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# Hope, But Not for Us: Ecological Science Fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*

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It was Fredric Jameson who remarked, in a line from the preface to *The Seeds of Time* that has since become proverbial (as well as anonymized and widely misattributed<sup>1</sup>): “It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism” (*Seeds of Time* xii). This is to say that the ideological assumptions of capitalism have now become so utterly naturalized, and our imagination of any possible alternatives to what currently exists so totally impoverished, that we cannot imagine even the mechanism by which some alternative might emerge. The entire world would end first—and even that might not be enough. For Jameson it is this loss of faith in the possibility of revolution—the evacuation of futurity that Francis Fukuyama called “the end of history”—that marks the shift from modernity to postmodernity. When we were modern, we believed the world could change; now that we are postmodern, we are certain it cannot.

In a later essay, 2003's "Future City," Jameson revises his famous line a bit. He writes:

Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.

...

But I think it would be better to characterize all this in terms of History, a History that we cannot imagine except as ending, and whose future seems to be nothing but a monotonous repetition of what is already here. The problem is then how to locate radical difference; how to jumpstart the sense of history so that it begins again to transmit feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia. The problem to be solved is that of breaking out of the windless present of the postmodern back into real historical time, and a history made by human beings. ("Future City")

This article follows Jameson's historical imperative to argue that the science fictional imagination of the apocalypse functions today as the postmodern version of Jameson's called-for "radical break," which is "the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system" (Archaeologies 231–32). The apocalypse is the only thing in our time that seems to have the capacity to shake the foundations of the system and "jumpstart" a history that now seems completely moribund—the only power left that could still create a renewed, free space in which another kind of life might be possible. Apocalypse (especially eco-apocalypse) is increasingly the frame we use for imagining an end to capitalism, precisely because (after the "end of history") we can't imagine any other possible way for it to end. And in a way this is eerily appropriate; the increasingly dire predictions of ecological science warn us that "the end of the world" and "the end of capitalism" may in fact describe the same event—the one is catapulting us faster and faster towards the other.

If capitalism has always been, in K. William Kapp's memorable formulation, "an economy of unpaid costs" (231), then I argue our increasing recognition that the bill is coming due represents a kind of nascent revolutionary consciousness. Looking through the lens of the apocalypse—skipping ahead, that is, to the end of the story—we can see capitalism more clearly, without the distortions of ideology, complacency, and reaction that ordinarily cloud our view.<sup>2</sup> And though apocalypse might appear at first glance to assert the *impossibility* of significant change in our social relations (the first version of Jameson's quote), the radical disruption of history offered by eco-apocalypse is, in fact, a dialectical reassertion of both the possibility and the necessity of such change (the second version). Apocalypse reminds us that the logic of consumer capitalism is not, in fact, timeless and eternal; there was a time before it, and there will be a time after it. History does, indeed, go on. This article therefore seeks to draw out the unexpected utopian potency lurking within our contemporary visions of eco-apocalypse, taking as its primary object of study two recent eco-apocalyptic novels by Canadian author Margaret Atwood: *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and its 2009 "midquel," *The Year of the Flood*. Both books seek to open up new space for imagining a post-capitalist future through a satirical, science-fictional staging of capitalism's final, catastrophic breakdown—and the subsequent emergence of other kinds of lives, after the end of history.

## The End as Beginning

These two novels are by no means obscure or undiscovered gems; in fact, I suspect that most of the audience for a special issue of *LIT* dedicated to the apocalypse will likely have some familiarity with both of them. I hope, therefore, that I might get away with only a comparatively brief plot summary. The first novel tracks two childhood friends growing up in a hyperextended, hypertrophic version of US-style consumer capitalism—our mad world, gone even madder. One, Jimmy, later nicknamed Snowman, ultimately goes to a “humanities” college (scandalously, a third-tier educational track in this dystopic future) and eventually works in advertising; the other, Glenn, referred to almost exclusively as Crake, becomes a scientist. A brilliant (if deeply troubled) mind, Crake ultimately is placed in charge of an immortality project called “Project Paradise”<sup>3</sup> and recruits Jimmy to work for him. But it turns out Crake’s plans are much more sinister than he has admitted—he actually intends to take this opportunity to usher in his personal version of Utopia by replacing humanity with a better-designed, upgraded version. Unleashing a highly contagious supervirus he has developed<sup>4</sup> and distributed in the form of a designer birth control pill=aphrodisiac, Crake’s monstrous plan succeeds—and Jimmy is soon (he believes) the last human being alive, in charge of shepherding the “Children of Crake” out of the laboratory and into the ruined, empty world in which they will now live.<sup>5</sup>

Both novels rely on a pattern of alternation between their narrative “present” (the post-apocalyptic ruins that Snowman inhabits) and “past” (the world of Snowman’s childhood and young adulthood, a hyperexaggerated version of our present). *Oryx and Crake*, in particular, is structured like a prototypical Last Man on Earth novel: we begin inside the confused, traumatized mind of a character calling himself Snowman, who wakes alone on the beach. We quickly come to understand that Snowman is living after the end of the world. Surrounded by the “rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble” from the old world, this lonely figure carries with him a broken watch case that “he wears . . . now as his only talisman” (1). Recalling E.P. Thompson’s classic essay on the invention of and struggle over time in early industrial capitalism, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” Snowman’s broken watch now functions as an index of the radical dissolution of the capitalist system. The watch’s blank face shows Snowman “zero hour,” an encounter with the void that “causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is” (1).<sup>6</sup>

The rest of *Oryx and Crake*’s first chapter similarly situates us within the familiar ruined spaces native to the post-apocalyptic genre. Snowman has lost his clothes; instead he “wraps a dirty bedsheet around himself” and makes his way to a cache where he has hid both food and two other talismanic objects, an “authentic-replica Red Sox baseball cap” and a pair of sunglasses with one lens missing (2). As Snowman begins to eat, he recites to himself sentences from age-old self-help and personal-management books, which appear to him unbidden as if originating outside himself. (We later discover that he wrote his college thesis on such books.) “‘It is the strict adherence to daily routine that tends towards the maintenance of good morale and the preservation of sanity,’ he says out loud” (2), reflecting that this “obsolete, ponderous directive” was likely “written in aid of European colonials running plantations of one kind or another” (4). This moment suggests the tight relationship between fantasies of apocalypse and fantasies of the frontier—the notion that after the end of civilization the entire world becomes again free and open land, to be once again molded and “tamed” by heroic individuals. But almost immediately this relationship is undermined; Jimmy’s mind quickly turns to the basic moral *unacceptability* of these texts and colonial practices:

They would have been told to wear solar tops, dress for dinner, refrain from raping the natives. It wouldn't have said *raping*. Refrain from fraternizing with the female inhabitants. Or, put some other way . . . He bets they didn't refrain, though. Nine times out of ten. (3)

The frontier fantasy is here upended, revealed now as an unspeakable crime. Jimmy's inability to draw a model from history that might help him navigate his new terrain, or to generate a new model on his own, reminds us of the fundamental *exhaustion* of the frontier myth, whose institutions, motifs, and ideological assumptions are now, as Peter Paik has written, "incapable of carrying out the functions formerly accorded to them of building a society in what was once a wild and hostile territory" ("Gnostic Zombies"). Those old stories are of no use to us anymore; they have been reduced to meaningless gibberish (*Oryx and Crake* 5).

## Blood & Roses

Within three pages Atwood has effectively destabilized the typical affective coordinates of post-apocalyptic fiction, in which the post-apocalyptic landscape is a horror and the pre-apocalyptic landscape the longed-for object of nostalgia. Whereas the pre-apocalyptic status quo is generally figured as a lost Golden Age to be mourned, in *Oryx and Crake* its deprivations are quickly revealed to be easily the match of Snowman's wasteland. In the end the pre-apocalyptic landscape turns out to be much worse than the post-apocalyptic, built as it is upon a nightmare of murder, rape, exploitation, and theft that is, as we know too well, the actually existing, entirely nonfictional history of European expansion.

The past is monstrous—as is the era of Jimmy's childhood, a twenty-minutes-into-the future satire of our present. Atwood envisions a world in which the historical trajectory of neoliberal capitalism has reached its logical culmination. The world has become bifurcated into very strict class divisions: hyper-secure, gated communities called Compounds, for an increasingly small technical elite, and "pleeblands," filled with poverty, desperation, and disease, for everybody else. State power has collapsed; in lieu of a police force, we now have a private security force called the Corporate Security Corps, amusingly abbreviated (seemingly at the level of official corporate branding) the CorpSeCorps. Environmental degradation, too, has continued apace: climate change has desertified the planet and flooded the coasts,<sup>7</sup> while genetic engineering has unleashed invasive hybrids like "pigoons," "bobkittens," "wolvogs," and "rakunks" into the landscape, as well as introduced the threat of new and untreatable superviruses. In fact, we are told that the drug companies, confirming our worst paranoid fears, are actually deliberately introducing manufactured epidemics into the population that they can then subsequently cure, to great profit (210–11). Even food has become a grotesque parody of itself; the worst example in the novel is the nightmarish ChickieNob, vat-grown meat that is a monstrous head-like orifice (without eyes or beak, and allegedly without the ability to feel pain) atop multiple bodies that grow only breast or only drumstick (202–03). *The Year of the Flood* only adds new crimes to the indictment of this sick system, beginning with the intergenerational debt peonage that arises out of medical bankruptcy in this bleak future (25–29). We quickly come to understand that the ethical and ecological horrors that constitute this society, on every level from top to bottom, structure Jimmy's entire life: we find that his earliest memory (a kind of primal scene) is of a massive cattle and sheep bonfire necessary to keep hoof-and-mouth disease from spreading, a disease that is reported to have been deliberately introduced to the herd, either by competitive ranchers or by environmental activists, but could simply be the by-product of the deeply unhygienic practices of contemporary industrial meat production (*Oryx and Crake* 15–19). Indeed, we might say that the entire plot of the book unfurls

through the recovery of Jimmy's buried traumatic memories of the unhappy hypercapitalist system of which he is now the last survivor.

Atwood presents a vision of deregulated neoliberalism, ecological catastrophe, unchecked accumulative profit-seeking, and nightmarish repetition of the same that could make even Ayn Rand think twice about the wisdom of the free market:

Or [Jimmy]'d watch the news: more plagues, more famines, more floods, more insect or microbe or small-mammal outbreaks, more droughts, more chickenshit boy-soldier wars in distant countries. Why was everything so much like itself? (253–54)

There are then, crucially, two dystopias in *Oryx and Crake*: the postapocalyptic, representing the fear that things might change, and the preapocalyptic, representing the fear that they might not.

The latter dystopia is not only capitalism, but also history itself—even, perhaps, human nature as such—which is depicted as the accumulation of an endless series of disasters. In one of the book's most compelling passages, the buried traumatic memory of civilization *writ large* is represented through the strange games that Jimmy and Crake play as teenagers. First, they play *Barbarian Stomp: Can You Change History?*, in which players attempt to rewrite the history of empire at some crucial moment in which "civilization" was threatened by "barbarians": "Rome versus the Visigoths, Ancient Egypt versus the Hyksos, Aztecs versus the Spaniards. That was a cute one, because it was the Aztecs who represented civilization, while the Spaniards were the barbarian hordes" (77–78).

Soon this game begins to bore them, and they move on to *Blood & Roses*, which takes the same basic idea of a human history predicated on violence and extends it across all areas of human achievement. The logic of *Blood & Roses* literalizes the Benjaminian dictum from "Theses on History" that "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256). The logic of gameplay in "Blood and Roses" is the tradeoff between human achievement on the one hand and atrocities on the other:

The exchange rates—one Mona Lisa equaled Bergen-Belsen, one Armenian genocide equaled the Ninth Symphony plus three Great Pyramids—were suggested, but there was room for haggling. To do this you needed to know the numbers—the total number of corpses for the atrocities, the latest open-market price for the artworks; or, if the artworks had been stolen, the amount paid out by the insurance policy. It was a wicked game. (*Oryx and Crake* 79)

The result is a brutal, utilitarian calculus that pits civilization's triumphs against its failures, ultimately proving their radical incommensurability—or, perhaps, suggests that the apparent "failures" of civilization are, in fact, the true underpinning of all its supposed triumphs.

There is another echo of Benjamin's "Theses" here: his well-known reflection on Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which sees the "Angel of History" being blown from Paradise by the storm we call progress (257–58). The violence of the storm prevents the Angel from ever intervening in our history, which from his lofty perspective perceives not as "a chain of events" but as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (257). When Snowman recalls this game to himself in the ruins, years after Crake has destroyed the world, he seems almost to put civilization itself on trial on behalf of this Angel, presenting an epic list of Roses followed immediately by a longer list of Bloods, beside which the Roses seem hopelessly dwarfed and insufficient:

“Homer,” says Snowman, making his way through the dripping-wet vegetation. “*The Divine Comedy*. Greek statuary. Aqueducts. *Paradise Lost*. Mozart’s music. Shakespeare, complete works. The Brontë’s. Tolstoy. The Pearl Mosque. Chartres Cathedral. Bach. Rembrandt. Verdi. Joyce. Penicillin. Keats. Turner. Heart transplants. Polio vaccine. Berlioz. Baudelaire. Bartok. Yeats. Woolf.”

There must have been more. There were more.

*The sack of Troy, says a voice in his ear. The destruction of Carthage. The Vikings. The Crusades. Genghis Khan. Attila the Hun. The massacre of the Cathars. The witch burnings. The destruction of the Aztec. Ditto the Maya. Ditto the Inca. The Inquisition. Vlad the Impaler. The massacre of the Huguenots. Cromwell in Ireland. The French Revolution. The Napoleonic Wars. The Irish Famine. Slavery in the American South. King Leopold in the Congo. The Russian Revolution. Stalin. Hitler. Hiroshima. Mao. Pol Pot. Idi Amin. Sri Lanka. East Timor. Saddam Hussein.*

“Stop it,” says Snowman.

*Sorry honey. Only trying to help. (Oryx and Crake 79–80)*<sup>8</sup>

The clear implication of the list—the insufficiency of any Rose when compared to any Blood, much less the whole list compared to the whole list—is that civilization is in truth a terror, history itself a monster. One cannot help but wonder, after playing Blood & Roses, if the human history that has been wiped out by the apocalypse is actually worthy of being mourned at all.

## Forget Building A Better Mousetrap; Build A Better Mouse

Likewise—true to Atwood’s subversive reversal of the usual loyalties of apocalypse—the post-apocalyptic scenario turns out rather unexpectedly to have some important points in its favor. We soon discover that the Crakers are separated from Snowman not only by the temporal disjunction between *before* and *after* the end of the world, but also by the crucial modifications that have been made to their genome by Crake in order to “perfect” them—beginning with something as simple as the removal of facial hair to eliminate the inconvenience of shaving and moving on to far more radical interventions that challenge the notion that the Crakers are still “human” at all (9).

The Crakers have been engineered to live in very small numbers in stable harmony within a very limited environmental niche<sup>9</sup>—thereby preventing any rerun of the destructive capitalist attitude towards the environment that first necessitated their creation. At one point, before Crake has revealed the full scope of his plans to Jimmy, Crake explains his ecological, neo-Malthusian rationale for their design:

Jimmy, look at it realistically. You can’t couple a minimum access to food with an expanding population indefinitely. *Homo sapiens* doesn’t seem to be able to cut himself off on the supply end. He’s one of the few species that doesn’t limit reproduction in the face of dwindling resources. (120)

(We see now the crucial irony of the means Crake uses to wipe out humanity: he hijacks an attempt to rationally confront the crisis of overpopulation through the use of birth control in order to distribute his deadly supervirus.) Jimmy suggests in response that what Crake is essentially saying is that the human

species is “doomed by hope,” which Crake reframes instead as “desperation” (120)—an immutable feature of life for *Homo sapiens*, perhaps, but something easily removed from the genome of Humanity 2.0.

This Crake-imposed limitation on the size of Craker civilization has a second salutary effect in returning human life to the hyperlocal scale of the tribe; his research in genetics, primatology, and evolutionary psychology has shown Crake that “*Homo sapiens sapiens* was not hard-wired to individuate other people in numbers above two hundred” (343). To replace the once inevitable cycle of spiraling overpopulation, as well as the often destructive dance of love and courtship, Crake has replaced the concealed ovulation of human women with the estrus of baboons. Once every three years, a Craker woman turns blue in her buttocks and abdomen in order to signal her fertility, a feature of the baboon genome combined with octopus chromophores and spliced into human=Craker DNA. The Craker men spar for the right to mate with the woman (through ritual song and dance, rather than violence), with the four winners following her to a secluded spot to copulate until the woman becomes pregnant (164–65). Because men and women both are stimulated solely and entirely by pheromone release, this competition for mates is purely amicable: “There’s no more unrequited love these days, no more thwarted lust, no more shadow between the desire and the act” (165). Such a state of affairs is therefore in Crake and Jimmy’s calculation a Utopian solution to the problem of love, which Crake cynically frames as the “needless despair . . . caused by a series of biological mismatches, a misalignment of the hormones and pheromones” (167). For the Crakers, there is “no more prostitution, no sexual abuse of children, no haggling over the price, no pimps, no sex slaves. No more rape” (165).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, for the Crakers there can be no establishment of paternity, and therefore no patrilineal descent, and therefore no patriarchal family divisions to risk balkanizing society against itself.

In the absence of the possibility of medical science—which is much too advanced for the simple Crakers—Crake has given them an inborn ability to heal one another, through a splice from feline DNA that causes them to purr “at the same frequency as the ultrasound used on bone fractures and skin lesions” (156). To replace the struggle for alpha-male reproductive dominance that once constituted the role of men in society, Crake has given them instead a passive, community-oriented role: chemicals in Craker men’s urine keep animals at bay from the Craker encampment (155). This “ring-of-pee” likewise demarcates the spatial-temporal boundaries of Craker futurity; the Crakers, unlike their human predecessors, will never outgrow their niche, never overrun the globe.<sup>11</sup> The Crakers, of course, are vegetarians (158); in fact, they are caecotrophs, a trait borrowed from rabbit DNA, which boils down (in Jimmy’s horrified formulation) to “eat[ing] your own shit” (158–59). Jimmy finds this practice monstrous, but Crake argues that “any objections to the process were purely aesthetic”—and, indeed, from the Crakers’ perspective nothing could be more natural (159).

The Crakers seem even to have a diminished capacity for abstract thought, a key part of Crake’s attempt to craft a more ecological, rational, and sustainable human being. It is never entirely clear whether this diminished capacity originates in the genome or in early childhood language instruction, or perhaps both. We do know that “it was one of Crake’s rules that no name could be chosen for which a physical equivalent—even stuffed, even skeletal—could not be demonstrated. No unicorns, no griffins, no manticores or basilisks” (7).<sup>12</sup> The plan here, à la Orwell’s Newspeak, is to eliminate from the Craker’s mind the very capacity to conceive of God, whom the atheistic Crake scornfully declares is merely “a cluster of neurons” (157), as well as the removal of the fantasies of post-biological afterlife that Crake finds destructive (120). But a secondary advantage of modifying the Crakers’ ability for abstract thought prevents them from replicating *Homo sapiens*’ previous attempt to master nature



through technical artifice. The Crakers cannot read (41); they do not waste (363); they cannot build (367).

This, then, is the twisted sense in which Crake's project fulfills its original "immortality" manifest: the Crakers cannot conceive of their own mortality, and thus do not know they will ever die. And yet Crake's plans are partially and significantly thwarted: he discovers, to his great frustration, that we are, in fact, "hard-wired" for dreams and for singing (352), and religion, narrative, music, and art all likewise turn out to be impossible to eradicate, despite his greatest efforts. He is further thwarted in all this by the influence of Jimmy, who, as Snowman, regales the Crakers with ludicrous tales of the great gods Oryx and Crake in exchange for a periodic tribute of fish. Late in the novel, in Jimmy's absence the Crakers even spontaneously craft a magical totem designed to bring Jimmy back from his travels to the compound (361).<sup>13</sup> These humanistic "excesses" in the face of Crake's carefully crafted "perfection" are what allow the Crakers to transcend Crake's attempts to reduce the human to the level of an animal, even to a pure mechanism. The Crakers initially appear monstrous to readers to the extent that they lack the creative vitality of humanistic thought—and they only begin to seem potentially worthy successors to *Homo sapiens* to the extent that they turn out to retain this capacity after all.

## 'The Worst Mistake in The History Of The Human Race'

The resulting hybrid of the tribal and the posthuman should recall for us the quote from E.B. White with which Rachel Carson opens *Silent Spring*:

I am pessimistic about the human race because it is too ingenious for its own good. Our approach to nature is to beat it into submission. We would stand a better chance of survival if we accommodated ourselves to this planet and viewed it appreciably instead of skeptically and dictatorially. (qtd. in *Silent Spring* epigraph)

Atwood likewise seems strongly influenced in her construction of a Craker Utopia by the primitivist thinking of writers like Jared Diamond, Marshall Sahlins, and Daniel Quinn, who argue not only that we were *happier* in the pretechnological tribal context, but also that one way or the other, ready or not, we will be returning to it shortly.

Diamond begins his 1987 *Discover* magazine article declaring agriculture "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race" with a reversal of the logic of progress that frequently characterizes Western conceptions of history, arguing instead that "the adoption of agriculture . . . was in many ways a catastrophe from which we have never recovered. With agriculture came the gross social and sexual inequality, the disease and despotism, that curse our existence" (64). This attitude finds its echo in the teaching of the God's Gardeners in *The Year of the Flood*, for whom each so-called "advance" in knowledge or technology only leads humanity further and further away from the good life. "The Fall was ongoing," the teaching goes, "but its trajectory led ever downward" (189).

Americans might bristle at the notion that life was better as a hunter-gatherer, Diamond writes, but even putting their privileged position of world-historical wealth to one side, there are good reasons to doubt the inherent superiority of technological civilization. He refers to various tribal peoples like the Kalahari Bushman and the Hadza nomads of Tanzania, who work less, play more, and sleep longer than "their farming neighbors" (64). Marshall Sahlins, in his *Stone Age Economics*, makes much the same point, again using the Bushmen as a key example. Sahlins quotes findings from anthropologist Richard Lee that show that, far from the bare subsistence lifestyle we might imagine—that is, far from what we

have been taught—the Bushmen in fact live in caloric abundance (a daily per capita yield of 2,140 calories, when they likely need only 1,975 calories to survive). To gather this food, Sahlins shows, requires far less daily labor than is required in modern capitalist society.<sup>14</sup>

The primitivists frequently go still further, claiming not only that the conditions of hunter-gatherer life are happier and freer than civilization, but that they have the additional advantage over capitalism of being genuinely sustainable as well. A key assumption of primitivist thinking is the neo-Malthusian belief that modern civilization is doomed by its need to grow endlessly within the finite space of Planet Earth. One of Jimmy's girlfriends, Amanda—who later returns as one of the protagonists of *Year of the Flood*—evokes this *longue-durée* slow-motion apocalypse explicitly: “According to them it had been game over once agriculture was invented, six or seven thousand years ago. After that, the human experiment was doomed, first to gigantism due to a maxed-out food supply, and then to extinction, once all the available nutrients had been hoovered up” (243).

In his 1992 novel *Ishmael*, a cult classic among college environmentalists that has spawned a primitivist movement called new tribalism, Daniel Quinn provocatively compares the historical trajectory of technological civilization that began with the first Neolithic agricultural explosion to a nineteenth-century flying contraption that has been recklessly driven off a cliff. The passengers believe the vehicle is flying because the plane has not yet hit the ground:

Their flight could never end, it could only go on becoming more and more exciting. They couldn't know, couldn't even have guessed that, like our hapless airman, they were in the air but not in flight. They were in free fall, because their craft was simply not in compliance with the law that makes flight possible.

. . . But your craft isn't going to save you. Quite the contrary, it's your craft that's carrying you toward catastrophe. Five billion of you pedaling away—or ten billion or twenty billion—can't make it fly. It's been in free fall since the beginning, and that fall is about to end. (107–09)

Crake makes a similarly apocalyptic prediction as the futurological foundation for the Paradise Project that produces his Crakers:

“I didn't know you were so altruistic,” said Jimmy. Since when had Crake been a cheerleader for the human race?

“It's not altruism exactly,” said Crake. “More like sink or swim. I've seen the latest confidential Corps demographic reports. As a species we're in deep trouble, worse than anyone's saying. They're afraid to release the stats because people might just give up, but take it from me, we're running out of space-time. Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply for *everyone*.” (295)

Crake's monstrous work—to kill off the human race and replace it with the more ecologically sound Children of Crake—becomes from this perspective something more like a mercy killing: “For instance, Crake said once, ‘Would you kill someone you love to spare them pain?’ ” (320)

Intriguingly, Atwood eerily echoes Quinn's metaphor even more explicitly at the close of a short piece she wrote for the *Guardian* during the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009 titled “Time Capsule

Found on the Dead Planet.” Reading like a full-on endorsement of the Crake theory of history, Atwood’s short story traces the project of human history from the invention of the gods through the invention of money to the final replacement of God with money. Money then creates the bifurcated world of *Oryx and Crake*: “It created feasts and famines, songs of joy, lamentations. It created greed and hunger, which were its two faces” (“Time Capsule”). Finally, in the fourth age of mankind, man creates only deserts—concrete jungles, poisoned wastelands, scorched earth. In a world that is dead, the only response left is to worship nothingness. At this point Atwood turns to the fifth and final age, which is not an age of creation at all but a age of desolate mourning and loss: “You who have come here from some distant world, to this dry lakeshore and this cairn, and to this cylinder of brass, in which on the last day of all our recorded days I place our final words: Pray for us, who once, too, thought we could fly” (“Time Capsule”).

Atwood presents a bleak, declinist vision of the future that is fundamentally at odds with the traditional science fiction trope of continuous progress that culminates in interstellar colonization, which (as in familiar narratives like Gene Roddenberry’s *Star Trek*) imagines a human race that quite literally can “fly”: to the moon, to the rest of the solar system, and onward out into the universe. To Atwood, this dream of flight turns out to be only a delusion—at least for us.

There have always been alternatives to the utopian, expansionist futures imagined in galactic science fictional narratives—one need think only of the immense popularity of nuclear war fictions in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s—but the “space empire” narrative of science fiction was nonetheless the dominant mode of imagining humanity’s future until the ecological turn of the 1970s, when SF began to focus instead on the long-term survivability of a human race permanently confined to a single planetary ecosystem with finite and rapidly dwindling resources. Instead of the promised stars, we found we now faced only an inevitable, shattering crash. The map of human history that is produced by this imagined historiography is a bell-shaped curve, nicknamed the Olduvai theory for the Olduvai Gorge, where the earliest prehuman fossils have been found by one of its key developers, Richard C. Duncan. Olduvaians believe that human society will use up its available resource base and then crash, returning ultimately to a level of technological sophistication only slightly more advanced than the technology originally used in the Neolithic. Once technological civilization has collapsed (or, with Crake’s intervention, has been overthrown), there will be no chance for a sequel.<sup>15</sup> From this perspective, then, Crake is merely speeding an inevitable process along, making sure that the humans who will inhabit the postcollapse, neo-tribal future will be better-suited to it than we have been.

Here Crake follows the mode of “catastrophic thinking” recently endorsed by Evan Calder Williams, which refuses the logic of sustainability in favor of more aggressive, more radical intervention:

What [sustainability] forgets is what the harder line of catastrophic thinking—that which insists that we pushed off that cliff long ago—grasps better. It is the more extreme position, closer to the call for civilization’s end, which gives us sharper tools to forestall such an end, even as we aim to hasten the end of this particular world order. (202)

Williams’s notion of “combined and uneven apocalypse” begins from this recognition that “*the post-apocalyptic is not an image of that to be*” but “*a perspectival stance to be taken up now*” (158)<sup>16</sup>. In the “Eight Principles of Uncivilization” of the apocalyptically minded Dark Mountain Manifesto, we similarly find the joyful embrace of the coming end of civilization framed as the only possible response to an ongoing “age of ecocide” (“Dark Mountain Manifesto”).

So-called “deep ecology,” both in and outside science fiction, has long wrestled with precisely this fraught relationship with catastrophe and extinction in its push for a human race with so light an ecological footprint so as to (at the extreme end of its logic) be erased from the planet altogether. Perhaps—as the Internet’s darkly humorous “Voluntary Human-Extinction Movement” has long suggested—the universe would simply be better off without us. Amanda’s friends, in fact, take exactly this position:

Human society, they claimed, was a sort of monster, its main by-products being corpses and rubble. It never learned, it made the same cretinous mistakes over and over, trading short-term gain for long-term pain. It was like a giant slug eating its way relentlessly through all the other bioforms on the planet, grinding up life on earth and shitting it out the backside in the form of pieces of manufactured and soon-to-be-obsolete plastic junk. (*Oryx and Crake* 243)<sup>17</sup>

In the face of man’s mania for self-destruction, which now threatens not only the future of *Homo sapiens* but all life on the planet as a whole, Crake’s virulent misanthropy unexpectedly becomes transformed into something like a virtue, the truest form of love. (If this is not genocide as humanitarianism, exactly, then it is at the very least genocide as environmental policy: global death, in the name of preserving life.) This bizarre, murderous love directs itself not only towards preventing the predictable suffering of humans in the face of inevitable catastrophic collapse but towards all other life forms on the planet as well; when Crake witnesses a television report on peasant revolts in the Third World, his reaction is to want to kill the police state suppressing the riots—not because they are harming guerillas (“there are always dead peasants”) but because in the process they are massively defoliating the forest (179).

Likewise, one of Crake’s primary social outlets during his teen years is the online video game *Extinctathon*, which is organized around the neurotic memorialization of every “bioform that had kakked out within the past fifty years” (80). (We discover in the sequel that *Extinctathon* has a secondary purpose as a communication network for environmental activists=extremists, called the God’s Gardeners, who are *The Year of the Flood’s* primary protagonists.) The new name Crake takes for himself is his handle in the game, after the red-necked crane—which is still alive in our time but extinct in theirs. Indeed, Atwood once described the entire book as flowing out of her encounter with a red-necked crane while touring Australia: “I saw a red-necked crane,” she said, “and I saw the shape of a book. There was the book shining in the distance, as a goal” (Gussow). In the face of an ongoing mass extinction event that shows no sign of slowing or abetting, Crake’s intervention becomes the other side of the logic of the Anthropocene, the proposed name for the geological epoch marked by the largely unintended and mostly negative consequences of human civilization. Here, a humanity that has become the dominant agent of extinction on the planet accepts the mantle of global responsibility that has been thrust upon it—and decides to finally stop the insanity by extinguishing itself.

## ‘Ustopia,’ Politics, And Apocalypse

At this point one might be forgiven for taking *Oryx and Crake* as a deeply cynical, deeply conservative (even reactionary) *anti*-utopia that endorses Crake’s naive, scientific reduction of all human institutions to evolutionary “hard-wiring,” thereby denying any possible solution to environmental crisis. (If the problem is culture, we might have had a chance; but if the problem is our *nature*—if we’re just built wrong—then there is no hope.) Indeed, a left critique of the novel might begin with the claim that it

misreads social structures as genetic ones, mistaking a temporary historical subjectivity for “human nature” and thereby misidentifying the real enemy. The stirrings of such a case against *Oryx and Crake* might be further bolstered by Atwood’s well-known rejection of the label of science fiction on the grounds that “science fiction” (descending, she says, from Wells) refers to such impossible confabulations as “talking squids in outer space,” while the genre in which she writes, “speculative fiction,” (descending from Verne) describes those things that “could really happen” (qtd. in Langford). A person who truly believed *Oryx and Crake* is a possible vision of the future would indeed have no hope for mankind.

But in fact *Oryx and Crake* primes us to reject such a reading, beginning with its opening epigraph, which draws a version of Atwood’s proposed distinction between science fiction and speculative fiction from another source:

I could perhaps like others have astonished you with strange improbable tales; but I rather chose to relate plain matter of fact in the simplest manner and style; because my principal design was to inform you, and not amuse you. (qtd. in *Oryx and Crake* epigraph)

That writer, of course, was Jonathan Swift, and the book, that famous naturalistic rendering of plain, unembellished fact, is *Gulliver’s Travels*. And like the work of her announced predecessor, Atwood’s books are unmistakably satirical, a tone found everywhere in the *Oryx and Crake* series, from her world’s transparently illegitimate and utterly irrational institutions to her scientists’ cartoonishly irresponsible experiments. Crake’s totalizing genetic determinism (and accompanying quick-fix solution) is just another part of the joke.

The Crakers, in this context, should be understood as a hyperbolic version of the fantasy that we might turn back the clock and begin history anew, this time avoiding the mistake of so-called “civilization” that has brought down so much pain, misery, and death upon nearly everyone it touches through its awful past, miserable present, and terrible future alike. The Crakers are manifestly not an *actual* plan to save the world—Crake’s plan employs unethical methods and impossible genomics towards a plainly ridiculous purpose. Rather, the Crakers allegorize the radical transformation of both society and subjectivity that will be necessary in order to save the planet—showing us how very difficult the project will be, and giving us a sideways, funhouse-mirror, only-kidding glimpse at the kinds of revolutionary changes that will be required to make the future better than the present.

To this end the Crakers are quite deliberately framed by the novel as an over-the-top return to Edenic perfection, in ways that are likely already quite clear, beginning with Jimmy’s first view of them inside the Paradise Project dome: “This was his first view of the Crakers. They were naked, but not like the Noodle News: there was no self-consciousness, none at all” (302). Late in the novel, as Jimmy prepares to leave the Crakers in search of the other humans he now knows to be alive, he reflects on the Crakers’ odd innocence:

Except that they don’t need commandments: no *thou shalt not*s would be any good to them, or even comprehensible, because it’s all built in. No point in telling them not to lie, steal, commit adultery, or covet. They wouldn’t grasp the concepts.

He should say something to them, though. Leave them with a few words to remember. Better, some practical advice. He should say he might not be coming back. He should say that the others, the ones with extra skins and feathers, are not from Crake. He should say their noisy

stick should be taken from them and thrown into the sea. He should say that if these people should become violent—*Oh Snowman, please, what is violent?*—or if they attempt to rape (*What is rape?*) the women, or molest (*What?*) the children, or if they try to force others to work for them . . .

Hopeless, hopeless. *What is work?* Work is when you build things—What is *build?*—or grow things—What is *grow?*—either because people would hit and kill you if you didn't, or else because they would give you money if you did.

*What is money?* (366–67)<sup>18</sup>

The novel ultimately ends with Jimmy (and the reader) unsure whether he should ambush the other original humans he has discovered in order to protect the Crakers—or else join them, hoping against all reason that human beings might deserve another chance after all. (It's a choice Jimmy has been forced to make once before, when he first led the Crakers out of "Paradise." Then, he chose the Crakers, coldly killing any human survivors he ran across [352]). Will the trio of strangers he has found be "good-hearted, sane, well-intentioned," or will the atrocious history of *Blood & Roses* and *Barbarian Stomp* be repeated once again in yet another disastrous moment of first contact between cultures (366)? The novel ultimately leaves us hovering within that ambiguity—we know Jimmy has made a decision, but we do not see it. The overall effect of the novel thus becomes something like an obscene dare to endorse what Crake has done: to give his "Paradise" our seal of approval, despite its terrible cost.

*The Year of the Flood* culminates in another version of the encounter between Jimmy and the unknown trio of surviving humans, now retold from the perspective of the other party (415). We find out that Jimmy is interrupted before he can make his final choice. This moment happens only fifteen pages from the end of the novel, at which time another encounter is staged, with a similarly ambiguous anxiety about what will happen when two very different groups meet for the first time.<sup>19</sup> The effect of these endings is perhaps the greatest disproof of Crake's scientific emphasis on mechanism and determinability present in both novels; both novels culminate in a moment of radical choice for the characters, a moment that cannot be reduced to clean, empirical measurement, and which can only be tackled by dirty and messy humanistic thinking. This triumph of duality, indeterminacy, and creative potentiality over cool scientific rationality—tempered, as it is, by the threat that the characters will only use their ability to choose to make more catastrophically bad choices—is replicated outside the texts in the reader, as Atwood herself has noted:

Do the surviving human beings in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* represent a dystopic threat to the tiny utopia of genetically modified, peaceful, and sexually harmonious New Humans that is set to replace them? As it is always the reader rather than the writer that has the last word about any book, I leave that to you. (*In Other Worlds* 93)

Elsewhere in *In Other Worlds*, Atwood describes her notion of *ustopia*, a combination utopia-dystopia, where the two exist in simultaneous superposition with one another, each containing the other.<sup>20</sup> In an "ustopic" reading of the novel, Crake becomes something like Derrida's famous *pharmakon*—he is that which kills (through the BlyssPluss epidemic he deliberately engineers) but also, perversely, that which cures (humanity's dysfunctional relationship with the globe). And true to the Moses archetype on which so much utopian fiction is based, Crake is himself unable to cross over into his Promised Land; the last murder he arranges is his own.

So there is indeed “hope” of a kind in the blisteringly pessimistic *Oryx and Crake* series—only, as the Kafka quote from this article’s title suggests, the hope is “not for us.”<sup>21</sup> There is no hope for liberal individualist consumers living in the pseudo-utopia of late capitalism; our system—and the subjectivities and ideologies it produces, to say nothing of its material excesses and cold consumer comforts—is genuinely doomed. To the extent that Crake’s murderous, Frankensteinian actions do indeed usher in a kind of utopia, then, we must understand that it is not a Utopia for us—not for us the way we now are, the way we now live.

The political content of both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* is predicated on the increasingly desperate need to find some “outside” to the closed, totalizing system called capitalism, which has swallowed the entire globe and remade all of human history, all the way down to the level of the gene, in its image. The books allegorize both the difficulty and the *necessity* of finding some sort of alternative. In *Oryx and Crake*, the answer (such as it is) comes in Crake’s New Humans, as striking a version of “hope but not for us” as one might imagine; no matter how we try, we could never become the Crakers, nor (as with their caecotrophy) can we really even *understand* their subjectivity and the way they see the world. In *The Year of the Flood*—seemingly an attempt on Atwood’s part to clarify (or even rewrite) her earlier book and prevent any possible misinterpretation of it—the change is much more down to earth: the possibility of an alternative is located in God’s Gardeners, a group of ecologically minded, religious separatists who attempt to prepare for the “Waterless Flood” of capitalism’s inevitable collapse. In *Oryx and Crake*, the God’s Gardeners appear only in the background, as another joke; neither Jimmy=Snowman nor Glenn=Crake take them very seriously. But in *Year of the Flood* their presentation is much more sympathetic, and the humanistic challenge to unchecked science accordingly that much stronger. The ultimate intellectual project of God’s Gardeners is to unite the “two cultures” of *Oryx and Crake*: to reconcile science to humanism and find some way to move forward with both.<sup>22</sup>

*The Year of the Flood* reveals that an astounding number of God’s Gardeners manage to survive Crake’s apocalypse, a viral version of the collapse of civilization for which they were all completely unprepared and for which none had Jimmy’s deliberately engineered immunity. They survived (and here the book is almost as straightforwardly moralistic as a fable) because they saw a disaster coming and chose to change.<sup>23</sup> But Atwood’s answer is not that we must all become eco-religious separatists either, anymore than we all must become Crakers; her book is not best understood as a blueprint for utopia, nor as a Bible for the world to come.<sup>24</sup> Rather, I read *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* as asserting through allegory the urgent necessity of radically changing our social relations and anti-ecological lifestyles—of choosing to make a better *social* world before it is too late for the natural one.

In this respect we find Crake’s monstrous plan oddly exemplifies Jameson’s critical notion of the radical break:

For it is the very principle of the radical break as such, its possibility, which is reinforced by the Utopian form, which insists that its radical difference is possible and that a break is necessary. The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by *forcing us to think the break itself*, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things will be like after the break. (231–32, my emphasis)

Indeed, “break” is precisely the figure Crake uses to describe the way his plan snips the thread of epistemic continuity that links each generation to both past and future: “All it takes . . . is the

elimination of one generation. One generation of anything. Beetles, trees, microbes, scientists, speakers of French, whatever. Break the link in time between one generation and the next, and it's game over forever" (223). But of course Crake doesn't really want to "end" the game at all; he only wants to change the way we play, so the game can go on forever.

It was the eco-critic Lawrence Buell who noted, "Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (285), and Greg Garrard (among others) who has replied by noting the fatal internal contradiction of the politics of apocalypse: "Only when we imagine the planet has a future are we likely to take responsibility for it" (107). I take Atwood's two postmodern ecological jeremiads as attempts to somehow bridge this fundamental critical disjuncture: to imagine a future that is *frightening* (as ecological science tells us it must be) without at the same time being *final* (as it so often seems it will be)—a doomsday, that is, to which we are not simply and inescapably doomed. To say that the present has no future is not to say there *is* no future—it is only to say that things cannot continue to go on as they have. The sense of futurity at the heart of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, and I argue the core of its unexpectedly utopian politics, lies therefore not in prediction or in program, but in this reopening of possibility: the assertion of the radical break, the strident insistence that things might yet be otherwise—however that might happen, and whatever else we might become along the way.

## Notes

1. The most common alternative version is "It has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism," and the most common misattribution is to Slavoj Žižek.
2. This mode of thinking is likewise at the core of the time-travel logic Slavoj Žižek has recently embraced as a political response to ecological crisis: "We have to accept that, at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, that the catastrophe will take place, that it is our destiny—and then, against the background of this acceptance, mobilize ourselves to perform the act that will change destiny itself and thereby insert a new possibility into the past" (151).
3. Note the "c" replacing the "s" in "Paradice," suggesting a relationship to gambling or to random chance, which replaces the more traditional notion of an ordered divine plan. In a send-up of trends in twenty-first century corporate branding, most of the companies and products we encounter in Atwood's novel have names with similarly modified or outright silly spellings—HelthWyzer, RejoovenEsence, ANooYoo, etc.
4. The implication of the novel is that Crake has secretly been working on his virus for nearly his entire life, originally testing it on his own mother in retribution for her betrayal of his father; the symptoms of the world-ending supervirus match quite closely the symptoms of the unknown infection that killed her.
5. *The Year of the Flood* explores these same events from the perspective of minor characters from the first book, among them two of Jimmy's former girlfriends, Amanda and Brenda=Ren; accordingly, Jimmy and Crake become background characters in that book, appearing only here and there in unexpected ways. By its conclusion, *The Year of the Flood* has brought us only about a chapter past the cliffhanger that ended the first book—only to abruptly end on another cliffhanger, which still waits to be resolved by Atwood's promised third and final book in the series.



6. The words “zero hour” recur, 374 pages later, as the second-to-last sentence of the novel, now signifying the instant in which a momentous decision must finally be made—mirroring in macrocosm an existentialist dialectic between radical freedom and radical nihilism that recurs throughout the novel.
7. Texas “dried up and blew away” (244); at one point a reference is made to Harvard, “back before it got drowned” (173).
8. Snowman’s interlocutor here is his memory of Oryx, a key character who provides the other half of the novel’s title. Oryx is another of Crake’s employees, hired because of her physical resemblance to the face of an exploited young girl he and Jimmy once saw while watching child pornography on the Internet. (She is initially presented as if she were, in fact, the same person, though by the end of the novel this seems highly dubious.) She, like Crake, has taken a new name based upon a now-extinct animal. While I do not speak much about Oryx in this article, she is in fact a crucial part of Atwood’s critique of contemporary civilization—physically embodying a critique of misogyny and patriarchy that deeply informs both Crake’s plan to remake civilization and encourages us take his solution seriously. As H. Louise Davis has noted, this aspect of the novel’s critique is key to its ecofeminist politics: “Ecofeminism should not simply be about defining or detailing the parallel oppressions of women and nature! Ecofeminism should also aim to provide the reader of both theory and fiction with the language and the tools necessary to effectively perceive and question those patriarchal structures that recklessly limit, oppress, and violate both human beings and their natural=cultural environments” (92–93).
9. It should be noted that Crake’s development of the Crakers appears to draw on a Romantic notion of the natural world as stable and harmonious, which is no longer current in ecological science. On this point, see Dana Phillips’s *The Truth of Ecology* or John Kricher’s *The Balance of Nature*.
10. This alteration takes on a rather more disturbing valence when seen through the eyes of female protagonists Ren and Toby in *The Year of the Flood*. When the Crakers encounter unmodified human women, they read the women as being sexually available (“smelling blue”) at all times, and appear as if they might sexually assault them (409–412). The scene is quite ambiguous, and can be read *both* as an attack on Crake *and* as a validation of his genomic=pheromonic solution to the problem of rape.
11. Such an act of closure has a long tradition in utopian thought, dating back to King Utopus’s foundational digging of the trench that first turned Utopia into an island; see *Archaeologies of the Future* 204.
12. Snowman chooses his new moniker precisely in spite of this rule, as the very word “Snowman” has no referent in the Crakers’ hot, beach climate.
13. Even their version of religious practice, such as it is, is intensely ecologically minded: “After a thing has been used, it must be given back to its place of origin” (363). There are no cathedrals in Craker religion, no waste.
14. In the Bushmen communities which Lee studied, 35% of the population did not work at all; the remaining 65% worked only 36% of the time. The “work week” in this area averaged two hours a day (21).
15. Indeed, Crake believes that the current instance of technological civilization is the only possible version in Earth’s entire history: “Because all the available surface metals have already been mined . . . without which, no iron age, no bronze age, no age of steel, and all the rest of it.

There's metals farther down, but the advanced technology we need for extracting those would have been obliterated" (223). A second industrial revolution is by this logic impossible.

16. Little wonder to find the title for Williams's academic blog reimagining a classic Marxist slogan: the site is not "Socialism or Barbarism," but "Socialism *and/or* Barbarism."
17. In Terry Gilliam's apocalyptic *Twelve Monkeys* (1995)—which shares with *Oryx and Crake* an epidemic deliberately released by a deep ecologist in the name of preserving life on Earth—the architect of the release of the virus likewise frames his doomsday vision in these terms:.

I think, Dr. Raily, you've given your virus a bad name. Surely there is very real and very convincing data that the planet cannot survive the excesses of the human race: proliferation of atomic devices, uncontrolled breeding habits, the pollution of land, sea, and air, the rape of the environment. In this context, isn't it obvious that "Chicken Little" represents the sane vision and that *Homo sapiens'* motto, "Let's go shopping!" is the cry of the true lunatic?

18. One must think here of what Jameson calls "the grandest of all the ruptures effectuated by the Utopian Imagination: namely, the thought of abolishing money and private property" (229).
19. Indeed, Crake's brief appearances in *The Year of the Flood* implicitly suggest he has deliberately left enough humans alive to force this very confrontation, in a sense giving the human race its second chance after all. If we take this implication, the result transforms Crake from the world's deepest cynic into an idealist (of a sort) after all.
20. This idea is quite close to what Tom Moylan has developed in his work on *the critical utopia* and *the critical dystopia*, the latter of which the *Oryx and Crake* series perhaps stands as the paradigmatic example.
21. The best-known version of this quote comes via Walter Benjamin in his essay "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death": "[There is] plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope – but not for us" (Franz Kafka, conversation with Max Brod, cited in Benjamin 116).
22. This synthesis is groped for throughout *Year of the Flood*, and is explicitly evoked near the novel's end: "Some will tell you Love is merely chemical, my Friends, said Adam One. Of course it is chemical: where would any of us be without chemistry? But Science is merely one way of describing the world. Another way of describing it would be to say: where would any of us be without Love?" (358).
23. Among the changes they make, it must be noted, is to become vegetarians (19) and to wear eco-friendly clothes whose dyes turn their skin blue (209), as well as to live in a Garden led by a man who calls himself Adam—all features that link the separatist Utopia of *The Year of the Flood* to the Craker Utopia of *Oryx and Crake*. We also find, late in the second novel, that a splinter group of God's Gardeners helped Crake design and plan the Crakers, further uniting the two groups (412).
24. I want to thank Greg Garrad for challenging me on this point, particularly in bringing to my attention the fact that Atwood was accompanied on her book tour for *Year of the Flood* by a gospel choir singing the Gardeners' hymns. Garrad suggests that the book may, in fact, be a serious attempt to create a Darwinist ecological religion—making the novel quite literally a Bible for the world to come after all. I concede the possibility that this was Atwood's intent, but my feeling remains that the book is most satisfying when read as a broadly satirical statement of the problem rather than a (frankly naïve) solution proposed in earnest.

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