

The Comic Apocalypse of *The Year of the Flood*

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Is the post-apocalypse redemptive or traumatic? Is it revolutionary or conservative? What does a world that has abandoned a 'sense of an ending' look like? Is it about ruins and ghosts? Is it about possibility and plurality? What does it mean to be stuck in the game? And what does it mean to try to 'pass beyond man'?

~ Teresa Heffernan, *Post-Apocalyptic Culture*, p. 22

If one of the primary tensions in Margaret Atwood's work is between survival (for the individual or humanity as a whole) and "the question of whether survival is even merited," exemplified by the author's recurring interest in exploring the end of the world (Wilson 177), then Atwood has become one of contemporary literature's most rigorous demythologizers of Apocalypse, while at the same time contributing to its tradition of prophetic warning. Her dystopian novels are in many ways informed by the apocalyptic imagination, as they articulate cultural anxieties towards epochal and/or millennial endings and beginnings; cataclysmic breaks from and within historical time; as well as the despair and hope directed towards the possibilities of revelation and/or renewal. Atwood also works within the realm of speculative fiction, which "reflects real human nightmares, sounding warning regarding the consequences of our actions in the hopes those consequences never become reality" (Urbanski 12). For instance, the action (or, post-apocalypse) of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* takes place in 2025, near enough to our present time so that they depict the immediate and nightmarish consequences of our science and technology primarily because much of the science exists or nearly exists; thus Atwood presents a warning or call to debate the issues/implications before the act, or, before the fall (Howells 163). In this sense, "perhaps hope is the key sentiment behind the cautionary tale," indicating the primary tension in apocalyptic narratives is between prevention and prediction: "After all, why warn us about something that is inescapable?" (Urbanski 10). As an apocalyptic writer who retains a comic, or skeptical, distance from the nightmares she presents, Atwood's jeremiads offer not so much predictions of inevitabilities, but warnings of possibilities (c.f. Garrard 99); their ambiguous and open-ended narratives resist closure, leaving an escape route "into the darkness within; or else the light" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 295).

However, prior to the publication of *The Year of the Flood*, one might agree with Sharon R. Wilson when she concludes her reading of *Oryx and Crake* by suggesting that Atwood's work is "growing more pessimistic" (187). Although *The Year of the Flood* returns to the dystopian world of *Oryx and Crake*, reliving the same nightmare (albeit from a different perspective), this time the emphasis is on the hope of human survival and redemption rather than the prevailing despair of Jimmy/Snowman's "Last Man" narrative. Moreover, *The Year of the Flood* goes beyond merely warning against impending environmental catastrophe but sustains a complex critique of apocalyptic rhetoric as it is located in competing discourses of ecocritical movements. The text interrogates and illustrates how these kinds of doom-laden narratives or myths, if taken to nihilistic extremes, may bring about the very disasters they warn against; consequently, we might read *The Year of the Flood* as a meta-narrative, a cautionary tale about our cautionary tales. Of course, Atwood also asserts her own "brand" of environmental apocalypticism, one that falls into a comic (non-catastrophic) as opposed to tragic (nihilistic) tradition. According to Greg Garrard, the rhetorical strategy of comic apocalypse is not so much concerned with "anticipating the end of the world, but about attempting to avert it by persuasive means" (99); it emphasizes human fallibility and agency and thus when applied to ecocriticism allows for the possibility of "a holistic perspective" embracing the "reciprocity between man and nature" (92); it resists, as *Oryx and Crake* seemingly fails to do in its somewhat misanthropic conclusion, "a blank apocalypse: an *eschaton* without a utopia to follow" (93).

Indeed, *Oryx and Crake* appears to express the position of many (post)modern writers for whom, as Teresa Heffernan observes, the traditional myth of apocalypse has failed to provide meaning, order, or the promised hope of rebirth and/or renewal (8); rather, the End is viewed as “senseless and arbitrary” (5), no longer offering the possibility of revelation, disclosure, or a better world since we are already dwelling within the remainder, ruins, and trauma of the post-apocalypse (6). Nevertheless, Frank Kermode reminds us that modern artists and writers, in reaction to each successive war or violent cataclysm of the twentieth century, continue to give “precise expression to a vaguer, more general, less acute anxiety that all may share, [and] find themselves repeating the old figurations of Apocalypse. Even when the old thought is modernized the old imagery recurs, and is potent because Apocalypse still has a date in the calendar” (20). Even if we accept the millennial or apocalyptic “moment is a fiction and our responses to it as humans [are] as fallible as all the other stories we tell ourselves” (Kermode 27), we still cling to such cultural narratives as long as “the power of tradition ... allows us to behave as if this were not so” (Kermode 19). In other words, regardless if we discount millennia as a mythic construction of time and acknowledge scientifically that two-thousand years is nothing in contrast to the history of the universe, “the idea of disorder and decay as the prelude to the end is still present” (Kermode 19). We still long for an end that will clear out all the old detritus and allow for a new beginning because human imagination resists history as a mere succession of events: we need repetition, narrative, and plots (with ends) (Kermode 26).

We are left then with two competing views of apocalypse (in literature): the traditional (Kermodian) view, in which “[c]losure is the point of revelation” (Heffernan 15); or the postmodern, which denies closure while remaining obsessively haunted by the End: “The sense that the power of the end is exhausted leads on the one hand to the anxiety that we exist after the catastrophe, after the end, and on the other to the hope that the very openness of a narrative that cannot be claimed by a unifying telos, that resists the pull of imagined or real absolute ends, keeps alive infinite directions and possibilities” (Heffernan 14). Atwood consistently plays with our notions of endings by thwarting and satisfying our desire for narrative closure. For example, *The Year of the Flood* by itself remains open-ended, yet simultaneously forces us to revise or shift our view of Jimmy/Snowman’s “ending.” *Oryx and Crake* does not “end” until we reach the end of *The Year of the Flood*; the two narratives converge, disclosing Jimmy’s immediate fate, at least directly following on from when we last saw him, but still leaving open to speculation what will happen next. We desperately want to know what happens next perhaps because, as Atwood pointedly observes in her examination of the inherent dangers of apocalyptic rhetoric, and as Walter Benjamin anticipated: “[Humanity’s] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it is capable of experiencing its own destruction as an aesthetic enjoyment of the highest order” (qtd. in Heffernan 18). The fact that we are now seeing in the twenty-first century a resurgence of apocalyptic narratives, “a renewed investment in the end” (Heffernan 25), either in response to 9/11 or our own millennial moment, indicates that we’ve not only come to enjoy the spectacle of apocalypse but that the apocalypse and its post are inextricably linked (Heffernan 26, 151). Atwood’s metafictional and comic approach resists the grand tradition or myth of apocalypse, yet she is not aimed at exposing the futility of revelation and/or meaning but focused on demythologizing in order to show the limits or ends of the myth itself. The overall viewpoint of *The Year of the Flood* is expressed in its “skeptical revelation,” as it holds out for the possibility of revelation, or the unveiling of a “truth” that will make possible our survival, while refusing to fall for the myth of apocalypse and its own self-destructive impulses.

The more extreme forms of apocalypticism are inclined towards paranoia and violence, relying on a moral dualism that insists “upon the ‘unveiling’ of trans-historical truth and the corresponding role of believers as the ones to whom, and for whom, the veil of history is rent” (Garrard 86). Apocalypse, like any myth, is of course “inevitably bound up with imagination, because it has yet to come into being” and so it is always a form of prolepsis, one that often problematically “both responds to and produces” the crises it anticipates (Garrard 86). Apocalyptic narrative might follow either a tragic or comic plot depending on one’s “frame of acceptance” with regard to the role and/or responsibility of the individual or community in averting or hastening the imagined end (Garrard 87). The tragic plot accepts that evil is fundamentally rooted in guilt whereas the comic plot remains focused on “the exposure of fallibility” so

that evil is viewed in terms of human error; thus redemption is contingent upon the recognition (and rectification) of mistakes rather than sacrifice and death; in other words, tragedy demands victimhood and comedy permits agency (Garrard 87). Working within these classical terms, as Garrard goes on to observe, comic visions emphasize a figurative apocalypse that refuses to take biblical prophecy literally, choosing instead a temporal perspective that is "open-ended and episodic" (Garrard 87). Conversely, a tragic apocalypticism views history as "epochal" and assumes the end is "predetermined" (Garrard 87); its rhetoric ultimately denies responsibility and agency: "The warning [of the end] is presented in terms of absolute authority; the material threat is 'evil', and so, by association, are the authors of it; the consequences of failure to heed the warning are catastrophic, and the danger is not only imminent, but already well under way" (Garrard 95). As we see in *The Year of the Flood*, the God's Gardeners espouse the tragic view while the narrative framework and tone of the text itself presents a comic vision, as Atwood explores the tensions that exists between doom and hope; between warning and alternative (cf. Garrard 95).

Within the God's Gardener's eschatology, which itself is always rooted in some kind of origin narrative, the biblical Flood is set up as the primal myth of Apocalypse. Noah, who "alone was forewarned," is their prophetic saint and model, "symbolizing the aware ones among Mankind" (*The Year of the Flood* 90; hereafter cited as YF); as "the chosen caregiver of the Species" (91) he was thus appointed to help bring about "a second Creation" when God became unhappy with his "experiment" (90). The Gardeners are now the new "Noahs"; attuned to "the symptoms of coming disaster," their self-appointed mission is vigilance and preparation: "We must be ready for the time" (91). Their apocalypticism is grounded in a fervent desire for the end, or rather a return to the beginning, to "that unrepeatable day" (the sixth day before the fall of man), which represents a new paradise that will regenerate the world and redeem humanity: "How much have we lost, dear fellow mammals and Fellow Mortals! How much have we willfully destroyed! How much do we need to restore, within ourselves!" (13). Even if they have a reasonable point here, one that underlies the majority of environmentalist discourses and Atwood's own view that we are bringing ourselves to the brink of destruction through our own willfully destructive actions, for the Gardeners, there is no imaginable solution other than a complete cataclysm that will cleanse the world and humanity of its degenerative decay, leaving in its wake a new world set aside especially for the chosen believers. They do not want to avert the apocalypse but in fact hasten its advent.

The Gardeners' rhetoric, framed in the high tradition of tragic apocalypse, reiterates the revenge fantasy found within the *Book of Revelations*, which presents the vision of a great bloody battle glorifying the ascent of the righteous oppressed and the defeat of the powerful (and thus deserving damned). It is a text that graphically imagines the coming apocalypse and not as prophetic warning but merely as precedent to its author's closing, desperately urgent plea for the apocalypse to be fulfilled. In D.H. Lawrence's estimation: "John the Divine had ... a grandiose scheme for wiping out and annihilating everybody who wasn't of the elect, the chosen people, in short, and of climbing up himself right on the throne of God" (63). This is certainly the grandiose scheme of Glenn/Crake, who in his desire to play God by creating a "new" human is also responsible for the bio-engineered plague that directly brings to fruition the Gardeners' apocalyptic vision, which is wryly summarized by Toby as such: "A massive die-off of the human race was impending, due to overpopulation and wickedness, but the Gardeners exempted themselves: they intended to float above the Waterless Flood[,] ... Thus they would survive to replenish the Earth" (47). If anything, the God's Gardeners are a radical cult of wilderness survivalists, and though by the end of the novel they are clearly the only ones best equipped to endure the deprivations and dangers of the "new world," Atwood does not expect us to take seriously, or even accept, their version of environmental apocalypticism.

The text's satirical portrayal of the Gardeners is located in the inherent contradictions of their beliefs and discourse, as Atwood playfully, riotously intersperses Adam One's sermons and the Gardeners' corresponding hymns with the narrative (and skeptical) viewpoints of Toby and Ren. Adam One's sermons are a comedic hodgepodge of "high" and "low" language, as he mixes lyrical (albeit biblically parodic) passages with mundane observations. For example, he exhorts his followers to stay true to their mission, which is to assist in "the redemption of God's Creation from the decay and

sterility that lies all around us," following this with the assertion: "if all were to follow our example, what a change would be wrought on our beloved Planet!"; and then, as if in solemn confirmation of their ability to "move forward undaunted," he remarks: "I am glad we have all remembered our sunhats" (11). Further on, Adam One declaims: "God cannot be held to the narrowness of literal and materialistic interpretations" (11), yet his ensuing endeavors at translating God's intentions on a metaphorical level are undermined by his attempts to apply scientific explanations to the biblical text; such as when he reconciles the creation narrative in Genesis with "The Big Bang" theory, and then becomes caught up in determining the precise language God used when He spoke to the animals (12).

The muddled rationale behind most of Adam One's scriptural exegeses is motivated by the urge to make the text fit his overly literal interpretations of the signs of oncoming apocalypse, and more importantly to further his radical environmentalist agenda. As Toby quickly assesses when she reluctantly joins the Gardeners: "the prayers were tedious, the theology scrambled – why be so picky about lifestyle details if you believed everyone would soon be wiped off the face of the planet?" (46-47). The Gardeners stick closely to the script of tragic apocalypse, which is predominantly found in fundamentalist eschatology that demands an "embarrassing literalism"; as such, revelations of the impending doom always seem to be treated "as a direct prophecy of the time of the interpreter" (Kermode, 21, 22). More problematically, this kind of apocalyptic rhetoric, when presented at the literal rather than figurative level, is rarely capable of sustaining the "distinction between prophecy and exhortation," and as a result both "religious and secular narratives of the End in the tragic mode ... share a propensity to lapse into either unintentional comedy or self-fulfilling horror" (Garrard 99, 100). For example, reading the bible literally, the feuding Lion and Wolf Isaiahist cults dispute "whether it was the lion or the wolf that would lie down with the lamb once the Peaceable Kingdom had arrived" (YF 39), eventually reaching the conclusion "that the only way to fulfil the lion/lamb friendship prophecy without the first eating the second would be to meld the two of them together" (YF 94). The result of this is the creation of the "liobam," a genetically spliced "monster" that is perhaps more menacing than peaceable, at least for the survivors of the apocalypse.

Although Atwood mocks the literal-minded, self-fulfilling prophecies of fundamentalist believers, she also intends for us to acknowledge their underlying potential horror. In other words, "fringe" groups like the Gardeners or Isaiahists may be laughably "loony" in their distorted worldviews, but this does not mean we shouldn't take seriously the dangers they pose in having a real impact upon the world. After all, it is the MaddAddams who are partially responsible for the apocalypse, since many of their members are recruited by Crake to help fulfill his ultimate project of human extinction. Atwood certainly insists on the need to resist and subvert the tragic End, since such apocalyptic narratives "are radically dualistic, deterministic and catastrophic and have tended historically to issue in the suicidal, homicidal or even genocidal frenzies" of millenarian cults (Garrard 88). Perhaps the most glaring inconsistency in the Gardeners' apocalypticism is their pacifist beliefs set alongside their obsession with death and destruction, as Ren observes with some confusion: "they talked so much about Death. The Gardeners were strict about not killing Life, but on the other hand they said Death was a natural process, which was sort of a contradiction" (59). The Gardeners are not so much concerned with preserving life but passively standing by as witnesses to its annihilation. When Zeb claims, "Wherever there's Nature, there's assholes" (186), he may as well be referring to himself since his bio-terrorist group inadvertently contributes its own share of destroying the very thing they believed they were intent on saving.

The Gardeners' ecological stance more or less follows inhumanism, encapsulated by Adam One as a philosophy that exhorts its followers to resist "the error of pride by considering ourselves as exceptional, alone in all Creation in having Souls; and that we will not vainly imagine that we are set above all other Life, and may destroy it at our pleasure, and with impunity" (53). What this amounts to, though, is that they care more for the suffering of fish than people (YF 196), and their refusal to confront the extensive human suffering in the world around them undermines their original principles of love and faith as they begin to turn towards a blank or nihilistic apocalypticism: "We find the Sky an empty void,/The Universe a blank" (198). The Gardeners' overall passivity (which in the world of Atwood's novels is a sure sign of willing victimhood) allows them to abnegate all meaningful

responsibility: "Our role in respect to the Creatures is to bear witness. ... And to guard the memories and genomes of the departed" (253). Atwood may have in mind here the reactionary discourses of Christian evangelists and environmentalists for whom, according to Al Gore's critique, apocalyptic rhetoric should not be used as "an excuse for abdicating their responsibility to be good stewards of God's creation" (qtd. in Garrard 89). Indeed, as Atwood's text implicitly explores through the God's Gardeners' tragic apocalypticism, we have begun to see an increasing trend in which "Environmental crisis serves modern American conservative evangelists just as natural disasters served mediaeval millenarians: as a sign of the coming End, but not as a warning to avert it" (Garrard 88).

Eventually the Gardeners begin to splinter when various members defect, culminating in Zeb's demand that they take a less pacifist, or passive, stance than Adam espouses, insisting "Peace goes only so far" (252). Neither has the right answer. Adam's inaction leads to despair and nihilism: "What is it about our own Species that leaves us so vulnerable to the impulse to violence? ... [W]e should reflect on our own brutal history. Take comfort in the thought that this history will soon be swept away by the Waterless Flood. Nothing will remain..." (312). Zeb establishes his own extremist group, which in fact only initiates or plays out the violent fantasies embedded within Adam's longing for the apocalyptic break from history. The MaddAddams, engaging in "bioform resistance," attempt to "destroy the infrastructure" through terrorist acts, which they believe would then allow "the planet [to] repair itself. Before it was too late and everything went extinct" (333). Zeb's terrorism is feebly justified by the claim that he "didn't believe in killing people" (333), and his group denies responsibility for the plague even though they were "all helping Crake with his big experiment: some kind of perfectly beautiful human gene splice that could live forever" (395). Of course they didn't know Crake's ultimate agenda, but this refusal to acknowledge their complicity, and their seeming self-satisfaction in surviving the very disaster they predicted and perhaps helped accelerate, exposes the underlying dangers of a tragic apocalypticism in its tendency "to 'produce' the crisis it describes" (Garrard 105).

The God's Gardeners' schismatic unraveling and its consequences reveal a tragic vision of apocalyptic doom that is paranoid and violent, and when applied to ecocriticism, is often constructed "in terms of a dualistic moral schema that crudely oppose[s] humanity and the wild" (Garrard 104). As M. F. Lee argues, the radical inhumanism and "biocentric beliefs" of extremist environmentalists who espouse a tragic apocalypticism "deny the human species a pivotal role in history. When it is pushed to its limits, this belief system provides a justification for any action undertaken in defence of the wilderness, regardless of whether or not human beings are harmed. Individuals who hold such beliefs are capable of wreaking significant havoc on the human civilization in which they live" (qtd. in Garrard 104). The other (comic) side of this is an emphasis on human responsibility, negotiation and direct action that nevertheless resists the nihilistic despair of apocalypse as well as our more violent impulses, all of which informs Atwood's vision, and not only in *The Year of the Flood*, but across the body of her work. Survival is always contingent upon her protagonists taking some form of decisive action (Wilson 182) that allows them to resist "the victim hammerlock" (YF 290) and (re)negotiate the terms of their identities by refusing to remain complicit with the treachery of power politics.

A typical strategy for Atwood's characters when they find themselves forced to circumnavigate the oppressive nightmare of a dystopic, or post-apocalyptic, world is their recognition of the need "to distinguish between ... illusions and [reality]" (YF 15). As Wilson observes, "[v]ision imagery" is one of the most significant repeating tropes in Atwood's texts; they often begin with (partially) blind narrators who must grow or move outside "the objectifying Gaze" as the best strategy for their survival; the narrator becomes a "trickster creator" who manipulates the Gaze and language so that their story is transformed into one of survival rather than victimhood (178). For example, Offred and Snowman both experience debilitating doubts while attempting to recover their alienated sense of reality as they maneuver through the devastation of their former worlds, and it is only by negotiating their identities in relation to other humans (or, in the case of the Crakers, more-than-humans) that they eventually discover some way of *seeing* themselves, which is ultimately necessary to their survival. Ren and Toby, however, are left stranded or barricaded within locked spaces in which they are allowed no access to the other's gaze, no means for situating themselves in relation to reality. Both struggle to retain even their faith in reality; they persist in questioning, without anyone to provide a response, what they are

now expected to believe, since belief itself seems beside the point, as Toby observes of herself: "She ought to trust that she's here for a reason – to bear witness, to transmit a message, to salvage at least something from the general wreck. She ought to trust, but she can't" (95). Accordingly, Toby's and Ren's stories are very much concerned with negotiating the tensions between apocalyptic hope and despair, and in returning to the central debate between Crake and Jimmy, Atwood makes a persuasive argument against Crake's misanthropic view that "as a species we're doomed by hope" in favor of Jimmy's tentative suggestion that "we're doomed without hope" (*Oryx and Crake* 120).

The Year of the Flood, if read as the author's own reply to her previous work, offers a "feminine" vision, or revelation, that is grounded in a (skeptical) faith in the possibility of human survival and/or redemption. Toby's pragmatic integrity and Ren's resilient optimism allows them to view others as well as themselves through a critical but also forgiving lens. This distinguishes them from the predominantly pessimistic and self-absorbed perspectives of Jimmy and Crake, who are both "monstrous in their ways of seeing," as their "unethical vision" ultimately puts everyone around them "in jeopardy" (Wilson 186). Although Jimmy is far less guilty of a monstrous egotism, he is just as culpable for the disastrous effects of Crake's "experiment" since he always "turns a 'blind eye' ... to whatever he doesn't want to see" (Wilson 187). He is as cruelly insensitive and indifferent to the experiences and feelings of others, in spite of his attempts to present Crake as the villain to his victim, which becomes all the more apparent when we learn in *The Year of the Flood* of Jimmy's emotionally abusive and manipulative treatment of women. Or at least, this is how Ren presents him, but Ren never plays the victim; she may be foolishly obsessed with Jimmy but also clearly sees him for what he is, and thus takes responsibility for her own poor choices; if anything, Ren refuses to be her own or anyone else's dupe while simultaneously 'accepting that love, as a choice, is that which allows one to have "more sympathy" towards others (YF 225). The text thus sets up an implicit critique of the willfully destructive male blindness in *Oryx and Crake* as opposed to the survival tactics of *The Year of the Flood's* female protagonists, whose ability to see and ethically respond to the "other" articulates Atwood's hope for human survival.

Overall, the imaginative and affective capacity for sympathy, as well as their ability to see themselves and others, is what provides Ren and Toby with the necessary means to survive their ordeals. Both of them, like Jimmy/Snowman, are left "to confront the scandal of apocalypse alone" (Howells 170), but contrasting with Snowman's increasingly suicidal despair, they hold out for the possibility that there are still others and thus their own survival might be merited (at least if human life is going to endure). Although Toby is careful "[n]ot to waste hope" (YF 5), and often mirrors Snowman's willed disbelief that there could be anyone else left except her, she nevertheless remains vigilant in her will to survive: "The doors are locked, the windows barred. But even such barriers are no guarantee: every hollow space invites invasion" (YF 5). Rather than giving in to the futility of her situation, and unlike Snowman who repeatedly and recklessly endangers his own life, she carefully rations out her supplies and stubbornly guards her "fortress" against anything that might physically harm her. Ren, on the other hand, practices a form of willed belief primarily because she has no other choice; locked in a room with dwindling food and no way of escape, she makes a point of actively envisioning Amanda walking across the desert to come save her (which she does, somewhat miraculously, and almost beyond the belief of the reader). Atwood's point, however, as is Ren's, is that "[y]ou create your own reality" (YF 284); or rather, we can choose to dwell in either hope or despair, but it's only the former that will ultimately save us since it is hope that compels us towards self-preservation, and by extension, preservation of the world in which we live – as opposed to the catastrophic and hence self-destructive or ineffectually despairing viewpoint of a tragic apocalypticism.

This seems to be the viewpoint of *Oryx and Crake* when it concludes with Jimmy setting off, gun in hand, to meet the three strangers on the beach. We are left to speculate, now that it seems he has finally made a choice to survive, as to whether that choice will end in violence, and ironically enough, most likely his own death. If we accept the novel's last words, and that it is indeed "Time to go" (374), then Atwood certainly offers no more than a blank apocalypse, as "blank" as the face of Jimmy's watch, and marking the inevitable End or futility of human life as long as survival is conditional to continuing violence. However, and again contrasting with Jimmy/Snowman's reaction to his own "plot change" or twist that he is "not the Last Man after all" (Howells 170), Atwood offers an alternative in *The Year of*

the Flood. Ren and Toby resist following the survivalist tactics they learned from the God's Gardeners: "if you are clutched or even touched, you too will drown" (21); or, when the end comes, at all costs, save yourself even at the expense of another's life. The women's investment in hope for their own survival, in spite of any evidence that such faith or belief is warranted, is the determining factor in their later actions or choices when they must confront the impulse towards violence and vengeance in themselves and others. After Toby almost "blindly" shoots Ren, and having realized the error of her "homicidal impulse" (YF 360), when faced with the choice of killing the Painballers, she chooses forgiveness, or at least mercy; because why hope for one's own survival if one does not believe in the possibility of redemption? As Toby insists: "This is not the time ... for dwelling on ultimate purposes. I would like us all to forget the past, the worst parts of it. Let us be grateful..." (430-31). Although Ren feels her anger is the one thing that has preserved her in the face of others' cruelty, when reunited with Jimmy, who now appears utterly destroyed and powerless, she realizes that her own power has always derived from her capacity for love and faith in the regenerative possibilities of hope as the key to one's survival: "The Adams and Eves used to say, *We are what we eat*, but I prefer to say, *We are what we wish*. Because if you can't wish, why bother?" (400).

As for the Adams and Eves, although the Gardeners despair over the fact that their apocalypse did not bring about the new Eden they'd imagined, questioning why God would "give us another Earth when we have mistreated this one so badly" (424), they hold on to the hope of forgiveness, and not divine mercy but the difficult task of forgiving themselves and others for the errors of their ways (or rather, their inaction in preserving the Earth they *had* been given). Adam One reminds them (and us) that this kind of "Forgiveness is the hardest task we shall ever be called upon to perform" (425). In other words, forgiveness is that which demands or requires recognition of the other, of the fallibility within others as well as ourselves, and with such recognition the possibility of redemption and mercy. This in itself speaks to the comic vision of Atwood's text, as her apocalypse does not end in darkness but light, as the novel concludes with the image of "the flickering of ... torches, winding towards us through the darkness of the trees" (431). Atwood's typical interplay of light and darkness is representative of the prevailing theme in nearly all of her works; that we always have a choice between agency and victimhood, between accepting the comic or tragic plot.

Overall, although apocalypse seems a necessary rhetoric for environmental discourse in its capacity for "galvanising activists, converting the undecided and ultimately, perhaps, of influencing government and commercial policy" (Garrard 104), at the same time it often "tends to polarise responses, prodding sceptics towards scoffing dismissal and potentially inciting believers to confrontation and even violence"; and when framed in the tragic mode, it becomes little more than a self-fulfilling/defeating prophecy (Garrard 105). Thus, as Garrard argues, environmental solutions might best be articulated when "framed by comic apocalyptic narratives that emphasise the provisionality of knowledge, free will, ongoing struggle and a plurality of social groups with differing responsibilities" (107). *The Year of the Flood*, as a comic apocalypse, fulfills these requirements, and is in many ways representative of Atwood's environmentalism, which has developed throughout her body of work. In her commitment towards exploring various strategies that might bring into play a more productive discourse of ecocriticism that stresses the need to balance and accept how we "affect and are affected by the larger environment in which we evolve," Atwood emphasizes our "interconnectedness" as the key to negotiating our capacity for destructiveness and vulnerability, where compassion, faith and mercy may act as the antidotes to the violence within human nature and culture (Hengen 83-84). Moreover, if the postmodern post-apocalypse means we live *after* apocalypse and its tradition, then it would appear we exist "after the faith in a radically new world, of revelation, of unveiling" (Heffernan 6). Thus, if in the world of Atwood's novels vision is a necessary component to our ultimate survival, we are then inevitably forced to confront the question of what it means to live in a world "with diminished faith in revelation" (Heffernan 7).

This is the key question we must ask of Atwood's texts since it is one she herself poses throughout her oeuvre, and perhaps to a far greater degree of intensity in *The Year of the Flood*, which is deeply concerned with the limits of belief while also attesting to the possibility of revelation. If anything, this points towards the most crucial tension existing within the human imagination, since, according to

Ren, "people can believe two opposite things at the same time" (229). Such unresolved tensions within Atwood's work allows for a critical space that examines both the limitations and possibilities of apocalyptic rhetoric: the text expresses a longing for the promised renewal of apocalypse while dwelling in disbelief; it retains a critical, or comic, distance from religious and secular myths in order to avoid a tragic nihilism; and it provides warnings of our most self-destructive impulses while existing in the hope of humans' capacity for mercy, forgiveness and revelation as that which merits our survival. As the Gardeners propose in one of "their instructive rhymes" (YF 19), which they themselves seem to lose sight of in the aftermath of their own apocalyptic fantasy: "It is better to hope than to mope!" (89); and more importantly, as the text so thoroughly explores in its competing narratives of apocalypse: "Without the light, no chance; without the dark, no dance" (279).

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Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* and the Garden of Limited Choices

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While in *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood filters the demise of a high tech world through the eyes of Snowman/Jimmy, a romantic loser, in *The Year of the Flood*, she foregrounds two female perspectives, those of Toby and Ren, who are associated with an environmentalist cult, God's Gardeners. Like Snowman, Toby and Ren contemplate a scenario in which they are among the few humans left on earth; unlike him, they are not attacked by pigeons, but by the extremely dangerous Painball men who plan to shoot them. A female perspective does not presuppose female power. In *The Year of the Flood*, women are neither leaders nor decision makers as the futuristic society envisioned by the author is controlled by big corporations and male scientists and policed by corporate security forces. Instead, Atwood's female characters, who are prostitutes, trapeze dancers, depressed or