

Environmental Paradigm Shifts: Unnatural Disasters and Ethical Solutions

BURCU KAYISCI
Monash University

‘The creatures need no lesson books / For God instructs their Minds and Souls / The sunlight hums to every Bee / The moist clay whispers to the Mole’ (236). These lyrics from a hymn of God’s Gardeners, in Canadian author Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood* (2009), outline her central message: the creatures might not need lessons, but humans definitely do. This essay discusses the lessons to be learnt from Atwood’s two cautionary speculative fiction novels through the analysis of their eco-politically oriented apocalyptic *topoi*. Underlining the relevance of the comic perspective to ecological concerns, it will propose a new interpretation of the novels that will relate the comic mode to their apocalyptic content and thus reveal their prophetic motive. This essay argues that the discourse of comic apocalypse has potential to address environmental issues directly and efficiently, insofar as it helps to build a cognitive bridge between imagining the future in the form of an imminent—and yet, presumably, strange or not so probable—catastrophe, and experiencing the present with a sense of ethical responsibility towards the world, in such a way as to prevent the catastrophe.

Kate Rigby and Axel Goodbody contend that ‘seeing oneself through the eyes of animals, plants, or inanimate objects is a prerequisite for ethical interaction with the rest of the world’ (9). Literature can maintain this interaction through its variety of genres, styles ‘and techniques such as sincerity, internal persuasiveness, comic structure, and chronotopes [. . .]’ (9). Atwood forges her response to nature within a comic apocalyptic paradigm that presents a critique of postmodern, corporate culture in its treatment of nature as an entity to be dominated and exploited for maximum profit by unbridled free market capitalism.

The discourse of comic apocalypse bolsters her critique by enabling her to depict both the literal relocation (or annihilation) of *homo sapiens* within the ecosystem, and the metaphorical relocation of their perceptions, reaching new levels of awareness, of the natural environment. This discourse operates so as to remind us that we are part of the ecosystem rather than its master, and thus allows Atwood to expose human fallibility and the dire consequences of our ethically irresponsible acts. Failure to reflect on consequences might culminate in the end of humanity, she reminds us, yet she also maintains her faith in both survival and survivors. Although she depicts a dystopian vision in both texts, Atwood also allows space for the formation of utopian enclaves, which have ecological, cooperative and egalitarian characteristics. This alternative order and the possibilities it embodies will be elaborated below.

First, however, let us attempt a theoretical outline of comic perspective and comic apocalyptic discourse. Underlining the parallels between perceptions of the world and humans in comedy and ecology, Joseph W. Meeker argues for a comic, rather than tragic,

response to environmental crisis: ‘comedy and ecology are systems designed to accommodate necessity and encourage acceptance of it, while tragedy is concerned with avoiding or transcending the necessary in order to accomplish the impossible’ (30). The tragic hero is burdened with the conflict between moral and natural law, and his choice usually operates to the detriment of nature over which he struggles to assert his superiority. By contrast, ‘comedy is concerned with muddling through, not with progress or perfection’ (Meeker 26); and thus, ‘if the lesson of ecology is balance and equilibrium, the lesson of comedy is humility and endurance’ (Meeker 39).

Stephen O’Leary also emphasises the relevance of the comic mode to a better understanding of the world and proposes a comic interpretation of apocalypse, focusing on its argumentative and secular dimensions. His definition of apocalypse draws on Kenneth Burke’s ‘frames of acceptance’ which are ‘the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it’ (Burke 5). O’Leary defines apocalypse thus in relation to tragic and comic frames:

tragedy conceives of evil in terms of guilt; its mechanism of redemption is victimage, its plot moves inexorably toward sacrifice and ‘the cult of the kill’. Comedy conceives of evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves not toward sacrifice but to the exposure of fallibility. (68)

The vision of tragic apocalypse, O’Leary argues, is based on scripture and concerned with a closure that renders human choice and agency redundant within a predictive paradigm, whereas comic apocalypse recognises humans as active agents responsible for creating their own evils and therefore carries cautionary potential. This differentiation is persuasive mainly in relation to the Book of Revelation, the *ur-text* of apocalypse, but it requires further clarification in terms of the difference between the apocalyptic and the prophetic traditions. The two should be distinguished in order for a clearer hermeneutical positioning of comic apocalypse, which is also hinted at by O’Leary in his emphasis on choice and agency. Believing in choice and agency, or lack thereof, shapes our attitude toward the world. Martin Buber refers to the ancient Hebrew texts and the Jewish–Christian apocalyptic writings of the late Hellenistic period to explain the human response to the tension between deterministic and indeterministic views of the world:

the time the prophetic voice calls us to take part in is the time of the actual decision; to this the prophet summons his hearers [. . .] In the world of the apocalyptic this present historical-biographical hour hardly ever exists, precisely because a decision by men constituting a factor in the historical-suprahistorical decision is not in question here. (180)

Comic apocalypse, then, can be regarded as a ‘double gesture’ that operates within the tension Buber observes. It signifies an ‘end’, but it also pertains to prophetic disclosure, ‘unveiling’ as the literal meaning of the word ‘apocalypse’ suggests.

Both Meeker's emphasis on comedy as survival/coexistence and O'Leary's Burkean definition that regards comedy as a 'frame of acceptance' are compelling. Yet, it is equally possible to argue that the discourse of comic apocalypse functions as a 'frame of rejection' that represents 'an attitude towards some reigning symbol of authority, stressing a shift in the allegiance to symbols of authority' (Burke 21). In narratives like *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*, the apocalyptic imagery is utilised first and foremost to 'unveil' and 'reject' the 'authority' of hypercapitalist and consumerist culture. Thus, the catastrophic end is represented with a prophetic impulse. Atwood avoids textual and contextual (historical) closure, and her depiction of the future is marked by hope as well as fear. Only when the myth of unlimited progress is debunked/rejected, can a more meaningful and 'comic' relationship with the natural environment be imagined.

The two novels, which can be read both as individual works and in relation to each other, each allow interpretation within the framework formulated by Meeker and O'Leary. Atwood simultaneously tells the story of catastrophe and of survival, and envisions a radical historical break, predicated on the hope that things are not and will not be as they were. This deliberate temporal disorder stems from the novels' specific narrative style, which is mainly based on the use of retrospect, as analysed by Amanda Cole with respect to *Oryx and Crake*. Making the protagonists narrate from the future and alternate between their past and present, Atwood is able to present, not only the chain of events that culminates in catastrophe and brings about the end of the world, but also the post-apocalyptic world and its survivors. Gerry Canavan's observation that there are actually two dystopias in *Oryx and Crake* is also applicable to the latter novel: 'the post-apocalyptic, representing the fear that things might change, and the pre-apocalyptic, representing the fear that they might not' (143).

While *Oryx and Crake* concentrates on accounts of Glenn (aka Crake) and Jimmy (aka Snowman (depending on their temporal positioning and their past or present characterisation)), *The Year of the Flood* broadens the narrative spectrum to include a much wider range of characters and places. It provides the background to the worldwide catastrophe outlined in the first novel. The common denominator of both is the depiction of global capitalism's ferocious commodification of everything, enforcing a regimented way of life, based only on exchange value in the market. Science and technology are reduced to mere tools, operating not for the betterment of human and other species, but only for corporate profit. The inhabitants of Atwood's future live either in the ultimately sterile compounds and modules that represent the techno-scientific domains of capital, or in cities called pleeblands which are the sites of common people, consumers, immigrants, criminals and no-names.

This Panopticon-like social organisation is under strict surveillance by CorpSeCorps, the private security firm that takes over after the collapse of police forces due to lack of funding. CorpSeCorps officers hold comprehensive personal records and are fully informed about activities in both compounds and pleeblands. Despite this surveillance disguised as maintenance of public security, the kidnapping of scientists by rival corporations, or their murder by their own institutions for fear of information leakage in

the compounds, is not uncommon; nor are the forgery of ID cards, drug dealing and bloody gang fights in the pleeblands. CorpSeCorps knows what is going on and condones or even takes part in such illegal activities. As long as its own benefit, and that of the corporations that employ its services, is not at risk, it will turn a blind eye.

Jimmy and Crake, the protagonists of *Oryx and Crake*, become friends in one of the segregated modules of the HelthWyzer Compound, to which Jimmy's father has been relocated from his former position in OrganInc Farms. As a genographer, he worked on the so-called Pigoon project, which aims 'to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host' (22). The new position also involves pigoons, its target being to replace old skin with completely new and fresh. When Jimmy's father tells his family they have finally managed to grow 'genuine human neo-cortex tissue' in a pigoon, his wife blames him for this betrayal of his own ideals: 'you're interfering with the building blocks of life. It's immoral. It's sacrilegious' (57). This is reminiscent of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*—and Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.*—for her main concerns are ethical rather than religious, even as she uses the word 'sacrilegious'. She senses the dangers inherent in failure to take responsibility for such radical acts, and recognises that the exploitation of all living beings for maximum profit has become the true *raison-d'être* of the compounds.

After Crake graduates from the HelthWyzer High and the prestigious Watson-Crick Institute, he launches a major project in the RejoovenEsense Compound, an even bigger outfit than OrganInc and HelthWyzer. Eventually, he invites along Jimmy, a mere 'words' person, with a degree in advertising from a mediocre college, and introduces him to the compound's two main initiatives. The first is the BlyssPluss Pill, which will sterilise people 'without them knowing it under the guise of giving them the ultra in orgies' (294). The subjects for its clinical trials are supplied from poor countries for a few dollars, yet another indicator of ethical collapse.

The second, even more groundbreaking, initiative is the generation of a brand-new species of humanoids in Crake's special Paradise Unit. This project could be described as eutopian since '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' (305). Racism based on colour is eliminated in the model group quite simply because they do not register skin colour. There is no hierarchy amongst them because they do not have the neural complexes that would create it in the first place. They feed only on leaves, grass and roots. They can be perfectly adjusted to their habitat, 'so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons [. . .] They would never have to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money.' According to Crake, 'they represent the art of the possible.' 'We can list the individual features for prospective buyers. Then we can customize' (305), he says to Jimmy.

Yet, it soon becomes clear he does not want buyers, but rather envisions a future in which the Paradise humanoids (or Crakers, as Jimmy calls them) would take over after the deadly virus inserted into the BlyssPluss pills has wiped out humanity. Crake believes that humans are already on the verge of extinction, and so attempts to build a sustainable

future without them, since they lack the necessary skills to ensure it. The JUVE (Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary) breaks out simultaneously in all parts of the world, while Jimmy, locking himself in the sterile Paradise dome, watches the news of the catastrophe: ‘meanwhile, the end of a species was taking place before his very eyes. Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species. How many legs does it have? *Homo sapiens sapiens*, joining the polar bear, the beluga whale, the onager, the burrowing owl, the long, long list’ (344). The hierarchy between humans and non-humans is ironically eradicated through the simultaneous extinction of species. Other environmental disasters are also mentioned, as happening concomitantly with the compound projects: ‘the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on [. . .]’ (24). At the end, Crake chooses to ‘sacrifice’ both himself and Oryx, who works for the project as instructor to the Crakers and with whom both he and Jimmy are in love, so that the world can be ceded to the new generation of his own design. After killing Oryx, Crake commits suicide, entrusting Jimmy with care of the Crakers.

Crake’s view of humanity as a lost cause and of humans’ relationship with their environment as destructive is persuasive. When we consider his methods and alternatives, however, it becomes clear that his ‘tragic’ stance exacerbates those conditions, leading only to mayhem and terror. He wields the same tools and methods as those he bitterly criticises. Hence, his approach is ethically flawed regardless of its seemingly eutopian ‘end’ as he disregards the unethical nature of the means, i.e. destroying the whole human race, because of his biological over-determinism. His last words to Jimmy, ‘I am counting on you’ (329), actually contradict his own desire to get rid of humanity. Arguing that Crake has actually ‘literalized the pastoral fantasy of humanism’ (735), which is to tame the human animal, Hannes Bergthaller states that, not only Crake but also Jimmy, adopt a problematic stance in regard to human nature.

Where Crake’s faith in biological determination is excessive, hence defective (although he seems cognisant of this in his last words), Jimmy 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 conflicted tendencies rooted in our biological being’ (737). Both are too loyal to their own ‘books’ in making sense of their own existence and the world around them. A more balanced attitude, which evenly recognises the biological and symbolic dimensions of human existence, would clearly be necessary if meaningful, collective action were to be taken in the face of the impending catastrophe.

At this point, Atwood juxtaposes both Jimmy’s flawed humanism and Crake’s tragic apocalypticism to a comic apocalyptic approach in the depiction of the God’s Gardeners movement. Although there are references to the Gardeners in *Oryx and Crake*, their world is much more fully explored in *The Year of the Flood*. It is possible to read the latter as a complementary piece, providing a better understanding of the dystopian world depicted in the first novel through a wider narrative lens and diversification of voices. In the rotten state of the pleeblands, the Gardeners emerge as followers of an ecological movement that anticipates what they call the ‘Waterless Flood’ and makes long-term

preparations to survive it. Like *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood* opens with the post-apocalyptic image of the world in which Toby, one of the main characters, manages to remain unaffected by the virus in a sheltered spot: ‘this was the Waterless Flood the Gardeners so often had warned about. It had all the signs: it travelled through the air as if on wings, it burned through cities like fire, spreading germ-ridden mobs, terror, and butchery’ (20). A tragic line of thinking might be observed in the Gardeners’ anticipation of and preparation for the catastrophe.

Their response to the crisis of humanity, however, is different from Crake’s, although he is inspired by them for his Paradise project. The Gardeners do not exacerbate the existing conditions with ‘final solutions’. This difference seems to encapsulate their comic response to environmental crisis as formulated by Meeker. They are well aware of the destructive tendencies of humans, which eventually culminate in the breakout of the deadly virus, and so they strive to organise a new community that will refrain from asserting utilitarian and authoritative claims over nature. They create what Foucault would call heterotopian (and eutopian) spaces on the rooftops of deserted buildings by turning them into sustainable gardens. Vegetarians, they grow their own food and provide for their other needs such as honey, soap, and medicinal herbs. Killing is prohibited unless extremely necessary. Minimum use of water is encouraged and all waste products are recycled. Their whole social system is based on equality and mutual respect, not only towards one another, but also towards all other living beings. The ‘Adams’ and ‘Eves’ rank higher in their social organisation, but their numbers indicate areas of expertise rather than orders of importance. So Adam One functions as the spiritual leader of the community, ensuring dialogue and the distribution of knowledge among its members, but is by no means superior to others.

If Atwood’s formulation of a new eco-religion is ‘the most stimulating new feature of *The Year of the Flood*’ (Jameson ‘Then’), the greatest novelty in her depiction of the Gardeners is the collection of oral hymns sung at the end of each of their regular gatherings. These not only recapitulate the Gardeners’ worldview, but also transmit significant messages concerning nature and human approaches to it. This worldview combines analytic/ scientific with belief-based/religious interpretations of natural phenomena without asserting the epistemological superiority of either over the other, as the lyrics of certain hymns clearly demonstrate: ‘Oh let me be not proud, dear Lord / Nor rank myself above / The other Primates, through whose genes / We grew into your love.’ (54) While Crake’s radical (mis)interpretation of the anthropocene ‘accepts the mantle of global responsibility that has been thrust upon [humanity]—and decides to finally stop the insanity by extinguishing itself’ (Canavan 151), the Gardeners try to promote a vision of harmonious coexistence. The Paradise Project is thus an act of hubris, of failure to take responsibility by overdoing it, to the extent that its eutopian motivation is nullified. By contrast, the influence of the Gardeners expands exponentially.

Their teachings and ways of life are diametrically opposed to those of the Compounds. They advocate the interdependence of every living creature, rather than human superiority and domination over the other, and thus seek ways to become ‘something more “another” rather than “Other” to the rest of the world’ and so live ‘in closer

relationship with the vast array of entities constituted as alien others by the current dichotomy of human versus nature' (Murphy, 'Rethinking' 315). Citing the Flood in Genesis, Adam One says that 'many recall the Covenant with Noah, but forget the Covenant with all other living Beings' (91). This latter requires that we recognise our 'anotherness', and the symbolic gestures of the Gardeners, such as talking to bees or apologising to the animals they have to kill, embody this recognition. They are well aware that we are all connected: 'when a Species dies from Earth, we die a little too' (314). If survival is a matter of harmonious co-existence in nature, then human claims to superiority are necessarily and automatically invalid. Acknowledging their own place in the world, the Gardeners develop what Patrick D. Murphy would call 'a criterion of ecological value' ('Prolegomenon' 42), as opposed to the paradigm of use/exchange value which dominates global corporate culture.

Even if she explicitly favours their system, however, Atwood is careful not to depict the God's Gardeners community as a 'perfect model'. On the contrary, her comic perspective associates the desire for perfection with the catastrophe produced by Crake. So she would rather have the Gardeners celebrate the 'April Fish' and allow Adam One to say: 'to be an April Fish is to humbly accept our own silliness, and to cheerfully admit the absurdity—from a materialist view—of every Spiritual truth we profess' (196). This approach both renders Atwood's depiction more credible and adds a dialogical dimension to the narrative. It also alludes to the comedic conception of evil as error, rather than guilt, and emphasises the significance of recognition for a sustainable future. The eutopian impulse is thus embedded in her comic perspective, despite the dystopian order of compounds, modules and pleeblands. Her apocalyptic vision contains both an end and 'no-end', designed to suggest that a 'break' from our ongoing ways is urgently necessary for the sake of historical continuity.

Greg Garrard argues that the real moral and political challenge of ecology 'may lie in accepting that the world is *not* about to end, that human beings are likely to survive even if Western-style civilisation does not. Only if we imagine that the planet *has* a future, after all, are we likely to take responsibility for it' (107). In a recent interview with Stephen Romei, Atwood takes Garrard's observation a step further: 'I don't think we're capable of killing everything . . . we will go before it does.' Romei suggests that her perspective can be understood as a kind of 'perverse optimism', since she believes that 'humankind may well become extinct but the planet will go on.'

While this article was in the process of publication, the eponymous third book of the *Maddaddam* series was released. Although the discussion of *Maddaddam* is not within the scope of this article and requires a full-length study, it should be briefly noted that Atwood deploys her 'perverse optimism' to the fullest extent by portraying humankind's gradual demise and its replacement with, contrary to Crake's expectations, symbol-using Crakers and hybrids. Yet, Atwood's vision of the future is far from tragic: the human survivors remain till the end of their life-span and a new generation of hybrids born out of human-Craker intercourse takes over. The cultural misunderstandings between the two groups, and the Crakers' initial inability to grasp symbols or metaphors compose the humorous core of the story.

As the novel comes to a close, it is revealed that some parts of the narrative are in fact written by the Craker Bluebeard, who, fascinated by the symbols, learns how to write from Toby and teaches it to the rest.

Oryx and Crake and *The Year of the Flood* depict the collapse of Western-style civilisation. Atwood reveals the catastrophic results of failure to reflect on consequences through the image of apocalypse. But her eutopian motive and prophetic perspective become manifest in her invention of the God's Gardeners community and her ironic final gesture towards a posthuman future. This gesture does not point to despair or aim to elicit cathartic purification; it rather leads the reader to critically engage with the current historical situation through comic alienation. We too are 'up to [our] neck[s] in the here and now' like Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* (162), and this might be the most important message Atwood would like to deliver. If lesson books seem too trite to convey the gravity of the situation for some, it seems easier to gravitate towards Atwood's 'strange and improbable,' but also 'alarmingly close to fact' tales and to appreciate their direct and efficient 'treatment' of environmental issues. They remind us that what we do here and now will change the shape of things to come and so affect the chances of survival, which Atwood prefers to approach, not only from a purely biological, but also from a highly 'symbolic' and ethical perspective.

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