potentialities of people who have been forced to operate within an oppressive power structure is itself a comment on the strength of liberal humanist ideals. Lowry's and Whelan's portrayal of "exceptional individuals destined to act as catalysts for reform" is thus, Bradford et al. note, mapped onto the humanist concept of "an essential human nature" that is "capable of withstanding negative forms of socialization and control" (Bradford et al., 110–111).

The young protagonist's decision to resist power which is oppressive suggests both an active distrust of the hegemonic ideologies of the system and a more general assertion of identity and individuality — the values of a democratic society offered in opposition to those of a totalitarian state. As Don Latham explains, this resistance can also be construed as a typically, but not exclusively, American response (Latham 2004: 147). To support his claim, Latham quotes from Thomas Hine's 1999 *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*:

There has probably never been a culture in which the quest for an individual identity has been as important, and thus as fraught with problems, as that of the United States ... Rarely do we think that people are, or ought to be, born into a particular role in life, though that has probably been the norm in most times and places. Nor do we view a role in society as being a gift that its holder can pass on to a protégé. (in Latham, 147)

From this perspective, as Latham puts it, roles should not be assigned to individual subjects through a kind of cultural determinism. The child characters' brave defiance turns into a social or explicitly ideological commitment, while representing the triumph of the individual over the political forces of oppression (Latham, 147). By presenting their protagonists at the centre of ideological activity, in periods when they are trying their ideas about social meanings and cultural norms, *Fruitlands* and the Giver trilogy raise questions pertinent to the obvious thematic opposition between individuality and the collective. Another implication of the protagonists' quests is that they are as important to the individual subject as to society as a whole. The awakening of self-consciousness is essential, the authors suggest, before one enters the concrete realm of social relations in order to begin the move

towards change. This is why all protagonists who undergo the process have most of their choices ahead of them: they are in their teens. The fact that in their growth to personal wholeness the protagonists encounter several "reality instructors" — Jonas is taught by the Giver, Kira by Matty and Thomas, Matty by Seer and Kira, Louisa by William and her sisters — points to the importance of the social factor. Becoming whole on the personal level clearly has its social dimension and thus becomes a process of universal significance.

Similarly, a pronounced "transformative utopianism" pervades Lowry's investigation of the relationship between history and identity, and between private and official history. The importance of an accurate collective memory and representation of the past is a theme repeated throughout the trilogy. In *The Giver* all knowledge of the past was deliberately wiped out of the community's collective memory. *Gathering Blue*, in turn, is more concerned with the recovery of personal consciousness, which mirrors the more general social development of a society devoid of historical memory. If the narratives of the first two parts of the trilogy are organized by sequences involving the recuperation of memory erased by the cultural amnesia, in *Messenger* citizens are split off from memory and history in much the same way as their village is split at that historical moment. Indeed, social fragmentation in the novel is closely related to the obliteration of historical memory. It follows that Lowry sees memory as bound up with the construction of community: it takes on a collective value. This viewpoint accords with that of Moylan and Baccolini, who insist that "whatever bad times are upon us have been produced by systemic conditions and human choices that preceded the present moment" and that "such conditions can be changed only by remembering that process and then organizing against it" (Moylan and Baccolini, 241). The loss of historical memory excludes the possibility of the social and political transformation of society. It is true, Bradford et al. argue, that the qualities which distinguish "Village" as a utopian enclave "echo national mythologies of the United States as a haven for those from dysfunctional and impoverished communities." However, the decision of the villagers to cut themselves off from strangers and refugees by erecting a wall represents a significant evasion of the legacy of the past and marks a move away from what Bradford and her co-authors identify as "the values inscribed by Emma Lazarus's 'give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses,'" and to a "fearful and distrustful attitude towards those figured as Other" (Bradford et al., 110). Thus, gradually, collective life is turned in the direction of a hermetically sealed world and a closed system of values.

To examine the construction of utopian communities in modern children's literature is to acknowledge the predominance of dystopian novels. But both utopian and dystopian narratives seem to underline the truth that even the most depressing of novelistic "realities" may be changed. This is clear in *Messenger* when Matty realizes that despite "a tangled knot of fears and deceits and dark struggles for power" symbolized by the thickening of Forest, the utopian transformation of the

village can still take place. Notwithstanding the utopian community's failings, social dreaming is not only visible but leaves its mark on people's experience. As such it remains potent and desirable — even if in fact it may prove destructive. The purpose of this paper has been to flag some of the most significant ideas relating to communal well-being that are in play in Whelan's and Lowry's novels. The novels' manifest involvement in different and differently ideological pictures of utopian communities together with their insistence on the importance of memory afford, I would submit, a striking instance of how contemporary children's literature responds to global politics in its constructions of community.

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