

Introduction

Our Obstinate Future

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The anticipation of apocalypse has become ubiquitous, represented in the form of natural catastrophes and dystopian futures that reappear with each new cycle of summer blockbusters, television shows, and even millenarian novels. These fantasies of doomed futurity explicitly and implicitly draw on real-world disasters, from long-term economic decline to resource wars. Chief among the present roster of existential threats is climate change, as continued political inaction shifts the probability of its direst consequences within range of the inevitable. Pop-culture fictions rehearsing our apocalyptic expectations find their counterpart in fantasies of what we might call the inevitability of the unexpected, of certain disaster averted. Escapism is the predominant theme of the contemporary epic—comic books—which has lately achieved a strange cultural dominance in this young century. Michael Chabon's *Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* follows the creators of the metafictional Escapist, a superhero from the golden age of comic books. The novel presents the superhero as the contemporary incarnation of the nineteenth-century circus escape artist locked in a never-ending struggle to protect the world from inevitable destruction.

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Chabon's narrative of inevitability bounces between despair and romantic longing for escape that sours into operatic anguish. In this way it registers ambivalence about apparently certain knowledge. Chabon's illusionist, Bernard Kornblum, is commissioned to smuggle the Jewish community's Golem of Prague to Lithuania to avoid its confiscation and transport to Germany by the Third Reich's art collectors. When Kornblum realizes that the boy ushered into the vestibule of his building is probably Josef Kavalier, who similarly attempted to emigrate and evade the Germans earlier that day, his heart sinks: "Those who make their living flirting with catastrophe develop a faculty of pessimistic imagination, of anticipating the worst, that is often all but indistinguishable from clairvoyance" (Chabon 2000: 16). He might well be describing the imagination of today's cultural critic.

Our historical perspective is a reminder that inevitability is not just a trap that captures the longings of consumers of popular culture. In this issue Mark Miller finds that inevitability and "the trauma and glamour of apocalypse" in *Piers Plowman* are emblematic of a desire for the absolute freedom of complete transformation, or revolution; because the status quo is overdetermined, we come to understand "the world" itself as our problem. Miller's observation gets at the heart of our interest in inevitability as a special issue. Marshall Brown's (2004) mission statement for *Modern Language Quarterly* asks how literary historians can make arguments that do not succumb to "timeless reflections," "close readings not embedded in a historical argument," or "readings so embedded that they subordinate literature to its contexts." At its worst, the abstract opposition between structure and agency pits formal analysis against a text's historical conditions. Yet literary form is determined by the work's struggle with inevitability, which, with Brown (*ibid.*), we understand as "a temporal gesture, in relationship to a past or in passage toward a future, or, ideally, both at once." As the contributors to this collection argue, "context" is not an a priori structure standing outside the text but what emerges when that struggle is engaged, in time.

The reflexive anxieties of criticism occasion judgments of inevitability. Is the human subject determined by history, by discourse, or by power? Is the literary text subordinated to its context? Is the literary critic bound to vanishing modes of being and a sense of helplessness to prevent their extinction? To David Simpson, an *MLQ* board member whom Brown (*ibid.*) quotes, the problem of contemporary literary criticism "is

not so much one of deciding between absolute agency (I make my world, create my situation) and complete passivity (I am forced to be what I am), although some might still put it this way; it is more a matter of figuring out how to respond to the acceptance that we are always in both positions at once.” If the humanities have been tasked with delineating a space for subjective freedom against material causality, that focus can be properly historicized only in light of an ever-increasing awareness of our exposure to conditions that appear insurmountable. Literary works, the novel in particular, confront the problem of subjection to history; their forms of resistance to an obstinate future shape what Franco Moretti (2000: 45) terms the dialectical relationship of “subjective possibility” to material certainty. This issue brings together a range of literary scholars to investigate freedom through its limits. Our tasks are to (1) historicize the concept of the inevitable after modernity, with a special focus on its role in narrative literature; (2) demonstrate its value for contemporary debates in literary criticism; and (3) theorize its penumbral affects: defeatism, euphoria, and any number of attachments to the political.

Historicizing the concept of the inevitable in literature presents many challenges. For inevitability is itself a theory of historical agency, and an adequate critical account must confront inevitability’s claims without simply falling back on conventional notions of freedom, originality, or creative expression. Indeed, the inevitable is not merely a discourse to be cataloged by positivist historiography; it names a threat to any attempt at making humanity the author of its own experience. In its antique versions, women and men chalked their situation up to fate and diagnosed their historical condition through prophecy. In the late medieval era, more sophisticated but equally deterministic accounts of humanity’s relationship to historical change came into circulation, such as Calvinist predestination, fatalism, modern compatibilism, probabilism, and the acceptance of political economy as a science. Eventually, Charles Darwin’s natural history posited the inevitability of extinction in conditions of scarcity. The politicization of inevitability and conflicting visions of civilizational collapse followed, with communism and capitalism each decrying the other as a doomed system to be overcome. Friedrich Nietzsche’s eternal return recast inevitability as the nonlinear recurrence of intensifying crises. Walter Benjamin wrote of an angel of history who is condemned to look back on the wreckage of civilization. Today, in the wake of both historicopolitical optimism and existential

pessimism, notions of the Anthropocene present a fatal paradox: the effects of human industry have set in motion a geological transformation that modern civilization might well not survive. The concept of the inevitable spins these discourses into a common thread, as so many attempts to diagnose the fundamental problem of human agency's internal limits as expressed in time, along with whatever consolatory freedoms we might draw from our constraints.

Kenneth Burke was highly suspicious of the inevitable in all its rhetorical incarnations, from judicial rulings to theories of historical change. Yet he also resisted the valorization of potentiality as a site of resistance to inevitability. While poststructuralist theory now often makes a fetish of potentiality, Burke (1969: 257–58) argues that, on a discursive level, potentiality is the dwelling of future limits in the present:

We can readily see the difference between the potentiality of “tendencies” and the kind of potentiality imputed in theories of strict determinism, predestination, or the “historically inevitable.” The concept of the inevitable “substantially” merges the permanent and the changing, since it accounts for the flux of events by some underlying principle that prevails always. It says in effect not simply that the future *will be*, but that it *is*, since it is *implicit* in the structure of the present. And any group claiming to represent the “inevitable” course of events, as the proletariat in the Marxist view of capitalism’s “inevitable” development toward socialism, shares in this substantiality.

Ever the rhetorician, Burke seeks to unmask the inevitable as a conspiratorial, ideological sleight of hand used to justify present violence in the name of the future. He sees as “motivated” any theory that presumes a foregone conclusion, even in accounts of chance. Thus, buried in probabilism are often “assumptions of strict determinism. That is, the outcome is already in the cards, but we don’t ‘know enough’ to read the signs correctly” (ibid.: 259). Theories of probability, then, do not introduce the wonders of the contingent and the random into our lives; rather, assuming an ontological certainty, they gesture to our epistemic weaknesses, or “the defects of our instruments” (ibid.). Contingency is not the opposite of the inevitable; Burke’s Kantian spin is that the inevitable is the sublimity we experience when made aware of our limits. It would be smug to condemn Burke as a paranoid reader (see Sedgwick 1997) or to eschew his suspicious hermeneutic in favor of the pure formalism of surface reading (see Best and Marcus 2009). Indeed, his

analysis shows how profoundly paranoid reading can discern ideological effects lodged in the temporal structure of texts. Burke appears to have foreseen that historically oriented literary criticism that gravitates from probability to causality furnishes readers with probable cause to seek out the inevitable as a feature of literary texts.

There has been a flourishing of scholarship that sets fictional form against inexorable probability and causality.¹ Within novel criticism, this work tends to follow in the footsteps of Michael McKeon (2002), who argues that the early English novel was soteriological: it rationalized theodicy into signs that the reader connected into a logically consequential narrative. Critics have taken this insight in opposite directions. In *Harm's Way* Sandra Macpherson (2010: 13) argues that these narratives are thematically beset with “unintended acts and consequences” in a world where characters are “rigorously emplotted but in which the accidents of fate are necessarily felicitous and, moreover, are something for which no one is responsible.” In a world of inevitable accidents, Macpherson (*ibid.*) provocatively claims, “the realist novel is a project of blame[,] not exculpation”; readers are invited to hold characters liable for reckless acts that they have caused, though not necessarily intended, rendering the novel a tragic form. In contrast, Christian Thorne reads early realism as a secularizing attack on the concept of “fortune,” which employs the natural sciences to rationalize the vicissitudes of a social world exposed to invisible and remote economic changes. In this view the novel reduces seemingly inevitable futures to their “secondary” (nondivine) causes, and novelistic narrators assume an ethical responsibility as those who “have the common obligation to track causality down” (Thorne 2010: 278). Thorne is writing of Daniel Defoe, who puts it more urgently in *A Journal of the Plague Year* when decrying the prevailing ignorance of both the plague and its social consequences. There is a strain of the disease we can recover from, Defoe (1992: 158) writes, but also a worse strain that “was inevitable death; no cure, no help, could be possible, nothing could follow but death. And it was worse also to others, because . . . it secretly and unperceived by others or by themselves, communicated death to those they conversed with, the

¹ Outstanding examples of this work include Kavanagh 1993; Molesworth 2010; and Puskar 2012.

penetrating poison insinuating itself into their blood in a manner which it is impossible to describe, or indeed conceive.” By narrating the spread of a lethal contagion, Defoe (2003: 187) explains how subjection to a common threat (“Things as certain as Death and Taxes”) becomes a common cause. Yet this form of causality could not be understood through the natural sciences of his day and thus differed little from fate. Cause and effect remain invisible, and the novel depicts an information society where faulty communication can strike characters down like a bolt from the blue. Either as a project that holds characters responsible for inevitable or unintended consequences or as one that protests the subjection to context, Macpherson and Thorne show how novels place humans within a structure and thus help readers come to terms with it.

Georg Lukács led the way in arguing that the novel’s unique task was to construct just such a structure for a modern, atomized world in which the organic totality presumed by the classical epic no longer held. The barely perceptible distinction between ordered material contingency and arbitrary fate was essential for comprehending his object: historical causality. Although Lukács repudiated his own work on multiple occasions, his various arguments regarding the novel invariably link realism to a social reality “in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem” (Lukács 1971: 56). His *Theory of the Novel* contrasts the “lightness” of the epic, with its self-evident meanings, to the “heaviness” of the modern novel: “Heaviness means the absence of present meaning, a hopeless entanglement in senseless causal connections, a withered sterile existence too close to the earth and too far from heaven, a plodding on, an inability to liberate oneself from the bonds of sheer brutal materiality” (ibid.: 57–58).² A causal connection in this view cannot simply advance plot. It must be linked to a more elaborate system of meaning.

Today the difficulties of achieving a rational comprehension of the social world have multiplied as industrial society’s ever-increasing powers of destruction ally with global capitalism’s growing complexity. Scholars

² As Helen Thompson (2013) says, materiality is never “sheer.” Citing early modern understandings, she points out that “corpuscular units of materiality can harbor qualities, attractive or repulsive forces, and even divinely ordained intentions,” meaning that materiality and agency do not have to be understood as binaries.

have renewed their attention to capitalism's externalizations on our environment. Ian Baucom's article in this issue is part of an ongoing engagement with the Anthropocene, a concept borrowed from geological and climate sciences that describes the accumulated effects of human action since the Industrial Revolution on the planet's future. By recognizing humanity as a geophysical force, the Anthropocene subjects human progress to absolute limits that are no longer natural or external, so "the projects of historical-making (and of human freedom) seem determined, and annulled, in advance." Baucom notes in his abstract his indebtedness to Dipesh Chakrabarty's theory of historical thought since the Enlightenment: "History 1 and 2 refer to liberalism and its postcolonial and postmodern critique, respectively. History 3, post-Anthropocene history, marks the horizon of historical consciousness." To this list Baucom adds "History 4°," which alludes to that moment of crisis (a 4° rise in the global temperature after which environmental catastrophe is understood to be irreversible) when the threat to our species's existence requires that we transcend History 3's limits. Chakrabarty argues the impossibility of rendering an experience or a politics adequate to the knowledge of our global situation. History 4° calls us to face, Baucom's article declares, "a seemingly inevitable future simultaneously reopened to the questions of justice and freedom." In short, as his abstract explains, Baucom "proposes 'History 4°' to synthesize History 1–3 into a new totality in which the historical present is defined as internal to an imminent catastrophe. History 4° poses a challenge to the historical novel: somehow it must reveal the intimate causal linkages between human and nonhuman across time, while remaining within the bounds of literary realism."

Baucom cites David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* as one contemporary novel that is adequate to the representation of History 4°. The character Sonmi-451, a clone struggling to obtain the rights of legal personhood, has an experience of the sublime that is an encounter not with the infinite expanse of nature but with a natural landscape already ravaged by human industry. As Baucom says, she encapsulates "the experience of the indistinction of the human and the natural, in the awareness of the blending (even the catastrophic blending) of the human and the non-human worlds." Structurally, *Cloud Atlas* rejects the linearity of the Lukácsian historical novel; its protagonists are linked to one another and themselves over the breadth of human history. Sonmi-451 shares with the

other protagonists in *Cloud Atlas* a comet-shaped birthmark—a sign of identity—that does not figure in a scene of Aristotelian recognition (like the one in which Odysseus’s old servant suddenly recognizes him by his scar). Here glimpses of past selves through diaries, letters, and holographic visions trigger intuitions of Hegelian recognition through extrabiographical spans of historical time: past and future lives converge on an uneven footing. Sonmi-451 is not just an effective guide for the reader; she becomes an object of veneration in the future, ushering in a new political theology: a clone whose struggles for legal personhood are recorded in a futuristic hologram later in the novel and left to be found by a primitive people seeking to break the yoke of slavery. In rendering the multiple histories—and orders of history—that constitute a single life, the novel’s unlikely protagonist becomes for Baucom “a figure of messianic possibility,” making unthinkable any linear determination of the future in advance.³

Inevitability is perhaps best understood not as an absolute horizon or limit to human agency but as a rhetorical form that defines the historical subject’s relationship to a future crossed by multiple lines of causation. Baucom reads *Cloud Atlas* as a rejection of the sense that our future is fixed to the contours of biography. Burke similarly objects to inevitability at the level of its insinuation into discourse. Burke criticizes the law, especially American jurisprudence, for its tendency to present past principles as immutable in new and unexpected cases.⁴ Arguably,

³ Beyond the fields of literature and history, Baucom’s intervention puts him in dialogue with contemporary philosophers of historical change. For Alain Badiou (2009), the realization of a historical turning point or “event” requires “fidelity” to its truth, or a sustained belief in its eventuality, in the time before it fully manifests itself to the world. This nonlinear temporality, referred to (after Jacques Lacan) as the *futur antérieur*, is also affirmed by Slavoj Žižek (2009, 2010), who argues that to prevent the catastrophe predicted by climate scientists, we must accept its inevitability and act as if we had been given a second chance.

⁴ “The ironic fact about reference to precedent is that, in a nation whose scenic conditions were changing constantly, one might well expect precedent to count most if used *in reverse*. That is, one might adduce precedents to justify the *opposite* kind of decision now, on the grounds that the scenic conditions are now so different from those when the precedent was established. However, ‘higher law’ and the precedents based on it referred not to changing material conditions but to the kind of ‘immutable scene’ that could be idealized and generalized in terms of ‘eternal truth, equity and justice’” (Burke 1969: 379–80).

common law in general proceeds according to *stare decisis*, the principle by which similar enough precedents and commonly accepted principles are organically rephrased and updated with each judgment (from an appropriately higher court), “making it seem that a decision is consistent with precedent even when it is not” (Chemerinsky 2002: 2016). Robert A. Ferguson (1990: 213) identifies the stylistic elements of legalistic inevitability in judicial rulings: “The monologic voice, the interrogative mode, and the declarative tone build together in what might be called a rhetoric of inevitability. . . . Inevitability, in this sense, is part of the compelled narrative of individual opinion, but it is also a function of the larger philosophical emphases at work in the law.” These philosophical emphases are, by necessity, inherent to the case form of legal judgments, in which singular instances must be made to represent the continuity of naturalized legal and social norms.⁵

Vivasvan Soni posits an alternative to doctrinal common law judgments. These moments of authentic judgment are counterpoints to the rigid determinism often espoused by early modern thinkers, from John Locke’s epistemology to Isaac Newton’s mechanics, and, in particular, Bernard Mandeville’s ubiquitous “commercial modernity.” Judgment, Soni observes, “is about the things that can be otherwise, and a judgment in the sense I mean it can always be made otherwise; it is not the inevitable outcome of an algorithmic calculation.” Soni claims that Shaftesbury and Fielding, respectively, theorized and fostered in readers a relationship to judgment that rejects market-driven choices and the reduction of social relations to “contractual, legalistic, and litigious terms.” Soni’s article, “Judging, Inevitably: Aesthetic Judgment and Novelistic Form in Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*,” draws parallels between this work and the *Odyssey*, in which inns represent “the ancient ethic of hospitality” and the innkeeper is a figure who may choose to offer hospitality at his own discretion and expense. From the perspective of the early modern market, such a choice is “all but unthinkable.” The decision to demonstrate hospitality invokes values from the epic tradition in

⁵ James Chandler (1999: 211) treats the case form as an exercise in normativity, “uniting the anomalous instance to the context.” Lauren Berlant (2007: 666) introduces temporality when she argues that the case form is “actuarial”: by raising “questions of precedent and futurity,” we reference the anomalous by its conventionality and understand it as a type of exemplarity.

the service of an extrajudicial, antimodern Aristotelian faculty of judgment. This is not judgment in the Kantian sense of an epistemological reflex; Soni appears to describe a simultaneously structural and volitional position revealed by these fictional judgments. In *Joseph Andrews*, judgment can be discerned in the exercise of a discretion that prompts characters to refuse to allow the market to make inevitably correct judgments on their behalf.

Fredric Jameson's (2013) long essay on the nineteenth-century realist novel sidesteps the problem of causation to focus on the novel's unique temporality. Jameson historicizes the novel as the product of a formal tension between the time of the *récit*, a term only loosely translatable as "tale," "story," or "anecdote," and that of the "scene," the chronologically suspended moment of sensory and affective rendering. Jameson's condensed yet sweeping synthesis of narratological theories from Ramon Fernandez to Goethe to Henry James to Benjamin reveals destiny or irrevocability as the *récit*'s deeper philosophical content. The recounting of a significant personal event in chronological time, *récit* is a narrator's explanation of how he or she became a character or a subject of destiny. Thus it refers both to the tale and to the moment of its telling, and inevitability is latent in the temporal structure of any story that possesses a beginning, a middle, and an end. We can think of *The Decameron* (1353) or Antoine Galland's *Mille et une nuits* (1704–17) for early modern literary explorations of the *récit*. According to Jameson, the novel's chief formal innovation is the interruption of the narrative's chronological temporality by the evocation of a scene. Implying a consciousness beyond that of narration, this phenomenological "impersonal present" is shaped by a host of literary devices, of which narrative omniscience and free indirect discourse are but the best-known. Much criticism since Lukács and M. M. Bakhtin has sought to align the novel with freedom in the face of its relentless submission to material fact, but Jameson (2013: 26) insists on fact as well as on freedom, in the play of "destiny versus the eternal present." While the dynamic between the two grants the realist novel its power, it is only a temporary historical union. Jameson (*ibid.*: 25) argues that, as twentieth-century modernism and postmodernism reshaped the novel, an "impersonal consciousness of the present" increasingly registered chronological narrative, character,

and action as “mere objects in it,” as opportunities for reflection or pretexts for formal play.

For Jameson (*ibid.*: 163), narrative literature has been relegated to the purgatory of “literary fiction,” or what he calls “realism after realism.” While he does not accept Roland Barthes’s polemical reduction of the “classical” realist novel to a commoditized package of rhetorical conventions, he does suggest that contemporary literary fiction has suffered that fate. Jameson’s account makes formal predetermination vital to the development of any notion of history, whether it be the resolution of fate or the accumulation of contingency. Moving in opposite directions, market realism and postmodern experimentalism have left inevitability behind, and with it the possibility of narrative as a mode of historical knowing. But realism is not the only valid aim of literary narrative.

Orientalism, understood after Edward W. Said as central to the formation of modern European (and “Western”) identity, has long been associated with violations of verisimilitude and probability. While typically reactionary, the use of orientalist tropes in fiction allows for productive estrangement from the assumed norms of European realism, along with European culture and political economy.⁶ Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud analyzes the orientalist tropes in Balzac’s early novel *La peau de chagrin* (*The Magic Skin*, 1831) as a subversive means of criticizing liberal society under the July Monarchy. Declining to turn his gaze toward the Orient, Balzac finds rampant in Paris itself all the conventional signs of Eastern economic decadence: uninhibited consumption of luxury goods, financial speculation, and gambling, all indicators of the instability of property after the bourgeois revolution of 1789. Balzac’s protagonist, Raphaël, comes across an “Oriental” skin (*shagreen*) that has the magical power to grant his every wish and leads to his downfall; in Cohen-Vrignaud’s reading this makes the novel an inverted bildungsroman. Raphaël’s Enlightenment skepticism of the supernatural blinds him both to the skin’s morally poisonous influence and to the countervailing forces of Providence. Cohen-Vrignaud sketches the intellectual history of this contrast between Oriental and Christian inevitability by employing Leibniz’s notion of “Turkish reasoning,” the supposed Muslim

⁶ This point is argued most persuasively in Aravamudan 2012.

fatalism that refused causal probability. Balzac's novel, however, shows how easily one slips into the other. The narration of Raphaël's personal and family history places his foolhardy decision to use the skin in the context of a sequence of disasters, including his profligate aristocratic heritage and his tutelage under the "dissipational system" of the Parisian social climber Eugène de Rastignac. Through these episodes those who are most successful under capitalism are shown to be cheats and scoundrels. Their vaunted economic rationality—their attempts to pass off their selfish motives as "causes"—is treated with a (Kenneth) Burkean scorn as mere pretense. According to Cohen-Vrignaud, Balzac diagnoses a self-destructive passion at the heart of liberal capitalism itself.

Though we have been concentrating on prose fiction, our attending to problems of historicity in a context that predates the dominant literary forms and ontological convictions of industrial or protoindustrial capitalism furnishes a useful parallel to our own situation. Miller's essay in this issue argues for a reading of William Langland's fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman* in Lacanian terms. Against the popular misconception of the Middle Ages as a historical period grounded in stable social and theological orthodoxies, Miller reads *Piers Plowman* as an exploration of how commitment to those certitudes in medieval society gave rise to contradictory ethical, political, and psychological compulsions. Miller draws a striking comparison between Langland's Augustinian understanding of sin's inevitability and Lacan's theory of the psychoanalytic subject as fundamentally split by irresolvable antagonisms. Lacan's notion of the unconscious emergence of desire in the face of conflicting, self-undermining demands helps Miller parse the paradoxes that Langland poses to the reader. As denizens of a fallen world, we cannot conceptualize our primary difficulties in a way that permits lasting solutions. Confession recapitulates sin; demands that are individually just contradict each other in practice; a ruler invested with the power to enforce justice repeats injustice. The desire for salvation that exceeds the limits of every concrete demand is for Miller the poem's structuring concern, and not even its depiction of apocalypse can provide narrative closure. Though inconsistencies in, for example, divine and royal justice make radical or even apocalyptic change seem necessary, the poem's episodic form foregrounds the impossibility of resolving them, even in terms of literary representation. Langland can then speak to our

capitalist and environmental crises and to the resulting proliferation of apocalyptic and utopian fantasies. To privilege any particular effort to resolve social contradiction, no matter how radical it promises to be (including Langland's attempt to grapple with the problems of his social world), is to betray the essential utopian desire that animates all such efforts.

Today's fantasies of utopia and apocalypse—"totalizing" narratives marked by the teleological inevitability that the realist novel attempted to dissolve—are most often cataloged under the incoherent heading "genre fiction," a term roughly used to indicate narratives that operate according to rules of closure more or less openly acknowledged from the outset. While all literature is to some extent structured by genre, many popular narrative forms, segregated by market category, overtly traffic in shared sets of codes. Of science fiction, Damien Broderick (1995: xiii) writes that "the coding of each individual sf text depends importantly on access to an unusually concentrated 'encyclopaedia'—a mega-text of imaginary worlds, tropes, tools, lexicons, even grammatical innovations borrowed from other textualities." Science fiction, fantasy, romance, the gothic, and other popular genres are key to a literary study of inevitability via two major aesthetic challenges. The first is the importance to popular genre fiction of conventional plots in which the reader is assumed to know the basic parameters (centrality of technology in science fiction; improbable plot twists in thrillers) yet eagerly anticipates the precise sequence of events. The second has been key to critical work on genre since the 1980s: utopia.

Insofar as it is oriented toward an ideal future, utopian fiction contradicts conventional narrative development by beginning just when its history ends. Representing a plausible utopian society and creating a compelling narrative would seem to be fundamentally at odds. Eleanor Courtemanche addresses this long-standing aesthetic problem—what she calls the "inevitability effect"—from an unexpected angle: the satirical television show *Portlandia*. She begins by drawing a distinction between didactic futurological utopias that appeared in the aftermath of *The Communist Manifesto* (Edward Bellamy's 1887 *Looking Backward* is perhaps the best-known) and the early modern tradition of utopian satire that followed the model of Thomas More and Jonathan Swift. The critical reevaluation of utopian fiction over the last few decades has

tended to operate from within the parameters of Marxist critique, specifically Jameson's analysis of postwar consumer society's apparent inability to imagine alternatives to capitalism. Courtemanche suggests that this programmatic telos makes the incompatibility of utopia and narrative appear insurmountable. In *Archaeologies of the Future* Jameson (2005: 35) identifies the pleasures outside narrative that are offered by the didactic utopia, the "hobby-like activity" of utopian authors and readers imagining the future as "a better mousetrap." Though it in no way offers an alternative to the capitalist mode of production, *Portlandia* presents an alternative lifestyle within capitalism, one whose values reflect not a possible future but a liberal nostalgia for the recent past: Portland is an isolated community where the "progressive" 1990s are said to be still alive. Narrative drive is ironically suspended in favor of comic observation, as a means of reorienting the utopian form away from the contradictions of capitalism writ large and toward the contradictions of everyday life.

Where Courtemanche turns her attention to the utopian capabilities of ephemeral, nonnarrative popular genres, Thorne questions the association of narrative techniques that upset predetermined finality with a narrow modernist canon. He argues that the suspension of narrative resolution is not the sole province of high modernism but is equally present in popular works. He thus challenges two related critical assumptions, both still widely held by contemporary scholars: (1) popular narrative in the great tradition of the nineteenth-century realist novel tends toward closure, and (2) modernist narrative embraces the opposite, the ambiguous "open ending," in which nothing is finally resolved. The first assumption describes the effects of commercialization on cultural forms, while the second is supposed to indicate the so-called art novel, produced despite the market. Both assumptions are derived from Barthes's (1970) analysis of Balzac's novella *Sarrasine* in *S/Z*. Thorne, providing counterexamples from such sources as classical epic and Hollywood blockbusters to dispute Barthes's claims, finds that commercial imperatives are just as likely to produce an endless chain of sequels and prequels as they are "classical" closure. He concludes that Barthes's ostensibly Marxist critical rhetoric in fact allegorizes liberal, "antitotalitarian" arguments commonplace in the late 1960s and 1970s,

such as the association of narrative “openness” with liberalism’s “open society,” both collected under the heading “modern.”

As a legal scholar, Richard A. Epstein initially directs his response at Macpherson’s *Harm’s Way*. In a legal context, inevitability means “the sense of inexorable social forces bordering on logical certainty, and not of contingent propositions that admit of empirical doubt.” This is implicitly a rejection of the more capacious meaning used by Burke to include probabilities. From the start, the law’s fixation on simple causality relegates the issues addressed by this issue’s contributors to a realm of imprecise, overwrought, and overdramatic theorizing. Indeed, central to Epstein’s commentary is a reading of a 1616 case, *Weaver v. Ward*, testing whether the court would accept a defense of “inevitable accident” that rested on the self-evidence of causality. Inevitable accident once counted, along with necessity and impossibility, as a defense to a regime of strict liability, which imposes liability on a party unless these very narrow exemptions are satisfied. Epstein takes the rigorous understanding of responsibility to be crucial to the smooth functioning of a commercial economy, which depends on clear and stable principles, whereas Macpherson takes fictional narratives to allocate responsibility judiciously among all the parties to an action. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.’s discussion of inevitable accident places it under the principle of no liability without fault. Inevitable accident now becomes tantamount to bad luck following reasonable care, a far more subjective defense. The shift is small yet, according to Epstein, crucial, because it is a formal change internal to legal reasoning that brought the law to the precipice of imaginative sympathy. Yet even “the dubious intellectual movement toward negligence” had, he says, “no large-scale social effects.” We can perhaps better understand Epstein’s differences with this collection’s literary critics in regard to interpretation with reference to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (2013: 539) observation that the jurist’s mind-set is “to so interpret the law that the legal order fully penetrates reality.”⁷ This is a reversal of most historicist and sociological approaches to literary criticism; it is such a thoroughgoing difference that it entirely eclipses

⁷ Robert M. Cover (1986: 1606–7) would extend this observation about the difference between legal and literary modes of interpretation to specify the mode of legal penetration into reality: legal interpretation acts on the world so as to saturate it with institutionalized violence.

performative approaches to literary interpretation. The interests of literary expression and interpretation fall squarely outside the rule-governed domain of the law, which operates according to competing interpretative modes. In taking issue with the subjective direction toward which Holmes steers the law, Epstein demonstrates that legal change is neither inevitable nor “directed by the positive law itself . . . realizing what can sensibly be called its own ambitions” (Dworkin 1985: 181).

Inevitability is a concept fiercely unreconciled with its negation, the chance to choose otherwise. This issue boasts an eccentric cast of characters who cope dysfunctionally with the consequences of certitude. Will, Langland’s narrator, suffers from repetition compulsion; Sonmi-451’s sublimity is compromised and toxic; Joseph Andrews survives a Hobbesian world thanks only to an innkeeper’s irrational hospitality; Raphaël is brought low by compulsive, serial wish fulfillment; Portland’s bohemians find their happiness only through geographic and temporal isolation; and Barthes attempts to rewrite the entirety of literary history to work out his compromised politics. Closest to home, the concept of inevitability may resonate in a time when neoliberalism has taken so much about university life and made it contingent. In a national political climate that refuses to change, for these authors choosing otherwise is as necessary (and futile) as inevitability itself.

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