

Louise Squire: 'Death-Fear and the Human "Imagination" in Margaret Atwood's "Environmental Crisis" World'

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This essay explores the viability of the theoretical mode of late post-structuralism for the examination of environmental crisis fiction. In particular, it engages with Michel Foucault's "technologies of the self,"¹ Judith Butler's Foucauldian subject "performativity,"² and Emmanuel Levinas' claim that one's ethical relation to other is prior to one's ontological relation to self.³ Contemporary "environmental crisis" fiction, while largely occupied with renditions of the "crisis" scenario, can also be said to take an interest in the human subject as the site of failure and – correspondingly – opportunity. One way, then, to approach such texts is to observe their participation in a specific process of subject repositioning – one that responds to, and arises out of, an "environmental crisis" world. This essay observes such a process at work in Margaret Atwood's two simultaneous works of speculative fiction,⁴ *Oryx and Crake* (2004) and *The Year of the Flood*, (2009), focusing in particular on their foregrounding of a notion that "environmental crisis" is, ultimately, the result of human fear in the face of death. This conception of the human subject specifies its concerns at an existential level, exposing the depth of ontological angst that pervades "environmental crisis" thinking.

From a Foucauldian perspective, all attempts to define the human subject are also manifestations of the cultural or social moment out of which such defining arises.⁵ On this view, while "environmental crisis" fiction seeks to redefine the human (or posthuman) "self" in various ways, its reshaping of conceptualised humanity is correspondingly an indicator of the discursive world of "environmental crisis" in its cultural, and thus the contemporary, moment. Hence, what matters in this Foucauldian sense is the textual remaking of "who we are," in turn invoking the concerns of an unstable present, rather than the reclamation of some essential or idealised human self. This might invite recourse to the notion that poststructuralist relativities are some kind of "cultural prison,"⁶ having no meaning beyond the text within which they are contained. But I would suggest, rather, that the *availability* of the poststructuralist subject for reconsideration, whether in terms of its ontology or its ethical relations to the world, makes poststructuralism a valuable critical tool for the analysis of such texts, whilst supporting contemporary ecological thinking in an *investigational* mode. The

“thinking” that we ‘textually’ do is philosophically important; if we need, amongst other things, to “think” ourselves beyond the mess that – in some sense – we “thought” ourselves into in the first place, the interior meaning of text unfolds such a thinking space.

In its weak sense, the project thus implied – that of defining an ecologically sound human subject – appears to defer to the premise that through “transforming” humanity, a “changed world” might ensue. More pragmatically, the fact that contemporary “environmental crisis” fiction appears immersed in reappraisals of the “human condition” not only exposes but also reinforces the existential angst at work within the mores of the contemporary. This is interesting in itself, in view of the corresponding assertions it projects – whether covertly or overtly – to do with needs of the present; the need, for example, to remodel aspects of humanity’s structural inheritances in line with reassessments of the circumstantial moment. In demonstrating the schematic detail of subject positioning in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, focusing in particular on the way it is tied, quite specifically, to the ontological problem of human death-fear, I hope to sketch out the way this existential angst in turn projects views on certain questions and problems, in turn presenting, critiquing, or justifying various ways forward in the present.

Firstly, a short synopsis of the two novels, in view of their combined exposé of a specific discourse, is required. Both texts revolve around the same key narrative event: scientist Crake’s destruction of the human species as a means to halt humanity’s harmful behaviours. Each text then offers an alternative response to what I put forward as an increasingly prevalent discourse in contemporary fiction, according to which the fundamental cause of “environmental crisis” is the human “fear in the face of death”. This discourse takes one of humanity’s most defining features – that of our ‘mortal’ status, whereby an allegedly human-specific “imagination”⁷ allows us to envisage our impending deaths – as the ultimate cause of our downfall in leading to environmental crisis. In the first text, *Oryx and Crake*, Crake tackles this failure by replacing humanity with ‘the Crakers’, a modified posthuman version with the capacity for “imagination” removed. This modification, intended to eliminate fear of death and thereby elicit more ecologically sound modes of dwelling, is questioned when the Crakers’ imaginations re-develop, undermining, for example, such projects as bioengineering. The second text, *The Year of the Flood* then steps in to address the issue from a different perspective, suggesting that by learning to face death from the outset, as explored in the character Toby, such failures as Crake sought to remedy might instead be avoided. In Toby, the problem of death-fear is returned to the locus of the individual as performatively engaged in its world; this in turn raises questions over the defining of

humanist and posthumanist standpoints as well as their implications for current challenges faced by humanity.

Atwood's strategies, though, as Katarina Labudová observes,⁸ are ambiguous. The two novels by no means offer a straightforward face-off between humanism and posthumanism, or between the evils of technology on one hand and the basic (if we can salvage it) "good" of humanity on the other, as some scholars have concluded. Danette DiMarco, for example, views Crake as the classic *homo-faber* whose conception of the non-human world is purely instrumental, and sees his good friend Jimmy (aka Snowman), left by Crake to survive as caretaker to the Crakers, as the (humanist) site for change.⁹ But, as Hannes Bergthaller points out, '...such readings pass too quickly over both the utter helplessness of Snowman and the terrifying perspicacity of Crake'.¹⁰ The character Snowman, as my reading will expose, provides a neat counter to Crake's biotechnological solution: where Crake's Crakers render humanity "animal", Snowman simply *becomes* "animal" through his dwelling in the post-apocalyptic world. But this ability to adapt to a changed world of the future seems a mere consolation against the matter-of-fact claim that intervention *of some kind* is required in the present. Crake in this sense acts from the deep prescience of environmentalist utilitarianism, sacrificing present (human) lives for the greater good of a more inclusive definition of "life" in both classificatory and temporal terms. His act at the same time symbolises the existential angst that "environmental crisis" engenders, drawing down the impassability of "death" as the means to ring-fence, absolutely, our continued impact on the planet. Even so, his act is one of global genocide, refracting the punishment of death onto a humanity that has failed to change its ways.

By observing the ways the two novels engage with the discourse as outlined, specifically the notion that human death-fear is relational to the emergence of "environmental crisis," we can begin to draw out these complexities. The problem of death-fear appears to be submitted, in the novels, to a three-way treatment of the human "imagination". While the narrative theme of "imagination" has been variously considered by scholars, the question of "death," despite its overt narrative presence in the texts, has received no comprehensive attention. J. Brooks Bouson uncovers a related trope – the degenerative *cannibalism* of excessive consumption;¹¹ Bergthaller, whose reading resembles mine in a number of ways, while not mentioning "death" per se, conceivably includes *fear of it* under his general notion of 'humanity's frailties';¹² Sarah A. Appleton perhaps comes the closest, suggesting that the whole narrative of *Oryx and Crake* is a mythical creation of the narrator's own psyche, thus considering (among other aspects – id, anima, etc.) his *thanatos* and *eros*.¹³ But, even here,

the discourse of ‘death as relational to environmental crisis,’ per se, seems to pass unnoted. Conversely, by highlighting the discourse, its bearing on such themes as “imagination” can be foregrounded, in turn enriching our reception of differentiated subject positioning in the texts.

This compound treatment of the “imagination” in relation to death-fear has three key stages. The first is Crake’s project to remove the “imagination” – a venture intended to re-tame death by rendering the human *animal* in his posthuman Crakers. The second occurs when this project is undermined by “imagination-loving” Snowman, who *becomes* animal with no need for biotechnical intervention. The third arises when, contrary to DiMarco’s assessment, Snowman fails to provide the site for change, opening for reconsideration the idea that human death-fear might be overcome by an animalistic subject-ontology. In this third route the “imagination” is reinvested, through the character Toby, with a form of agency that is performatively conceived, shifting focus from what it means to “be” animal (in being human), to what it means, more broadly, to “live” or “be alive” as one of – or among – the animal species that *is* human.

We start, then, with scientist Crake’s assessment of the role of “imagination” in the human fear of death:

Men can *imagine* their own deaths, they can see them coming, and the mere thought of impending death acts like an aphrodisiac. A dog or a rabbit doesn’t behave like that. [My emphasis] (OC, 139)

Crake’s assertion, here, refers expressly to a philosophical problem: how might we understand the human fear of death? Is it instinctual, as is common to all life? Is it the result of a specifically *human* capacity to envisage past and future? Is it a matter of cultural or social conditioning?¹⁴ The question-mark this places in the narrative goes on to destabilise related discursive avenues within the texts, these being further interrupted by the occasional appearance of Alex the Parrot – a textual motif referring to a real-life parrot whose cognitive, rather than merely mimetic, linguistic capacities signal parity between human and non-human minds. Crake associates death-fear with a specifically human imaginative capacity, nonetheless originating in the “ancient primate brain” (OC, 305). This capacity, in turn, Crake describes as causing the species survival mechanism of procreation to go into overdrive, leading, he says, ‘...as we’ve seen in spades to overpopulation and environmental degradation’ (OC, 345). Taking the line of populationist arguments, according to which the curbing of population levels is paramount to resolving “environmental crisis,” Crake’s removal of the human “imagination” via geo-engineering is thus intended to limit future

population growth and, along with it, the desire for “immortality” that might be said to fuel society’s craving for perpetual youth, as well as such injustices as superfluity.

Crake’s act of replacing humanity with the Crakers, ostensibly, reinstates the human *as animal*. His removal of the “imaginative” capacity, in removing what is generally thought to distinguish human from non-human, at the same time, dissolves the simulative nature of today’s globalising world that such a capacity might be said to construct. This enables the Crakers to adopt a more ‘direct’ relationship with the physical environment. Yet the comic primitivism they subsequently depict undermines the posthumanist ideals that their project relies on, while parodying Romantic calls for a “return to nature.” Ultimately, Crake’s removal of the “imagination” proves ineffective as the Crakers’ imaginations start to develop, undercutting the notion that the human “imagination” might be severed as though it were some separate thing. While the future success of the Crakers is left unresolved, a parallel can be drawn with Snowman in the first novel’s second approach to the human “imagination”.

Snowman (aka Jimmy), once boyhood friend of scientist Crake, is a lover of words, and places high value on the human “imagination”. Following Crake’s release of a lethal virus, as humanity’s edifices crumble, Snowman finds that his words crumble too – this failure of language signalling interrelation of self and its world. Crake, having disclosed his plans to no-one, is no longer alive, leaving Snowman alone except for the Crakers, now in his care. As the contextualising effect of ‘human’ other dissolves, Snowman clings to its remains, lone scavenger of the edible amid toxic remnants of a fallen world. Despite the emergence of new growth, or, in Lee Rozelle’s words, the “liminal ecologies”¹⁵ of this post-apocalyptic world, he fails to identify the non-human landscape as a source of survival; Snowman, we could say, is no animal. Yet, gradually, he comes to encounter his animal self: early on, for safety, he takes to the trees – a symbolic reclaiming of his primate ancestry; ‘[s]ometimes [he] laughs like a hyena or roars like a lion’ (OC, 5); later, when coming across his own underpants stacked on shelves, they seem to him like ‘some kind of weird bondage gear’ (OC, 393); one night, in a dream, he even senses a fanged animal, ‘gazing out from the shadowy cave of the space inside his own skull’ (OC, 307). As the boundaries that previously defined his ‘human’ self lose meaning, he realigns himself with the world within which he emerges: Snowman *becomes animal* with no need for a technological fix.

This transformation effectively counters the means by which Crake sought to tackle the problem of the human “imagination”. That Snowman *becomes animal*, or at least notionally so, reinforces the destabilising of human–animal distinctions implied in the re-emergence of the Crakers’ imaginations. The human, it seems, cannot simply be taken out of

the human; nor can it be so distinguished from animal. However, Snowman, for all his transformational capacities, presents no alternative solution to the problem of death-fear. His personal response toward “death” is one of helpless rage: ‘What’s his life worth anyway, and who cares? Out, out, brief candle. He’s served his purpose as Crake knew he would. He’s saved the children. “Fucking Crake!” he can’t help yelling’ (OC, 125). Thus, despite his ability to realign with the world, Snowman seems unable to exit a mode of self-absorption, making him unable to offer any real site for change.

Yet, it is in Snowman that at least the beginnings of an alternative subject positioning can be discerned. He is bound, as has been established, to the human world through “language” – another old chestnut, like the imagination, in the longstanding philosophical discourse of human exceptionalism. Correspondingly, it is Snowman’s *words* that fail him as the human world crumbles: ‘[h]e has a vision of the top of his neck, opening up into his head like a bathroom drain. Fragments of words are swirling down it, in a grey liquid he realizes is his dissolving brain’ (OC, 175). Where, in the Crakers, the “imaginative” capacity was nullified via a modification of the brain, Snowman’s dual collapse of language and world might be said to create a parallel alteration, for there are now ‘... blank spaces in his stub of a brain, where memory used to be’ (OC, 5). In presenting the brain as adaptive, this simultaneously presents it, together with language, as functioning to construct the world of our embedding – a world which, in turn, demands our participation.

This positioning of the subject *in its world* problematises definitions of the subject that do not account for the conditions of living within which it emerges, or for the other to which its existence is owed. Judith Butler’s work on subject-theorising provides a useful view on this. Building from a primarily Foucauldian subject, Butler discusses a performative mode of being wherein one’s arrival *in the world* precedes one’s forming of self. For Butler, we are ‘beings formed in relations of dependency’.¹⁶ In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) she sets out to show that this does not rule out autonomy; rather, she suggests, it is through the “violence” of our arrival in the world that one acquires the capacity for an ethical response. She states, précising Adorno: ‘The way we respond to injury may offer a chance to elaborate an ethical perspective and even become human’.¹⁷ Working from Levinas, Butler then adds to this “violence” of arrival, the arrival of “responsibility,”¹⁸ proposing – thus – that our violent performative arrival in the world *already* assumes our “responsibility” along with the corresponding need to offer an ethical response.

The narrative descriptions of Snowman’s transformation set the scene for this shift of subject positioning, to be developed later in Toby. As his aloneness intensifies, a pseudo-

presence of other slides up around him so that, 'as often, he feels he has a listener: someone unseen, hidden behind the screen of leaves, watching him slyly' (OC, 51). This conjuring up of other highlights the performative aspect of our existence, as always-already-here in a world that precedes our arrival. As Butler remarks, 'It would seem that one is always addressed in one way or another, even if one is abandoned or abused, since the void and the injury hail one in specific ways'.¹⁹ Gradually, as Snowman is hailed by this void of apocalypse, he comes to accept it as the other within which he is contained, permitting his arrival at the present as an in-the-world being: 'So here it is then', he observes, 'the moment, this one, the one he's supposed to be living in. His head's on a hard surface, his body's crammed into a chair, he's one big spasm. He stretches, yelps with pain' (OC, 312).

This arrival as "violent event" also incurs the arrival, at last (if only just), of Snowman's sense of responsibility. As the first novel comes to a close, a band of human survivors have appeared and he must decide whether to warn the Crakers about the dangers of guns, and of rape. While their naivety could put them at risk, Snowman wonders what effect such words as 'war' and 'rape' might have were they to enter their vocabularies, their minds and thus their lives. Realising the possibilities, he decides that all he will say to the Crakers, before leaving to seek out the strangers, is merely: *Crake is watching over you* and *Oryx loves you* (OC 426). It might be that, in choosing not to prepare them, he has left the Crakers open to danger; on the other hand he might have forestalled their departure onto a journey towards the bleaker aspects of humanity. Either way, this belated development in Snowman only points to a shift that will take shape in *The Year of the Flood*. That Snowman is about to step into a future peopled with strangers seems an anticipatory moment; yet, occurring on the last pages, it also closes Snowman's story for now. Snowman, as we leave him, is barely aware of his own consciousness; weak, confused, and suffering from an infected foot, his deterministic mode of self-absorption seems to have amounted to little more than failure.

The three-way treatment of the "imagination" in relation to "death-fear" and "environmental crisis" now takes its third approach in *The Year of the Flood*. From the very outset this second novel presents an explicit view of 'fear in the face of death'. It is uncalled for, standing contrary to an appropriate recognition of a somewhat religiously conceived natural order.

Vultures are our friends, the Gardeners used to teach. They purify the earth. They are God's necessary dark Angels of bodily dissolution. Imagine how terrible it would be if there were no death! (YF, 4)

This opening sentiment is then set up for evaluation via the character Toby: ‘Do I still believe this?’ [she wonders]. ‘Everything is different up close’ (ibid.). Toby, who we learn lived for some years among the Gardeners, goes on to provide the focal point, in conjunction with fellow gardener Ren, for an appraisal of the God’s Gardeners’ teachings.

The God’s Gardeners are a somewhat mockingly portrayed eco-religious group, who combine a pantheistic Judeo-Christianity with the natural sciences and teach an Epicurean view of death. Epicurus considered “fear of death” to be unfounded because death is beyond experience; one cannot ‘suffer’ as a result of death, as no self remains *to* suffer. He advocated, in turn, a form of ‘garden’ living, which is echoed in the “back to the land” lifestyle of the Gardeners, based on simple satisfaction of basic needs.²⁰ The Gardeners take this a step further, believing that “death” should be positively embraced as a necessary function of life, an idea they continually promote: ‘Should your life be required of you, rest assured that it is required by Life’ (YF, 415-16). While the comical solemnity of their daily practices forms a parody of the deep-ecological position as religious sanctimony, the Gardeners’ emphasis on the vital role of “death” sets up a censure of the same desire for “immortality” that Crake sought to overcome with his technological fix.

The Gardeners, though, differ significantly to Crake in their approach, explicitly drawing “death” into the “imaginative” frame of daily living as the conscious means to overcome fear of it. This can be related to the work of death historian Philippe Ariès, who explores a shift from “tame” death in the mediaeval era, wherein death was a familiar fact of life, to “wild” death in the modern world, wherein death is evacuated from the sphere of the self.²¹ The Gardeners, accordingly, *reclaim* “death,” reasserting it as an intrinsic aspect of the self, while – correspondingly – rejecting modern consumer living. Subsequently, and significantly, it is (on the whole) the Gardeners who survive Crake’s apocalypse, while those caught up in the desire for “immortality” purchase Crake’s Blysspluss Pill, and so *consume* the lethal virus it contains. This outcome seems an approval of sorts of the Gardeners’ practices; not of their valorising of pastoral retreat per se, but of their positioning of death in relation to living – for, overcoming “fear of death” clearly equates, here, with living, not with dying.

This biocentrically legitimate approach to death as an aspect of “life” is presented, in *The Year of the Flood*, as attainable through linguistically performative means. The human “fear of death” is confronted directly as part of the Gardeners daily practices, wherein death’s ‘value’ is made a recurrent ceremonial theme, as well as being drummed into the Gardeners

from a young age. The Gardeners, even the young ones, consequently – at least theoretically – do not fear death:

None of it scared the real Gardener kids. They were used to it. They'd even make fun of it ... "We're all gonna diiiie," they'd say, making dead person faces. "Hey, Ren. Want to do your bit for the Cycle of Life? Lie down in that dumpster, you can be compost." "Hey, Ren. Want to be a maggot? Lick my cut!" (YF, 71)

This deliberate drawing of "death" into the daily practices of living, via oral repetition in speeches and sermons, can also be viewed in terms of Foucault's "technologies of the self". In his study of ancient Greek and Roman civilisations Foucault observed the way "care for the self" incorporated an acceptance of death.²² He went on to suggest that human subjects can choose to 'transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality'.²³ While this might seem precariously wide open, it relates in Foucault's thought to the way care for the self, in ancient Greece, was directed toward the polis, rather than the individual of our post-Freudian conceptions.²⁴ Concern with individual wellbeing is thus seen as contingent to today's world, rather than as essential to the human subject. The Gardeners, in countering death-fear through performative practices, repeatedly state that the wellbeing of the world at large – human and non-human – is *served* by the death of the self. In both its literal and figurative senses, this reveals a destabilising of the individual human subject from its specifically human world, repositioning it as performatively embedded within an ecological whole, to which it owes an ethical response. While Foucault's work does not specifically invite such a leap, the discursive world of Atwood's creation certainly suggests it, amounting fairly straightforwardly to an extension of ethical interest to that beyond the specifically human.

Toby provides an important perspective on this, supplementing the Gardeners' teachings with a reflexive mode, without which the effect of the Gardeners' teachings might seem, alarmingly, rather more like Huxlean sleep-learning. Toby is sceptical towards the Gardeners' religiosity and similarly resistant to their romantically inflected appropriation of "nature". When Gardener, Pilar, says to her: 'Nature never does betray us. You know that?' Toby, we hear, 'knew no such thing' (YF, 203). Yet Toby does not dismiss the Gardeners' teachings; rather, her scepticism sets the tone for her repositioning of the problem of human death-fear in relation to the "imagination". She engages with the Gardeners' views on death on her own terms, the result being, for Toby, that when it comes to the apocalyptic moment (assumed by the Gardeners to be the Waterless Flood, God's punishment for humanity's destructive ways), she responds quite differently to Snowman. Where his "arrival" does not occur until late in the first text, Toby, in *The Year of the Flood*, rallies almost at once.

The effect, on Toby, of the Gardeners' practices, is best illustrated in a narrative event that occurs close to the end of this second novel. It is post-apocalypse, and the landscape now holds such dangers as feral genetic hybrids and the odd band of aggressive humans. Toby is journeying with Ren, and they come across one of their Gardener friends, Oates, who has been slaughtered and strung up in a tree (YF, 450ff). While Ren requests that they stop and perform a burial, Toby insists that they move on, focusing on biological "survival". At the same time, an alignment is set up between Oates' death and that of Laurence Titus Oates of the Scott Expedition, as we are reminded of his famous words: 'I am just going outside and may be some time' (YF, 486). This double-death of Oates can be viewed under the terms of Levinas' claim, as drawn into Butler's performative subject mode: that one's ethical relation to other is prior to one's ontological relation with self.²⁵ The idea of "sacrifice," to which the double-death of Oates alludes, takes on an interesting definition under these terms. "Sacrifice" is, of course, a loaded term and might seem to suggest, here, that the human race should make itself scarce, allowing the natural world to recover, as is put forward in Crake's act. However, Toby's response to Oates' death, less drastically, simply responds to "death," when it occurs, as an event that is necessary for (all) "life". While Toby, we find, is no less traumatised than Ren by the death of their friend, she refuses to participate in what Derrida refers to as the 'trespass of "death,"'²⁶ by which he means the constructing of narratives to safeguard us from it. Her "imagination" is held in check on this matter. Or should we say, rather, it has been *re-invested* with the Gardener ideal: when death is requested of you, it is required by life.

In this reading of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, a 'square peg round hole' issue does seem to emerge; for, even as this last example shows, whatever is presented is simultaneously – at some point – undermined. While the schema applied provides a surface foothold for exploration, Atwood's strategy with regard to the problem of the human subject's relation to "death," thus to "life," and to "all life," at the end of the day, maintains its ambiguity. As Labudová remarks, Atwood's fiction 'does not comply with fixed categories'.²⁷ In presenting ontological dilemmas, the two novels quite consciously play with a broad range of ideas from philosophy and science, whilst freely abandoning the rigor that might be said to complete them. The novels are in this sense classifiably postmodern, and in many respects – such as their specific use of Derrida (a matter I have hardly touched on) – self-consciously poststructuralist. Butler's work, together with that of Foucault and Levinas, is amenable to all this, for it allows the application of such a schema, whilst also making

room for the undecidability of pegs and holes. They seem, in fact, to add to positions drawn, facilitating a ‘disturbed’ space around them, within which to “think”.

What I hope, then, to have achieved through this application of a particular set of poststructuralist thinkers, is a means to track the two novels’ experimental rendering of the problem of humanity’s death-fear, as applied to alternative subject positions: first to Crake (and the Crakers), then to Snowman, and finally (or, almost finally) to Toby. The shift I have traced functions to position the problem of human “imagination” in different ways, with specific reference, in each case, to the subject’s relation to the problem of human death-fear. At the same time, such a schema raises further matters for consideration.

Firstly, in responding to a problem assumed within the two novels, that of the projected failure of humanity to respond to environmental crisis, it raises the issue of the need for intervention in some form. Where Crake’s act, arguably, points to the need for intervention,²⁸ Toby’s positioning supports such need by justifying its coherence. In Toby, the human subject is embedded within a world to which it owes an ethical response, acquiring “responsibility” through the “violence” of its performative “arrival”. The crux of this intervention is that it is conducted through the mode of “life” and “living,” as opposed to the mode of “death” as engendered by Crake. Yet, even this is finally undermined, only occurring on the last pages. Ren, standing outside the schema described, has throughout the second novel viewed Toby with a mix of admiration and resistance. As the second novel draws to a close, she provides witness to a curious, and subtle, reduction of Toby’s character, indicating to the reader that the persistent questionability of all means is still at stake.

Secondly, and finally, this whole scenario is clearly in dialogue with a deeper set of issues. The two novels, in taking the distinctive “what are we, as humans?” anxieties of today’s world to a baseline that amounts to an *existential* crisis, construe the problem of *environmental* crisis as ‘discursively’ ontological. In pointing to the active function of this existential angst, the two novels thus interrogate and re-present a question of our era, pushing it to its limits, seeming to suggest the need to address it if we are to move on.

Notes:

1. See: Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (eds.) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
2. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005).
3. Emmanuel Levinas, in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Philosophers: The phenomenological heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) pp. 57-8.
4. The term "Simultaneous" refers to the way both texts revolve around the same set of narrative events, albeit from varying standpoints. See Margaret Atwood, Coyne interview, 2009. Atwood also suggests that there may be a third simultaneous novel to join these first two. This may, of course, call for the reconsideration of readings of the first two.
5. For example see Foucault's famous discussions with Chomsky, who argued for an intrinsic 'human nature', whereas Foucault located Chomsky's argument as itself a product of a certain cultural and intellectual moment. Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature* (New York: The New Press, 2006).
6. Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 46.
7. Here, the human "imagination" is understood as having the capacity to conceive of the dynamics of past, present and future, whereas longstanding views of animal minds assess animals to live merely, and absolutely, in the present, with any death-fear being purely instinctual.
8. Katarina, Labudová, 'Power, Pain, And Manipulation In Margaret Atwood's *Oryx And Crake*.' *Brno Studies in English* 36.1 (2010): 135-146, p.136
9. Danette DiMarco 'Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained: Homo Faber and the Makings of a New Beginning in *Oryx and Crake*'. *Papers on Language and Literature* 41.2 (2005): 170-195p. 170
10. Hannes Bergthaller 'Housebreaking the Human Animal: Humanism and the problem of sustainability in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*'. *English Studies* 91.7 (2010): 728-743. p. 735.
11. J. Brooks Bouson, "'We're Using Up the Earth. It's Almost Gone": A Return to the Post-Apocalyptic Future in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*'. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46.9 (2011): 9-26.
12. Hannes Bergthaller, 'Housebreaking the Human Animal' p.739.
13. Sarah A. Appleton, *Once upon a Time: Myth, Fairy Tales and Legends in Margaret Atwood's Writings* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) p. 10.
14. This is a broad and complex area of dispute involving philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, the empirical investigations of science, behaviourism and so on, also infiltrating the realm of psychoanalysis.
15. See Lee Rozelle, 'Liminal Ecologies in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*' *Canadian Literature* 206 (Autumn 2010): 61-72.
16. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 20.
17. Ibid., p. 101. Here, Butler is summarising her account of Adorno.
18. Ibid., pp. 84-101. Here, Butler integrates ideas from Laplanche and Levinas.
19. Ibid., p.51.
20. See Epicurus, *Letters, Principle Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings*, tr. Russell M. Geer (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1964).
21. Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Towards Death: from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974).
22. Michel Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview With Michel Foucault on January 20th, 1984' (Trans. J. D. Gauthier). In Burnauer, J., & Rasmussen, D. (eds.), *The Final Foucault* (London: MIT Press, 1988), p. 9.
23. Michel Foucault, in Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (eds.) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault*, p. 18.

24. This does not mean that self is denied as such; rather one takes care of the self as part of one's participation in the polis. See further discussions in Burnauer, J., & Rasmussen, D. (eds.), *The Final Foucault*, p. 7ff.
25. Emmanuel Levinas, in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Philosophers: The phenomenological heritage*, p. 57.
26. See Derrida's discussions in: Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993)
27. Katarina Labudová, 'Power, Pain, And Manipulation In Margaret Atwood's *Oryx And Crake*', p. 136.
28. Hannes Bergthaller takes the view that 'Crake's posthumanist scheme for attaining sustainability, horrifying as it is, must not be dismissed too easily'. 'Housebreaking the Human Animal', p. 741.

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