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The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 2011 46: 9

DOI: 10.1177/0021989410395430

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“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

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood reflects in her 2009 novel *The Year of the Flood*, as she does in her 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake*, not only on feminist but also on humanist and posthumanist concerns, as she questions the very survival of humankind in an era of environmental destruction, excessive consumption, unregulated biotechnological experiments and pandemic viruses. Offering a strident critique of the contemporary culture of unbridled consumption, Atwood, in *Year*, draws on and literalizes the trope of corporate cannibalism in describing her Americanized and corporation-controlled world. In a similar way, she draws on and extends a related idea she has long made use of in her fiction – that of the male commodification and consumption of women – as she tells the intertwined stories of Toby and Ren, two female pleebland survivors of the pandemic plague and former members of the God’s Gardeners, an eco-religious cult and resistance group. Invoking the idea of degeneration as she expresses her long-held fears about environmental and social decline, Atwood looks to religion – specifically eco-religion – as she seeks evidence of our ethical capacity to find a remedy to humanity’s ills.

Keywords

Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, *Oryx and Crake*, feminism, postfeminism, posthuman, apocalypse, post-apocalypse, Americanism, cannibalism, degeneration, environmentalism, eco-religion

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Vol 46(1): 9–26. DOI: 10.1177/0021989410395430

“If the twentieth century begins with a sense of exhaustion and frustration with the end as revelation,” observes Teresa Heffernan, at its close “the end of time – as both catastrophic and redemptive – [has been] resurrected across the cultural spectrum in film, literature, science, politics, and religion”. Just as evangelical Christians await the Armageddon, science has its own version of end times in Al Gore’s 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth*, which predicts an environmental catastrophe, and in the emergence of an extreme group like the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, which invites people “to die out so that the earth’s biosphere can be restored”.¹ Even as the recent “proliferation” of apocalyptic scenarios brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s prediction that we “might come to enjoy the spectacle of [our] own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure”, it also reflects the “cultural anxiety that we may have reached . . . the end of our species”.² Giving expression to that cultural anxiety in gruesome yet comic works that create, at once, enjoyable and horrific spectacles of the end of humanity, Margaret Atwood, who has long been known for emphasizing feminist and postfeminist concerns in her novelistic investigations of female victims and survivors, reflects in her 2009 novel *The Year of the Flood*, as she does in her 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake*, not only on feminist concerns but also on humanist and posthumanist concerns, as she questions the very survival of humankind in an era of environmental destruction, excessive consumption, unregulated biotechnological experiments and pandemic viruses. Even as Atwood draws on what has been called the “microbe mania” that has gripped the contemporary cultural consciousness in our “new age of epidemics” and “pop-culture plague tales”,³ she also conveys in *The Year of the Flood* and *Oryx and Crake* what James Berger describes as the “pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility” of contemporary culture, which reveals that the “traumatic past” of twentieth-century catastrophes “lives among us”.⁴ As Berger explains, “we have had the opportunity . . . to see in a strange prospective retrospect what the end would actually look like: it would look like a Nazi death camp, or an atomic explosion, or an ecological or urban wasteland”.⁵ Speaking the unspeakable, “post-apocalyptic representations are simultaneously symptoms of historical traumas and attempts to work through them”.⁶ But while trauma produces “symptoms in its wake, after the event”, apocalypse is “preceded by signs and portents whose interpretation defines the event in the future”.⁷ Thus, the “apocalyptic-historical-traumatic event becomes a crux or pivot that forces a retelling and revaluing of all events that lead up to it and all that follow”.⁸

In a repetition of a novelistic trauma, Atwood, in *The Year of the Flood*, circles back to and forward from *Oryx and Crake* in her retelling and revaluing of her apocalyptic-traumatic end-of-the-world story, returning to *Oryx and Crake*’s environmentally devastated and corporation-controlled futuristic world in which an all-powerful scientific elite are given free reign

to tamper with nature by creating genetically modified hybrid animals and humanoid creatures. In *Oryx and Crake* Atwood tells the story of Jimmy-Snowman, who divides his identity into his pre-catastrophe past as Jimmy and his post-catastrophe present as Snowman, when he finds himself the sole human survivor in the posthuman world engineered by his genius-scientist friend Crake. As readers eventually learn, Jimmy has been left alive by Crake, who has killed off humanity through a pandemic haemorrhagic virus, so that he can act as the guide and protector of the Crakers, the bioengineered and environmentally-friendly hominoid creatures created by Crake as a replacement for humanity. If in *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood focuses on the Compound world – gated communities where elite scientists and business people live and work under the protection of the CorpSeCorps, a ruthless and totalitarian private corporate security firm and police force – in *The Year of the Flood*, in contrast, she centres her story on the pleebland world where the non-affluent masses live, as she tells the intertwined stories of Ren and Toby, two female pleebland survivors of the pandemic plague and former members of the God's Gardeners, an eco-religious cult and resistance group.

Like *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood* alternates between the pre-catastrophe past and post-catastrophe present of the two central characters, and it, too, contains a mixture of genres: the dystopian end-of-the-world story; the castaway-survivor story; the coming-of-age story (Ren); the romance plot (Ren's thwarted romance with Jimmy, the love triangles between Ren, Amanda and Jimmy and between Toby, Zeb and Lucerne); the political thriller and mystery story (as readers come to speculate on the connection or even collusion between Crake and the male leaders of the God's Gardeners, Adam One and Adam Seven/Zeb). Even as *Year* provides intratextual commentary on and even a re-visionist reading of *Oryx* by centering on the violent and degrading pleebland world inhabited by Ren and Toby, where vulnerable and unprotected women easily become the sexual prey of predatory men, it also, like *Oryx and Crake* and like apocalyptic fiction in general, writes toward the ending as readers are urged to speculate on the future by asking, at the end of *Oryx*, if Jimmy-Snowman will survive and, at the end of *Year*, if Ren and Toby will continue to survive the "Waterless Flood", that is, the pandemic virus created by *Oryx*'s Crake. Indeed, what motivated Atwood to write *Year*, in part, as she has explained, is that people asked her "what happens next",⁹ when they got to the end of *Oryx*, in which a starving and seriously injured Jimmy-Snowman, who thinks he is the only human survivor, encounters a trio of armed humans and tries to decide whether or not to kill them, aware that if he shoots at them he risks being killed. If in *Year*, we learn the identity of the other human survivors Jimmy-Snowman encounters in this scene, the ending of *Year*, even as it writes beyond the ending of *Oryx*,

also leaves the reader in a state of unknowing, a gesture meant to compel, as many Atwoodian novelistic closures do, reader participation in the text.

Atwood, who has had a long-term interest in the victimhood and survival of women, takes this organizing idea to a new level in *The Year of the Flood* where young postfeminist women like Amanda and Ren have learned, like Oryx in *Oryx and Crake*, to use their sex for barter and where a woman like Toby is preyed upon by the brutal rapist Blanco, who is free not only to make Toby his sexual slave but also, if he wishes, to kill her and to literally turn her into meat. In an essay on Angela Carter in which Atwood provides an account of Carter's Sadeian vision, we gain insight into the gruesome world of human cruelty and sexual predator-prey that Atwood conjures up in *The Year of the Flood*. As Carter offers an analysis of the writings of the Marquis de Sade in *The Sadeian Woman*, she examines de Sade's view of human nature which, in describing how the strong not only "abuse" but also "meatify" the weak, draws a distinction between "'tigers' and 'lambs', carnivores and herbivores, those who are preyed upon and those who do the preying".¹⁰ For de Sade, "predator and prey, master and slave, are the only two categories . . . that he can acknowledge; above all, for him sex between unequals cannot be mutually pleasurable, because pleasure belongs to the eater, not to the eaten".¹¹ While for Carter the "nature of men is not fixed . . . as inevitably predatory, with females as their 'natural' prey" and while "lambhood and tigerishness" can be found in both men and women, society can "slant things so that women appear to be better candidates for meathood than men and men better candidates for meat-eating". Indeed for Carter, "a certain amount of tigerishness may be necessary if women . . . are to avoid – at the extreme end of passivity – becoming meat".¹²

That for the Sadeian male predator "sex between unequals cannot be mutually pleasurable, because pleasure belongs to the eater, not to the eaten", is illustrated in Toby's pre-catastrophe life as a sexually vulnerable pleeblander woman who works for the predatory Blanco at SecretBurgers in one of the "worst pleeb", which is called the "Sewage Lagoon because a lot of shit ended up in it".¹³ Offering an extreme – and grotesque – rendering of the bottom-line mentality of the contemporary corporate business world, Atwood describes how the CorpSeCorps allow the pleebmobs to operate corpse disposal businesses – barbaric, cannibalistic businesses with "few supply-side costs" (p.34) – in which they harvest organs for transplants and then, according to rumour, run "the gutted carcasses through the SecretBurgers grinders" (p.33). If, as critics have observed, Atwood uses the trope of cannibalism to call attention to "the unchecked will to consume at the heart of the western and European model of society",¹⁴ in *Year*, she extends this idea as she draws on and literalizes the trope of corporate cannibalism in describing her corporation-controlled world. In a similar

way, she draws on and extends a related idea she has long made use of in her fiction – that of the “metaphoric consumption of women in North American culture”¹⁵ – as she exposes the sexual cannibalism of Blanco, the predatory manager of SecretBurgers, who views the women who work for him – like Toby – as his female prey. That the association of women with the body is part of the “long tradition of female objectification that facilitates, even encourages, the transformation of the female subject into mere flesh”¹⁶ is evident in Toby’s story, and *Year* also draws much of its abject horror from its vision of the male “carnification” of the female subject: that is, the reduction of the woman to a fleshly object or to meat or to a rotting corpse.¹⁷ A jealous tyrant and a sexually rapacious and sadistic man, Blanco views women as possessions to be sexually used and abused – indeed, to be persecuted and then turned into meat. The tattoo on Blanco’s back of an “upside-down naked woman”, who is “wound in chains” and whose “invisible” head is “stuck in his ass” (pp.36-7), offers a stark emblem of his sexist view of women as mindless and replaceable bodies and as sexual slaves.

“Cross me up, I’ll snap you like a twig”, Blanco says when he tells Toby he is “promoting” her after killing her predecessor, who is found in a vacant lot cut up and with her neck broken (p.37). Toby’s life as Blanco’s “woman” is one of constant sexual torture and humiliation:

His view was that a woman with an ass as skinny as Toby’s should consider herself in luck if any man wanted to stick his hole-hammer into her. . . . She should thank her lucky stars. Better, she should thank him: he demanded a thank you after every degrading act. He didn’t want her to feel pleasure, though: only submission. (p.38)

After Toby is rescued by the God’s Gardeners, she still feels endangered by Blanco, who is enraged at the fact that Toby kicks him as she is being spirited away by Adam One and his followers: “That kick of hers would be very expensive. It would take a publicly advertised gang rape or her head on a pole to wipe the slate” (p.47). Even after spending years with the Gardeners, the sexually traumatized Toby still has nightmares about Blanco’s “skinless-looking blue-veined hands coming for her neck. *Say you love me! Say it, bitch!*” (p.97). As Toby realizes, “Freedom from Blanco was worth a lot: she was lucky she hadn’t ended up fucked into a purée and battered to a pulp and poured out onto a vacant lot” (p.103). “You’re meat!” as Blanco later says when he sees Toby during his thwarted attack on the Gardeners (p.255).

Even as Atwood, in telling the story of the middle-aged Toby, invokes the Sadeian world described by Carter in which sexual relations are viewed in “terms of butchery and meat”¹⁸, she also offers an admonitory satire on our contemporary postfeminist society as she engages with second-wave

and postfeminist ideas in telling the story of the other woman survivor, Ren, who is twenty-five years old when the plague hits. As she does in her other works, Atwood depicts the generational divide between feminists and postfeminists in telling the stories of Toby and Ren, for while the middle-aged (feminist) Toby is aware of the potential brutality of male-female relations, the younger (postfeminist) Ren, who grows up both in the privileged world of the Compounds and in the communal world of the God's Gardeners, seemingly chooses, or at least accepts, her own sexual commodification and humiliation. After spending several years at the Martha Graham Academy where she takes courses in Dance Calisthenics, Ren eventually ends up working at Scales and Tails, which is part of the SeksMart. Sex workers like Ren, who are known as "the cleanest dirty girls in town", see themselves the way Mordis, the manager of Scales and Tails, sees them – as "a valuable asset". In the morally bankrupt and sexist culture Ren inhabits, where the sexuality of women is degraded not honoured, Mordis shows that he has "ethics" because he never takes "freebies" from his sex workers. When clients become violent, he stands up for his workers. "'Nobody hurts my best girls,' he'd say. It was a point of honour with him" (p. 7).

A product of her postfeminist culture with its bottom-line corporate business culture mentality, Ren, who works as a trapeze dancer at Scales, views herself solely as a sexual commodity. "Ren, you make them shit thousand-dollar bills", Mordis tells her (p.55). Unlike the "cream of the crop" sex workers like Ren, women prostituting themselves outside the Corp-controlled SeksMart system are "pathetic" and "wrecked" old women called "Hazardous waste" by the Scales girls (p.7). When Painball veterans are brought to Scales, Mordis uses temporary sex workers for the "bristle work" – "smuggled Eurotrash or Tex-Mexicans or Asian Fusion and Redfish minors scooped off the streets" – because the Painballers, who easily go into "full rage mode", want "membrane" and any "damage" to regular girls like Ren would be "pricey" (p.130). Cheerfully acknowledging the voyeuristic male gaze that turns women into pornographic objects and sexual commodities, the Scales girls wink at the club's hidden cameras in "mid-moan" when they are doing "plank work" to express their camaraderie with those who have been placed in the Sticky Zone, that is, medical confinement, which is where Ren ends up during the Waterless Flood (p.8). Like postfeminist Ren, her pleeblander friend Amanda has been socialized to view sex as a commodity women can use to "trade" or barter for goods or services. "You trade what you have to. You don't always have choices", according to Amanda (p.58) and she also argues that love is "useless" because it leads to "dumb exchanges" in which the individual gives "too much away" (p.219). By emphasizing Ren and Amanda's passive acceptance of their sexist world in which women have become consumable

sexualized and eroticized objects, Atwood accentuates her fear, expressed in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, that the recent gains women have made as a result of the feminist movement may be short-lived and that there is a thin line, indeed, between the postfeminist's embrace of her sexuality and the sexist world of the prefeminist past.

If in *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood satirizes but also expresses alarm about the pervasive violence of contemporary culture by describing how, as teenagers, Jimmy-Snowman and Glenn-Crake play violent computer games like Barbarian Stomp and Extinctathon and watch live executions on the Web, in *The Year of the Flood* she extends her critique of media violence in her horrific account of the onscreen Painball game, a gruesome spectacle in which condemned criminals, like Blanco, are placed in the Painball Arena – an enclosed forest that contains hidden cameras – where they engage in a savage and deadly game of predator and prey. Like a regular paintball gun, the Painball gun shoots paint, “but a hit in the eyes would blind you, and if you got the paint on your skin you’d start to corrode, and then you’d be an easy target for the throat-slitters on the other team” (p.98). In a passage that anticipates the closure of the novel, in which Ren and Amanda, along with several other surviving members of the God’s Gardeners – Shackie, Croze and Oates – become caught up in a deadly Painball game with the brutal, sadistic Blanco and his two companion Painballers and Oates ends up strung up in a tree with his throat cut and his kidneys removed, *Year* describes how some teams hang their victim – their “kill” – on a tree and mutilate the corpse to intimidate the opposing team: “Cut off the head, tear out the heart and kidneys. . . . Eat part of it, if food was running low or just to show how mean you were” (pp.98-9).¹⁹ Even as Atwood provides intratextual commentary on the passage in *Surfacing* in which the Surfacers-narrator finds strung up in a tree “like a lynch victim” or martyred Christ the body of a heron that has been preyed upon by the violent “Americans” who are spreading the “virus” of Americanism into Canada,²⁰ so in *Year* she extends this idea by showing that the “virus” of Americanism – that is, the American culture of violence and corporatization and commodification and unbridled consumption – has gone global. If cannibalism has traditionally been used to reinforce the “opposition between civilization and savagery”,²¹ for Atwood the global consumer culture bred by the virus of Americanism promotes a form of what Deborah Root has described as the “cannibal psychosis” that drives the rapacious violence and cannibalistic consumption of contemporary culture in which “consumption is power, and the ability to consume excessively and willfully becomes the most desirable aspect of power”.²² Thus, as Fredric Jameson has commented, “the Fall” in Atwood’s novel is “a fall into Americanism” in a “global near future” in which “the term American is no longer necessary”.²³ Moreover, global Americanism has

inspired Crake to create his “global” pandemic virus, a violent, predatory act that imitates Americanism even though Crake’s intent is to wipe the earth clean of the “virus” of Americanism.

As Atwood offers a strident critique of global Americanism in *The Year of the Flood*, she also voices a deep fear that has long plagued Western society and that has found expression, over time, in utopian hopes and their related dystopian fears: that scientific advances will lead not to a progressive utopian future but instead will result in humanity’s reversion to a savage dystopian (even pre-human) past. Indeed, while *Year* is set in a ruined futuristic cityscape on the northeast coast of the United States, the future world Atwood conjures up as she expresses her moral outrage against the violence and barbarism of contemporary culture invokes the idea of degeneration, which, as William Greenslade has observed, “was an important resource of myth for the post-Darwinian world” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.²⁴ As Greenslade explains, degeneration became a “fully fledged explanatory myth” in the late nineteenth century when there was a growing sense of the disparity between the “rhetoric of progress” and the “facts on the ground, the evidence in front of people’s eyes, of poverty and degradation at the heart of ever richer empires”.²⁵ An explanatory myth that speaks to the “dark side of progress”, degeneration describes “the boundless capacity of a society to ‘generate’ regression: on the one hand, generation and reproduction, on the other, decline, degradation, waste”.²⁶ Viewed through a degenerationist frame, the “post-Darwinian city” is a place of “moral darkness” where the “struggle for life” produces a “new species” of people – “menageries of sub-races of men and women”.²⁷ Not unlike earlier writers who succumbed to what Greenslade calls the “explanatory lure of forms of biological determinism”,²⁸ Atwood, in part, draws on the idea of degeneration in *The Year of the Flood* as she describes a world taken over by the degeneracy instilled by the “virus” of Americanism which fosters, on one extreme, the selfish individualism and greed of the wealthy elite and, on the other extreme, the predatory behaviour, unbridled violence and rapacious cannibalism of Blanco and his cohorts. If Crake’s pessimistic – and Freudian – view of the “murderous threat posed by unrestrained instincts” makes him, in the words of Stephen Dunning, “a Freudian with the technological resources to change radically what Freud took to be the permanent features of our psychological landscape”,²⁹ he also harkens back to the biosocial model of the degenerationists and radical eugenicists who believed in the decline of civilization or that “civilisation itself could be on the verge of extinction”.³⁰ Thus, in the post-Darwinian and eugenicist belief system of Crake, the radical solution to humanity’s ills in a twenty-first century world of global, social and economic decline is the destruction of humanity

and the creation of the Crakers, noble savages that are environmentally friendly, peace-loving and socially and economically egalitarian.

Not unlike Crake, whose “ultimate solution” grows out of his degenerationist assumptions, the God’s Gardeners also see the need for a cleansing renewal of humanity and the creation of a new social and moral order. Indeed, *The Year of the Flood*, in its account of the horrors of life for the have-nots of society, invokes the post-Darwinian rhetoric of social panic and degeneration in describing the spectacle of poverty found in the teeming and violent pleebland slums where the innocent are preyed upon by marauding youths, brutal mobsters and competing criminal gangs. If through *Year’s* degenerationist discourse, Atwood expresses her own long-held fears about environmental and social decline and her scepticism about our ability to make wise use of the scientific and political tools at hand, she also, in an unexpected manoeuvre for readers long familiar with her work, looks to religion – specifically eco-religion – as she seeks evidence of our ethical capacity to find a remedy to humanity’s ills, including the ever-spreading and deadly “virus” of Americanism. Against her dark vision of a corporation-controlled, consumer-driven and morally corrupt elite class, Atwood offers, as a kind of counter-vision and counter-narrative of sweetness and light, her story of the eco-religious sect, the God’s Gardeners, a radical fringe group of environmentalists and anti-capitalist revolutionaries.

Readers initially view the God’s Gardeners through the sceptical eyes of Toby, who, after being rescued by the sect, cannot imagine herself “sticking it out among these fugitives from reality for long” (p.47). To Toby, not only are the Gardeners a “clutch of sweet but delusional eccentrics” (p.103), but the female members of the sect have a “smiling, bossy sanctimoniousness” that she dislikes and she finds the prayers of the sect “tedious” and the theology “scrambled” (p.46). “Why be so picky about lifestyle details if you believed everyone would soon be wiped off the face of the planet?” Toby wonders (pp.46-7) as she ponders the Gardeners’ belief in the Waterless Flood – the “massive die-off of the human race” (p.47) that will come as a pandemic plague spreads “germ-ridden mobs, terror, and butchery” and thus causes “total breakdown” (p.20). If Atwood, who has long described herself as an agnostic, is in part tongue-in-cheek as she describes the religion of the God’s Gardeners, she also extends in *Year* the ideas she expressed in *Oryx and Crake* about the hard-wired aspect of religion, for despite Crake’s best effort to get rid of the “G-spot” in the brains of his genetically modified Crakers,³¹ it is clear that his hominoids are developing a religion as Jimmy-Snowman tells them Genesis-like stories about their creation. Indeed, as Atwood has remarked, “We seem to be hard-wired to have a belief system of some kind. . . . Very few people don’t have some

belief system that includes something other than themselves. That just seems to be part of the tool kit that we have as human beings".³²

Drawing on the idea that environmentalism will not work if it does not become a religion,³³ Atwood mixes together science, religion and environmentalism as she imagines the eco-religion of the pacifist and vegetarian God's Gardeners. Although Atwood has explained that she "did not know" of the existence of the Green Bible when she wrote *Year*,³⁴ her Gardeners not only read the Bible as a green text but they also have all the usual trappings of an organized religion, for they listen to sermons, they sing hymns, they have special feast days and marriage and burial ceremonies, and they follow their own saints' calendar as they set aside special days on which they honour environmental saints and martyrs, including Saint Dian Fossey, Saint Euell Gibbons, Saint E.O. Wilson, Saint Rachel Carson, Saint James Lovelock, Saint Stephen Jay Gould and Saint Jane Jacobs. When the sceptical Toby, after being rescued by the Gardeners, first sees their rooftop garden – the Edencliff Rooftop Garden – she is awe-struck by its beauty:

She gazed around it in wonder: it was so beautiful, with plants and flowers of many kinds she'd never seen before. There were vivid butterflies; from nearby came the vibration of bees. Each petal and leaf was fully alive, shining with awareness of her. Even the air of the Garden was different.

Toby feels as if "a large, benevolent hand had reached down and picked her up, and was holding her safe", and later, when she hears Adam One talk about "being flooded with the Light of God's Creation", she realizes that "without knowing it yet that was how she felt" (p.43).

That Toby perceives nature as a benevolent force even while she is aware of its predator-prey savagery is suggestive since, as Atwood has remarked, in the "Nature-as-metaphor battle" prevalent in the nineteenth century – and revived in Atwood's novel – nature is envisioned, contrastingly, as a "Wordsworthian" good mother and a "Darwinian" bad mother.³⁵ These contrasting images are brought together in the scene in which Toby, after the plague, sees liobams for the first time. A lion-sheep splice, the liobam was "commissioned by the Lion Isaiahists . . . to fulfill the lion/lamb friendship prophecy" and thus "force the advent of the Peaceable Kingdom" by melding predator and prey. At first appearing gentle "with their curly golden hair and twirling tails", the liobams have "long, sharp canines" (p.94). While Toby is fascinated as she watches while the two liobams "gambol together", she "doesn't relish the thought" of being "mangled and devoured" by a liobam, preferring instead to be attacked by "a more conventional beast of prey" (pp.94-5). The fact that Toby sees a liobam-like creature during her drug-induced vigil suggests her own ability to be both the peace-loving gardener and the fierce warrior.

Indeed, when Toby tells Pilar what she has seen – a golden-colored lion-like animal with “gentle green eyes and canine teeth, and curly wool instead of fur” (p.171) – Pilar says that Toby’s animal vision is “a good sign” and means that she will be “helped with strength” when she needs it (p.178).

In Adam One’s sermons, which are addressed to his “Fellow Gardeners in the Earth that is God’s Garden” (p.51), Atwood gives expression to her long-held environmental concerns that humanity – plagued by the global “virus” of Americanism – is greedily consuming and destroying the environment. As Adam One states, “Ours is a fall into greed: why do we think that everything on Earth belongs to us, while in reality we belong to Everything? . . . God’s commandment to ‘replenish the Earth’ did not mean we should fill it to overflowing with ourselves, thus wiping out everything else” (pp.52-3). To Adam One, who reminds his followers of the “knots of DNA and RNA that tie us to our many fellow Creatures” (p.53), the Gardeners’ “role in respect to the Creatures is to bear witness” and “to guard the memories and the genomes of the departed” (p.253). As he mourns the “wholesale slaughter of ecosystems” (p.90), Adam One warns that his followers “must be ready for the time when those who have broken trust with the Animals – yes, wiped them from the face of the Earth where God placed them – will be swept away by the Waterless Flood” (p.91). “More practical” and “more tactical” behind the scenes (p.246), Adam One explains to his inner circle that he wants to reconcile “the findings of Science” with a “sacramental view of Life” (p.240) in his eco-religion and “to push popular sentiment in a biosphere-friendly direction by pointing out the hazards of annoying God by a violation of His trust in our stewardship” (p.241). And yet, while the God’s Gardeners are taught to cherish nature and respect animals, in their extreme environmentalism and view of all life as interconnected, they also see themselves as potential victims in nature’s Darwinian predator-prey arrangement. Adam One, who finds in the image of the fox snake ingesting a frog a reminder of the “intertwined nature of the Dance of Life”, also reminds his followers that the “Spirit of God . . . is not always peaceful: it has a ferocious side to it as well” (p.233). He teaches his followers that they must be “willing” to “offer” themselves “to the great chain of nourishment” (p.125) and to “repay the gift of Life by regifting” themselves “to Life when the time comes” by becoming compost (p.161).

Opposing the political-economic order, the God’s Gardeners actively resist their society with its rampant consumption and environmental and social exploitation, and they include in their ranks former scientists, who come from the higher echelons of the biotechnological corporate world. Over time, as the God’s Gardeners grow in influence, they have branches in different plebs and other cities and “cells of hidden Exfernal sympathizers embedded at every level, even within the Corporations themselves”. As

Toby comes to realize when she becomes Eve Six and gains new knowledge of the inner workings of the group, the Gardeners are not “wrapped in some otherworldly sheepfold-like cocoon” but are “a real and potentially explosive power” (p.189). Unlike Adam One who insists that the Gardener way is “the way of peace”, to Zeb and his schismatic MaddAddam followers “peace goes only so far”: “There’s at least a hundred new extinct species since this time last month. They got fucking eaten! We can’t just sit here and watch the lights blink out” (p.252). Actively doing battle with the corporate powers that are ruling and destroying the world, Zeb’s MaddAddam group of eco-activist scientists and eco-warriors commit public acts of bio-resistance. When, for example, they create an asphalt-eating microbe that destroys highways, their purpose, as Shackie, Croze and Oates later explain, is to use “bioform resistance” to “destroy the infrastructure” so that the earth can “repair itself” before “everything” goes “extinct” (p.333). Blamed by the CorpSeCorps for the acts of bio-resistance, the God’s Gardeners are attacked: their Edencliff Rooftop Garden is destroyed and members of the pacifist group are “hounded and pursued”, some of them ending up “murderously spraygunned in the course of raids carried out against them” while others are “mutilated and tossed into vacant lots” and still others end up “disappeared, snatched from their places of refuge, to vanish into the prisons of the Exfernal Powers” (p.311).

Even as Atwood circles back to and elaborates on *Oryx and Crake* by describing the MaddAddam group and its acts of eco-resistance, she also returns to *Oryx*’s Extinctathon grandmaster Crake, showing the connection not only between Crake and the MaddAddam group but also between Crake and the God’s Gardeners. If some readers of *The Year of the Flood* feel that they are “undergoing, and failing, a test of [their] cleverness at guessing from hints, reading between lines and recognising allusions” to Atwood’s earlier novel *Oryx and Crake*,³⁶ others may take a special pleasure in unraveling Atwood’s gamelike novelistic clues as they draw connections between the two works. Even more compelling, as *Year* replays and reworks *Oryx*’s traumatic-apocalyptic plotline, it gets caught up in what James Berger describes as the paradox of post-apocalyptic representation, which “impossibly straddles the boundary between before and after some event that has obliterated what went before yet defines what will come after”.³⁷ Not only is “every action before the apocalypse . . . simultaneously an action after the apocalypse”, writes Berger, but “the event itself exists as a monstrous possibility”. Moreover, the “narrative logic” of apocalyptic representation, which “insists that the post-apocalypse precede the apocalypse”, is also “the logic of prophecy”.³⁸

Just as the apocalyptic-traumatic event compels a retelling of the events that lead up to and that follow it, so Atwood feels compelled to retell the before-and-after events of *Oryx* in *Year*, especially in telling the

story of Glenn-Crake. But while the genius-scientist Crake is a central character in *Oryx* and is the agent of *Year's* Waterless Flood, there are only fragmentary traces of his disquieting story and presence in *Year*. And yet Crake takes on a kind of portentous meaning to informed readers of *Year* and his appearances in the novel, not unlike the return of the repressed, seem at once strangely familiar and uncannily strange as readers recognize the “monstrous possibility” portended by his prophetic words. When the adolescent Crake, who acts as a “boy courier” (p.243) for the Gardeners, has Pilar’s biopsy samples tested and then returns with news of her fatal cancer diagnosis, Amanda and Ren, his contemporaries, recognize from the way that he talks that Crake is a Compound “brainiac”, for he states that illness is “a design fault” that can be “corrected” and he also is convinced that if he were “making the world”, he would “make it better” (p.147). When the fourteen-year-old Ren returns to the HelthWyzer Compound after her mother, Lucerne, leaves Zeb, she meets *Oryx's* Jimmy-Snowman and Glenn-Crake in high school, and Crake, who already knows “a lot” about the God’s Gardeners, questions Ren about the beliefs and practices of the group and he also asks her if she thinks that the “Waterless Flood is really going to happen” (p.228). Years later, when Ren is working at Scales, she again encounters Crake, a graduate of the prestigious Watson-Crick Institute who has become a top scientist at the Rejoov Compound. Not only does Crake ask the Scales girls that he rents for the evening to purr like cats and sing like birds – details chillingly significant to readers of *Oryx* who recall that Crake’s hominoids, the Crakers, purr like cats and have strange singing voices – but Ren also hears him discuss the Paradise Project. “Sometimes he’d say he was working on solutions to the biggest problem of all, which was human beings – their cruelty and suffering, their wars and poverty, their fear of death”, Ren learns from listening to Crake discuss with his investors his creation of the Crakers, which he sees as a genetic improvement on humanity (p.305).

Initially Adam One and the surviving God’s Gardeners, who were tellingly not “taken by surprise” by the global pandemic, are hopeful as they prepare to leave their sheltering Ararat, imagining that the “outer world is Exfernal no more – that the Waterless Flood has cleansed as well as destroyed, and that all the world is now a new Eden. Or, if it is not a new Eden yet, that it will be one soon” (p.345). Despite their disappointment with the debris-filled – and corpse-littered – world left by the plague, the Gardeners, according to Adam One, are nevertheless “privileged . . . to witness these first precious moments of Rebirth” (p.371). But as the Gardeners prepare to leave their place of refuge, Adam One also tells them to meditate on the “Alpha Predator aspects of God” – “God the Tiger. Or God the Lion. Or God the Bear” (p.346). Even more chillingly, he asks his followers to consider this: “Which is more blessed, to eat or

to be eaten? . . . We would not be Human if we did not prefer to be the devourers rather than the devoured, but either is a blessing. Should your life be required of you, rest assured that it is required by Life" (p.347). When one of the plague survivors is killed and devoured by wild dogs, Adam One states that she has "made the ultimate Gift to her fellow Creatures, and has become part of God's great dance of proteins" (p.404). And then, when the few surviving Gardeners, who have made their way back to the site of the Edencliff Rooftop Garden, begin to succumb to the plague and Adam One also recognizes that he, too, is showing symptoms of the virus, he prepares his followers for the end of humanity: "It is not this Earth that is to be demolished: it is the Human Species. Perhaps God will create another, more compassionate race to take our place" (p.424). Yet while the lamb-like Gardeners face extinction as they prepare to "become part of God's great dance of proteins" (p.404), the conclusion of *Year* does include a gesture of hope not only for ecological renewal but also for human survival.

Offering two competing visions of humanity in *Year's* closing scenes, Atwood tells the story of the brutal Painball game played by Blanco and his companion Painballers, who ruthlessly hunt down, kill and mutilate Oates and take captive and sexually torture Amanda and Ren, side by side with the story of Toby's fierce acts of bravery and loving acts of human compassion and of Ren's acts of loyalty, love and forgiveness. After Ren escapes from the Painballers, Toby uses her knowledge of poisons to kill Blanco while she uses her healing powers to restore Ren, coming to see Ren as a "precious gift" (p.357), as someone to "cure" and "cherish" (p.360). In stark contrast, Amanda, who has long followed the materialist and sexist ethos of her culture by "trading" to get what she wants and who remains the captive of the two remaining Painballers, becomes the ultimate female victim when the men, after torturing her, try to "trade" her – a sign that the men are "tired" of Amanda, making her "disposable" (p.399). Imagining that if they trade Amanda to the Crakers, whom they see as "savages", the Crakers will "human-sacrifice" Amanda after having group sex with her, one of the men then jokes that she is "a sex toy you can eat" (p.417).

Even as Atwood exposes the predatory ruthlessness and sexist savagery of the Painballers in these scenes, she also emphasizes the feminist ideal of female solidarity by describing how Ren and Toby put their own lives at risk to save Amanda. In a replay and extension of the end of *Oryx*, Atwood describes how Jimmy-Snowman, who is about to shoot the Painballers, hesitates when Ren tells him that the woman the men are using as a shield is Amanda. When the armed Toby, who is "skinny, tattered, teeth bared," surprises the men and keeps them from rearming, Ren grabs their weapon and then Amanda gets free of her rope noose and attacks and subdues

the men (p.419). Afterwards, Ren feels fortunate to still be alive: “We’re lucky, I think. To be here. All of us, even the Painballers” (p.428). And yet the survival of Ren side by side with the Painballers suggests the staying power not only of human kindness but also of human cruelty – that is, lambhood and tigerishness. Indeed, as Ren, Toby, Amanda, Jimmy and the two Painballers sit around a fire, the flickering lights make them look “softer and more beautiful” than they are, but also “darker and scarier too” (p.428).

If Toby is presented as a feminist heroine in *Year*, she also, not unlike Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake*, represents the average person who has long ignored the warning signs of the coming apocalypse. As Toby recalls the past, she admits to herself that while she “knew there were things wrong in the world” because they were talked about and were in the news, “the wrong things were wrong somewhere else”. When she was in college “the wrongness had moved closer” and while people “knew” they did not admit it, and when other people discussed it – “*We’re using up the Earth. It’s almost gone*” – people like Toby “tuned them out, because what they were saying was both so obvious and so unthinkable” (p.239). Seeing her cautionary tales, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, as a form of environmental consciousness-raising, Atwood seeks a wide public readership for these works as she challenges her readers to think the unthinkable. Atwood, who has long talked of the moral imperative that drives her work, also believes in the transformative – and ethical – potential of imaginative literature, and indeed, *Year*, like *Oryx*, is a feminist, anti-corporate and radically ecological work in which Atwood, in sharing her fears of and outrage against current trends in contemporary society, also wishes to prod her readers to meaningful political thought and action.

Even as Atwood offers an admonitory satire in *The Year of the Flood* on the violence and greed of a contemporary culture driven by rampant consumerism and environmental and social exploitation, she also offers a hopeful gesture at the end of the novel by suggesting that the ragtag group of human survivors – including not only Toby, Ren and Amanda, but also Shackie, Croze, Zeb and some of the MaddAddam scientists – might rebuild society and set up a new social-political utopian enclave among the dystopian ruins of the old order. But while Atwood offers a glimmer of hope at the end, lingering questions remain as she, in the mysterious final scene of the novel, presents her readers with a typical Atwoodian puzzle to solve. When an enraptured Jimmy-Snowman says, “Listen to the music. . . . You can’t kill the music”, Ren listens and hears something “faint and far away, but moving closer”: “It’s the sound of many people singing. Now we can see the flickering of their torches, winding towards us through the darkness of the trees” (p.431). Are the “many people” singing Crakers,

who sing in their eerily and strangely beautiful crystalline voices during their religious-like processions? Or are they human survivors from the Gardener movement singing Gardener hymns of praise as they journey out of their safe houses into the post-apocalyptic world swept over by the Waterless Flood? Creating a space for utopian hope and desire in her radically dystopian novel, Atwood reclaims utopian possibility in the closure of *The Year of the Flood* even as she offers us a grim warning that the very survival of humankind is at risk if we continue to ignore and refuse to act on what we all know: “We’re using up the Earth. It’s almost gone”.

NOTES

- 1 Teresa Heffernan, *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, p.150.
- 2 *ibid.*, p.151.
- 3 Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005, pp.248 and 249.
- 4 James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, pp.xiii and xix.
- 5 *ibid.*, p.xiii.
- 6 *ibid.*, p.19.
- 7 *ibid.*, pp.20-1.
- 8 *ibid.*, p.21.
- 9 Erica Wagner, “Margaret Atwood Interview”, *Times Online*, 15 August 2009. Retrieved 27 December 2009 at http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/book_extracts/article6796036.ece
- 10 Margaret Atwood, “Running with the Tigers”, in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage, London: Virago Press, 1994, pp.117 and 118.
- 11 *ibid.*, p.120.
- 12 *ibid.*, p.121.
- 13 Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, New York: Doubleday-Random House, 2009, p.30. Subsequent references are to this edition and are included in the text.
- 14 Marlene Goldman, “Margaret Atwood’s *Wilderness Tips*: Apocalyptic Cannibal Fiction”, in *Eating Their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity*, ed. Kristen Guest, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, p.172.
- 15 Lynda Hall, “‘He Can Taste Her Blood’: Dr. Jordan’s Consuming Desires in *Alias Grace*”, *Margaret Atwood Studies* 2,1 (2008), 28.
- 16 Amelia DeFalco, “Haunting Physicality: Corpses, Cannibalism, and Carnality in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*”, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75,2 (2006), 779.
- 17 *ibid.*, 774-6.
- 18 “Running with the Tigers”, p.127.
- 19 In describing the Painballers, Atwood draws on the native cannibal figure of the Wendigo, which she describes in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North*

in *Canadian Literature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. "In their indigenous versions", writes Atwood, "Wendigo legends and stories are confined to the eastern woodlands, and largely to Algonquian-speaking peoples such as the Woodland Cree and the Ojibway" (p.66). In the northern Canadian forests, "the belief that one has become a Wendigo or has been possessed by the Wendigo spirit" is a documented "form of insanity" (p.68). According to Atwood, "fear of the Wendigo is two-fold: fear of being eaten by one, and fear of becoming one. Being eaten is simpler: a matter of mere gulps and gollops. Becoming one is the real horror, for, if you go Wendigo, you may end by losing your human mind and personality and destroying your own family members, or those you love most. You can be changed into a Wendigo by being bitten by one, or by tasting human flesh – even if driven to it by imminent starvation . . ." (p.67). In their mindless cruelty and rapaciousness and cannibalism, the Painballers have "gone Wendigo" – that is, they have become destructive and human-flesh-eating monsters. For an interesting discussion of Atwood's use of the Wendigo figure in her short-story collection *Wilderness Tips*, see Marlene Goldman's "Margaret Atwood's *Wilderness Tips*: Apocalyptic Cannibal Fiction", in *Eating Their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity*, ed. Kristen Guest, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, pp.167-85.

- 20 Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*, New York: Warner, 1983, pp.138 and 152.
- 21 Kristen Guest, "Introduction: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Identity", in *Eating Their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity*, ed. Kristen Guest, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, p.2.
- 22 Deborah Root, *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996, pp.10 and 9.
- 23 Fredric Jameson, "Then You Are Them: Review of *The Year of the Flood* by Margaret Atwood", *London Review of Books* 31,17 (10 September 2009). Retrieved on 6 January 2010 at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n17/fredric-jameson/then-you-are-them>
- 24 William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture, and the Novel, 1880–1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994, p.1.
- 25 *ibid.*, p.15.
- 26 *ibid.*, p.16.
- 27 *ibid.*, p.38.
- 28 *ibid.*, p.5.
- 29 Stephen Dunning, "Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*: The Terror of the Therapeutic", *Canadian Literature* 186 (2005), 94.
- 30 *Degeneration, Culture, and the Novel, 1880–1940*, p.17.
- 31 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, New York: Doubleday-Random House, 2003, p.157.
- 32 Sinclair McKay, "Margaret Atwood: The Canadian Novelist Talks to Sinclair McKay About Books and Bees", *Telegraph*, 20 August 2009. Retrieved 16 December 2009 at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/6061404/Margaret-Atwood.html>
- 33 People have observed, as Atwood comments, that "unless environmentalism becomes a religion it's not going to work". Environmentalism "has that element of faith, and when you meet all the people doing things on behalf of this cause,

you think this is a lot like dedicating yourself as a nun must have been in medieval times, going out and teaching kids to make gardens. The towers are toppling, and you are doing this. You must believe that come what may this is the thing to do" ("Margaret Atwood Interview").

- 34 Rick Kleffel, "Authors Find Fertile Mix of Science and Religion", NPR interview 1 January 2010. Retrieved 11 February 2010 at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122107126&ft=1&f=3>
- 35 *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, p.22.
- 36 Ursula Le Guin, "The Year of the Flood by Margaret Atwood", *The Guardian* 29 August 2009. Retrieved 27 December 2009 at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood>
- 37 *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, p.19.
- 38 *ibid.*, p.6.