



FACULTY OF ARTS
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Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Report

MA Thesis by Magdalena Hejna "The *Xenogenesis* Trilogy: The Utopian Writing of Octavia E. Butler"

This thesis first discusses the term "utopia" and its present relevance. The following chapters focus on individual volumes of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy: *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*. The conclusion outlines further development of Butler's utopian writing in the Parables novels. My report deals with the problematic aspects of the interpretation of the individual volumes of *Xenogenesis* as well as with the development of the "utopian impulse" into "a new religion" in the Parables novels.

The explanation of the term "utopia" coined by Thomas More is not precise. More did not use "Greek words *eutopie* ('good place') and *outopie* ('no place')" (p. 15) but invented the word as a combination of two Greek prefixes – "ou-" ("no") and "eu-" ("good") – and the word "topos" ("place").

Most ancient utopias are mythical and backward-oriented. This should be added to the passage on p. 15, claiming that "one thing that all these utopias have in common is a lack of human agency". I do not think this statement adequately describes the ancient utopias.

The account on twentieth-century utopias (pp. 16-17) is reductive, since it overlooks serious analyses, which do not prefer dystopia to utopia, such as Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope* (Bloch is referred to only indirectly later in the thesis). Although Bloch was a Marxist philosopher, his work became stimulating for a number of later thinkers. Bloch's book anticipates the revival of utopian studies later in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including the widely quoted works of Tom Moylan.

Moylan's concept of "critical utopia" (p. 18) may be seen as an ahistorical pleonasm, since most utopias, starting with More's book, are critical and sometimes even satirical. As a result, even the other term coined by Moylan, namely "critical dystopia" (p. 20), would also need some reflection.

To conclude, the theoretical part of the introduction would surely need expansion and deepening. Other theoretically relevant books, such as Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, are not even mentioned in this section.

The main problem of *Dawn* seems the biological determinism, indeed. In her rather inconsistent critique of Butler's position (which reveals the inconsistency of the arguments of other critics) the author admits that the book is not entirely anti-utopian, but stops at the threshold of a productive critical approach stating that "the Oankali do not find value in individualism" (p. 40). Here the key word should be "value", leading to apply a Nietzschean critique of values, based on the relative, differential nature of "the value of values" (here "humanity" in relation to "the Other").

The tendency towards this approach appears in the next chapter on *Adulthood Rites*, where the author quotes Naomi Jacobs' discussion the two "utopian possibilities" of Butler's novel: "The other is to be found in the radically changed relation to difference, identity, and agency exemplified by that new hybrid itself, which figures both the utopian possibilities and the dangers of the posthuman" (p. 48). Indeed, the main agenda of *Adulthood Rites* can hardly be the project of the colonization of Mars, but the Nietzschean "transvaluation", based on the positive understanding of "hybridity". This transvaluation would overcome the biological determinism and bring the interpretation closer to

postcolonial studies, especially to the work of Homi Bhabha. Jacobs' conclusions appear to me as fundamental for the interpretation of Butler's trilogy.

Another productive trend would be the critique of the ethical implications of biological determinism, especially the Christian idea of the "freedom of choice", whose criticism can be traced back to the *Second Discourse* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The knowledge of the fact that humans valuing individual freedom are also forced to make wrong solutions (not having a chance to make good ones) is absent from the author's argument, as well as from Butler's reflections and statements of her critics.

It can be stated that due to its emphasis on biological determinism, Butler's dystopia is remarkably retrograde, pointing back to the works and theories of Naturalism. The absolute authority of Darwin's name (substituting that of God) is supplanted by that of the genetic code and enhanced by the possibility of its modifications. Therefore it is very good that the author stresses the importance of alternative interpretation, especially that of Cathy Peppers, which displays a similar genealogical approach as Nietzsche, for instance in *The Genealogy of Morals*. The importance of the "cyborg way" as the "middle way between humanist individualism and boundaryless postmodernism" is indeed the major thematic implication of Butler's trilogy. The question is whether the genealogy of Haraway's posthumanism should not be traced further to the past.

The problem of the third book of the trilogy, *Imago*, is that it returns to the theme of biological determination, acknowledging that Jodah, as a human born "ooloi", "cyborg" and "shapeshifter", can manipulate biological determinations of its body. It can be argued that in this way, biological determinism returns with vengeance as the main topic of the trilogy. This is confirmed by the fact that the "shapeshifter" nature of Jodah "unlocks the full potential of the new species into limitless becoming" (p. 67). However, other sci-fi authors, such as Iain M. Banks, presenting a "Changer" Bora Horza Gobuchul as the main hero of his first sci-fi novel *Consider Phlebas* (1987), show that the possibilities of shifters are not limitless, but always determined by the political and military situation in the outer space. The question then is whether the "transvaluation" aimed by Butler really opens the way to the "limitless" existence of the new species. The symbolic representation of the insect metamorphosis (pointed out by the title of the book) as the key feature of the new being eliminates the importance of memory, which, as Norbert Wiener shows in *The Human Use of Human Beings*, is the crucial feature of both human beings and AI systems facilitating the development of their communication. Here the author could identify another significant lacuna in Butler's utopian thought.

A more serious problem is the identification of the biological shapeshifting of Jodah with Deleuze's (and Guattari's) "becoming", discussed in detail not in *A Thousand Plateaus* but especially in Deleuze's *Logic of Sense*. The main feature of "becoming" is not the dynamic flow but rather a different reading of time, explained in *The Logic of Sense*. In contrast to "the always limited present, which measures the actions of bodies as causes [...] in depth (Chronos)", Deleuze posits "the essentially unlimited past and future, which gather incorporeal events, on the surface, as effects (Aion)" (*The Logic of Sense*, 61). In Deleuze's "reading of time", the "unlimited future" is always accompanied by the "unlimited past" and the lack of limitation of the Aion is not caused by the endless progress, but by the endless divisibility of individual moments of time. This is a widely different perspective on becoming than that usually gathered from *A Thousand Plateaus* and described in the thesis by Alison Tara Walker (pp. 69-70). The paradigm of "the rhizome" is difficult to apply without the reflection of temporality, which is missing in the author's approach. Were Deleuze's theory more considerably applied, the author would certainly recognize the limitations of the meaning of Jodah as a "symbol of freedom" (p. 71).

Although the use of "molar" and "molecular" identities and Derrida's notion of "play" definitely contributes to the correct interpretation of the last novel of the trilogy, the aspect of the temporality of the whole process is not sufficiently explored, which, by the way, is typical of most utopian thought. Therefore, the final emphasis on "Utopian Darwinian Apocalypse" (p. 80) should be submitted to critical thought: if "apocalypse" means "the revelation", what kind of revelation does Butler's trilogy present? The problem which Derrida describes in his "nuclear criticism", in the essay "No Apocalypse, Not Now", is that under the threat of nuclear annihilation "[n]o truth, no apocalypse", but only beliefs can exist. The author comes with an alternative interpretation of this impasse ("non-passage", p. 81), which, however, does not bring any relief, since this is still a mere "belief", and



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moreover, a “not knowing where to go”. To see this as “the experience of the impossible” is deeply ambivalent, and does not take us beyond Kantian antinomies.

What might help here, would be a return to Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche in his first book *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, where the above notion of “transvaluation” is discussed, and perhaps also his commentary on Kantian antinomies in *Kant’s Critical Philosophy* showing that “we confuse this negative enjoyment [expressing our independence from sensible inclinations, i.e., desire] with a positive sensible feeling or even with a motive of the will” (p. 37). To put it in a simple way, the “*aporia par excellence*” and especially its ethical implications – it “necessitates a response” (Angela Warfield, p. 82) - should be subjected to reflection. Here I do not argue against the deconstructive approach employed by the author and the quoted critics, but rather against confusing truths and beliefs, which Derrida criticizes in his anti-apocalyptic essay. This confusion is evident in the extract from Butler’s *Parable of the Talents* used as the epigraph of the thesis’ Conclusion. Is the “utopian impulse reducible to beliefs (or a new religion) expressed in Butler’s later “parabolic” novels? Will not the “new religion” finally reify in a set of repressive, dogmatic doctrines? Here, one should perhaps return to experimental and sceptical rationality typical of major works of science fiction.

In spite of many problems, some of which I have attempted to discuss, the thesis is an excellent interpretation of a rather controversial work of Octavia Butler. It significantly surpasses average master theses in the depth of detailed thematic analyses, in the research and use of theoretical and interpretive sources and also in the clarity of structure and style. Therefore **I recommend the thesis to the defence and propose to grade it “excellent” (“výborně”)**.

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