



ISSN 1754-1514

The Bottle Imp

Issue 19, June 2016
Different Strokes, Smokes, for Different
Folks: Naomi Mitchison's *Solution Three*
Gavin Miller

Naomi Mitchison's short science-fiction novel *Solution Three* (1975) imagines a near-future Earth transformed by global warfare and an ensuing population crisis. Despite its superficially post-apocalyptic setting, the world of *Solution Three* is largely peaceful, ruled by a universal Code that prohibits inequality and aggression. Yet this future society is sinister in its own way, particularly in its technological dominance over both nature and culture; the narrative sketches out a society sensing its need for a changed relationship to biological diversity and cultural difference. *Solution Three* is undeniably polemical: it presents Mitchison's manifesto for green politics, and for the politics of diversity.

In an earlier genre of writing, the 'fantastic voyage' across land and sea (like Lemuel Gulliver's travels) would take the reader to a radically transformed society. Mitchison's text, like much science fiction, offers instead a temporal journey into the future. A global, presumably nuclear war, leads to 'the annihilation, as living and food-producing places, of large parts of the Earth's surface'.¹ Overpopulation of the remaining living space and agricultural land reaches crisis level, and the titular 'Solution Three' is developed: 'the women giving birth, popping the new lives out, over-populating, until at last it was realized that the attraction between the sexes was only a snare and an aggression; the real thing was man to man and woman to woman'.² *Solution Three* is instigated by 'Him' or 'Her', the un-named leaders who emerge during the crisis period, and who are venerated as paragons of intelligence and wisdom:

The challenge to aggressive inter-sexual love came first from Her; then the challenge was made still

clearer in the Code which He homologated and by the Council itself. When that age-old sexual aggression changed to non-aggressive love of man for man and woman for woman, overt aggression dropped in the same curve as the still dropping popu[lation]-curve.³

The governing 'Code' promulgated by Him and Her is continued by the world's ruling Council: the doctrine forbids inequality and aggression,⁴ and thus (in the text's logic) discourages heterosexuality, particularly procreative heterosexuality. The result is 'a world at last with a dropping population, and with a genuine diminution of aggression, group or personal'.⁵

Readers may wonder at Mitchison's depiction of heterosexuality as essentially aggressive (and homosexuality as essentially non-aggressive), and also at the text's confident extrapolation of biological and psychological engineering. Beginning with 'intensive school-age hormone and psychological treatment during the years of population crisis',⁶ compulsory homosexuality is supplemented by the 'hidden persuaders' of mass propaganda: 'Persuasion was, after all, such an expert business; it had only to be applied, both subliminally and overtly, through the many media'.⁷ At the time of the main narrative action, the solution is largely self-maintaining, and enforced by a combination of 'hormones' and 'propaganda',⁸ so that 'the absolute numbers [of births] dropped year by year. People do not on the whole break their customs and social morality and face the disapproval of their peer group for something as unimportant as inter-sexual love'.⁹

The psychological assumptions in Mitchison's novel are, though, less important than the world thereby extrapolated. *Solution Three* revels in the satirical opportunities offered by a world turned upside down. The critical social commentary is clear: although heterosexuality is not strictly forbidden by law, the residual straight population are regarded as 'social misfits'¹⁰ even by members of the ruling Council. Tolerated, but hardly celebrated, heterosexuality is 'not against the Code', but 'utterly distasteful'.¹¹ The 'deviants'¹² who practise it are a 'tiny minority' who are harried by feelings of shame and insecurity 'with their colleagues' eyes and tongues on them',¹³ and who can express their love openly in only a few public spaces 'known for being friendly to heterosexual deviants'.¹⁴ As well as giving straights a fictional taste of their own medicine, the text also invites a reversal of other majority-minority relations. Tobacco cigarettes are regarded as

'doped',¹⁵ while cannabis is normalised as 'the aggression dispeller', and smoked during governmental meetings 'on occasions when hatred, anger and prejudice might have crept into the minds of the Council'.¹⁶ The majority population are also vegan, mostly because animals 'were such inefficient makers of protein and fat or milk constituents', but also because of 'civilized sentiment' against aggression, even between species.¹⁷

As the repression of heterosexuals suggests, the world of *Solution Three* is not wholly benign. As Susan M. Squier explains, *Solution Three* relies on 'softer coercions': those, for instance, 'who are unwilling to abide by the mandated homosexuality, or wish to reproduce *in vivo*, are given substandard housing and less job access'.¹⁸ There is normally little physical coercion under *Solution Three*, although notably there are planes and helicopters at the ready for when normal processes of pacification fail, particularly in rural areas outside of the mega-cities that house the majority of the population.¹⁹ The oppressive power of the world Council lies more in its power to exclude as unimaginable (rather than illegal) that which is 'out of social character',²⁰ be this heterosexuality, the consumption of certain drugs, or the possibility of possessive maternal love. The latter exclusion arises in the Council's eugenic ambitions, by which live births are normally clones of Him and Her. These are brought to term and raised through infancy by an elite of so-called Clone Mums, who are selected, in part, because they lack the intellectual gifts to question the *status quo*.²¹ The aim is ultimately for the Clones to take over the Council, and to form a permanent leadership caste.

The ambiguities of the Council's soft power are particularly clear in its treatment of the Clone Mums. One of the latter, Lilac, tries to resist the removal of her infant Clone (known only by a number at this point): she protests, 'He was mine. [...] Fed on my milk. My little mammal. My own'.²² As evidenced by her other science-fiction texts, Mitchison is clearly writing in conscious awareness of post-war attachment theory, and its evolutionary account of the mother-infant relationship amongst primates, including humans.²³ But Lilac's avowal of a particular, possessive love (which the text represents as evolved and innate) is sententiously rebuked by Jussie, a Councillor: 'You know it is wrong for one person to assert ownership over another, even a lover, but most of all over a little child. A little Clone'.²⁴ The world of *Solution Three* thus pursues an ethic

of universal love in order to non-violently expel particular love from the 'social character'. Lilac recognizes the persistence of a 'police state':

But not police any longer: instead watchers and carers. [...] And who was suffering? Not so much ordinary people who had suffered in the police states in the old days and been bullied and unhappy and lost their identity. No, now it was the baby Clones and the Clone mums who must fight for them. The suffering was going on, pinpointed this way.²⁵

As Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou explains, the world government soon manages to re-assert its non-violent control over Lilac: 'She is [...] quickly and easily benumbed with the help of aggression dispellers [...] such as cannabis and sexual excitation. Stroking and smoking, and the offer of a job by Jussie, a Council member, and later Lilac's girlfriend, make Lilac forget her Ninety (the number of the baby boy)'.²⁶

Viewed without its veil of anodyne rhetoric, the world of *Solution Three* is rather more sinister than it might appear. Indeed, the text offers an ethical rebuke by way of biological metaphor: part of *Solution Three's* action concerns diseases that threaten the standardised plant crops upon which the remaining world population depends, such as the '[w]heat, rather ominously standard, all the same height, colour, genetic formula, tailored to its environment' which is grown across large areas of centrally managed land.²⁷ In a Council discussion of this new danger, there appears an allusion to 'a novel' (an outmoded genre in the future) from 'the second half of the twentieth century'²⁸ which foresaw the possibility of an infection that destroyed food crops. The intertextual reference is to John Christopher's *The Death of Grass* (1956) which depicts the worldwide collapse of civilization because of the 'Chung-Li virus', which at first destroys rice before jumping up a taxonomic level to infect all the grasses, thereby destroying the world's cereal crops and pasturage.²⁹ The human race's failure to defeat the Chung-Li virus is presented not as inevitable, but as a consequence of a particular solution used early on. One character explains: 'if they'd found a virus-resistant rice, that would have solved the problem properly. You can almost certainly find a resistant strain of anything, if you look hard enough or work on a large enough scale'.³⁰ Unfortunately, rather than turning to the diversity of the gene pool, a crop treatment is used instead that leaves behind, at first unnoticed, the strain that affects all the grasses.

The moral of Christopher's story carries over into *Solution Three*, which at a scientific level warns against the loss of biodiversity in an overdependence on intentionally selected strains of food crops. Symbolically, however, biodiversity is mobilised also as a warning against the socio-cultural homogeneity of *Solution Three*. When the Council member Jussie reflects that '[t]here were probably still wild wheats, triticums of some kind, in parts of central Asia, small places which had resisted education'³¹ she unwittingly makes the connection for readers between biological and cultural diversity. The analogy is further developed in an implicit comparison between a mass culture engineered by elites, and a spontaneous and diverse folk culture. Under *Solution Three*, historians are propagandists for historical uniformity in the 'great men' (and women) of history. The historian, Ric – who accepts as a truism the homosexual love between 'Jesus and John' and 'Stalin and Beria'³² – reflects on his conviction that 'history must be re-made in order to flower profitably and beautifully. Just as flowers and fruit are constantly remade. He was thinking of his current work on Castro and Che, the scraps of evidence floating and pinned'.³³ On the other hand, the heterosexually procreative population in peripheral areas of Outer Mongolia are deviant not only in resisting *Solution Three*, but also in shunning consumption of the world government's propaganda: 'though the scattered villagers had transistors and sometimes listened to songs, they didn't bother with them much but preferred making their own'.³⁴

Solution Three ends with the successful recovery of wild species drawn from the earth's diminishing gene pool. The analogy is driven home as the Council comes to recognize that the mass-produced Clones may present an equal liability, since 'a kind of excellence which exactly fitted a certain epoch might, sooner or later, need certain alterations'.³⁵ The supposed lesson from human genetics is echoed in the cultural plane: a more accommodating relationship is found with the heterosexuals of the text, who are handy proponents of sexual reproduction, and also a cultural equivalent to the rare wild strains. The overall ethical equation is formalized in the novel's closing sentences, spoken by the Councillor, Jussie: 'There are so many kinds of happiness. According to the genes'.³⁶

There is undeniably something clumsy in Mitchison's predication of sexual reproduction

upon heterosexual preference. *Solution Three* ignores the possibility of, for instance, artificial insemination, or *in vitro* fertilisation, between the sexes, even if the parents in question are homosexual in preference. Sexual reproduction, which introduces genetic diversity via 'the sin of meiosis, the upsetting of reason and planning, re-shuffling the chromosomes just anyhow',³⁷ is thus rather a retrograde metaphorical vehicle for Mitchison's identity politics. Heterosexual reproduction *in vivo* is unthinkingly naturalized in *Solution Three*, in a way that few would find plausible today. The text, having introduced the possibility of the cultural extinction of heterosexuality, assuages the anxieties of its majority readership. Not only do some people, particularly amongst the academic Professorial classes, seem entirely resistant to the social conditioning of homosexuality, there even emerges – by some unknown mechanism – a small number of heterosexuals amongst the population of Clones, that 'rising forest of genetic excellence'³⁸ whose preferences were assumed to be innately homosexual.

More positively, though, Mitchison's text may be seen as marking a transition in political discourses, from the politics of redistribution, to concerns with identity and the environment. The future Earth of *Solution Three* has effectively addressed material inequality: everyone is roughly equal in wealth, and there is no such thing as private property, or ownership of others' labour. But politics, and history, still goes on: biodiversity and cultural difference are threatened, and the question arises of a new 'solution' that would preserve them. The satirical representation of marginalized heterosexuality is chastening for those who might think that minorities are sufficiently protected by rights-based discourses: the heterosexuals of *Solution Three* are free to be straight, but are denigrated by the dominant culture's 'social character'. The missing ingredient is 'recognition': the affirmation that their sexuality can be the parameter of a successful life, rather than a disabling, limiting form of 'deviance'. The puzzle-solving narrative of Mitchison's novel thus endorses biodiversity (in response to the agricultural and human eugenics of *Solution Three*) as well as cultural diversity (in response to the misrecognition of minorities). As Esa Väliverronen explains, the power of the term 'biodiversity' as 'a metaphor in semi-professional and popular discourses' is 'linked to its origin as a scientific concept'.³⁹ Mitchison's vindication of identity politics takes

the rising popular-scientific authority of 'biodiversity' as a supposedly uncontentious good, and transfers it to cultural diversity, further cementing 'the "biocultural" transformation in contemporary society'.⁴⁰

Dr Gavin Miller
Director of the Medical Humanities
Research Centre
School of Critical Studies
University of Glasgow
gavin.miller@glasgow.ac.uk

Notes

- 1 Naomi Mitchison, *Solution Three* (New York: Feminist Press at City University of New York, 1995), p. 7.
- 2 Ibid. p. 16.
- 3 Ibid. p. 80.
- 4 Ibid. p. 132.
- 5 Ibid. p. 7.
- 6 Ibid. pp. 16–17.
- 7 Ibid. p. 23.
- 8 Ibid. p. 134.
- 9 Ibid. p. 16.
- 10 Ibid. p. 13.
- 11 Ibid. p. 122.
- 12 Ibid. p. 118.
- 13 Ibid. p. 40.
- 14 Ibid. p. 41.
- 15 Ibid. p. 93.
- 16 Ibid. p. 88.
- 17 Ibid. p. 61.
- 18 Susan M. Squier, 'Afterword', in *Solution Three* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1995), pp. 161–83 (p. 173).
- 19 Mitchison, p. 150.
- 20 Ibid. p. 110.
- 21 Ibid. p. 92.
- 22 Ibid. p. 95.
- 23 Gavin Miller, 'Animals, Empathy, and Care in Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*', *Science Fiction Studies*, 35 (2008), 251–65.
- 24 Mitchison, p. 96.
- 25 Ibid. p. 95.
- 26 Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou, "'None of Woman Born": Colonizing the Womb from Frankenstein's Mother to Naomi Mitchison's Clone Mums', in *Biotechnological and Medical Themes in Science Fiction*, ed. by Domna Pastourmatzi (Thessaloniki, Greece: University Studio Press, 2002), pp. 208–21 (p. 215).
- 27 Mitchison, p. 69.
- 28 Ibid. p. 115.
- 29 John Christopher, *The Death of Grass* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 22–23.
- 30 Ibid. p. 22.
- 31 Mitchison, p. 24.
- 32 Ibid. p. 48.
- 33 Ibid. p. 49.
- 34 Ibid. p. 105.
- 35 Ibid. p. 153.
- 36 Ibid. p. 160.
- 37 Ibid. p. 92.
- 38 Ibid. p. 24.
- 39 Esa Välvirronen, 'Biodiversity and the Power of Metaphor in Environmental Discourse', *Science Studies*, 11 (1998), 31.
- 40 Ibid. p. 32.



ASLS is a registered charity no. SC006535