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Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy: Postmodernism, Apocalypse, and Rapture

DEBRAH RASCHKE

THE PUBLICATION OF THE NOVEL *MaddAddam*¹ in 2013 completes Margaret Atwood's trilogy of the same name. *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the first published novel of the series, oscillates between a dramatized present of apocalyptic ruin and a tour de force account of the wastelandic events leading up to that ruin. Both past and present are focalized through Jimmy-Snowman, who has split himself into Jimmy (his corporate-world identity) and Snowman (his post-apocalyptic identity, in which he mourns what has been lost as well as his own beguilement). Also shifting between the past and the present apocalypse, *The Year of the Flood* (2009) focuses on the stories of two women (Toby and Ren) who are not part of the corporate wonderland, thus revealing what it is like to be part of the 99% that make up the pleebland. Finally, the post-apocalyptic *MaddAddam* portrays a ragtag band of human survivors and the Crakers, the ecological humanoids designed to replace humanity, as all begin anew in a ruined world.

Each novel in the trilogy revisits events leading up to the "year of the flood," constantly retelling its portents (Bousoon 10). These portents take many forms: ecological, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual — all vital driving factors in what has produced the near end of the world. However, as I see it, Atwood casts postmodernism, particularly as it emerges in the theories of Lyotard and Baudrillard, as the driving force behind them all. In much of her work, Atwood demonstrates that she has a pulse on the cultural zeitgeist, including postmodernism in its varied forms. Throughout the trilogy, there is some Derrida, some Foucault, some Jameson, but it is Lyotard's emphasis on the utilitarian and performative and Baudrillard's emphasis on simulation that become the subjects of Atwood's critique.² This marks a shift in Atwood's thinking. *The Handmaid's Tale*, frequently seen in relationship to *Oryx and Crake*,³ celebrates postmodernism as a means of subversion, as a way to destabilize an ultra right-wing Gilead that imposes its monomaniacal religiosity on nearly everyone (Raschke 263-64). However, the post-

modernism of the 1980s is not the postmodernism of the twenty-first century. The trilogy, in effect, dramatizes the postmodern condition gone amuck. The once subversive alternative narratives have given way to an implosion of meaning and inefficacy of agency that has produced a kind of cultural paralysis. Co-opted and corporatized, postmodernism's multiplicity of narrative has become a means to distract and beguile the public. In spite of its heterogeneity, postmodernism has produced a lack of imagination bordering at times on a literalism metonymic for not being able to think one's way out of a cultural box. This postmodern condition is indeed the conundrum of the *MaddAddam* trilogy with Atwood, in a narrative twist at the end of *MaddAddam*, giving the narration for the entire trilogy to the literal-minded Crakers. This subtle shift in narration, which sends us back to *Oryx and Crake* for questions regarding "who tells," changes everything. It becomes the palimpsest for understanding what the trilogy critiques and its gestures toward remedy.

By the end of *MaddAddam*, it is clear that Blackbeard has transcribed and compiled the stories of *MaddAddam* and *The Year of the Flood*. After Toby wanders off into the woods, Blackbeard takes it upon himself to put together the stories Toby has collected — a bit like Pieixoto, who arranges Offred's tapes in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In giving the "Book that Toby made" (*MaddAddam* 385) to the Crakers, Blackbeard lists the stories that Toby has written down: Oryx, Crake, Zeb, Adam, Pilar, Rhino, Katrina WooWoo, March the Snake, all of the MaddAddamites, Swift Fox, Amanda, Ren, and Snowman-the-Jimmy (385-86). This compilation accounts for the narrated stories in both *MaddAddam* and *The Year of the Flood*.⁴ It does not account, however, for Jimmy-Snowman in *Oryx and Crake*. Who then tells Jimmy-Snowman's story?

Who *sees* in Atwood's trilogy is fairly clear; who *tells* is trickier. While isolated at AnooYoo in *The Year of the Flood*, Toby, who initially appears to be the narrator of *MaddAddam*, accentuates this distinction when she begins writing on notepaper graced with images of "kissy lips" and a winking eye (*YF* 163, 237)⁵ — in other words, images that prompt us to consider who sees and who tells. In *Oryx and Crake*, the narrative is focalized through Jimmy while, in *The Year of the Flood*, it is focalized through Ren and Toby. In *MaddAddam*, we see primarily through Toby's eyes, although this becomes complicated since what Toby sees at times is conveyed through Zeb, whose voice intermittently becomes

that of Adam, the Rev., and Trudy. Even more complicated, though, is who tells in *Oryx and Crake*. Noting the shifts between the “fictive present” and past memories and fantasies in *Oryx and Crake*, Coral Ann Howells notes how Snowman’s story “is refracted through an omniscient narrative voice” (171). Howells clearly identifies another voice beyond Snowman’s, and since there are no other humans present in Snowman’s rubble-plagued world until the very end of *Oryx and Crake*, this assumption of omniscience seems to be the only plausible explanation. Jimmy thinks of keeping a journal (as Toby did), but in his semi-delirious state living in a tree he never writes down a word. *MaddAddam*, however, violates the narrative expectations laid out in *Oryx and Crake*: there is no omniscient narrator. In *MaddAddam* the diegetic plot begins with a chaotic, uncomprehending camera-eye recording of the untying of the Painballers. It concludes with Blackbeard, as the author of “The Story of Toby,” giving us three alternatives for what happens to Toby, all the while admitting that he actually does not know her fate: “Where [Toby] went I cannot write in this Book, because I do not know” (390). This lack of omniscience then calls into question the narration of *Oryx and Crake*. The only ones left to tell are the Crakers and their descendants.⁶ They are the only ones who bear witness to Snowman’s tale. And the stories they tell (those belonging to Jimmy and Snowman, distinct from those of Snowman-the-Jimmy) are not included in Blackbeard’s list of collected stories. Thus, *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam* (excluding “BOOK”) have been compiled by the Crakers, with some added narrative flourish, and *Oryx and Crake* (and the section “BOOK” from *MaddAddam*) are written by them.⁷

Other evidence of the Craker narration in *Oryx and Crake* emerges in an initial narrative voice that is characteristic of the Craker mind: a proclivity for literalism and consistency, as well as positive attitudes toward sex and a desire for happy endings. The noted “revisions” in the text suggest just that. The first revision changes Snowman’s habit of not dipping a toe in the lagoon “even at night, when the sun can’t get at him” to “especially at night” (6) — the reasoning for which is explained later in Jimmy’s fear of the pigeons and wolvogs. This revision and others like it suggest a shift from what seems to be Snowman’s perspective to some other voice who is editing his past for consistency. The second revision follows the Coleridge quote “Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea!” (232-33). In *Oryx and Crake* the line

reads “Revision: seashore” (10).⁸ In its changing of “sea” to “seashore,” this revision indicates that whoever is narrating *Oryx and Crake* has no awareness that Jimmy is quoting Coleridge nor any understanding that the poem places a high value on metaphor. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” which is interwoven throughout *Oryx and Crake*, dramatizes a crime against nature, which has obvious resonance for Atwood’s trilogy. However, a more subtle and revealing reading of Coleridge’s poem is its chastisement of literalism as the death of imagination. The third use of revision emerges in the change of “tart” to “professional sex-skills expert,” a change that reflects the Crakers’ lack of understanding of slang and their positive attitude toward sex — hardly characteristics particular to Jimmy (11). In commenting on the prospects for “sustainability” or “housebreaking the human animal,” Hannes Bergthaller presciently observes that *Oryx and Crake* provides “only a terrifying literalist answer” to the problems it engages (737) — an observation that cannot be fully appreciated until the culmination of the trilogy in which the Craker narration is revealed.

Grammatical errors and errors of usage also indicate someone who is still learning a language: Jimmy, for example, is described as hiding from the sun “in under the shade of the trees” and as “[leaning] against a tree, listening to the noises off” (6, 168; emphasis added). Typical of the Crakers — for example, “what is toast?” (OC 97) — is an occasional lack of understanding of words, even within the same scene. Snowman’s tears are initially described as “salt water” that is “running down his face”; a page later, this “salt water” is identified as “tears” (11-12). There are, as well, odd uses of metaphor and idiom. Night is described as “dark as an armpit” (107), and Jimmy picks fruit from “life trees” (176). “Fish” in *Oryx and Crake*, suggests a shift in perspective, with the Crakers beginning to be designated as “people” — a concept that is still being debated in the latter part of *MaddAddam*. Moreover, the story of how Snowman was once Jimmy (the “Once upon a time” that begins “Bonfire”) provides the Crakers with what they have constantly desired: the real story of their origin (15). This is the more sophisticated and later version of Snowman’s and Toby’s creation stories, which run parallel throughout *Oryx and Crake* and *MaddAddam*.

Finally, as a new species, the Crakers have a limited repertoire in their production of stories. Jimmy, as a child, sounds very much like the young Crakers: “Why were the cows and sheep on fire?” and “What’s

a disease?” (19). The Crakers, similarly, can utilize only materials to which they have been exposed. Crake’s character, as Michiko Kakutani notes, can be seen as rather “cardboardy.”⁹ Given a Craker narration, though, that “cardboardiness” becomes perfectly explicable, in that Crake is beyond their imaginative repertoire. The Crakers, moreover, can tell only what they know. Oryx and the other trafficked girls are all forced to pee in a row — like the Crakers do (124). For both Snowman and Toby, the red baseball cap and the shiny watch initiate story time and a conduit to Crake as the all-knowing omniscient narrator in the sky. Tellingly, as the story of Oryx is revealed, it is supposedly the all-knowing “shiny watch” belonging to sex-trader Uncle En that keeps Oryx and the other girls from running. Oryx tells Jimmy that Uncle En “would always know where they were: all he had to do was hold his shiny watch up to his ear and it would tell him, because there was a little voice inside it that knew everything” (127-28). Oryx later asks Uncle En if she can “listen” to his “watch” (133) — just as Snowman and Toby, at the command of the Crakers, listen to Jimmy’s watch. The correlation offers a much more sinister twist to the stories that Snowman and Toby concoct to placate the Crakers. And it adds a more sinister twist to the rather too chirpy diegetic survival ending of *MaddAddam*, which extends from “Moontime”¹⁰ to the end of the novel. The “garden is progressing well”; the “Mo’Hair flock is increasing”; improvements such as the installation of “functioning solar units” are being made. There is singing, dancing, music groups, meditations, and peace with the pigeons. After Toby’s death, Swift Fox becomes pregnant again, this time by the Craker “fourfathers,” of which Blackbeard is one. And there are babies — many Craker hybrid babies. With the exception of Blackbeard’s declaration of authorship, *MaddAddam* ends with an affirmation, “a thing of hope” (390). All’s well that ends well. Why then am I not consoled?

If *The Year of the Flood* concludes with a “bitter-sweet, almost fairytale-like ending,” as Hannes Bergthaller suggests (741),¹¹ *MaddAddam* does so even more emphatically. The “it will be fine tomorrow” fairy tale that concludes *MaddAddam*, though, is not the end of the trilogy; it is this non-ending that drives the interpretation of the series. *MaddAddam*’s final two chapters (“Book” and “The Story of Toby”) accentuate again the question of narration. At the end of *MaddAddam*, Blackbeard declares, “This is the end of the Story of Toby. I have written

it in this Book” (390). Initially, it seems that Blackbeard has authored only “The Story of Toby.” Blackbeard, however, also declares that he has written “The Story of Toby” in “this Book” (the title of the final section and chapter of *MaddAddam* he has compiled), which suggests that he has had a hand in the writing of “Book” as well. The trilogy keeps propelling us backward to other chapters, back to enactment of the palindrome of its title.

In this light, *Oryx and Crake* can be read as the later text — both aesthetically and chronologically. It stages an earlier event (Jimmy-Snowman’s life before and after the apocalypse), but it is written during a later time. Following the logic of the palindrome, Snowman’s death at the end of *MaddAddam* is his beginning — the beginning of his narrated story. As narrators in *Oryx and Crake*, the Crakers are no longer the talking, purring vegetables of their predecessors. They still struggle with aspects of language, but they have also become quite adept at using it: “A breeze ruffles the leaves overhead; insects rasp and trill; red light from the setting sun hits the tower blocks in the water, illuminating an unbroken pane here and there, as if a scattering of lamps had been turned on” (95). Such an aesthetic description could rival that of any of human creation and seems to vindicate Crake’s “sweetly [wiping] everybody else off the face of the planet” to make room for a new, kinder, gentler transgenic species (*MaddAddam* 264). And the planet, in some ways, is better off. Gone are the CorpSeCorps who expunged anyone challenging their unchecked consolidation of power. Gone, too, are the pharmaceuticals who embedded in their vitamin supplements hostile bioforms. Gone are the hookworm-like ChickieNobs and the dizzying high-tech everything that produced an untethered world. All gone. The planet, unimpeded by our further environmental meddling, is teeming with new life, even familiar life — the chirping of birds, the usual noises of “faraway barking of dogs, the tittering of mice, the water-pipe notes of the crickets, the occasional grumph of a frog” (*YF* 5). It is as though Atwood’s trilogy answers Shelley’s taunt in “Mont Blanc”: “And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind’s imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?” (142-44). The resounding answer seems clear: still here — and doing much better without you, thank you very much. As Gerry Canavan suggests in his discussion of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, if “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” in a “pseudo-utopia of late capitalism.” (154). This system, along with “the subjectivities and ideologies it produces,” as Canavan rightly contends, “*is* genuinely doomed” (154). In this scenario, we, as a human species, are toast — like the tribe of Zebulon, one of the legendary ten lost tribes of Israel, which, after being exiled, became extinct, their history lost (Wigoder 783-84). Gone, too, is art — that potentially transformative catalyst of the human spirit. All that is left are literary memes — lines quoted without context: “All, all alone. Alone on a wide, wide sea” (*OC* 10). It is Blood and Roses, and Blood won.

Is then the *MaddAddam* trilogy simply a *bildungsroman* for the Crakers? If, indeed, we as a human species are doomed either through obliteration or through biogenic replacement, there is not much to do except ride out the apocalypse — a stance Atwood deplores in *Payback*, whose last chapter depicts an oblivious, pleasure-driven Scrooge who, a bit like the Crakers, prefers to fast-forward through any negativity. Published in 2008 and frequently seen as a parallel text to *The Year of the Flood* (2009), *Payback* dramatizes two alternatives: the planet’s protection or its destruction.¹² Likewise *MaddAddam*, too, poses a choice. One is the blithe acceptance of the belief that “it will be fine tomorrow,” echoed three times in various contexts on *MaddAddam*’s last page alone. The phrase, occurring frequently in Atwood’s novel, alludes to a central line from *To the Lighthouse*, the source for the second epigraph in *Oryx and Crake*. In Woolf’s novel, the phrase “it will be fine tomorrow” ostensibly highlights Mrs. Ramsay’s and Mr. Ramsay’s differing opinions about the weather, but, in actuality, accentuates their differing epistemological positions. Toward the end of *MaddAddam*, the pigeons lead the Bacon Brigade back to the Paradise Dome, where the very mortal bodies of Oryx and Crake are discovered: “There are two destroyed skeletons on the floor of the airlock. The bones have been gnawed and jumbled, no doubt by animals. Rags of mouldering cloth . . . a dirty pink ribbon tied in the long black hair of one of the skulls” (*MaddAddam* 356). Looking at Blackbeard, Toby “can see the sudden fall, the crash, the damage” (356). Thus, when *MaddAddam* concludes with the overly saccharine happily-ever-after ending that gives us many babies, with Toby possibly morphing into a bear, and with “Tomorrow is another day,” which is “a thing of hope” (390), the effect is unset-

ting. This whole idea of surviving the apocalypse is a fairy tale. In fact, “in French, the equivalent formula for ‘they lived happily ever after’ is ‘ils eurent beaucoup d’enfants’: ‘they had many children’” (McCrea 8). Along with the questions posed by the narration, this happy survival fairy tale should send us back to *Oryx and Crake* — back into the seeds of our apocalypse.

Those seeds lie in the postmodern condition — a condition that is doubly mirrored in the trilogy’s pre-apocalyptic world and in the Craker creation. Coined by Jean François Lyotard, and amplified by Jean Baudrillard, the postmodern condition embodies that state in which the real is infinitely indeterminate. Both theorists become part of Atwood’s central critique of postmodernism. For Baudrillard, postmodernity has been a gradual untethering of representation, as reflected in his four stages of simulation. In the first stage, there remains a close resemblance between the image and the referent. In the second stage, noted as the beginning of simulacra and simulation, the difference between what is true and what is false is no longer possible. In a world where a copy of a copy of copy prevails, the original representation can no longer be located. The third stage, linked with sorcery, uses the image as a guise to hide the reality that there is nothing there. It uses presence (an over-saturation of information) to mask absence. The fourth stage has no connection to reality at all (*Simulacra* 6). Postmodernity is thus marked by a simulation of presence that ultimately masks a vacuum. Ideology or “a corruption of reality through signs,” which could still be corrected (see Gilead, for example), gives way instead to simulation — “a short circuit of reality” and a “duplication through signs.” Restoration is a “false promise” because there is simply nothing there to restore (*Simulacra* 27). Referents have no connection to an external reality, a principle that also defines Crake’s rules: “no name could be chosen” that had “a physical equivalent” (*OC* 7).

In a strange replication, Crake’s rules, though, already apply to the pre-apocalyptic world that Jimmy and others inhabit. Jimmy’s mother, in rare moments, “was like a real mother and he was like a real child” (*OC* 30), and his father seemed as though he were “auditioning for the role of Dad” (*OC* 52). Games like Barbarian Stomp (See if You Can Change History!) and Blood and Roses supersede any historical real. Baudrillard contends, “Forgetting extermination is part of extermination, because it is also the extermination of memory, of history, of the

social, etc.” (*Simulacra* 49). Historical and cultural narratives can provide a counter to the narrative of postmodern untethering. However, once the expunction is forgotten, the possibilities for resistance become irretrievable. How does one mourn what one never knew? Crake tells Jimmy, “All it takes . . . is the elimination of one generation. One generation of anything” and then “it’s game over forever” (*OC* 223). And most of the past has already been exterminated in *Oryx and Crake*. Snowman’s memory wanes, and pieces of the past, including a literary past, emerge without any connection to their referents. This “*desert of the real itself*” (*Simulacra* 1) is the fourth stage of Baudrillard’s simulacra. In this stage, the free-floating image “is its own pure simulacrum” and all “referentials” are liquidated (6). It is not that this hyper-reality is fake (that would suggest an oppositional mode in which one could still compare real and fake); it is “another type of ‘reality’” that has become reality itself (Lane 100). While watching some of the top internet sites — hedsoff.com, brainfrizz.com — Jimmy asks Crake, “Do you think they’re really being executed? A lot of them look like simulations” — to which Crake replies, “You never know” and “What is *reality*?” (*OC* 83). Echoing Jimmy’s questioning of whether on-line executions are simulations, Zeb in *MaddAddam* wonders if the intestinal parasites in the game he is playing have any basis in reality (198). Game, thus, becomes indistinguishable from reality. If what is real cannot be known, why waste time staging a protest? It may be only a simulation. This constant state of simulation ultimately provides a perfect smoke and mirrors for those in power to do as they please — for example, to implant new diseases in pharmaceuticals to increase future profits.

This Baudrillardian blankness has at least one other key implication. It provides an explanation for Crake’s death sweep. While at HelthWyzer, Zeb observes that although Glenn (Crake’s pre-apocalyptic identity) seems to have “no scars, no bruises, and no difficulty eating his meals,” something haunts him. Zeb concludes, “Nothing definite, perhaps. More like a lack, a vacuum” (236). It is an affliction Zeb also sees in himself when he catches himself “unawares in the mirror” (*MaddAddam* 236). In other words, it is an affliction of an era: what Baudrillard describes as a state of seeming plenitude in which information abounds (the inundation of everything in *Oryx and Crake*) but which ultimately yields only emptiness — a vacuum that produces metaphysical despair (*Ecstasy* 34).

Liotard's theories of the postmodern also infuse the trilogy. More sanguine than Baudrillard, Lyotard sees the multiple narratives that constitute postmodernity as a means of resisting tyranny.¹³ Noted for his proclaimed death sentence for any grand narrative's ability to capture the complexity of the postmodern condition, Lyotard champions instead a host of smaller, more localized micronarratives.¹⁴ Indeed, since many narrative voices emerge in the trilogy, Atwood may not have abandoned the postmodern narrative entirely.¹⁵ Yet within this multiplicity also lie an ineffectuality and paralysis. *The Year of the Flood* makes explicit what is implicit in *Oryx and Crake* — a world that is heterogeneous, one in which pluralism reigns but is equally ineffectual. Outside the scientific Compound, there are many available, localized options, at least in the plebs where most people live. If a pleeb, one can become immersed in the consumer culture that sells NooSkins and AnooYoo, join a gang, or become absorbed in the new techno culture or the latest sex trot (or in both together, virtual or real). One can dress up as a fish, complete with a scaly suit, and provide sex to wealthy clients. One can join a religious group — the Pure-Heart Brethren Sufis, the Lion Isaiahhists, or the Wolf Isaiahhists (39). But, if a pleeb, it doesn't really matter what one does because none of it affects the power, money, and decisions wielded by the scientific Compounds.

In fact, what has enabled that power is a narrative plurality in which no narrative can be legitimized. As Lyotard suggests in *The Postmodern Explained*, questions of "What ought we to be" and "What might we do in order to be that" are no longer legitimate (48). The result, however, has not been a more equal playing field for all involved, as Lyotard imagined. What has evolved instead in late postmodernism, in which all narratives are possible and all equally de-legitimized, is an emptying out — a power vacuum that has enabled an even more formidable power structure to take hold. The Crakers are, in part, a metaphor for precisely this postmodern dilemma: Toby muses, "It's tempting to drift, as the Crakers seem to. They have no festivals, no calendars, no deadlines. No long-term goals" (*MaddAddam* 136). They blithely inhabit the eternal present. Moreover, the Crakers are *différance* to the hilt.¹⁶ Each one of them is a different skin colour: "chocolate, rose, tea, butter, cream, honey" (8). But this presentation of diversity is shallow, one in which a different skin colour is donned like a different-coloured garment. The Crakers, at least to some extent, suggest a "Benetton-style embodiment

of diversity,” in which multiculturalism is more of a “brand” or “label” (Titley and Lentin 12). Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, thus, observe, “Note how many corporate and public images of smiling and harmonious diversity present, Benetton style, images of smiling, harmonious and fiscal solvent diversity” (21). This outward Craker plurality mirrors what Angela Laflen defines as a “new mass uniformity of thought and action” in the pre-apocalyptic world (108).¹⁷ Such a plurality results in inefficacy and nearly total subordination. Repeatedly pleading in effect, “Oh Snowman, tell us what to do, please tell us what to do,” the Crakers are the perfect corporate citizens. With the exception of God’s Gardeners, many of whom become co-opted into Crake’s biogenic plans, resistance in the first two novels is almost moot. Most people are too encapsulated in their own micronarratives to pay attention to what is going on in the Compounds. The plurality of narratives serves as a diversion — a pretense of possibilities that levels any challenge to another narrative. Whoever wins is best at “language games”¹⁸ — and that would be the Compounds at least up to the year of the waterless flood. It is performativity (not justice or injustice) that determines the worth of an action, a principle Atwood critiques. The levelling of all narratives makes any opposition invisible. Those in power rely on the postmodernity of narrative — on the perception of its hipness, of its progressiveness. It is how the Compounds, a metaphor for corporate power elites, get away with it.

It is indeed this levelling of narrative that initiates the diegetic narrative of *MaddAddam*. The Crakers, believing everyone must be helped, untie the Painballers: “*This rope is hurting these ones. We must take it away*” (13). For the Crakers, the Painballers’ perspective is just as important as the ones belonging to Amanda and Ren. What better way to diminish dissent than to flatten any grievance as just another perspective. For the Crakers, the trauma of sexual violence is simply one narrative among many, which perhaps explains their narrative inability to understand the plight of Oryx. The Crakers further see no reason not to give the Painballers what they want (“the stick thing”) — share and share alike — a decision that would have destroyed them had Toby not intervened. Postmodernity has created a kind of flatness that obliterates any distinction. As Laflen observes, *Oryx and Crake* gives us a world in which visual culture, in its proliferation of the sign, obliterates the ability to see with any discernment. Subsequently, “viewers lose the

ability to distinguish between images that are important and those that are banal" (114). Thus, the depicted "global village" in *Oryx and Crake* "draws little distinction between images of prisoners being executed in Asia, child pornography, and political speeches" (Lafren 114).¹⁹ They all blend hopelessly together, making it difficult to address any afflictions. It is a bit like tuning into the daily news on the internet.

Whether contemplating *Oryx and Crake's* reproof of sex trafficking or the dehumanization emanating from globalization, the "marketing" of death and disease for economic gain by multinational "super corporations," what Sarah Appleton aptly terms the "Corpocracy" (64), one can see that the repercussions of these phenomena are quite real. Likewise, so are the Frankensteinian transgenics, the slow desensitizing of virtual violence and pornography, and the effects of the instrumentalism that drive the pre-apocalyptic world. All are central issues in Atwood's critique.²⁰ Yet locating the concrete reality in any of these issues, let alone finding an effective means to resist, becomes nearly impossible. Posing initially as "honest and trustworthy, friendly as daisies, guileless as bunnies," the Corps avoids revealing its real nature as "tyrannical butchers" (*YF* 266). As a network of power that provides no singular site against which a protest could be lodged, it then extends its "tentacles" in every direction, permeating global boundaries and markets (*YF* 25). In response to the encroaching power of the Corps, Zeb muses that "Old-style demonstration politics were dead" and that "any kind of public action involving crowds and sign-waving and then storefront smashing" would result in being "shot off at the knees" (*MaddAddam* 242). Resistance of any kind, in effect, is dead. Resist, and you fall off a bridge — "Blood gumbo" (*YF* 244).

Even more effective than fear-mongering resistance into a stilted silence, however, is a postmodernizing of resistance in which the production of nonidentity makes moot any sense of resistive agency. This production of nonidentity emerges in a freedom of localized narratives that thrive through what Michael Spiegel describes as "crisscrossing and overlapping authorities brought about by economic globalization" that produce "social and political schizophrenia" (126). What emerges then are "multiple and often contradictory loyalties that can only be reconciled through the fragmentation of the collective, continuous self into a patchwork of distinct and dissociated identities" (126). Crake,

for example, “appears to think and identify as a commodity,” to “both collude with the system and conspire against it” (128). Ren and Amanda both manifest a survivalist spirit, but both also define themselves as commodities.²¹ Moreover, Toby, Amanda, and Zeb are constantly forced to piece together new identities in order to survive — part of the corporate game that just keeps them running. Not only has postmodernism lost its subversive edge but it has also become a conduit for corporate control. The autonomous, unified self indeed may be a fantasy, but by embracing the fragmented and commodified nature of the postmodern self as avant-garde thinking, one falls into the trap of revelling in powerlessness as some kind of triumph. One cohesive narrative may no longer be possible, but discounting all cultural and historical contexts pre-empts the potential for making connections — for finding a resistive narrative. These are brilliant tactics that enable power structures to act unimpeded.

And art? *Oryx and Crake*'s Martha Graham Academy, the liberal arts college, reflects the status of Knowledge defined in Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*: Is it useful? Is it efficient? Is it profitable? Is the curriculum à la carte? Thus, we get a new “curricular emphasis” in the “*Contemporary arenas*”: Webgame Dynamics, Image Presentation, Pictorial and Plastic Arts — all of which prepare their supplicants for advertising slick adages for AnooYoo or HelthWyser (OC 188). Literature, in effect, “shares a spot on the endangered species list” (Laflen 112). If art does present a resisting message, no one is paying attention. Amanda tells Ren in *The Year of Flood* that she is “sending a message” in her art. To Ren's warning that she will get in trouble, Amanda replies that it is “okay”: “They won't understand it” (57). Amanda uses bioforms in her art and then takes pictures of their dissolution. One project involves the arrangement of cow bones, later to be topped with pancake syrup and consumed by insects.²² In another project, “The Living Word,” Amanda, in Derridean fashion, makes “words appear and then disappear” (304). Amanda's art, at first glance, seems simply whacky (particularly when topped with the pancake syrup), but a closer look reveals that it dramatizes the postmodern condition in which the signified is constantly vanishing. More importantly, in conjoining this instability with dissolution, Amanda demonstrates how the postmodern gestures toward extinction. Amanda, in effect, is narrating

the drama of extinction that is already occurring, one to which no one is paying much attention.

This postmodernist romp through contemporary culture in *MaddAddam* ultimately calls attention to the vital need for narrative in the face of postmodernism's levelling of narrative. The dire consequences of gene splicing, transgenic engineering, and "using up the earth" matter.²³ It goes without saying that all who read Atwood through an environmental lens see this as a kind of "moral imperative" — not as simply another narrative on an infinite menu.²⁴ Emphasizing Atwood's commitment to ethics and to an eco-spirituality, Shannon Hengen maintains that Atwood drives her readers to address their spiritual debts in order to find some balance in the universe (134-35). Likewise, J. Brooks Bouson, in "We're Using Up the Earth," suggests that Atwood has "long talked of the moral imperative that drives her work" (23).

"To splice or not to splice" is not, as the postmodern would have it, just one of many possible narratives. It is not, as Lyotard claims in *The Postmodern Condition*, the triumph of "incommensurable" discourses (23). Typical of the playfulness at the heart of the postmodern, the gene splicing in *Oryx and Crake* involves "a lot of fooling around," an "after-hours hobby" (51), a kind of game: Why not cross a raccoon with a skunk? But there are real repercussions to this gaming. Observing the results of this fooling around, Toby, in *The Year of the Flood*, notes how astoundingly quickly the green rabbits, the bobkittens, and rakunks multiply (15). Commenting on *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood has said, "If you are going to do gene splicing, you're going down a very strange path indeed. If you are going to do it on humans, you have to ask yourself, do you want the human race to remain human?"²⁵ The question posed belongs to the realm of ethics, inoperative in the Compounds; that is the purview of the defunct grand narratives.²⁶ Yet if *Payback* functions as a parallel text not only to *The Year of the Flood* but also to the trilogy as a whole, what is required is a stand. As Scrooge in *Payback* becomes increasingly agitated over the decimation of the earth — "the thawing tundra" emitting "immense clouds of methane gas," the "rising sea levels," the "superforce cyclones" — he asks the guiding spirit ("The Spirit of Earth Day Present") if he can "stop all this," to which the spirit replies, "International laws in this area are hard to achieve . . . because

no one can agree on what's fair" (193). In other words, no one can decide on a narrative.

Indeed, the ubiquity of ever-increasing diversions, what Fredric Jameson observes as the distracting quality of postmodernism (ix), feeds this narrative inefficacy. Zeb notes that Bearlift "lived off the good intentions of city types with disposable emotions who liked to think they were saving something" (*MaddAddam* 59). Other diversions simply provide distraction: HottTotts, Nitee-Nite, Extinctcathon, Spandrel, Weather Monsters, and the rabid consumption of plot-driven entertainment, which in the post-apocalyptic world has morphed into the happy stories demanded by the Crakers. Advising Toby on story time for the Crakers, Jimmy counsels, "Stick with that plotline," and Manatee suggests, "Tell them a happy story . . . [v]ague on the details." Such storytelling, Manatee continues, keeps them "placid" (265, 44). What the Crakers desire, though, is much like the plot-driven narrative we are given in *MaddAddam*, much like the too chirpy, too neat survivalist ending of the post-apocalypse. After all, nearly all of our favorite characters are there at the post-apocalyptic party, sipping on bad coffee and munching on kudzu pancakes.

However, given Atwood's propensity for doubling, it is not surprising that the Crakers serve a double function. The Crakers are us, adrift in the postmodern world: our current present. And they are our alien future, or more aptly our lack of a future. The cheerful diegetic ending of *MaddAddam* mirrors our own complicity in Craker complacency, in a too cozy survival narrative that is, in fact, driving us closer to apocalypse. However, like Scrooge in *Payback*, we still have a choice, even though the Craker narration clearly suggests our "toastedness."

That the narration in *Oryx and Crake* is being driven by Craker hands initially produces a kind of horror that conjures the unimaginable — the nonexistence that is one possibility of mortality. It also means the end of human art, which is memed throughout the trilogy — phrases from innumerable works repeated without connection, without context. The Crakers in *Oryx and Crake* have grown immensely in their understanding of the complexity of language, but the allusions to art remain opaque. Only the fragments remain. Allusions to *To the Lighthouse* appear throughout the trilogy, particularly in *MaddAddam*: the use, in various forms, of the line "it will be fine tomorrow"; the

repetition of “Time Passes” (the title of the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*, in which destruction reigns throughout most of the chapters); and the adoption of a mother figure who, presiding over a long dining table, attempts to assuage the post-apocalyptic blues. The most resonant allusion, however, is to the end of Woolf’s novel. In the final line of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily, the artist figure, declares, “I have had my vision” (209); Toby echoes these words at Pilar’s grave, morphing them into an over-the-top mushroom-inspired epiphany in which she is communing with feral pigs. In *Oryx and Crake*, Woolf’s novel becomes an echo without context.²⁷ It is Baudrillard’s fourth stage simulacra, in which the free-floating image is its own referent.

Behind this loss, however, looms another narrative presence who, in a waving of a Prosperian hand, emerges through *Oryx and Crake*’s framing epigraphs, through the ironic market voice that begins *MaddAddam*, and through the multiple literary allusions, including ones to Atwood’s own work. First of all, the second epigraph to *Oryx and Crake* from Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* places the trilogy in a philosophical context. *To the Lighthouse* is, to some degree, a novel about frames and how those frames determine what we see — whether we think it will be fine tomorrow or not. *To the Lighthouse* also addresses the destabilization of the grand narratives (a mark of postmodernism that actually dates back to modernism — despite many postmodern claims to the contrary). This second epigraph, through Lily, poses that decentering question: “Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air?” (180). In other words, is there no Archimedean point? The first epigraph, from Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, provides a clue for interpreting this destabilization, that is, through satire.²⁸ What ultimately is a liberation from imprisoning narrative frames in *To the Lighthouse* (and ultimately in Lyotard’s postmodernism) becomes a conduit for apocalypse in Atwood’s trilogy.

What frames *MaddAddam* is the hyperbolic voice of the corporate market that introduces the novel. Just as *Payback*, published in 2008, functions as a parallel text, so, too, does Atwood’s *Negotiating with the Dead*, published in 2002. Discussing writers, their influence, and the conundrum of inspiration in a market-dominated world, Atwood in *Negotiating with the Dead* expresses hope that the story told will speak beyond market demands. Thus, the market-driven plot summary that

introduces *MaddAddam* provides a frame for the plot-driven novel that follows.

This other “footprint” of a narrative presence, however, ultimately invites a synthesis.²⁹ The allusions to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” as well as the epigraphs, create a synergy that invokes an urgent conversation about art, transformation, and survival. There is an aura of *The Tempest* about Atwood’s trilogy (including the Crakers’ composition being part coral). Prospero, the subject of one of Atwood’s meditations in *Negotiating with the Dead*, asks his audience at the end of *The Tempest* to decide whether he will remain prisoner on his lonely island or be released to return to Milan.

Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be reliev’d by prayer,

He asks if they have been moved by his magic — in essence, by his art. Playing on this invitation to audience transformation, “Death by Water,” the fourth section of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, makes this query to the reader: “O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you” (320-21). It is the second of two direct addresses in Eliot’s poem.³⁰ Invoking the earlier reference to *The Tempest* (“Those are pearls that were his eyes”) in “A Game of Chess” (125), *The Waste Land* likewise invites the reader into either death by water or a sea change. As young Ferdinand in *The Tempest* mourns his father’s drowning, the sprite Ariel sings:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange. (I.ii.397-402)

Readers of *The Waste Land*, though, must piece together the fragments to ascertain that “death by water” is not the only choice: in fact, the allusion in “A Game of Chess” to King Alonso’s drowning is not death at all, but transformation. Like *The Waste Land*, Atwood’s trilogy urges

the reader to make connections — with the referenced art and, above all, with the world. The metaphysical and aesthetic shattering that initiated the twentieth century, what Ian Watt defines as the “twin rubrics” of the twentieth century’s “epistemological crisis” — “the death of God and the disappearance of the omniscient narrator” (39-40) — may never result in Humpty Dumpty being put back together again (perhaps thankfully). It nevertheless does not need to result in the sheer vertigo of late postmodernism, in which every narrative flattens into every other narrative.

I dare say that Atwood’s trilogy is *The Waste Land* of the twenty-first century. Like Eliot, who stages the final fragments of *The Waste Land* as a way out of the wasteland, Atwood stages, with a winking eye, the Craker narration as a means of both shocking us into seeing our extinction and shocking us out of the “I won hormones” (*MaddAddam* 297) that infuse so many survival narratives. The epigraphs and the introduction to *MaddAddam* suggest another narrator behind the Craker narration, one who alludes to many of her previous works: the Scrabble words in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the explorers of *Strange Things* (Crozier and Shackleton), the choice for a future in *Payback*, and the role of the artist in *Negotiating with the Dead*. Scrooge in *Payback* is offered two futures: the one in which we, and the planet, thrive, and the other — the one in which “chaos, mass death, the breakdown of civic order” (*Payback* 201) ensues: “Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London” (Eliot 373-75). Rubble: “Sandcastles in the wind” (*OC* 45).

Like Scrooge in *Payback*, we are being given a second chance — one defined by connection and transformation. If we see the world differently, we might treat it differently — and then, who knows, we might survive. As Shannon Hengen observes, we see hints of a change in Snowman when he “feels a ‘surge of tenderness and joy’ as he watches a caterpillar spiraling down on a thread” (136). Snowman goes on to note that “there will never be another caterpillar just like this one” (41). It is the Mariner’s blessing of the water snakes (285). Like in *Payback*, “the albatross” can be “saved” (199). Atwood’s trilogy thus encourages its readers to “suffer a sea change.” The last chapter of *Oryx and Crake* begins with Jimmy waking to the waves and observing the horizon: “On the eastern horizon there’s a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly glow. Strange how that colour still seems tender” (371). It is the same phrasing that begins the novel, only with an addition: “He gazes at it

with rapture; there is no other word for it. *Rapture*. The heart seized, carried away, as if by some large bird of prey. After everything that's happened, how can the world still be so beautiful?" (371). Herein lies the hope, not in the false survivalist ending of *MaddAddam* but here, in the alternative that prods us toward seeing that sunrise tinged with a greyish haze and a rosy deadly glow that begins *Oryx and Crake* as Jimmy sees that same sunrise at the end of *Oryx and Crake* — not just as a deadly glow — but as Rapture.

NOTES

¹ For clarity's sake, *MaddAddam* designates Atwood's last novel in her series. "*MaddAddam* trilogy" and "trilogy" designate the series as a whole.

² Poststructuralism is most associated with theorists whose primary interest is language. Critiquing the structural aspects of Saussure's work, critics such as Lacan and Derrida emphasize the slippage that characterizes signification. Although postmodernism has some roots in the early part of the twentieth century, particularly in architecture, it is frequently associated with a shift away from the language-based poststructuralism to a critique of culture in which any single defining narrative fails to encapsulate or simply fails entirely.

³ *Oryx and Crake* is frequently discussed with *The Handmaid's Tale*. Coral Ann Howells situates these two novels within the context of Atwood's dystopic vision. See, also, Katherine Synder, who examines the shared traumatic elements and use of "filmic return," and Earl G. Ingersoll, who discusses the two novels as "bookends" (173).

⁴ The one exception is Rebecca.

⁵ In the first passage, one eye is winking; in the second, both eyes are winking.

⁶ Descendants include both the Crakers and the Craker hybrids.

⁷ *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam* are presumably mostly compiled. However, Craker motifs emerge in both, suggesting that the Crakers also had a hand in the narration of these novels as well. For example, the armpit imagery of *Oryx and Crake* emerges in *The Year of the Flood* with Burt the Knob's obsession with little girls' armpits (143). In *MaddAddam*, Zeb, a hero to the Crakers, claims to be wired for singing just as the Crakers are. Zeb tells Toby that sex with Wynette (as opposed to sex with the beheaded Lady Jane Greys) is "real," and Oryx, another of the Crakers' heroes, tells Jimmy, in a slight variation, that "all sex is real" (144).

⁸ Note the punctuation and wording is also slightly changed. Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" reads, "Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea! (232-33). The passage in *Oryx and Crake* reads, "Now I'm alone," he says out loud. 'All, all alone. Alone on a wide, wide sea" (10).

⁹ Cited in Spiegel.

¹⁰ The reference is to the smaller section "Moontime" in "MOONTIME."

¹¹ See, also, Sharon Wilson's *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* for the importance of fairy tales in Atwood's work.

¹² Sarah A. Appleton, Susan L. Hall, and Shannon Hengen also note the importance of Atwood's *Payback*. See, in particular, Hengen, who discusses at length *Oryx and Crake's* connection to the moral debt and soulless consumption addressed in *Payback*.

¹³ In *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Lyotard has become more skeptical of post-modernism, particularly the inhuman.

¹⁴ See Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* for a discussion of the collapse of the grand narrative and his *The Differend* for a discussion of micronarratives and inventiveness as a resistance to univocal meaning.

¹⁵ Roger Davis suggests that Jimmy, by transforming into Snowman, becomes a representative of whiteness and western metanarratives responsible for turning humanity into a "sort of monster." He further notes that the delegitimizing of narrative delineated by Lyotard and the simulation described by Baudrillard encapsulate Jimmy's psyche as Snowman. While I concur with this assessment, I suggest further that these attributes clearly define Jimmy's world before the apocalypse and, moreover, are reasons for it.

¹⁶ Their varied skin colours suggest the ultimate diversity (difference) and the Craker understanding of language involves repeated deferrals, thus invoking Derrida's concept of *differance* (to differ and to defer).

¹⁷ Lafflen notes, "As characters consume and accept, even tacitly, the implicit ideological messages communicated via visual culture, their beliefs and actions are almost exclusively shaped by it" (108).

¹⁸ Commenting on Lyotard's "language games," Madan Sarup suggests, "Every utterance is thought as a 'move' in a game" (134). Thus, those who win out are those who are best at those language moves.

¹⁹ In tracing the effect of the visual image in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, Angela Lafflen observes how contemporary visual culture has produced an increasing dehumanization as well as a scenario that makes resistance nearly impossible, since the "referent" in the latter text has become utterly lost (100).

²⁰ Although many critics address these concerns in Atwood's work, see Michael Spiegel and Gerry Canavan on globalization, Sarah Appleton on corporate death, Theodore Sheckels on Atwood's critique of power, Danette DiMarco on dehumanization inherent to instrumentalism, and Karen Stein on transgenics. See, also, Howells and Bosco on Atwood's dystopic and apocalyptic vision respectively.

²¹ Bouson, in "'We're Using Up the Earth,'" suggests that Ren "views herself solely as a sexual commodity" (14).

²² Amanda's message refers to one of her art projects, which she never finishes, that contains the word "Kaput."

²³ See, respectively, Bouson's "'It's Game Over Forever'" and "'We're Using Up the Earth.'"

²⁴ Many, for good reason, read Atwood through an environmental lens. In addition to Bouson, see Canavan, Hengen, and Maxwell.

²⁵ "She Who Laughs Last" qtd. by Bouson in "'It's Game Over Forever'" (140).

²⁶ Indeed, the grand narratives of the past no longer suffice, as Coral Ann Howells observes of Snowman, who, at the end of *Oryx and Crake*, is "rehearsing old plots from narratives of European colonialism and the Wild West, only to discover none of them fits his present situation" (173). Yet the absence of narrative also fails, as Stephen Dunning argues when he notes that "whatever solutions we may hope for must come at least partially by way of recovery, recovery of some form of great narrative that reestablishes culture firmly in the *cultus* from which science has torn it" (98).

²⁷ Toby's words to herself are "You've had your vision" (223).

²⁸ It is noteworthy that Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* serves as one of the epigraphs to *The Handmaid's Tale*.

²⁹ Shuli Barzilai makes a similar argument of undocumented presence in her reading of *Oryx and Crake* as a revenge story that has its roots in *Hamlet* (90).

³⁰ The first is the transposition of Baudelaire, “You hypocrite lecteur! — mon semblable, — mon frère (76), which, like Baudelaire’s “To The Reader,” invites the reader into the poem. I would argue that Atwood is invoking a similar strategy.

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