

English Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/nest20>

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Available online: 27 Oct 2010

To cite this article: Hannes Bergthaller (2010): 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, 728-743

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2010.518042>

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Housebreaking the Human Animal: Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*

Hannes Bergthaller

This article discusses Margaret Atwood's novels Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood in the context of sustainability. The novels present the ecological crisis as arising from flaws in humanity's biological make-up; sustainability is thus a question of housebreaking the human animal, that is, of aligning human behaviour to the requirements of the planetary oikos. Through her protagonists, Atwood explores possible answers to this question which can be understood as anthropotechnologies in the sense outlined by Peter Sloterdijk in his controversial essay "Rules for the Human Zoo". Similar to the latter, Atwood's novels arrive at a qualified humanism informed by evolutionary biology and disenchanted with human nature.

Being a literary scholar can be a frustrating business these days. While colleagues in the natural sciences are hauling in grant money by the millions, funding for literary studies is shrinking. Literary studies are hankering for relevance, desperately trying to demonstrate their usefulness to university administrators and the public at large. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) delivers, among other things, a biting satire on this state of affairs; Martha Graham Academy, the decaying liberal arts college at which the novel's protagonist Jimmy enrolls while his scientifically gifted friend Crake is recruited by the prestigious Watson-Crick Institute, has reacted to the shift in its social environment in a way that will ring familiar to most scholars in our profession: "Our Students Graduate

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With Employable Skills, ran the motto underneath the original Latin motto, which was *Ars Longa Vita Brevis*”.¹

To traditionalists in our field, linking literary studies with the discourse of sustainability may seem like a similarly transparent bid for topicality—an attempt to legitimize the work we do in terms which, while they might successfully curry favour with those who have their hands on the financial spigots, are fundamentally alien to it. Such critics will probably harbour similar reservations about ecocriticism more generally. The first half of this essay argues that the idea of sustainability, and the question of species survival lying at its heart, poses a direct challenge not only to ecocritical orthodoxy, but to traditional conceptions of the humanities, as well. It challenges ecocriticism insofar as it exposes the untenability of the normative conceptions of nature which, under the name of ecology, have informed much ecocritical work. It challenges the humanities insofar as it forces them to revise the very understanding of *humanitas* that has traditionally underpinned them, and to recognize the arts as “anthropotechnologies”,² in Peter Sloterdijk’s terms: they are technologies of self-domestication that deal with human beings as evolved, biological creatures so as to make them governable. They are thus located on the same conceptual plane as other forms of bio-political control as Michel Foucault has described them—a part of the attempt to “rationalize the problems ... of a group of living human beings constituted as a population”.³

I then proceed to show how Atwood’s two most recent works of speculative fiction speak to these issues. Both *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009) are principally concerned with the question of what role language, literature and, more generally, the human propensity for symbol-making can play in our attempts to deal with the ecological crisis—a crisis that Atwood describes as arising from flaws in humanity’s biological make-up. Jimmy and Crake (and the academic institutions they attend) stand for two different ways of tackling these flaws: traditional humanism, which in *Oryx and Crake* appears to have pathetically failed, and an aggressive posthumanism that ruthlessly remodels human nature according to “ecological” criteria—an approach whose triumph the novel depicts as indistinguishable from catastrophe. *Oryx and Crake* thus ends with a conceptual impasse that Atwood attempts to resolve in *The Year of the Flood* by retrenching to a qualified humanism informed by evolutionary biology and disenchanted with human nature. To what extent this is a viable model for ecocriticism will be discussed in the concluding section of this essay.

¹Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 188. Further quotations from the novel, abbreviated *OC*, are given as in-text references.

²Sloterdijk, 23.

³Foucault, 73.

Sustainability, Ecocriticism, and Romantic Environmentalism

Sustainability is a notoriously fuzzy term; as Egon Becker, Thomas Jahn, and Immanuel Stiess put it in their introduction to a volume on sustainability and the social sciences, “the only consensus on sustainability appears to be that there is no shared understanding”.⁴ It is, of course, precisely this lack of definition which also constitutes the term’s remarkable serviceability. Put into circulation by the UN’s Brundlandt commission in 1987 partly in response to the grim neo-Malthusian scenarios which had dominated environmentalist discourse during the 1970s, the semantics of sustainability have since then filtered down into all the subsystems of society. In public discourse, sustainability frequently figures as a broader, more accommodating, and less disgruntled version of the environmental policies of the past, with a substantially expanded catalogue of desirabilities—we no longer just want to preserve certain natural habitats or reduce the quantity of particular harmful substances in the environment, we want to achieve these goals *while at the same time* allowing for further technological, economic, and social progress on a global scale. We want to alleviate poverty and foster individual liberty in what used to be called the Third World while holding on to the good life we have created for ourselves in the First, at the same time that we preserve the integrity of the natural world for future generations.⁵

The amorphousness of this “vision” has fed suspicions that sustainability is a vacuous concept, that when we say sustainability, what we mean is simply that we want to have our cake and eat it, too. Sustainability appears to be a markedly “shallow” reformist version of environmentalism. It is therefore not surprising that ecocriticism, which remains strongly influenced by Deep Ecology, has by and large kept it at arm’s length. John P. O’Grady, one of the few ecocritics to engage explicitly with the idea, has remarked that in its official formulations, sustainability has “fallen too much under the sway of the reductionism and rational materialism that mark our academic, corporate, and bureaucratic culture”;⁶ it excludes what ought to be at the very heart of any attempt to achieve a viable relationship with the natural environment: the realm of the imagination, as it finds expression in literature and the arts. It is through the imagination alone, he argues, that we come to recognize what “truly sustains us”—our “kinship” with the non-human world.⁷

The idea that the roots of the ecological crisis are to be found in a failure of the imagination, and that literary studies—the human imagination being their home turf—therefore have an important role to play in understanding and overcoming this crisis, is foundational to most forms of ecocriticism. O’Grady’s formulation of this idea is broadly representative for what I have referred to as ecocritical orthodoxy.

⁴Becker, Jahn, and Stiess, 4.

⁵Which is not to deny that a sophisticated “green politics of consumption” might hold considerable promise; see Soper, Ryle, and Thomas, eds.

⁶O’Grady, 7.

⁷Ibid., 8.

According to O'Grady, the failure consists in a misrecognition of the ecological relationship which ties humans to their natural environment—a relationship that he describes as a kind of ecological *a priori* underlying human existence and imposing ethical obligations on us: “though we may not always be able to perceive the connection, or perhaps ... even resent it, it remains intact and cannot be severed. Trusting that this connection persists, we each endeavor to improve our perception, which is directly linked to how we live our lives”.⁸

Like most environmentalist thought in the twentieth century—much of ecocriticism included—O'Grady's conception of the ecological relationship, and the social forces which obscure it, is a continuation of Romantic critiques of modernity.⁹ Such critiques saw a hubristic, domineering rationality pitted against an original, organic unity encompassing both man and nature. In giving voice to this original unity, the artistic imagination functions as a corrective to the predations of rationality. Environmentalists assumed that ecology could provide a scientific basis for these Romantic intuitions: it showed that humans and their fellow species were bound together into a single “household”. Unlike the other natural sciences, ecology seemed to underwrite a normative conception of nature: the idea there is a stable and knowable natural order within which human beings have their proper place. Thus ethical behaviour could become, in O'Grady's words, a matter of “perception”.¹⁰

Within this conceptual framework, all solutions to the ecological crisis are variations on one basic injunction that one might designate as the *ecological imperative*: humans ought to acknowledge (to properly perceive) that they are a part of nature and behave accordingly. As we shall see, Atwood's novels expose the woeful inadequacy of this formula as an ethical foundation for humanity's relationship to its natural environment. In *Oryx and Crake*, it is the genetic engineer Crake who takes the realization that humans are a biological species like any other to its radical conclusion—with a scheme that effectively vitiates the very possibility of ethical choice. On the other hand, the protagonists of *The Year of the Flood*, a radical environmentalist sect named “God's Gardeners”, must resuscitate the Biblical myth of the Fall in order to explain the strange fact that humans, in order to behave naturally, must cultivate themselves. Both novels thus point to the paradox implicit in the ecological imperative, a kind of performative contradiction which becomes obvious as soon as it is slightly reformulated: humans *ought to* behave like a part of nature because they *are* a part of nature.¹¹

Romantic environmentalism obscured this paradox; the idea of sustainability, properly understood, forces us to confront it. Scientific ecology has come to recognize that ecological processes and evolutionary history as a whole are characterized as much by chaotic fluctuations as by phases of stable equilibrium. Nature itself displays no preference either way. Against this background, it becomes

⁸Ibid.

⁹As Timothy Morton (7ff) argues, along with many other scholars.

¹⁰O'Grady, 8.

¹¹If they were indeed a part of nature, the injunction would be meaningless. See Bergthaller, 107ff.

much more difficult to denounce environmental degradation as “unnatural”—indeed, it is quite common for populations of natural species to increase exponentially until they destroy the environmental conditions which support them.¹² From this perspective, the current development of human society appears not at all as something distinctive, but rather as only natural, all too natural.

So humans are indeed part of nature—but, contrary to the assumptions of Romantic environmentalism, there is little comfort in this realization. While the idea of sustainability is often advanced in the terms of traditional environmentalism, as a call to heed the laws of nature, in practice it amounts to a rejection of any normative claims brought forward in the name of nature; after all, no other species ever *decided* to impose limits on its interactions with the environment in order to perpetuate its own existence. The fact of our naturalness does not answer the question of how we ought to live—it merely sets a base line for any attempt to formulate an answer to that question. The problem of sustainability thus turns out to be coterminous with another, much older but not necessarily more familiar problem—a problem which stands at the very centre of the humanist tradition: how to tame the human animal?

Housebreaking the Human Animal: *Oryx and Crake*

This is precisely the form in which the question of sustainability is raised in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. The ecological catastrophe against the background of which the lives of the characters in these novels unfold, and on which they provide a running commentary, is presented as being the result of a breakdown of culture, where the latter is understood as a form of *self-domestication*. Modern society, Atwood suggests, is collapsing because it has failed to produce workable strategies for taming the human animal.

This note is sounded already in the opening section of *Oryx and Crake*, titled “Mango”, which depicts the novel’s protagonist and focalizer Snowman/Jimmy as he wakes up to another day among the post-apocalyptic debris littering the beach where he has taken up his abode—the sole human survivor, to his knowledge, of the plague engineered by his former classmate Crake, with the exception of the genetically altered humanoids, referred to by Snowman as “Crakers”, whom Crake has created to replace mankind. The scene is a meticulous description of the order Snowman has imposed on himself in order to stay alive, of the planned maintenance of bodily functions: scratching bug bites, “around but not on the itchiest places, taking care not to knock off any scabs” (OC, 3); putting on his bedsheet and his “authentic-replica Red Sox baseball cap” after checking it for vermin (OC, 4); urinating only at the designated spot; carefully rationing his food. The peculiar pathos of the scene arises from the fact that these rudimentary forms of self-discipline are no longer synchronized with a social order that could give them meaning, a fact powerfully symbolized by Snowman’s broken watch: “Out of habit he looks at his watch. . . . A

¹²See Reichholf, especially 35ff.

blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is" (OC, 3). The concluding paragraphs of "Mango" comment more explicitly on the relationship between large-scale social order and individual self-control:

"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. He has the feeling he's quoting from a book, some obsolete, ponderous directive written in aid of European colonials running plantations of one kind or another. . . . They would have been told to wear solar topis, dress for dinner, refrain from raping the natives. It wouldn't have said *raping*. Refrain from fraternizing with the female inhabitants. . . . He bets they didn't refrain, though. Nine times out of ten. "In view of the mitigating," he says. He finds himself standing with his mouth open, trying to remember the rest of the sentence. He sits down on the ground and begins to eat the mango. (OC, 4–5)

Snowman fails to restrain himself from eating the mango, just as his imaginary colonial officials failed to refrain from raping the natives. Spurious as that parallel may seem at first blush (there is no good reason for him not to eat the mango), it makes sense against the backdrop of Jimmy's life as narrated in *Oryx and Crake*.¹³ In this narrative, Jimmy's failure to discipline his sexual urges is a dominant theme: he is a chronic seducer of women who dumps them as soon as they begin to bore him or start to demand serious commitment—and a master at crafting exit strategies and mitigating circumstances which allow him to shuck responsibility for his behaviour. The parallel also makes sense in terms of the novel as a whole, because Jimmy's own failure is presented as symptomatic for the larger failure of his culture to tame the destructive appetites of its members. Indeed, Snowman's invocation of colonialism is apposite in more than one way: firstly, because sexual violence against women and children is Atwood's most important trope for the general breakdown of cultural restraints; secondly, because European colonialism is the direct historical predecessor of the exploitative transnational capitalism Atwood excoriates; and thirdly, because like the latter, it was a system that, even while it cast itself as a force of civilized order, in fact worked to disinhibit its functionaries. The culture in which Jimmy grows up has, of course, given up any pretence of disciplining people's desires. Instead, it has instated their stimulation and gratification as the central object of the social order—a situation that is neatly emblemized by yet another instrument of time-keeping, complementing Snowman's dead watch in the "Mango" section: the "pink, phallus-shaped . . . Cock Clock, given to him as a joke by one of his lovers" (OC, 284). Humanism, Sloterdijk has argued in his controversial essay "Rules for the Human Zoo", is essentially the belief in the domesticating power of the written word: "That which has been known since the days of Cicero as *humanism* is in the

¹³"Snowman" is the name by which the focalizer refers to himself in the diegetic present, whereas "Jimmy" is the name he bore in his former life. I use the names accordingly.

narrowest and widest senses a consequence of literacy.”¹⁴ Like all media, literacy is an “anthropotechnology”, a “means of communion and communication by which human beings attain to that which they can and will become”.¹⁵ As such, literacy has always stood in competition with other media. In Roman times, humanism championed literacy against the bestializing influence of the gladiatorial games; more recently, it has pitted itself against popular music, television, and computer games, which it denounces as giving free rein to people’s worst impulses. At the heart of the humanist enterprise, Sloterdijk contends, is a pastoral fantasy: it is a discourse about the right means for taming the human animal in which the humanist casts himself in the role of the shepherd.¹⁶ What humanists have blinded themselves to is the fact that a shepherd does not only herd but also cull, that he is both a herder and a breeder. For all of its professed harmlessness, and largely unbeknownst to itself, humanism was thus engaged in what amounts to a eugenicist project *avant le lettre*. That humanism continues to deceive itself about this fact is the reason why it finds it so difficult to muster an adequate response to the challenges of the dawning biotechnological age.

Atwood’s *Snowman* is the unwitting inheritor of this humanist tradition, and the perfect embodiment of its perplexity as it is faced with the biotechnological hyperbolization of its own animating fantasy: at the novel’s opening, he is literally the shepherd of the Crakers, whom he has led out of “Paradice”—the laboratory where Crake kept them sheltered until he was ready to unleash the plague—into the promised land which Crake has prepared for them. *Snowman* teaches them to avoid the dangers of this post-apocalyptic world, tries to explain the puzzling remainders of a past which must remain essentially incomprehensible to them, and furnishes them with a cosmology in which Crake and his companion Oryx serve as watchful, beneficent deities.

Snowman thus plays Moses to the Crakers, as Sarah A. Appleton has pointed out.¹⁷ What makes his assumption of that role so profoundly ironic is that the Crakers do not really require his services, at all. Unlike the Israelites, they do not need to be given the Law—they have already been domesticated, as it were, and are far better adapted to this new world than *Snowman*, who is painfully aware of his own atavism. Not only do they have “a UV-resistant skin, a built-in insect repellent, an unprecedented ability to digest unrefined plant material” (OC, 304)—Crake has carefully eradicated those biological traits of older humanity that have led it down the path to ecocide:

What had been altered was nothing less than the ancient primate brain. Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world’s current illnesses. ... Since they were neither hunters nor agriculturalists hungry for land, there was no territoriality. ... Their sexuality was not a constant torment to them ... : they came into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than

¹⁴Sloterdijk, 12.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 20ff. Peter Sloterdijk traces this idea backwards through Heidegger and Nietzsche to Plato’s *Republic*.

¹⁷Appleton, 17.

man. . . . They were perfectly adjusted to their habitat, so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons, or, for that matter clothing. They would have no need to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money. (OC, 304)

Thus Crake has literalized the pastoral fantasy of humanism—he has employed the tools of genetical engineering in order to breed the wildness out of man, creating a species of human beings that will be congenitally unable to soil the planetary *oikos*. The Crakers have been thoroughly and permanently housebroken.

“Du mußt dein Leben ändern”: Art Versus Genetic Engineering

Most readings of *Oryx and Crake* view Crake primarily as an embodiment of the corrupt culture that is wrecking the planet, contrasting him to flawed but nevertheless repentant Snowman. As Danette DiMarco writes: “Too much a product of a profit-driven world who mirrors its economy of selfinterest, Crake emerges as the quintessential *homo faber*, making it unlikely that any kind of positive social change will happen directly through him. Instead, . . . Snowman serves as a potential site for change.”¹⁸ This perspective on the novel is both superficially plausible and comforting to literary scholars, as it nicely lines up with humanist presuppositions. After all, Jimmy is one of us—a “word person” (OC, 25), as his father points out—whereas Crake seems to represent the “numbers people” who keep pushing the limits of humanity’s manipulative powers but lack the empathy and imagination to understand the consequences of their actions.

However, such readings pass too quickly over both the utter helplessness of Snowman and the terrifying perspicacity of Crake. Significantly, Crake’s diagnosis of the problem, if not his motives, mirror nothing so much as the views of the God’s Gardeners, the group of radical dissidents which Atwood will put at the centre of *The Year of the Flood*, where his connection to them, only hinted at in *Oryx and Crake*, is made explicit. Already in the earlier novel, however, it is quite clear that Crake, underneath his veneer of cynical aloofness, nourishes a deep disgust of the world he grows up in, and that he is motivated not by greed but by a genuine desire to change it. His Paradise project is not a money-making enterprise, but an attempt to cut the Gordian knot that is human nature, to complete the transfiguration of life which art also aims at. Not coincidentally, one of the fridge magnets in his apartment at the Paradise dome carries the concluding line from Rainer Maria Rilke’s hymn to the transformative power of art, “Archaischer Torso Apollos”: “Du musz dein Leben ändern.”¹⁹

The problem with art, from Crake’s perspective, is that it fails to effectively countervail the destructive aspects of human nature, which stem *not* merely from a

¹⁸DiMarco, 170.

¹⁹“You must change your life.” In the original, the line reads “Du mußt dein Leben ändern” (Rilke, 313). One may feel tempted to speculate whether Atwood’s corrupt spelling is meant as a comment on the way in which Crake’s project distorts the meaning of Rilke’s poem, but I shall refrain from doing so.

failure of the imagination, but have their roots in human biology. This theme is first explored in an early section of the novel, “Brainfrizz”, which details Jimmy’s and Crake’s obsession with a series of violent computer games. All of these games are concerned with what Sloterdijk calls “the struggle between the bestializing and the taming tendencies”²⁰ of human life. This is most explicit in “Blood and Roses”, a “trading game, along the lines of Monopoly” in which “human achievements”—“*Monuments to the soul’s magnificence*, they were called in the game”—are weighed against “[m]assacres, genocides, that sort of thing” (OC, 78). One side plays with achievements, the other with atrocities:

The exchange rates—one *Mona Lisa* equalled Bergen-Belsen, one Armenian genocide equalled the *Ninth Symphony* plus three Great Pyramids—were suggested, but there was some 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. (OC, 79)

The frivolity of “Blood and Roses” is breathtaking, and one may well choose to interpret it as a satirical indictment of the thoroughly commercialized world of the new media where the lowest lows and the highest highs of human history are equally reduced to fodder for the entertainment industry. Yet the fundamental question which the game raises, in its brutally blunt way, is not frivolous in the least: what is humanity, after all, since it is capable of producing both a Bergen-Belsen and a *Mona Lisa*? What is at stake in “Blood and Roses” is, to quote Sloterdijk, “no less than an issue of anthropodicy: that is, a characterization of man with respect to his biological indeterminacy and his moral ambivalence”.²¹

The problem is that tallying up human achievements and human barbarism in the manner suggested by “Blood and Roses” ends up denying the significance of both and leaves one with a drastically impoverished account of what it means to be human. This, however, is the option for which Crake ultimately settles. In a later conversation between Crake and Jimmy, the latter objects that “[i]n your plan we’d be just a bunch of hormone robots”. Crake replies that “we’re hormone robots anyway, only we’re faulty ones” (OC, 166). From this perspective, art is unable to redeem us because it is just another expression of the same biological features (especially territoriality and sexual competition) that also lead to cruelty and bloodshed. Here is Crake’s pithy summary of his views on the matter:

The male frog, in mating season, . . . makes as much noise as it can. The females are attracted to the male frog with the biggest, deepest voice. . . . Small male frogs . . . discover that if they position themselves in empty drainpipes, the pipe acts as a voice amplifier, and the small frog appears much larger than it really

²⁰Sloterdijk, 17.

²¹Ibid., 16.

is. . . . So that's what art is, for the artist. . . . An empty drainpipe. An amplifier. A stab at getting laid. (OC, 168)

Jimmy finds himself unable to come up with an appropriate response—unsurprisingly, because his own life seems to bear out Crake's theory to the letter. Amiable as his abortive attempts to defend literature against Crake's put-downs are—"Think of all the poetry—think Petrarch, think John Donne, think the *Vita Nuova*, think..." (OC, 167)—, they are hampered by his failure to grasp that these "monuments to the soul's magnificence" (OC, 78) draw their meaning precisely from their relation to the life of the body. This is perhaps best summed up in Oryx' gentle rebuke to Jimmy when he asks her about the pornographic films in which she acted as a child: "'It wasn't real sex, was it?' he asked. 'In the movies. It was only acting. Wasn't it?' 'But Jimmy, you should know. All sex is real'" (OC, 144). Jimmy wants to believe that fictions can cancel out biological realities; Oryx knows from her own experience that the two invariably feed into each other, sometimes in the most pernicious ways.

Jimmy and Crake thus represent two different but equally flawed answers to the problem of taming the human animal. Crake fully understands the destructive potential of mankind's evolutionary inheritance, but he does not appreciate what his revulsion against the latter indicates: that human beings are not fully determined by that inheritance, and that this lack of determination allows for the forms of self-domestication that constitute cultural history. His attempt to do humanism one better in effect cancels out the conditions of its own possibility, foreclosing the very space of biological indeterminacy within which alone the imperative from the Rilke fridge magnet—"you must change your life"—can make sense. Jimmy, on the other hand, represents a humanism that fails to understand itself as a bio-political project. He is fully alive to the thrill of artistic beauty, yet does not understand that it is meaningful not in itself, but because it provides a way of coping with the conflicting tendencies rooted in our biological being. What is absent from *Oryx and Crake* is a perspective that would, as it were, put these two half-understandings together.

A Physico-Theological Anthropodicy: *The Year of the Flood*

Oryx and Crake formulates the question of sustainability as a question of human self-domestication, but presents only a terrifyingly literalist answer to it. *The Year of the Flood* attempts to provide a view on the problem that takes the full measure of evolved human nature and yet does not reject it, but accept the liabilities it entails. In public appearances, Atwood herself has referred to *The Year of the Flood* as a "simultaneous" to *Oryx and Crake*.²² It covers roughly the same time-span and follows a similar narrative pattern: like *Oryx and Crake*, it opens by describing the situation of its protagonists—two women in this case, Toby and Ren, both former members of

²²Atwood, "Margaret Atwood."

God's Gardeners—in the post-apocalyptic present. It then alternates between diegetic past and present, narratively unfolding the former lives of the characters in a series of analepses, while gradually advancing the plot which builds up to their reunion with other surviving members of the sect. In the final chapter, the narrative joins up with the ending of *Oryx and Crake*, revealing the identity and the fate of the three nameless survivors on which Snowman stumbles at the earlier novel's conclusion.

Except for the first one, each of the novel's fourteen chapters begins with a song from *The God's Gardeners Oral Hymnbook* and a sermon by Adam One, the group's religious leader. These sermons do not only lay out the Gardeners' theology. As the novel progresses, they also come to provide an increasingly dark commentary on the situation of the group as it is first driven underground, then riven by a schism, and finally largely wiped out by the plague—a catastrophe which they have anticipated as the “waterless flood”, with reference to God's promise to Noah that he would never again destroy the human race by water. The world-view of the Gardeners clearly does not lay out a viable path to a sustainable future—the Gardeners who survive do so because of their apocalyptic beliefs, whereas their efforts to minimize their own ecological footprint are utterly insufficient to ward off the larger environmental collapse. And yet, their beliefs do in the end emerge as a credible response to the crisis, not because of their efficacy, but because they are based on an understanding that the problem of sustainability must remain insoluble in the absence of an “anthropodicy”. It is not enough to simply survive—what is needed is a symbolic order within which the fact of survival can appear as meaningful and “good”.

The Year of the Flood has a much more numerous cast than *Oryx and Crake* (which also includes Jimmy and Crake, albeit now in marginal roles). Atwood employs this larger canvas to achieve what Frederic Jameson has described as an “enlargement of narrative perspective to include the deep space of institutions and collectivities”:²³ *The Year of the Flood* gives a significantly more fine-grained account both of the larger society, where all the functions of the state have been devolved to the villainous private corporations whose names are already familiar from *Oryx and Crake* (CorpSeCorps, HelthWyzer, AnooYoo, etc.), but especially of God's Gardeners. We witness the group's development mostly through the eyes of Toby and Ren. Ren is taken along by her mother to join the group when she is eight and returns to the compound of HelthWyzer at age fifteen (where she becomes Jimmy's first but quickly abandoned girlfriend). When the plague strikes, she is working at the high-end sex club “Scales and Tails”, in whose quarantine zone she survives. Toby joins the Gardeners' original commune as a young woman, after they have rescued her from the claws of Blanco, the novel's principal villain, at that time the manager of a SecretBurger franchise who treats his female employees as his personal sex slaves. Although she confesses her scepticism about the Gardeners' theology to the Adams and Eves (the honorary title given to the leading members of the group), Toby soon is accorded the status of an Eve, herself, and gradually introduced to the sect's inner

²³Jameson, 7.

workings. When the group is forced to go into hiding, she is provided with a new identity as manager of an AnooYoo spa. Although she loses contact with the group, she keeps faith with the Gardeners' doctrine in preparing an "Ararat", a hidden stash of supplies to weather the waterless flood, which eventually allows her to survive the plague.

To readers of the earlier novel, Atwood's decision to put the Gardeners at the centre of *The Year of the Flood* must come as a surprise. In *Oryx and Crake*, the Gardeners are mentioned only in passing as a religious cult hovering somewhere on the lunatic fringe and eliciting very little sympathy. When Jimmy's mother deserts him and his father, it is indicated that it is to the Gardeners that she flees; that she takes his pet "rakunk" (a genetic splice of racoon and skunk) along with her in order to "liberate" (OC, 61) it, it appears like an act of sheer ideological callousness which leaves her son entirely bereft of all emotional support. The other prominent representative of the Gardeners' beliefs in *Oryx and Crake* is Jimmy's college roommate Bernice, who burns his imitation leather sandals and jockey shorts to express her disapproval of his "carnivorous ways" (OC, 189) and loose sexual morals.²⁴

The picture of the Gardeners we get in *The Year of the Flood* is very different. They still have plenty of the less appealing features one would expect from religious fanatics. Their communal living arrangements and rigid code of conduct—no consumption of animal protein except in emergencies, no corporate products unless in recycled form, strict limitations on the use of water—impose considerable restrictions on the personal freedom of its members. After Toby joins them, she is told to let her hair grow long: "When Toby asked why, she was given to understand that the aesthetic preference was God's. This kind of smiling, bossy sanctimoniousness was a little too pervasive for Toby."²⁵ Their fanciful version of natural theology, which grafts views familiar from Deep Ecology (most importantly, the evolutionary kinship of all species and the ethical obligations it entails) onto an essentially Christian religious framework, contains much that is patently silly—for example Adam One's announcement that when "Jesus first called as his Apostles two fisherman," he surely did so in order "to help conserve the Fish population" (YF, 195).

However, the doctrines that Adam One preaches and on which the Gardeners' collective life rests are designed to achieve what eluded both Jimmy and Crake in *Oryx and Crake*: a reconciliation of the nature of human beings as evolved biological creatures, with all the frailties and flaws it entails, with their need for an imaginary order that transcends and, as it were, extenuates these biological givens. This is the underlying theme of all of Adam One's sermons, which often read like an odd cross-over between biology lesson and theological treatise. Thus in one passage, he

²⁴As childhood companion of Ren, Bernice plays a more prominent role in *Year of the Flood*.

²⁵Atwood, *Year of the Flood*, 46. Further quotations from the novel, abbreviated YF, are given as in-text references.

postulates that “God is pure Spirit; so how can anyone reason that the failure to measure the Immeasurable proves its non-existence?” (YF, 52); while in another, he demands from the audience: “Where would we be without the Flora that populate the intestinal tract, or the Bacteria that defend against hostile invaders? We teem with multitudes, my Friends—with the myriad forms of Life that creep about under our feet, and—I may add—under our toenails” (YF, 160).

At the outset of the narrative, Adam One’s abrupt transitions from the biological to the religious register appear mostly as comic; yet as the narrative progresses, the reader also comes to appreciate the combination of humility, generosity, and hard-headed, practical shrewdness which they reflect. Especially towards the end of the novel, the clownish aspects of his character give way to something approaching genuine saintliness. As already mentioned, the Gardeners’ views about the biological basis of human behaviour are very similar to those of Crake (who maintains close ties to them and serves as their informer before graduating to Watson-Crick)—indeed, they have canonized the sociobiologist E. O. Wilson as a saint (YF, 246). At the same time, however, Adam One also acknowledges the human need for faith: “We Humans must labour to believe, as the other Creatures do not” (YF, 235), he remarks in one of his sermons. Faith is necessary to complement scientific insight if the latter is not to breed nihilism and despair:

We cannot know God by reason and measurement; indeed, excess reason and measurement lead to doubt. Through them, we know that Comets and nuclear holocausts are among the possible tomorrows . . . ; and then the temptation to enact malevolence enters our Souls; for if annihilation awaits us, why bother to strive for the Good? (YF, 234)

The “labour” that is required in order to achieve faith is one of the imagination, but must not exhaust itself in words alone. This is the insight behind the handicrafts, the gardening, the liturgical calendar, and all the other ritualized activities around which the Gardeners’ communal life is organized: at the same time that they impart useful ecological knowledge and habituate the group’s members to environmentally responsible behaviour, they also create a symbolic order within which their survival can become meaningful. In this respect, they resemble many other survivors in Atwood’s earlier fiction who “us[e] their verbal magic to transform their worlds”.²⁶

The weirdness of the Gardeners’ theology underlines the precariousness of all such systems of belief; as fictions, they are, in a sense, self-supporting structures for which our biological nature can provide no warrant, even as it predisposes us to them. This sets the views underlying *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* apart from the Romantic environmentalism I have discussed in the first part of this essay: in Atwood’s novels, nature as such has no normative content. In the Gardeners’ version of natural theology, nature acquires normativity only by virtue of its createdness at the hand of God—that is, through the place it occupies within the symbolic order

²⁶Wilson, ed., xii.

that is created and upheld by the Gardeners' religious practices. This is, one suspects, the reason why Atwood chose a Christian background for the Gardeners, rather than any of the numerous neo-pagan or pantheistic beliefs which are in fact more prevalent among those real groups most closely approximating them: the Christian emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of an extramundane God resonates with Atwood's own views on the equally momentous sovereignty of the human imagination.²⁷

It is also the reason why the novel's bitter-sweet, almost fairytale-like ending is peculiarly appropriate. That so many of the Gardeners should have survived the "waterless flood" when almost everyone else has died; that they find each other as quickly as they do; that the story's arch villain Blanco is allowed to return, just long enough to provide a last, searing example of the vileness of which human beings are capable before finally being defeated: all of this is in flagrant violation of narrative probability. However, it accords with the insight that the narratives by which we endow suffering and destruction (and, as Adam One attempts to in his last sermon, even the end of the human species) with meaning are themselves utterly improbable—they are based on an act of the imagination. Like the theodicies of old, the God's Gardeners' physico-theological anthropodicy requires a leap of faith.

We are back, then, to what I have above referred to as the foundational assumption of ecocriticism—that the roots of the ecological crisis are to be found in a failure of the imagination. However, this is often taken to mean that imagination is required in order to perceive properly what is already there—our kinship with the natural world and the obligations it implies. In Atwood's novels, by contrast, the imagination is needed to see something that is, in an important sense, *not* there—without thereby blinding oneself to that which is, that is, without distorting or denying the scientific and historical record. The behavioural patterns that lead to environmental destruction are not in any way "unnatural", Atwood suggests; they are indeed lodged in "the ancient primate brain" (OC, 305), which is why Crake's posthumanist scheme for attaining sustainability, horrifying as it is, must not be dismissed too easily. The imagination cannot alter these biological givens; in the words of Adam One: "The Human moral keyboard is limited . . . : there's nothing you can play on it that hasn't been played before" (YF, 415).²⁸ What this musical metaphor is meant to convey, of course, is not that we give up playing, but that we learn how to play well—in other words, that ethical behaviour is something that requires practice and self-discipline. The reading of fiction, it appears, might be a way of exercising such discipline—or at least of honing our discernment in such matters. This would be humanism understood in its anthropotechnological dimensions, as a form of self-domestication.

²⁷Not coincidentally, Adam One's last sermon is dedicated to the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich, whose meditations focus on precisely this aspect of Christian theology: Atwood, *Year of the Flood*, 423–35.

²⁸See also Atwood's own statements, issued at numerous occasions, to the same effect: "*homo sapiens* remains at heart what he's been for tens of thousands of years—the same emotions, the same preoccupations" (quoted in Hengen, 72).

Such a programme is congenial to those versions of ecocriticism which aim to leave the Romantic critique of modernity behind and attempt to build bridges between evolutionary biology and literary studies. Greg Garrard, one of the most vocal proponents of such a linkage, argues that ecocriticism ought to base itself on a “poetics of responsibility” which “recognizes that every inflection of the Earth is our inflection, every standard our standard, and [that] we should not disguise political decisions about the kind of world we want in either the discredited objectivity of natural order nor the subjective mystification of spiritual intuition”.²⁹ At the same time, however, Atwood’s novels suggest that a rigorously pragmatic and empirical stance such as Garrard recommends may in and of itself be unable to respond to the fundamental question which the discourse of sustainability usually passes over: why (and under what conditions) the survival of the human species should be regarded as an ethical good to begin with. That no answer to this question could be validated by the natural sciences does not mean that we can do without one.³⁰ As long as that remains the case, the humanities will remain relevant to our debates about sustainability.

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²⁹Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 179. See also his more recent effort to link ecocriticism to E. O. Wilson’s project of “consilience”: Garrard, “Ecocriticism as a Contribution.”

³⁰Neither would such a need be obviated by a scientific explanation for its existence.

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