

Anatomies of future melancholy

DEREK TURNER *compares two powerful prophecies*

If the attainment of utopia is a recurring pipe-dream, so is its apparent opposite – the dystopian nightmare. For every More, Rabelais or Bacon who describes some ideal city, there are innumerable others who feel the fogs of the future are as likely to conceal demons as delights.

Jefferies, Orwell, Huxley, Hartley, Lewis, Golding, Nabokov, Koestler, Zamyatin, Raspail and Burgess are just a few who have given gloomy warnings to posterity. Some of these have become clichés – *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Clockwork Orange*, *Darkness at Noon*. A few are more forgettable – Lewis’s *Hideous Strength*, Nabokov’s *Bend Sinister* – and some are simply overlooked – Jefferies’ *After London*, Zamyatin’s *We*, Hartley’s *Facial Justice* and Raspail’s *Camp of the Saints*.

It has been argued that cautionary literature is a fundamentally conservative genre whatever the ostensible politics of its authors. Yet implicit in every dystopic depiction is the idea that if we start or stop doing something, or do it in a different way, we can avert this otherwise inevitable fate. Dystopias are really disguised utopias.

But some of the above-mentioned authors did not disguise their conservative predilections. Both *Bend Sinister* (1947) and *Facial Justice* (1960) targeted what Nabokov christened “ekwilism” – the dull dogma, now practically a religious obligation, that all are intrinsically equal and therefore everyone must be equalized at whatever social cost. In *Camp of the Saints*, Jean Raspail famously telescoped decades of Third World immigration and First World neurosis into a luridly imagined tale of a permanently un-Frenched France. Tito Perdue and Alex Kurtagic are likewise racially-conscious, anti-egalitarian ‘conservatives’ of some kind, sufferers from what Perdue calls

“...a spiritual illness in which the victim feels that the West is in worse condition even than yesterday.”

Perdue, whose very surname suggests loss, was born in 1938, son of an American mining engineer. He spent his boyhood in Alabama, moving away spasmodically to study in Ohio and Texas, and work in New York, Iowa and Georgia. He was expelled from college for cohabiting with an 18 year old named Judy, whom he married and who had their daughter. He and she are still together fifty-five years later, and Judy features in several of his novels. A small-r romantic as well as Romantic *aficianado* of Wagner and Mahler, he pities "...these moderns, for whom love was but a therapeutic expression." From 1983, he devoted himself to writing, and his first published work, *Lee*, appeared in 1991 to usually enthusiastic reviews in mainstream journals.

Lee is the tale of the elderly and unlovely Lee Pefley, a peripatetic elitist and hater of modern America, who often expresses his disdain and despair by administering severe cudgellings to those whom he regards as being more than ordinarily obtuse or ugly. Four other novels – *The New Austerities*, *Opportunities in Alabama Agriculture* (both 1994), *The Sweet-Scented Manuscript* (2004) and *Fields of Asphodel* (2007) deal with other phases in Lee's existence, pre-existence (*Opportunities* deals with his ancestors) or post-existence (*Fields* is set posthumously, with Lee wandering on the far bank of the Styx). The arch-reactionary (and incidentally Confederate sympathizer) Lee is clearly an unlikely object of empathy for mainstream reviewers, and that Perdue nevertheless garnered plaudits indicates the excellence of his style. Rarely has a thoroughgoing conservative critique been conducted with such humour, lyricism, surrealism and effervescence. Comparisons have been made with John Kennedy O'Toole's *Confederacy of Dunces*, but Lee is in a class of his own (as the old curmudgeon would doubtless have preferred). But publishers eventually cooled, and the author soon had a backlog of apparently unpublishable texts. But thanks to a small West Virginia publisher, the logjam has at last been broken, and two other novels should also appear shortly.

Many of Lee's ideals are reprised in the outlook of *The Node*'s unnamed protagonist – which is hardly surprising, as he is Lee's grandson. "Our bloke" is a "Cauk" (short for Caucasian), once numerically predominant and bristling with confidence, now a neurotic minority resented by the rainbow majority and oppressed by grotesquely unfair and vigorously enforced equality laws. "Our man's" America is dysgenic and dysfunctional, with all manifestations of high culture, independence of mind or even education regarded with disfavour. The Yuan-based economy is chiefly devoted to public relations, magazines devoted to the likes of recreational canoeing, advertisements shown on 300 inch TV

sets or projected into people's faces, as well as

“...candles, rubber and leather objects, tropical fish with human genes, velvet Elvises, blow-up dolls simulating forty-pound girls, musical roses...rare cheeses and hummingbird eggs.”

Banditry proliferates and pollution levels are so high that rain and sun are things to be shunned. Christianity has been replaced by a variety of anything-but cults, including one rather wonderfully devoted to the Gila Monster (one of the world's few species of poisonous lizard, indigenous to the American southwest). Cauks are singled out for constant monitoring and harassment, no matter what they say or do to placate government “facilitators” or other groups. Most seek quiet lives by avoiding any kind of corporate assertion or even self-expression, seeking to lose themselves in the sensate multi-melée.

The very few contumacious Cauks risk being scanned by electronic “attitude-analyzers” and removed to giant re-adjustment complexes, from whence not all return. The only answer in that future is to secede into autonomous, undemocratic “nodes” in which high culture can be maintained or recreated and plans drawn up to deliver some segment of the old country from the tedious tyrants. “Our man” becomes one such leader, and in his progress into prominence Perdue honours his own ancestors, homespun tamers of Alabama and gray-uniformed citizen-warriors against Yankee uniformity.

This scanty description fails to do justice to *The Node's* richness. There is joy and proportion in the author's references, store of words, manipulation of images, jumbling of tenses and senses, in-jokes, his verbal and even typographical games. Behind his writing one senses the existence of a wide, wild hinterland bordered by volcanoes and with a staffage of perfect people, animals and *cottages ornée*. He never succumbs to portentousness, always a temptation for doomsayers. Even when he describes revolutionary acts, such as the Nodists' annexation of adjoining territory carried out “in the fullness of crime”, there is delightful self-awareness. The rebels

“...sent one of the women forward to snip the fence that separated them from their neighbour's cattle, an episode remembered in history as The Electrocution of Betty Peal.”

The many humorous asides have the paradoxical effect of making his plaint *more* plangent. “Our hero's” love interest is bound up with his and our civilization's future, and in the middle of smiling we are brought up sharp with a realization of what we stand to lose, are already losing:

“Could he, or not, get from her a renewal of that species, the West made

new, a numerous people inhabiting everything between the Rockies and the Appalachian mountain chains?...The resumption of fine literature, star travel, Wagnerian opera houses? Not a chance of that.”

It would be a mistake to see Perdue as mere nostalgist, lost in some reverie of unrecapturable youth extrapolated into Spenglerian teleology. He looks forward almost as often as he looks back, in hope of “a globe of a hundred thousand societies”, in which people “care more about people than stuff”.

The 42 year old part-Spanish, part-Slovenian UK resident Alex Kurtagic likewise has a life beyond tenebrous theorizing. He is multilingual, a multi-instrumentalist and singer, a skilled speaker, writer and artist. (One of the many things which link these books is that Kurtagic has devised the front cover artwork for both.) Like Perdue, Kurtagic is someone who could make a success out of all kinds of careers if he chose to do so – but again like the author of *The Node*, he is public-spirited to the point of self-sacrifice.

Given to Gothicism and Spenglerianism, in *Mister* he offers an almost unutterably bleak vision of an almost-with-us Europe, in which indigenous Europeans have become a shrunken sub-group – rather like *The Node*’s America. But *Mister* is less fantastical and perhaps less forgiving. Kurtagic is unbending even with his readers, as is demonstrated by his nuclear-powered vocabulary, long dialogues in Spanish (Englished in a tiny font in footnotes) and wealth of reference and allusion. There is dry humour to be gleaned in his richly-textured vision, but it is as darkly unrelenting as that found in Bosch. The author does not believe in ‘accessibility’, and feels he is writing for The Ages, and for all of Europe.

Like Perdue’s, *Mister*’s central character is also unnamed and an instinctive elitist, but unlike Perdue’s he is a careerist trying to maintain the best possible standard of living for his wife and himself in a world determined to drag everyone down to the same scabbling Hobbesianism-in-disguise. An IT specialist, he is summoned to Madrid by a company seeking to minimize its ever-growing tax bill through creative computing. His journey is punctuated with small and large frustrations, as over-promoted, uncriticizable equal opportunity employees try to administer sensitive and sophisticated systems frankly beyond their capabilities – technology failures, ignorance, incompetence, impoliteness, lack of interest, distrust, dislike, theft and violence, all set amongst a chokingly entangled Euro-undergrowth full of mounting menace.

Almost everything about this excellently-imagined Europe has changed, and nothing for better – economic stagnation, political paralysis, resource

shortages, overpopulation, terrorism and global warming affecting everything, even to the appearance in the British countryside of wild baboon spiders, for the author apparently the epitome of horror. The physical structures of the past remain, but this only makes the metamorphosis more marked. The cool baroque and neo-classical elegance of the monarchical Madrid cityscape counterpoints the haphazard squalor of everyday existence in 2022's scorched Spain – ex-Christian domes shading drunks and drossiness, Corinthian colonnades ankle-deep in litter, grand staircases stippled by saliva, exedra bespattered with excrement, while all around these architectural aristocrats rises a superheated subtropical hubbub of pointless and aggressive noise.

Intelligent and vigilant, Mister can generally cope with such everyday annoyances, but more dangerous than even the worst street Apaches are the authorities. They become interested in him mostly because he is an indigenous European and has an aloof manner. His combination of pale skin and well-made clothes simultaneously arouses ethnic, economic and social envy, and 'everyone' has a vested interest in bringing him down. Mister's attempts at remaining above any fray have the paradoxical effect of making the authorities *more* curious about him – as if he were some kind of front for the resistance movement on which they are so fixated. It is a perverse sort of compliment – as if they simply cannot believe that someone so well equipped for every eventuality should apparently be content with just making money.

It is unclear whether Kurtagic's imagined resistance movement, cumbrously and counterproductively called the "Esoteric Hitlerists", is mostly a figment of that society's fevered imagination, but there are real resisters in *Mister*; some disconcertingly with us in 2012. Amongst many real-life recusants featured in *Mister* are the hereditarian psychologists Arthur Jensen and J. P. Rushton, and the Croatian writer Tomislav Sunić (who has written the foreword) – along with actual organisations like the Ludwig von Mises Institute and the Council of Conservative Citizens. Clearly, these are not "Esoteric Hitlerists", but there are also references to real Hitlerists, such as the wildly eccentric "Savitri Devi", a Frenchwoman obsessed by Hinduism who saw Hitler as some kind of predicted Indo-European avatar. Mister is privately sympathetic to some of the aims of some of these resisters, but the combined bizarre-bloodthirsty connotations of "Esoteric Hitlerism" understandably reinforce his determination to avoid any political activity and get back to the notional sanctuary of Surrey. His chief loyalty remains to himself, and his credit card is a kind of crucifix.

But there is little room for error for such as he in this jabbering, ungenial

Europe, and following a series of mishaps he is arrested as a potential racist, incarcerated and interrogated at length by a bully called Obama (!), who tries to link him tangentially with a range of people with whom he has unwittingly shared public space. The convincingly claustrophobic accounts of these intellectual jousts amount to a caustic critique of contemporary culture, in which everything is political and privacy has been abolished, and ‘whites’, ‘the right’ and ‘the West’ are always wrong. His only hope lies in his highly-developed facility for denial and dissimulation, and the length of his purse.

Mister eventually gets away with it, but it is more by luck than judgement, and at huge expense of money for which he had previously exchanged his soul. Now at the end, when it may already be too late, he has developed an awareness that not only is he not an island, but that his passivity has made him complicit in great crimes – wilful blindness, self-deceit, desertion in times of war, abandonment of one’s people. He who might have done much is actually morally inferior to those who could not help themselves. And although he has got away with it this time, he guesses it is probably just a stay of execution. He was targeted by virtue of being born with his particular physical endowments, and he is now implicated in perilous politics simply by virtue of having been accused. For his own sake as much as for Europe’s he starts to realize he must descend into that forsaken, foetid arena where civilizations are forged and fought for. As he finally, gratefully boards the long-sought flight out of Barajas, he consults his honour even as he congratulates himself on his ingenuity:

“Home free, yes!

Home, free?

Yes?

But, for how long?”

These are questions, the author suggests, all Europeans should be asking. ♦

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The Node

Tito Perdue, Nine-Banded Books, Charleston (West Virginia), 2011, pb, 258pp, \$12

Mister

Alex Kurtagic, Wermod & Wermod, Shamley Green (Surrey), 2009, hb, 531pp, £19.99