

Five English Disaster Novels, 1951-1972

By Nick Hubble

Introduction

John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), in which the hero and his socialite girlfriend escape the decimation of Middle England by giant walking carnivorous plants is the archetypal form of what Brian Aldiss dubbed the "cosy catastrophe", in which "the hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking) while everyone else is dying off."¹ The frequent repetition of the formula over the next twenty years suggests that the production of such cosy catastrophes almost came to constitute an obligatory rite of passage for any would-be science fiction writer of the period. Everything above ground gets blown away in J.G. Ballard's first book, *The Winds from Nowhere* (1962), but the heroes survive until the weather unexpectedly abates. In Keith Roberts's debut, *The Furies* (1966), aliens in the guise of giant wasps supply the dangers to be overcome before the hero can settle down as a farmer with an ex-prostitute. Not all disaster novels were quite so cosy. In John Christopher's *The Death of Grass* (1956), while the hero does manage to survive a right-wing government's attempts to bomb its own urban population in the face of imminent mass-starvation, and escape with his family to a hidden valley in the Lake District, it is only at the cost of killing his farmer brother. And by the politically volatile years of the 1970s, even the very possibility of narrative itself is disrupted by the fragmented form of Christopher Priest's *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (1972) as a suburban family disintegrates amidst the savage civil war triggered by the arrival of two million African boat people.

There is now a growing recognition that these catastrophes offered a sharp political contestation of the lines along which British society was run. A recent article in the *New Statesman* by Mark Slattery considered how Wyndham's "fascination with Englishness disguised a sidelong sneer at the vulnerability and incompetence of British authority."² Slattery went on to comment: "Wyndham's market was the middle class, whose old-fashioned values he lightly satirised. His depiction of the collapse of this homogeneous class was all the more shocking because he used its own idiom to emphasise its destruction."³ The reason why this was so attractive to a middle-class readership is because the order being overthrown by Wyndham's triffids was not their own but that of the Welfare State and collectivised social democracy, which by 1945 had supplanted the Conservative hegemony of the 1930s. As Ross McKibbin concludes in his history of class and culture in interwar England:

More or less everyone in the interwar years agreed that England was a democracy. The question was – whose democracy? Before the outbreak of war the question seemed to have been answered ... the ruling definition of democracy was individualist and its proponents chiefly a modernised middle class; in the 1940s the ruling definition was social-democratic and its proponents chiefly the organised working class. The class, therefore, which in the 1930s was the class of progress became in the 1940s the class of resistance.⁴

L.J. Hurst has pointed out that the title of chapter one of *The Day of the Triffids*, “The End Begins”, is an ironic reference to Churchill’s speech after victory at Alamein: “This is not the end. It is not the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”⁵ That phase of the war represented the END of interwar individualism and the beginning of the postwar order. Wyndham’s escapist fantasy of reversing that wartime beginning can be seen as creating the model for a genre which was to pander shamelessly to the desires of the English middle class to overturn the postwar order. However, such a reading can hardly account for the imaginative range of the genre or its continued potency – as witnessed by Ballard’s statement in March 2002, when invited by the *Guardian* newspaper to comment on BBC Chair Gavyn Davies’s contention that it is only the white middle classes who believe that the BBC is “dumbing down”:

I am a great admirer of the BBC – it is the greatest form of enlightenment and information since the Roman Catholic church. But my belief is that the middle class is the new proletariat and that in due course we will have to launch a revolution to free ourselves from the abuse we are now on the receiving end of. We are the new victims, exploited by society. We believe in virtues, charity and elitist culture and it’s all-out attack on our kind. We are society’s fair game – there are beaters in the woods trying to flush out the middle classes and sooner or later we will revolt.⁶

What is unsettling about this polemical outburst is the way in which it challenges our conventional understanding of recent British history: that the progressive gains of the postwar era – health, education, social and sexual liberalisation – came as a result of the 1945 settlement and the triumph of social democracy. Unless Ballard is merely engaging in hyperbole, his argument is based on an alternative understanding: that these progressive ideals were rooted in the interwar middle class and came to flourish despite, rather than because of, the postwar order. The consequence of the “all-out attack” on the middle class is the opening of a new political axis that bypasses the traditional positions of “Left” and “Right”. The attraction of using “middle class” as a term of abuse derives from the way it enables elitist snobbery, ingrained within a genuinely reactionary opposition to progressive enlightenment, to be masked by a feigned solidarity with traditional working-class values. However, it is very difficult to expose this manoeuvre without recourse to the history of middle-class progressivism which is implied by Ballard’s outlook but remains largely unwritten in practice.

Hurst has compared the temporal dislocation within the opening sentence of *The Day of the Triffids* with other opening sentences used to signify a novel’s belonging to the genre of alternate history. *The Day of the Triffids* opens: “When a day that you happen to know is Wednesday starts off by sounding like Sunday, there is something seriously wrong somewhere.”⁷ George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* opens: “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.”⁸ As Hurst observes, both sentences establish how “the normal constructs of time broke down in postwar England”.⁹ Hurst further argues that these were deliberate choices to make time “uncanny”, by suggesting that more obvious satirical devices, such as the invention of “Double British Winter Time”, were avoided.¹⁰ However, Ballard’s *The Winds from Nowhere* makes a similar device uncanny by applying it in midsummer: “It was only 4 o’clock but already dusk was coming in . . . which made the late June day seem more like

early Autumn.”¹¹ Roberts’s *The Furies* features the alternative dislocating motif of the stopped watch. Cairns Craig has linked Orwell’s famous 1942 assertion that “History stopped in 1936”¹² to an “English Ideology”, which came into being as a direct result of the replacement of Englishness as a progressive force by Britishness in the early 1940s – the process described above in the McKibbin quote. Stripped of its historicity, England was transformed into a perfect space – a blank page – for oppositional politics. Craig suggests that there were two problems with this: firstly, that it was a space as readily available to the political Right as to the Left; and, secondly, that it served to distract the English Left from a fully committed engagement with the politics of Britain.¹³ By reading these five novels intertextually as an interlocking alternative history, it is possible to recover the progressive strands of the middle-class opposition to postwar Britain, which are in danger of being swept away by the more reactionary currents of a rising Englishness

In the Country of the Blind

It is too easy to read these books as simply reflecting cold-war anxieties: the triffids are genetically developed in the Soviet Union; in Roberts’s *The Furies*, earthquakes are triggered by the testing of huge nuclear bombs; the cereal-killing virus which causes the mass-starvation in Christopher’s *The Death of Grass* originates in China – as by implication (although Ballard refuses anything so workmanlike as an explanation) do *The Winds from Nowhere*; while in Priest’s book, the Russians covertly arm African refugees in England. However, the key common denominator is that in all of these works the destruction of the postwar order is always overdetermined: in Wyndham there are both triffids and satellite weapons and a plague as well; in Christopher the food shortage is accompanied by an extremist government’s intention to bomb its own people; in Roberts swarms of giant extraterrestrial wasps quickly follow the bomb-triggered earthquakes; and in Priest the refugee crisis only triggers a civil war because there is already an extremely racist government in power. It seems likely that the cold war simply provided a suitably heightened context that allowed these overdetermined alternative histories to operate on more than one main axis: attacking both a specific postwar British complacency, which can be described in terms of the “Myth of the Blitz”, and the notion of civilisation itself.

Angus Calder’s *The Myth of the Blitz* has shown how postwar Britain’s identity was defined by its sense of standing alone during the war and of the internal solidarity within this lone stance, exemplified by the Dunkirk Spirit and the solidarity under fire during the Blitz. Britain thought of itself as unique – as outside the currents of World and European history.¹⁴ The “Myth of the Blitz” is bitterly contested by the five books under consideration here. Ballard’s attack on the military in *The Winds from Nowhere* is typically dismissive: “They had the Dunkirk mentality, had already been defeated and were getting ready to make a triumph out of it, counting up the endless casualty lists, the catalogues of disaster and destruction, as if these were a measure of their courage and competence.” (p.57)

The critique of civilisation shared across these texts is summed up by the realisation, as a character in *The Furies* puts it, that “we’ve all got a death wish”.¹⁵ One critic has gone so far as to suggest that there are similarities between Wyndham and the Frankfurt School’s critique of late capitalist modernity.¹⁶ In Wyndham and Roberts, modern life is interrogated from the perspective of a social-Darwinist discourse

concerning adaptability. In Priest and Ballard it is the unity of identity itself that is questioned. Christopher's novel can be seen as a bridge between the two positions. These themes have always been available to the critics and have led to the restricted definition of *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Furies* as "Cosy Catastrophes". Meanwhile the questioning of identity in the works of Ballard and Priest makes them seem more postmodern. Yet such categorisations miss the opportunity to explore the productive possibilities that are held in tension between the books and their particular and universal discourses concerning postwar Britain and civilisation in general. For it is precisely the utopian dream of supplanting the postwar British order that counterbalances the shared pessimism concerning the condition of civilisation and allows the genre to transcend the misanthropic tendencies of a different tradition of English post-disaster novels – ranging from Richard Jeffries's *After London* (1885) to Ronald Wright's *A Scientific Romance* (1997) – which, in effect, represents the effects of large-scale depopulation as a matter for lyrical celebration.

The distinction between these two traditions of disaster novel can be best illustrated with reference to Ballard, whose early novels such as *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Drought* (1964) also seem to celebrate disaster. Here, the crude plot structure of *The Winds from Nowhere* – written in a fortnight – serves as a useful guide to Ballard's more ambiguous deployment of similar themes in those subsequent novels. Leaving aside the potboiler elements of the mix, such as the action sub-plot involving an American submarine commander in Italy, and taking a specifically British perspective, we can interpret the all-pervading winds as a "strong breath of fresh air" (p.49) rather than simply a global "reaping [of] the whirlwind" (p.120). Thus, on the one hand – prefiguring the later novels – a Conradian message of the need to reject human pride is heavy-handedly hammered home. Hardoon, the magnate who intends to prove mankind's superiority by staring down the storm from a reinforced concrete pyramid, is described as "some Wagnerian super-hero in a besieged Valhalla" (p.181). Only after his defeat, proving mankind's inferiority to the forces of nature, are the winds allowed to drop. Running parallel to this theme – and equally prefiguring subsequent Ballardian themes – are the adventures of the book's British hero, Maitland, who undergoes a painful liberation from the tight confines of imposed (British) identity. When he tells his estranged wife, Susan, not to worry, "It'll blow over", during the opening passages of the book, he is not expressing complacency but a disturbing sense of relief: "As he turned the handle he realised that he had already begun to forget her, his mind withdrawing all contact with hers, erasing all memories" (p.16). Escaping from this scene through the sandbag tunnels, which provide the only form of pedestrian access in London, Maitland becomes trapped by falling masonry "like a rat in a pain corridor" (p.88) before fainting. In the traumatic rebirth which follows, the voices of two surgeons treating a victim of severe burns in an underground hospital carry through an air shaft causing the half-conscious Maitland to confuse his own identity with that of the victim. He imagines his hands to be in plaster casts and, on opening his eyes to total darkness, convinces himself that he is blind. Only after groping around his "bed" and finding first a brick and then a torch does he become capable of "assembling his mind again" (p.139). Maitland becomes the only character in the book capable of both action and perception, having finally "[shaken] himself free" (p.185) of both death wish and British lassitude.

Maitland's temporary blindness recalls the opening of *The Day of the Triffids*, in which Bill Mason gingerly removes the bandages that have covered his eyes for a week to find that virtually everyone else in the world has been permanently blinded. Barry Langford suggests that Wyndham reverses "the traditional trope that physical blindness begets spiritual and moral insight".¹⁷ On this reading, the blinding of humanity is an allegorical comment on an all pervading lack of foresight, and Wyndham's hero's vision represents an opening of eyes by a few. Only through the experience of blindness, can Wyndham and Ballard's characters learn to see properly and – as Langford points out – therefore reject their own complicity with the world's death wish. The obvious forerunner of this reversed trope is H.G. Wells's short story "The Country of the Blind" (1904), in which the sighted hero, far from becoming King as the famous proverb suggests, ends up dying an outcast rather than submit to having his eyes surgically removed. It is an allegory concerning the inhospitability of an ingrained and hidebound society (i.e. late Victorian and Edwardian England) to new ways of seeing (i.e. as advanced by representatives of the new science and the new politics, such as Wells himself). The development of the "scientific romance" created a brilliant device for presenting Well's visionary ideals to a wider public in the face of this stasis and reaction. The "science" guaranteed the progressiveness of the social and cultural themes, while the "romance" provided a fictional space in which to situate this oppositional discourse against that of the restrictive ruling ideology. Stripped down to its elements, it can readily be seen how suitable the Wellsian model was for the purposes of the disgruntled middle classes in postwar Britain, who felt themselves dispossessed of their progressive destiny and abandoned within a country of the blind. Postwar Britain, unlike Edwardian England, was newly formed and therefore its mental frameworks had not yet had the chance to transform themselves into insurmountable barriers of unconscious habit. When the main characters of *The Day of the Triffids*, Bill Mason and Josella Playton, discuss "The Country of the Blind", Bill is able to reassure Josella on precisely these grounds: "there's no organized *patria*, no State, here – only chaos. Wells imagined a people who had adapted themselves to blindness. I don't think that's going to happen here ..." (p.66, ch.5).

Parasites and Colonies

Much of the pleasure involved in reading *The Day of the Triffids* comes from its libertarian narrative, which revels in the freedom from governance and petty bureaucracy that chaos affords. This libertarianism travels the full political spectrum from Bill's unembarrassed assessment of the relative merits of his private hospital room in comparison to a public ward (p.2, ch.1); to the wonderful evocation of "tribal communities" flowering across the former mining areas, led by the men who had been on night shift during the original disaster and so remained sighted (p.218, ch.16). While these latter communities are not linked to the book's closing images of the progressive "colony" intent on establishing a new form of life on the Isle of Wight, they are celebrated precisely because "they'd escaped from being governed, and in spite of all their troubles they didn't want any more of it" (ibid.). Nor is "tribal" necessarily being used to imply inferiority: one of the central ideas of the book is the need to become "more like a *tribe* than we ever were before" (p.104, ch.7). Ultimately these traits of

independence and communality are valued in the book for their adaptability and held up against other more static forms of societal organisation. It is only by examining these rejected possibilities that we can understand how far Wyndham's version of social Darwinism departs from stereotypical eugenicist fantasies of the "selection of the fittest".

Throughout the book Bill and Josella retain a different sensibility from the group around Michael Beadley (with whom they eventually join). This group's one ideological commandment, that "the race is worth preserving", is used by a university sociologist to justify a stance of "*autres temps, autres moeurs*" (pp.98-100, ch.7). Bill and Josella accept these arguments on an intellectual level, even the regressive sexual politics which dictate that blind women can be saved for breeding but not blind men. However, when kidnapped by the socialist agitator, Coker, and forced to help groups of the blind to survive, neither can extricate themselves in the ruthless manner of Beadley and the others, although they are faced with the personal risk of disease. In particular, this period of enforced responsibility goes a long way to cure the prejudicial attitudes Bill had directed at women and the working class earlier in the book. Realising that he is up against the moral conditioning the sociologist had identified as the biggest obstacle to survival, doesn't cure Bill's sudden "damnable ability to see points on both sides" (p.111, ch.8). This virtue is enshrined in the enigmatic figure of Coker, whose accent and dialect modulate to suit his audience, leaving him equally at home quoting Marvell or cheerily enquiring, "'Wotcher, mates! 'Ow's it going?'" (p.145, ch.10). Coker is, as he freely acknowledges, a hybrid: a mixture of lower-class origins and progressive education – identical to that of Wells – representing the ideals and aspirations of a new middle class. It is, therefore, Coker who provides the challenge to Beadley's argument that sexual essentialism is necessary for survival, through his impassioned polemic concerning the necessity of everyone being able to do everything:

The point is we'll all have to learn not simply what we like, but as much as we can about running a community and supporting it. The men can't just fill in a voting paper and hand the job to someone else. And it will no longer be considered that a woman has fulfilled all her social obligations when she has prevailed upon some man to support her and provide her with a niche where she can irresponsibly produce babies for someone else to educate. (p.150, ch.10)

In this assault on the "mental laziness and parasitism" (p.149, ch.10) of traditional gender roles, a new vocabulary of moral approbation is coined, which, unlike the superficially modern attitudes of the Beadley group, contains the force required to build a liberated society for the future.

A re-reading of *The Day of the Triffids* demonstrates how this moral framework is implied from the beginning and therefore strives to contest the conventional attitudes held by its readership (whether in 1951 or 2005) in order to open a space in which it can be received as a novel of ideas rather than merely an escapist fantasy. While Bill's initial reluctance to smash shop windows for food is ostensibly portrayed as a lingering veneer of civilisation, the language in which he expresses it prefigures the insights he will eventually gain: "... the moment I stove-in one of those sheets of plate-glass ... I should become a looter, a sacker, a low scavenger upon the dead body of the system that had nourished me" (p.41, ch.3). The problem with parasitism is its generation of political and social inertia as – in a phenomenon well known to any thinking inhabitant of postwar

Britain – the sense of a great past rapidly grows into a millstone dragging everyone down by the neck: “Whole races have had that sort of inferiority complex which has sunk into lassitude on the tradition of a glorious past” (p.209, ch.15). It is this understanding which drives the novel’s total repudiation of the authoritarian Torrence and his mad dream of making the country great again by creating a feudal order based on blind serfs: the ultimate form of parasitism. If parasitism represents all that is bad, then it is the values of living in a colony that are held up as virtuous. A representative of the Beadley group pitches life on the Isle of Wight to Bill and Josella: “We aren’t out to reconstruct – we want to build something new and better” (p.220, ch.16). While the former principles of the Beadley group are still notionally in place, we know that they will be challenged both by Bill and Josella, who are taking their blind friend Dennis with them, and by the indefatigable Coker, who has already arrived there. The novel’s defiantly upbeat ending, promising the reclamation of the mainland from the triffids, holds out to its disenfranchised progressive middle-class readership the promise of “the day when we, or our children, or their children” (p.233, ch.17) will finally establish a new society.

Wyndham took care that his triffids should not be read as “a kind of sample visitation – harbingers of worse to come if the world did not mend its ways and behave its troublesome self” (p.18, ch.2). The very choice of *The Furies*, with its mythological implication of paying for past sins, as a title for a book about England overrun by giant wasps, suggests that Roberts was deliberately replaying Wyndham’s work with a view to inversion and, ultimately, subversion. Roberts employs a number of direct parallels and jokes, including calling his hero and heroine, Bill Sampson and Janette “Pete” Peterson (a working-class prostitute rather than a socialite), and having their safe haven turn out not to be the Isle of Wight but the Channel Islands – the location in the earlier book of those who reject, or are rejected by, the new society of the Beadley group. The net effect of these allusions is to rewrite the key concepts of parasites and colonies.

Trading on the British war experience, Roberts has his wasps capture people and put them in POW camps. The inhabitants of one hut shoot their way to freedom with a crossbow constructed in best Colditz-style underneath the antennae of their guards, before forming themselves into an active resistance group. The irony is that most prisoners prefer to stay with the wasps and enter into a productive and ecologically sound symbiotic relationship. This causes great identity problems for the freedom fighters, forced to hide in caves and referred to by Roberts as “the colony”, such that the hero comes to admit: “It seemed to me it was we who were the parasites. We were still living off the remnants of the old culture. The farmers were trying to stabilise a new ecology, a balance that included men and insects as working partners” (p.167, ch.12). In the grip of this middle-class anxiety, Roberts seems reduced to little more than a petulant romantic individualism: early on, the narrator writes “this is my book and I reckon I can start it any way I want” (p.7, ch.1). However, the inevitable doomed conclusion to this stance – so popular in late 1960s popular culture – is thwarted even as the wasps corner the hero and heroine, fleeing from the massacre of their comrades.

On a purely narrative level, the bizarre twist in the tale by which the Furies are defeated, or defeat themselves, rings false. It seems too convenient that they should suddenly go mad at this particular point in the action because, we are told, they cannot make themselves understand machines and modern weapons with the minds of the wasp form they have adopted. This unheralded *deus ex machina* turns on a joke: the aliens

originally picked on the form of the wasp – the perfect natural killing machine – as ideal for their aim of global domination because they had arrived at Earth during the time of the Roman Emperor Vespasian before equivalent artificial machinery had been invented. However, beneath this superficial absurdity lies a serious conclusion to the book’s ongoing social-Darwinist discourse: the notion of human adaptability is inherently paradoxical. If the endpoint of evolutionary adaptation is a perfect fit such as insects have developed with respect to their environment, then humans must be judged a failure for being totally dependent on the artificial props of their own civilisation. However, the corollary of this is that humans are only human to the extent that they are imperfect in an evolutionary sense. Roberts’s claim is that we do not adapt ourselves to our natural environment, but rather to our ongoing failure to fit that environment, and thus we need to live as both parasites and colonies: “We don’t know yet what form our New World is going to take; but we know whatever we build from the wreckage of a culture, in some way its got to be better...” (p.220, ch.14).

What Do You Expect of the Suburban Man?

The precondition for Wyndham’s and Roberts’s tales of the emergence of progressive heterogeneous societies, is the unfettering of the new middle class. Only “by using the words we used to use”, can Wyndham’s Bill Mason describe both the transformation of society and imply why it was necessary: “When I was a child we lived ... in a southern suburb of London. We had a small house ... and a small garden ... There was not a lot to distinguish us from the ten or twelve million other people who used to live in and around London in those days” (p.17, ch.2). Suburbia is the word we use to describe the fetters holding back the new middle class. It is a condition that is brutally interrogated in John Christopher’s *The Death of Grass*.

Placid John Custance, a civil engineer, and cynical Roger Buckley are friends who make bridge fours with their wives and rent a caravan together for south coast holidays. The artificiality of this existence is rendered explicit by the global failure of cereal crops and consequent threat of total famine. One morning Roger tracks down John at his place of work: “The Government fell yesterday. Welling has taken over, but Lucas is still in the Cabinet”.¹⁸ He goes on to explain the full significance:

“Atom bombs for the small cities, hydrogen bombs for places like Liverpool, Birmingham, Glasgow, Leeds – and two or three of them for London ...”

For a moment, John was silent. Then he said slowly:

“I can’t believe that. No one could do that.”

“Lucas couldn’t. Lucas always was the common man’s Prime Minister – suburban constraints and suburban prejudices and emotions. But Lucas will stand by as a member of Welling’s Cabinet, ostentatiously washing his hands while the plans go forward. What do you expect of the common man?” (p.50, Ch.5).

Roger apparently relishes the opportunity to escape “suburban constraints” by becoming a “murdering bastard” and hopes John will too. The irony is that it turns out to be a much easier transition for John, who is so successful that he becomes the leader, than for Roger, who finds himself hampered by a dual perspective: seeing both the logic behind John’s increasingly assertive leadership and the sense behind their wives’ moral objections to it (see p.158, ch.10). These ways of seeing are thrown into stark relief by

the unflinching depiction of the refugee experience of bewildered people pushing loaded handcarts through the length and breadth of England, subject to rape and extreme violence. This is the fictional return of the wartime memory that was repressed by the collective consciousness necessary to sustain the myths of postwar Britain: trekking – the phenomenon in which tens of thousands of British people left their homes empty every night in order to shelter from air-raids in the hills.¹⁹ As Roger comments, “the world’s grown honest” (p.119, ch.8). Accordingly, the strong class bias of the new order cannot be concealed, as witnessed by John’s mental rejection of the overtures of a man wanting to join his group: “A manual worker of some kind; the sort of man who would give a lifetime’s faithful inefficient service A few months ago, the pipe-dream had probably been a £75,000 win on the football pools” (p.141, ch.9).

Nonetheless, John ends up accepting the fealty of a number of regional working-class men and so – following the logic of the Hegelian dialectic – reinforces their material stolidity as the precondition of his own feudal lordship. The biblical resolution to the novel, in which John’s farmer brother David is killed – possibly by John – in the storming of the hidden valley that alone offers hope of survival, implies that this feudalism will continue to haunt the ostensibly progressive closing vision: “‘There’s a lot to do,’ [John] said. ‘A city to be built’” (p.191, ch.13). Like Wyndham, Christopher also employs direct textual references to Wells’s “The Country of the Blind”, but to an intentionally opposite effect. The hidden valley in the Lake District is called Blind Gill: “Cyclops Valley would have been a better name for it for it looked out of one eye only” (p.6, “Prodrome”). When John makes the decision to storm the valley in the face of his brother’s powerlessness to let him bring in his retainers, his wife reacts bitterly to what she perceives to be his driving ambition: “‘When you’re King of Blind Gill,’ she said, ‘how long will it be, I wonder, before they make a crown for you?’” (p.185, ch.12). The implication is that the ambition to become the King of the Blind reflects more on the limited vision of the holder than on any prospect of transforming society. This scepticism concerning the potential for success of such a middle-class project suggests that the book can be read as a critical commentary on *The Day of the Triffids*. Christopher remains truer to the ambiguity of the original proverb than to the Wellsian allegory, which serves as Wyndham’s model.

In an article, “British Science Fiction”, Priest describes *The Death of Grass* as “probably a better novel than anything Wyndham wrote” and particularly praises the way that Christopher concentrates “on the personality development and regression, respectively, of the two leading characters”.²⁰ It is not entirely clear whether Priest assumes that it is obvious which character develops and which regresses, or whether the statement is deliberately ambiguous – rather as we have seen the book to be. Perhaps Priest is suggesting that the real strength of Christopher’s book lies in its generation of a double optic which allows both of these possible dynamics to be viewed simultaneously. This is certainly the effect he employs in his own *Fugue for a Darkening Island*, but with the added refinement of allowing these simultaneous dynamics of development and regression to unfold in one single character.

The name of this character, Alan Whitman, foregrounds race as the crucial issue of the text. The opening sentence is “I have white skin”.²¹ Whitman’s earliest childhood memory is of hiding from the bogey: “some monstrous being with black skin that was out to get me” (p.24). His unfolding story is interlaced with incidental reports on the rise to

power of a right-wing neo-racist politician, John Tregarth. When nuclear war in Africa leads to the arrival of what will eventually be two million African immigrants – “Afrims” – in Britain, a vicious civil war breaks out and both the UN and “advisory” US marines become involved. While Priest’s immediate political reference points are clearly Enoch Powell and Vietnam, the situation is directly compared to “the early months of the second world war” (p.41) with the implication that racism and xenophobia are integral elements of the Myth of the Blitz and postwar Britain.²² Whitman’s complicity in these processes is shown obliquely. As an apparently liberal lecturer and member of a pro-Afrim college society, he criticises others for joining the society not out of commitment but for their own ends: “It was people such as these who first discredited the movement, as they were unable to answer the charges in the press and other media that the pro-Afrim groups were left-wing revolutionaries” (p.41). Yet his own account reveals that far from being committed, he is pre-occupied with an affair and joins the society to cover both his absences from his wife and his general detachment from life at the college (see pp.12, 44). Ultimately, the series of evasions and vacillations – including endless deliberations over whether to join the extreme-right “Nationalists” or the liberal “Secessionists” – lead to the abandonment of reason in the disturbing climax: “In the morning I murdered a young African and stole his rifle, and by the afternoon I was again in the countryside” (p.125). The book is a masterpiece in the way it clinically exposes how both postwar Britain and the oppositional middle-class disaster genre are equally haunted by the emotional logic of Fascism: better to end in horror than to endure horror without end.

That is the trajectory of regression that Priest uses Whitman to represent. However the recurring motifs and interlinked themes of the swirling fugue structure of the book, allow him simultaneously to generate an alternative figuration of a Whitman whose skin is not white but “smudged with dirt” (p.5). If Whitman’s failings are those of the bystanding common man, these can also, following Christopher, be replayed specifically as the failings of suburban man. Priest takes the work of his predecessor a step further by intercutting the refugee experiences of Whitman and his wife and daughter with scenes from their earlier life to create one huge revolving nightmare, which demonstrates rootless drifting displacement to be the latent content of the suburban condition. Once rendered explicit, however, this displacement holds open the possibility of an unfettered existence “outside the law” (p.111). This “comparative freedom” is fleetingly experienced by Whitman as he camps out with his wife and daughter (p.46) and again when wintering with the refugee group led by the “social visionary”, Lateef (pp.109-112). The non-white Lateef is Whitman’s double, as is acknowledged in their first encounter: “for several minutes we regarded each other carefully, each seeing in the other a man who responded to a situation in the same way as himself” (p.6). Throughout the book they make parallel attempts to confront their true situation only for Whitman to finally sink into crisis at the very moment when Lateef at last finds the resolve to fight for their utopian possibilities: “The refugees can unite, defend themselves. With rifles we can take back what is ours ... freedom!” (p.102). This hint of a political dimension allows the shadowy outlines of an alternative trajectory of development for Whitman to be glimpsed through the murk. Whitman’s first committed act in the book is the shooting down of a helicopter which sets up the possibility of a time loop in that, although chronologically a subsequent event, it seems to be the necessary precondition of his first meeting with Lateef beside a crashed helicopter. This time loop short-circuits the narrative concerning

the abduction of Whitman's wife and daughter, and allows the comparative freedom of their joint refugee experience to be cycled continuously. From this perspective, the racist closing act of the novel can perhaps be redeemed as a declaration of commitment to Lateef's vision of an interracial refugee utopia.

By locating these dynamics of development and regression in the same character, Priest succeeds in grasping the essential indeterminacy of the new middle class, procrastinating rather than choosing between two destinies: nihilistic reaction or progressive utopia. This deconstruction of the suburban condition as a mode of evasion is characterised by a strange interlude on the South coast: "Within a few hundred yards of the barricade I found myself in suburban streets which, because of their façade of normality, appeared strange to me" (p.119). Whitman quickly discovers the illusoriness of this situation: a four page edition of the *Daily Mail* is being produced in France, while BBC television consists entirely of American light entertainment programs on a closed-circuit system, broadcast from Worthing. His subsequent verdict serves as a retrospective judgement on the experience of the new middle classes in postwar suburbia: "I could not believe it to be real, but thought of it as an artificial restoration of normal life in an abnormal state" (p.123). In the rejection of this illusion, Priest registers the end of thirty years of enchantment and the beginning of Britain's forcible return, dragged kicking and screaming, into the world historical current.

Conclusion

This middle-class genre is not a straightforward expression of either a reactionary hatred for, or a progressive alternative to, postwar Britain and its universalised working-class culture. The dominant trope of vision is not simply intended to contrast with a supposed British blindness, but in all these books signifies a "damnable ability to see points on both sides". Collectively these works amount to an alternative history of the heterogeneous new middle class, which is as fully conscious of their parasitical tendencies as of their colonising potential, and not afraid to confront a terrifying indeterminacy. In calculating the value of this history to us at the present time it is only necessary to consider two points. First, until recently it was received historical opinion that this class fraction in Germany was the major basis of support for the Nazis.²³ Second, New Labour target their policies primarily at the new middle class ("Middle England") – now counted as an actual majority of the population – who they consider to be solely concerned with being "better off".²⁴ The blinkered vision evident in the latter approach renders itself wilfully blind to the haunting legacies of the former period, even as it plays the immigration card for reactionary ends. By denying anything other than a narrow socio-economic motivation to their electorate, New Labour fetter themselves with suburban constraints and suburban prejudices and emotions.

Now more than ever is it worth stating that science fiction is, and always has been since Wells, a new middle class medium in which the class has freely expressed its own aspirations to escape the fetters of not only socio-economic position (the planet's surface, as it were), but also the rigid identities of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and class itself. The traditions of sf remain not only a utopian reservoir, but a utopian reservoir constructed in the face of reactionary pressures. So at a time when a new heightened context of war and world terrorism is developing daily, the importance of sf in general and – to those in England – of the disaster genre in particular, is that it provides a form and a vocabulary for projecting utopian trajectories over the chasms of despair and

holding the otherwise inevitable descent into nihilism at bay. The suburbs of Middle England may yet burn again but the hybrids will adapt, survive and build anew.

¹ Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree* (London: House of Stratus, 2001), p.280.

² Mark Slattery, 'Down on the Triffid Farm', *New Statesman*, 19 November 2001, p.39.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures, England 1918-1951* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), pp.531, 533.

⁵ L.J. Hurst, "'We are the Dead": *The Day of the Triffids* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*', <http://dialspace.dial.pipex.com/l.j.hurst/weread.htm>, p.3.

⁶ J.G. Ballard, *Guardian*, 14.03.02

⁷ John Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2000), p.1.

⁸ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p.5.

⁹ Hurst, 'Remembrance of Things to Come: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Day of the Triffids* Again', <http://dialspace.dial.pipex.com/l.j.hurst/firstpar.htm>, p.2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ballard, *The Wind from Nowhere* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p.8.

¹² Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish War" in Peter Davison, ed., *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, XIII (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), p.503.

¹³ See Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), pp.119-172.

¹⁴ See Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1992).

¹⁵ Keith Roberts, *The Furies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.168.

¹⁶ Barry Langford, "Introduction" to Wyndham, op. cit., pp.vii-xvii, at p.xv.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.x.

¹⁸ John Christopher, *The Death of Grass* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p.49 (ch.5).

¹⁹ See Tom Harrisson, ed., *Living Through the Blitz* (London: Collins, 1976).

²⁰ Christopher Priest, "British Science Fiction" in Patrick Parrinder, ed., *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide* (London: Longman, 1979), pp.187-202, at p.195.

²¹ Priest, *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (London: Pan, 1978), p5.

²² Anyone who doubts that racial divisions were starkly visible in wartime London air raid shelters should consult Harrisson, op. cit., and also his article, "War Adjustment", *New Statesman and Nation*, 28 September 1940, pp.300-301.

²³ For a full discussion see Val Burris, "The Discovery of the New Middle Classes" in Arthur J Vidich, ed., *The New Middle Classes: Lifestyles, Status Claims and Political Orientations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp.15-54.

²⁴ See Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London: Abacus, 1999), pp.122, 212, 398-399.