TRANSHUMANISM AND SENTIMENTALISM IN LOIS LOWRY’S

THE GIVER

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Abstract: The article explores an aspect of American writer Lois Lowry’s award-winning adolescent novel The Giver (1993) that has not been sufficiently examined in criticism, namely, the author’s stance toward the general enthusiasm among scientists and politicians about the possibilities opened by the latest advances in science and technology to perfect human societies and improve the individual subject’s experience of life. Presenting the failure of a utopian project based on all-pervading social control and, on the other hand, biotechnology, the novel offers a cautionary tale against the dangers stemming from instrumental, soulless biopolitics. Lowry believes that public order and epidemiological control promoted by technocrats can give us physical safety, but can take a toll on our emotional health and intellectual development. As an alternative to the technocratic utopia Lois Lowry’s novel proposes social spaces organized on the basis of sentiment as the most natural political arrangement that guarantees human happiness and the fulfilment of human potential.

Key words: contemporary American literature, biopolitics, biotechnology

Lois Lowry’s Newbery Award-winning adolescent novel The Giver (1993) recreates, as Carter Hanson observes, a dystopia in the tradition of Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World where the population is kept subdued – yet content – by means of uncompromising regulations and, on the other hand, biotechnology. The communities, the political formations in The Giver, emerge after a series of social cataclysms, which obliterate what appears to be a socio-political order similar to the one we live in. The post-apocalyptic world calls Sameness its formula for stability and control over its subjects. Hanson aptly defines Sameness as “a complex, centuries old system of genetic, social and geographical homogeneity” (Hanson 2009:51). Specifically, this system involves refashioning of the natural environment (elimination of the diversity in climate, landscape, flora, and fauna); an extreme form of disciplinary society; control of discourse and collective memory; and, as will be further discussed, transhumanistic policies. As a number of critics (Hanson, Stewart, Latham) point out, the regulation of discourse and collective memory is among the Community’s most powerful tool for control over its population – a theme that links Lowry’s book to classical dystopian texts such as Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World and George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four. In The Giver, knowledge of the past is unavailable to the Community members. As literature, philosophy, history, and all forms of art are apparently disposed of, visions for a different world are circumscribed. All collective
memories are relegated to a single person—the Receiver of Memories. The present essay however discusses an aspect of Lois Lowry’s novel that is not sufficiently addressed in criticism: the transhumanistic theme and its treatment by the author. Lowry sees biotechnology as the mightiest and most ominous instrument for total power over the human herd. The human bodies in the communities are made “docile” by a set of tools such as genetic engineering, medications, and eugenics. This version of transhumanism, The Giver suggests, has impoverished rather than improved the human subject. As an alternative to arrant technocratic projects for social betterment Lois Lowry endorses humanistic models for human coexistence, specifically, the culture of sensibility where the individuals reach true happiness by diversifying their experiences, by cultivating their senses, and by refining their emotions; emotions that constitute the bonds of a full-blooded and felicitous sentimental community.

Transhumanism has been defined as a doctrine that affirms the possibility to better the human condition—and the experience of the social reality—through modifying via technology the humans’ intellectual, physical, and psychological features. Theorists of transhumanism (Max More, Nick Bostrom, David Pearce and others) regard its ideas and objectives as a part of the heritage of Enlightenment humanism. Committed to an Enlightenment vision of progress, transhumanism celebrates technology as an instrument for “human liberation from bondage to nature, finitude, and the vagaries of disease, decay and death;” as an engine for personal growth beyond the limitations set by biological givens (Graham 2002:9-10). Paradoxically, the society in The Giver has concluded that a peaceful world populated by content individuals can be achieved not by enhancing but by debilitating the subject’s physical, cognitive, and emotional capacity. Thus, the community members’ color vision has been eliminated by means of genetic engineering. Sexual desire, regarded as a source of rebellion against social discipline, is suppressed through daily medication. Following the ideal of sameness, the community has reduced phenotypic varieties. Almost every citizen has dark eyes and light skin. Eugenics is applied to dispense with newborns whose physical characteristics that do not correspond to the norms.

Lois Lowry’s The Giver tells the story of Jonas, a twelve-year-old who is trained to be the community’s next Receiver of Memories. The intake of collective mem-

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7 In “The Utopian Function of Memory in Lois Lowry’s The Giver,” Carter Hanson highlights that in Lowry’s novel memory works in a “highly figurative and unscientific” way. The transmission of memory from Giver to Receiver marks “the point at which the narrative moves from science fiction into fantasy” (Hanson 2009:52). However, this fantastic moment does not weaken the book’s imaginative power.

8 The term transhumanism was coined in 1957 by Julian Huxley, brother of Aldous Huxley, the author of the prototypical technoscientific dystopia Brave New World. For a concise overview of the history and ideas of transhumanism, refer to The Penn Center Guide to Bioethics. especially the section by Susan Schneider. Another useful source of reference for the present essay, Elaine L. Graham’s book Representations of the Post/Human, features a pioneering study of transhumanistic themes in literature and film.
ories from the pre-apocalyptic world causes Jonas to reject the founding principles of his society and ultimately to leave it in search for Elsewhere, a place where the old order has been preserved. However, the path to Elsewhere leads the protagonist into territories with harsh climate, wild nature, and scarce food — and thus to a better realization of the advantages of living in the community that always protected him from hunger, physical injuries, pain, or unpredictable events. Yet, Jonas never regrets his decision and asserts the primacy of free subjectivity over any other considerations. “If he had stayed,” Lowry’s narrator announces, “he would have starved in other ways. He would have lived a life hungry for feelings, for color, for love.” (Lowry 1993:172) For Jonas, the “hunger” for diverse emotions and sensations is equal to primal, biological needs. It marks, as Susan Louise Stewart writes, the character’s “return to the humanist subject position many readers occupy” (Stewart 2007:24). The following argument will establish that this “humanist subject position,” whose parameters Stewart does not specify, is a sentimentalist one.

Sentimentalism emerged, alongside with rationalism, as a major paradigm in the Age of Enlightenment.⁹ As will be further explained, sentimentalism was essentially an outgrowth of the cult of sensibility. As a moral and social philosophy, sentimentalism proclaimed that the ties of emotion are the principle force that sustains harmonious human communities. Interestingly, Lowry valorizes the family and domesticity as sources of bliss in the manner of eighteenth-century sentimental writers as can be seen in her recreation of a domestic space, which Jonas experiences in a memory:

“He was in a room filled with people, and it was warm, with firelight glowing on a hearth. He could see through the window that outside it was night, and snowing. There were colored lights: red and green and yellow, twinkling from a tree which was, oddly, inside the room. On a table, lighted candles stood in a polished golden holder and cast a soft, flickering glow. He could smell things cooking, and he heard soft laughter. A golden-haired dog lay sleeping on the floor.

On the floor there were packages wrapped in brightly colored paper and tied with gleaming ribbons. As Jonas watched, a small child began to pick up the packages and pass them around the room: to other children, to adults who were obviously parents, and to an older, quiet couple, man and woman, who sat smiling together on a couch.” (Lowry 1993:122-23)

Lowry’s tableau extols domesticity in the fashion of sentimentalist thinkers — both novelists like Radcliffe and Edgeworth and naturalists like Adam Smith — who believed that the familial home should be designed as a milieu where human nature can be refined and harmonized by gentle affectations (Barker-Benfield 1992:100). However, what strikes Jonas is not so much the affectations and the

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⁹ In The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture, Louis Dupré writes that the nature of eighteenth-century thought has been severely oversimplified as rationalism, while tendencies pointing in the opposite direction also existed, most notably sentimentalism. (Dupré 2005:xii-xiii)
charming ritualisms in the scene (soft laughter, distribution of richly decorated gift boxes, exchange of smiles, etc.); nor is it the unusual configuration of people (three generations — children, parents, and grandparents — living together) that stands in stark contrast to the “family units” of his community. For the protagonist, the exclusivity of the familial celebration springs from the atmosphere of “love” — a feeling alien to his community. All in all, Lowry’s assertion that in this domestic space feelings are aggrandized and invested with moral value defines the household from Jonas’s favorite memory as a sentimental community.

The characterizations of Jonas and the Giver evoke and juxtapose aspects of two ideologies that are played out in the novel — transhumanism and sentimentalism. When explaining to his trainee that the unusual quality he sees in the hair of his school friend Fiona is the color red, the Giver takes an aside to talk about the community’s transhumanistic policies. “We’ve never completely mastered Sameness,” he muses. “I suppose the genetic scientists are still hard at work trying to work the kinks out. Hair like Fiona’s must drive them crazy.” (Lowry 1993:95) However, what remains unsaid is that nature has been particularly resilient in individuals like the Giver, Jonas, and the newborn Gabriel. Not only do they differ in appearance with their blue eyes and blond hair from the other members of the community; their distinctive phenotypic markers seem to be correlated with the “Capacity to See Beyond” (Lowry 1993:63), namely, to perceive stimuli subliminal for the others. It can be inferred that this mysterious ability is nothing but the manifestation of a fully preserved, natural psycho-physiological capacity.

Despite its ostensible emphasis on spiritual and moral values, sentimentalism developed — like the more recent transhumanism — over biologic premises produced by the nascent natural sciences in the Age of Enlightenment. Sensibility, G. J. Barker-Benfield writes, denoted the receptivity of the senses and referred to the psycho-perceptual scheme explained and systematized by Isaac Newton, John Locke, and anatomists like Thomas Willis. It connoted the operation of the nervous system as the material basis for human subjectivity. (Barker-Benfield 1992: xvii) Considering that sentimentalism as the outgrowth of sensibility pursued the larger goal of the Enlightenment — the attainment of a more complete and knowing human subject — it stands as a diametrical opposite to the version of transhumanism in The Giver. Starting from the eighteenth century, sentimental writers (for sentimentalism manifested itself first and foremost as novelistic discourse) promoted the sensitization of consciousness as a means to expanding its capabilities and enabling it to respond more subtly to signals from both the external environment and the body. By contrast, as was previously examined, in Lowry’s novel, science is used to downgrade the material basis of consciousness for the purpose of debilitating the cognitive and emotional capacities of the community’s

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10 The reader is actually told that these characters have “pale” eyes. According to Stewart, while “Lowry carefully avoids specifically naming the eye color even after Jonas possesses the capacity to identify it,” it is not difficult “to infer that the eyes are blue because of the association with paleness and water” (Stewart 2007:27).
members.

According to sentimentalist thinkers, the cultivation of sensibility occurs when the individual’s senses receive diverse stimuli, often imagined as “vibrations” along the nervous “fibers” in the eighteenth-century models of the nervous system influenced by Newtonian physics. Therefore, exposure to different environments – social, natural, and artistic – was recommended for the elevation of the mind. In its essence, Jonas’s training represents a process of cultivation of sensibility and, ultimately, of regeneration of his full human capacity. Having gained access to the repository of collective memories, he indulges his sense of sight in a world with no visual arts. He visits museums and sees “paintings filled with all the colors he could now recognize and name” (Lowry 1993:121). Likewise, the memories of nature – the latter’s role in the rejuvenation of the human mind and emotion will be most highly extolled by Romanticism, the successor of the Enlightenment’s sentimentalist trend – offer Lowry’s protagonist heretofore unknown visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic experiences – experiences that bring him “countless bits of happiness” (Lowry 1993:121). Thus, Jonas would contemplate “a wonderful sail ... a bright, breezy, day on a clear turquoise lake” (Lowry 1993:116); acquire the feeling of horse riding or sliding on a sled (Lowry 1993:80-82, 122); sense the extremities of pain and pleasure in a universe where the agony of a wounded soldier or the ecstasy of libidinal “stirrings” are unimag- nable.

The Giver ends as Jonas reaches Elsewhere, a place where the sentimental community of his memories exists. In Lois Lowry’s artistic project, this ending seems to validate socio-political models inspired by sentimental philosophy as the ultimate formula for human happiness and self-realization. On the basis of the above analysis, it can be maintained that Lowry’s lesson for present-day politics contains two interrelated points. The first has already been voiced by commentator Erik Telford in a 2014-opinion post in Daily Caller. Telford implies that The Giver exposes the dangers of totalitarian political tendencies. “The government’s attempts to save us from our own choices,” the author reasons, “be they to own a gun, heat our homes with coal, use incandescent light bulbs, drink a soda, or any other activity the state has deemed ‘unsafe’ or ‘counterproductive’ — are products of the exact same mentality that drives the film’s horrific community.” The positive point in the dyad – a viable and vitalizing socio-political formula – Lois Lowry discovers in sentimentalist philosophy – perhaps also with influence from nineteenth-century American sentimental literature, which ultimately represents, in the words of Kevin Pelletier, love as the force that unites members of the family.

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11 The Giver’s ending is ambiguous, as it is not clear if Jonas sees the twinkling lights from the houses in Elsewhere or is hallucinating out of exhaustion. Yet, in a 1998 interview with Susie Wilde, Lowry insists on a “positive” interpretation, that is, that Jonas and Gabriel indeed remain alive and reach Elsewhere. Their survival is also suggested in Messenger (2004), which, together with another novel, Gathering Blue (2000), appears as a loose sequel to The Giver.
and, on the other hand, coheres families into larger communities (Pelletier 2015:48).

References:


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