

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* The Terror of the Therapeutic

In *Brave New World Revisited*, Aldous Huxley distinguishes between the oppressive regime of George Orwell's 1984, which maintains itself by "inflicting pain," and that of *Brave New World*, which prevails by inflicting "a hardly less humiliating pleasure" (42). Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) clearly stands within the Orwellian tradition, though in this case the oppressive regime is religious rather than political. *Oryx and Crake* (2003) returns to her dystopian concerns, but now in a markedly Huxleyean mood. It finds our current vulnerability to unprecedented disaster arises not from dystopian societies with hostile political structures, underwritten by oppressive metanarratives, and established through threat of imprisonment, torture and death, but rather within the qualitative vacuum of a culture that has lost its "great" narratives. This culture grinds on without what Neil Postman labels a necessary "god," without a story that "tells of origins, and envisions a future, a story that constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority, and, above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose" (5–6).¹

Atwood's shift from Orwellian to Huxleyean nightmare reflects an essential feature of what I call late modernity,² which has witnessed the failure—most dramatically in the fall of the Soviet Union—of all secular political substitutes for the Judeo-Christian narrative it originally rejected. Such failures appear inevitable given the ethos of the scientific revolution that inaugurated and continues to drive modernity: quantitative description and manipulation displaces qualitative discourse, a disastrous development the novel captures precisely in the relative valuation of "word" and "numbers" people.

Atwood recognizes that a world devoid of qualitative distinctions will be driven by base appetites and fears, stimulated by the latest technological innovations and marketed for maximum profit. But the novel does more than simply warn us against pursuing a purportedly therapeutic scientific project shaped ultimately by the laboratory and ledger. It also insists that sacred narrative cannot be excised without the loss of our humanity, and that we will not recover ourselves until we recover the stories that tell us who we are.

Atwood has captured precisely modernity's ethos, and portrayed its potential for disaster. At the risk of vastly simplifying, we might say that modernity began with a deliberate rejection of the received Judeo-Christian narrative, at least as embodied in mediaeval scholasticism, in favour of science's epistemology and precise quantification, which most apologists believed would inaugurate an era of universal health and prosperity. And modernity undoubtedly began as a therapeutic project intended to free society from the repressive pathologies of the past. Modernity's therapy has proven fatally hedonistic, simply because it debunked medieval asceticism without providing its own effective alternative ethic. Indeed, modernity's essentially quantitative discourse equates "more" with "better"—at least of those activities that satisfy what Robert Doede labels "first-order" desires (12). These desires push the individual in the direction of immediate gratification. Modernity can offer no convincing rationale for pursuing second-order desires, which require the suppression or deferment of first-order desires to achieve higher ethical (often communal) goals, precisely because, as both Huxley and Atwood recognize, modernity rejects the traditional cultural narratives that give such goals their authority.

Galileo's famous identification of mathematics as Nature's language thus represented a decisive shift that, over several centuries, displaced natural languages (and their attendant organizing narratives) from the centre to the periphery of cultural authority, where they prove—as the novel's narrator (Snowman) aptly puts it in describing his own linguistic labours—mere "window-dressing . . . decorating the cold, hard, numerical real world in flossy 2-D verbiage" (188). Descartes, brilliant mathematician and seminal voice of modernity, may have inspired Atwood's creation of *Crake*, the novel's destructively alienated antagonist. In any case, he shares Descartes' rejection of received authority, his desire to work within a comprehensive epistemology founded on ideas as clear and distinct as mathematical proofs, his preference for mechanical models of living beings,³ his identification of the self as

res cogitans (the original ghost in the machine), and his misrelation to the feminine, or Nature.⁴ Bacon's rejection of traditional wisdom for effective technical power also captures something of the modernist project as incarnated in *Crake*.

It is perhaps one of history's more exquisite ironies that many (if not most) of the first scientists and most eloquent apologists for the modern revolution were theists more or less within the orthodox Christian fold. What they did not realize, and what we have been gradually (and unavoidably) discovering, is that the displacement of traditional cultural narratives by science has produced comprehensive upheavals, a complete reshaping of the human landscape. Nothing escapes—at least where science rules unimpeded, as it does in Atwood's novel. Perhaps the original scientists imagined that their religious (and most certainly ethical) convictions would remain unscathed by the new epistemology, by the new authority of quantitative discourse. If so, we know that they were wrong. But the knowledge of loss came only gradually. Laplace's well-documented exchange with Napoleon regarding his revolutionary treatment of planetary movement encapsulates science's triumphalism quite precisely. Napoleon, hoping to embarrass Laplace by pointing out that his book on the system of the universe contained no reference to the Creator, received the following reply: "Je n'avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là" (Wilkins). And indeed, this dismissal typifies the fate of what has been called the "God of the gaps"—a sort of death by inches. God, and indeed everything originally lying outside science's sphere, survived only as embarrassing hypotheses (usually in some form of vastly reduced significance), useful only until science could dispense with them. This shifting involved both the expansion of science into realms traditionally reserved for qualitative discourses, such as theology or philosophy, and the reduction (or recasting) of these subjects in forms amenable to scientific discourse, as we see for example, in behaviourist psychology.

As science progressively eroded confidence in the traditional cultural narratives, it also offered rival accounts (most decisively those treating of origins and human nature) that further displaced our received notions of ourselves and of normative behavior. Very few realized what this loss might eventually entail. Thus, while individual crises of faith often find self-conscious expression in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, only in the twentieth century do we encounter dystopian fictional worlds in which these crises have collectively worked themselves out.

Oryx and Crake offers a darkly comic critique of our triumphant scientific

modernity that is only now beginning to reveal its true shape, having finally exhausted the resources of the world it has systematically destroyed. The admittedly odd title refers to two main characters, whose names derive from animal species, now endangered, but extinct in the near future of the novel. Snowman, the narrator,⁵ has close ties to both characters: Crake is his only friend; Oryx, the only woman he has ever loved. Like Offred, the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Snowman begins speaking as the devastated survivor of a carefully calculated catastrophe that the book gradually discloses. But here the catastrophe goes well beyond the predictable (though painful) cycling of political regimes, for Snowman initially appears to be the only *human* alive.

Crake masterminded this “final solution” designed to eliminate everyone but Snowman and the Crakers (a select group of genetically-altered *homo sapiens*), and thus the novel is arguably Crake’s story, at least in so far as we must grasp Crake’s relation to his world to understand what drives him to this radical therapy—and the irony is that (like the first advocates of the new science) he clearly acts with therapeutic intent. Oryx’s role in the work is much more enigmatic. She emerges as the oppressed, exploited “Other,” incarnating possibilities of communion and love that neither Snowman nor Crake can fully grasp. Yet paradoxically, she also inspires Crake, believes in his therapeutic mission, and assists him (albeit unwittingly) in bringing about the catastrophe. But if she is the abiding mystery at the heart of the story, a mystery I will examine more closely later, he remains its prime agent.

Crake’s drastic therapy seeks to remedy the ills of a world in deep distress on almost all levels of description or organization. Three centuries (or more) of technological innovation—effectively unrestrained by qualitative human concerns—have devastated the physical environment, making it less and less viable for more and more species—including humans. The trajectory of environmental degradation coupled with population growth becomes very clear to Crake. He responds to Jimmy’s query about his company’s new pill, BlyssPluss, a drug that increases libido, protects against all forms of sexually-transmitted diseases—and sterilizes:

“It’s not altruism exactly,” said Crake. “More like sink or swim. I’ve seen the latest confidential Corps demographic reports. As a species we’re in deep trouble, worse than anyone’s saying. They’re afraid to release the stats because people might just give up, but take it from me, we’re running out of space-time. Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geo-political areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply for everyone.” (295)

The italicized words are telling, for Crake's is a distinctly hierarchical world, divided visibly into the few haves and the many have-nots. Those gifted "numbers" people who can serve their commercialized technological society profitably find refuge behind highly fortified corporation compounds (explicitly likened to castles), while the ungifted or unfortunate find themselves banished to the "pleeblands" (28).⁶ Life for the unprotected is brutal, in large part because of the environmental damage produced by precisely the same technology that offers protection to those who can afford it. In the compounds, the elite rattle around like miserable, voyeuristic ghosts, starving in ways they cannot even begin to describe or address—living in various degrees of frustration, anxiety and isolation.⁷

Education provides a good point of entry into this decidedly elitist, technological society. Nothing resembling universal public education survives. Corporation compounds provide their own technical training for the children of their employees. Post-secondary education again functions under corporate auspices, and as with the compound schools themselves, the degree of security (and hence isolation from the pleeblands) is directly proportionate to the institution's educational status.⁸ "Numbers" people, those gifted in the sciences and technologies, are systematically (even exclusively) privileged. Exceptionally gifted numbers people, like Crake, find themselves aggressively recruited by these institutions that feed students seamlessly into the elite corporate universe. "Word" people, like Jimmy, however, can succeed only by proving themselves profitable in some manner, usually by helping to produce psychologically manipulative (and misleading) advertising.

Significantly, however, Jimmy prefers the society of his peers within the squalid conditions of his school to the company of Crake's pampered, socially retarded, corporate student associates who lead painfully impoverished lives, and appear incapable of any intimacy lying outside the narrow definitions of their work. Like Jimmy and Crake, they have grown up in a world of emotional impermanence, dictated by corporate whim, a mood the narrator captures well in recounting Crake's appearance in his life: "He was a transfer, the result of some headhunt involving a parental unit: these were frequent among the Compounds. Kids came and went, desks filled and emptied, friendship was always contingent" (71).⁹

A similar emotional dysfunction characterizes relations among adults. Both Crake and Snowman come from broken families, and where relationships survive, they do so only on the basis of cynical mutual exploitation and convenience. Indeed, Jimmy's preferred form of recreation as a new

corporate employee is simultaneously distracting, and being distracted by, as many bored compound wives as possible. None of this gesturing truly touches anyone, though it is telling that they find his considerable linguistic skills appealing, suggesting that on some level, they recognize the nature of their deprivation, the cause of their extraordinary loneliness. Community, even a community of two, requires communication.

That the culture's quantitative ethos and dominant technologies—especially “communications” technologies—militate against authentic community becomes particularly clear in Jimmy's and Crake's relationship, which remains the closest thing to a recognizable friendship that we find in the novel. Again, they do not use these technologies to communicate, so much as to entertain and distract themselves, a point Atwood emphasizes by having them augment their voyeuristic excursions into the Internet with mind-altering substances. Even their preferred Internet information service—the Noodie News—makes no claims to seriousness, for the boys merely enjoy the broadcasters' pretence that “nothing unusual [is] going on,” as they “studiously avoided looking at one another's jujubes” (81–82). Such pure entertainment pushes to secure the largest possible market share by appealing to the ever more grotesque violations of moribund convention and taboo.

Computer games provide the boys' other main form of entertainment and formative education. Blood and Roses, a particular favourite, is a trading game, something like Monopoly, in which the Blood side plays with human atrocities—“massacres” and “genocides”—as counters against the human achievements of the Roses side—“artworks, scientific breakthroughs,” and so forth, referred to as “[m]onuments to the soul's magnificence” (78). In hindsight, Snowman describes this as a “wicked game” (79), in particular because it allows a quantitative playing off of atrocities against achievements, so many Hiroshimas against a *Divine Comedy* or two; Mozart's music against Pol Pot's Killing Fields. As in history, the bias inclines to the Blood side, though as Snowman points out, the winner inherits a wasteland, very much like the one in which the narrator finds himself (80). Extinctathon, on the other hand, domesticates death through naming it. Snowman describes it as an “interactive biofreak masterlore game” in which players adopt the names of extinct animal species (hence Oryx and Crake), and traffic in the data of biological genocide. The game thus exploits the culture's pervasive anxiety over death by offering players like Crake positions of authority, rather than simply leaving them to wait passively for their own extinction.

Atwood also employs this world of terminal entertainment to symbolize other kinds of privation and loss. Crake has two computers, allowing him and Jimmy to sit back to back, even while playing virtual versions of traditional board games. This image, of two friends facing away from each other, intent upon a two-dimensional visual world that mediates their relationship, captures something of both the forces that violate human communion and the results of that violation. They neither look at, nor talk to, each other. In a sense, they are not present to each other at all, or perhaps virtually not present. We learn linguistic social graces through extensive enculturation, itself necessitated by our physical proximity to each other. That this universal aspect of all culture arises from the brute fact of our embodiment may seem too obvious to mention, but it may also be so obvious that we simply miss it, thus failing to recognize some of the consequences of our technological preoccupation with escaping (or ignoring) physical limitations.¹⁰ The boys *are* attending to a predominantly visual medium (while language has its roots in aurality), one that also privileges and reinforces those skills covered under the novel's rubric of "numbers." Such extended attention produces the likes of Jimmy's step-mother, Ramona, a highly gifted technician, who talks "like a shower-gel babe in an ad. She wasn't stupid. . . . she just didn't want to put her neuron power into long sentences" (25).

Thus the cycle continues. As the quantitative technological society advances, it reduces both our need of, and capacity for, linguistic subtlety, emotional precision and nuance, indeed for all those skills that permit and preserve fulfilling, embodied collective human existence. We eventually "see" the world as technology relentlessly parses it for us. And as we progressively forget the virtues of our former world, we turn more and more to those media that answer to our new skills and ever more urgent (and crude) desires. The novel also suggests that our new technologies rob us of precisely those qualities that help us resist the dehumanizing forces through which we amuse ourselves. Like Orwell and Huxley before her, Atwood laments the loss of a rich linguistic heritage for socio-political and psychological, rather than merely aesthetic, reasons. Snowman, a living repository of rare antiquarian words, long recognized the poverty of his world: "He compiled lists of old words too—words with a precision and suggestiveness that no longer had meaningful application in today's world, or *toady's world*, as [he] deliberately misspelled it on his term papers" (195).¹¹ But toady to what? And at what price?

The ultimate cost of living in an advanced technological society appar-

ently involves profound divisions within the self, including the fundamental splitting off of the body from the locus of self-consciousness. Snowman reflects on the significance of the Internet's preoccupation with violence and pornography:

When did the body first set out on its own adventures? . . . It must have got tired of the soul's constant nagging and whining and the anxiety-driven, intellectual web-spinning of the mind, distracting it whenever it was getting its teeth into something juicy or its fingers into something good. It had dumped the other two [mind and soul] back there somewhere . . . while it made a beeline for the topless bars, and it had dumped culture along with them: music and painting and poetry and plays. Sublimation, all of it; nothing but sublimation, according to the body. Why not cut to the chase?

But the body had its own cultural forms. It had its own art. Executions were its tragedies, pornography was its romance. (85)

This passage, of course, inverts the relationship between mind and body, and thus misrepresents both the cause of the division and the appeal of the Internet's grotesque violence and brute sex. First, the separation between body and mind—which arguably began with the Greeks, was articulated most clearly by Descartes, and is prominent in our time—was obviously an intellectual (not somatic) innovation, and perhaps inevitable, given both the predominance of vision over the other senses.¹² Second, the adventures to which the passage refers are not the body's, but rather those of a disembodied, transcendent consciousness desperately seeking immanence, reentry into the ground of its being, reintegration of the self.¹³ Thus the Internet is not populated by soulless bodies, but rather by disconsolate ghosts. In the novel, we witness an elite culture of disembodied voyeurs, who can only "experience" the shock of their own reality through ever more extravagant means.

In some sense, these desperate adventures may be seen as quests for legitimate limits, particularly ethical limits, at least for those, like Jimmy's true mother, who sense that ethical convictions cannot be reduced to psychologically-inconvenient biochemical states. She objects to her husband's current research: "'there's research and there's research. What you're doing—this pig brain thing. You're interfering with the building blocks of life. It's immoral. It's . . . sacrilegious'" (57). Others, like Crake, however, recognize neither natural limits nor ethics of any kind. These qualitative categories have no meaning in science's quantitative universe, and Crake's numbers tell him that something must be done. His virtue (and vice) is that he is willing to follow thoughts through to their conclusions, unhindered by questions of

metaphysics or ethics (69). God, for Crake, is simply an excisable neural cluster (157). The new god, of course, wields the genetic scalpel.

Crake's therapeutic approach to the pathologies of his world proves to be tellingly Freudian, a psychoanalytic tradition significantly shaped by the ethos of modernity. He remains clinically detached, despite the unacknowledged personal agony that drives him chronically to scream in dreams. Crake's analysis of our predicament also displays a typical Freudian pessimism.¹⁴ Essentially, the ego must fight to maintain itself against the encroachments of both the instinctual id and the cultural superego, or (under fortunate therapeutic circumstances) to increase the ego's territory. With Freud, Crake (in contrast to many sanguine post-Freudians) recognizes the murderous threat posed by unrestrained instincts. Similarly, he treats high culture as a sublimation of genital urges (168).

The ego itself carries its own dangers. Crake traces the current environmental predicament to our peculiar mode of self-consciousness that allows us to *imagine* our own death at times of physical privation, and thereby encourages us to procreate at precisely the wrong times to achieve a kind of indirect immortality. Thus we find ourselves doomed as a race by hope born of individual desperation (120). Similarly, we repeatedly demonstrate our "cretinous" incapacity to make short-term individual sacrifices to secure long-term collective gains (243).

His evaluation of the cultural superego is likewise distinctly Freudian. All grand cultural narratives—and especially the religious—are simply false, in the sense of foundationless, though they may serve necessary psychological functions, particularly in keeping the id at bay. The "raison d'être" of "crank" religions, according to Crake, is "based on misery, indefinitely deferred gratification, and sexual frustration." (295). He then goes on to argue that "the tide of human desire" would overwhelm these restrictions if given a chance, "as it had done in every large change throughout history" (296). Within a Freudian universe, the best one can hope for, therefore, is to refuse to be taken in by these repressive mythologies, and to negotiate with their demands less neurotically, while expressing the instinctual urges less destructively.

But Crake is a Freudian with the technological resources to change radically what Freud took to be the permanent features of our psychological landscape. Thus, within the confines of his high-security, high-tech complex, he attempts to eliminate the problematic, embattled human ego once and for all, by completely destroying *homo sapiens sapiens*, and by

genetically altering a small remnant—the Crakers—to live in complete instinctual harmony with their environment. The elimination of the human race also solves the environmental crisis at one stroke.

While Atwood obviously shares many of Crake's concerns and treats him with a certain grudging respect, she effectively undercuts, and at times even mocks, the blindly overweening reach of his science. Some of that mockery can be found in the unobliging behavior of his corporation's products, such as the towels that swell up and crawl across the bathroom floor, or the humidity-regulating rocks that occasionally explode, injuring people. Other products are simply abominations, most memorably the brainless "chick-ens" (more like a cross between a bird and a sea-anemone) that produce a multiple harvest of breasts or legs, allowing the associated fast-food franchise, ChickieNob Nubbins, to undercut the competition. The Crakers themselves, despite their childlike charm, are also extraordinarily comic in some respects. It is hard to take these purring, multi-colored, blue-bottomed, blue-penised, excrement-eating, perimeter-pissing, citrous-scented creatures seriously.

The Crakers' behaviour proves even more problematic for Crake's project. Again, Atwood ensures that we do not miss the telling irony. Crake believes that he has successfully removed their capacity for any form of metaphysical speculation, though he admits that their prototypes consistently frustrated his attempts to eliminate their dreaming and singing. Yet we learn that Snowman has been required to satisfy their relentless curiosity about their origins by telling them sacred stories, religious cosmologies in which Crake and Oryx figure as creative and sustaining deities.

But Atwood's pointed irony goes further. The relationship between Crake, Snowman, and Oryx unmistakably suggests the Christian Trinity whose authority science has effectively displaced. Crake assumes the role of Father, creator of all, triumphant over chaos; Snowman, that of sacrificial Son and immanent Logos (and perhaps also of Gnostic Logos marooned in matter); and Oryx, that of Spirit, omnipresent, "feminine" Paraclete. Though Snowman begins narrating the novel simply as interceding priest, he is eventually promoted into heaven, a development conceived by the Crakers alone, and affirmed during a ceremony in which they attempt to commune with and manipulate him through his effigy. Again, it would seem that the religious (magical) perception of correspondence between the seen and the unseen proves hard to excise. Crake's secular Eden has proven decidedly sacred. The familiar religious patterns stubbornly reassert

themselves; how and why we are not told. But we may be sure that Crake would not know either.

Crake's premeditated murder of Oryx and subsequent "suicide," as well as his decision to leave Snowman as the sole custodian of his precious Crakers, also further undercut his credibility. Why entrust them to the care of someone who embodies precisely those qualities that Crake rejects? His explanation that Jimmy is better with them than he does not convince, for he must recognize that if the Crakers require the guidance of qualitative discourse, so does he. Does he not realize that to secure Snowman's position in his new world is also to guarantee a place for all those things he seeks to eliminate? Killing Oryx also works against his declared interests, for she is arguably more vital to the well-being of the Crakers than Jimmy. Furthermore, in itself, the murder suggests that he is driven by qualitative forces undreamt of in his quantitative philosophy, even though these remain clouded for both him and the reader. We know that Crake loves Oryx, and that he is aware of her relationship with Jimmy. Jealousy and revenge may suggest themselves. Thus we might initially read the murder as his attempt to possess exclusively in death what he cannot in life, and to bind Jimmy to lifelong misery. But we have seen no previous evidence of sexual possessiveness, which Crake, in any case, would likely disdain as atavistic egoism; moreover, he appears genuinely fond of his friend. In the end, Crake simply cannot explain himself, which is inevitable given those vital human qualities that slip through his net of numbers.

Oryx proves even more elusive, both about her relationship with Crake, and indeed about her own life. She refuses (and has effectively been denied the opportunity) to speak of (or for) herself, preferring to deflect her interrogators by addressing the inarticulate urges of their bodies; thus, she both secures herself against penetrating intellectual curiosity and becomes the site of perpetual mystery, a space within which the narrator (and likely Crake himself) "writes" his own sense of the Other. Though she—in herself—escapes his vain attempts to articulate her, we nevertheless learn a great deal about Snowman (and again possibly about Crake).

The provenance of their first decisive encounter with Oryx on HottTotts, "a global sex-trotting site" (89), establishes her (at least in Jimmy's outraged estimation) as the exploited third-world "Other," victim of an imperialistic, commercialized "phallic" gaze. Jimmy's rage is undoubtedly directed against *himself* and his general complicity in the privileged world that has forced Oryx's parents to sell her into sexual slavery. Worse, he knows his

inveterate voyeurism has perpetuated this system in which people are bought and sold like commodities.

The photograph of the seven-year old Oryx (which Jimmy keeps secreted away) clearly haunts him, representing an ethical possibility he both fears and desires.¹⁵ He refers to himself as having been “caught” by her glance that “went right into him and saw him as he truly was” (308), that said, “*I see you watching. I know you. I know what you want*” (91). For the first time, he knows genuine guilt, though complicated by the realization that he is also hopelessly “hooked” by his desire for her (91). The strength of this ambivalent desire suggests associations with the previous losses of both his mother and pet “rakunk,” Killer, which his mother “liberated” into the wild upon leaving him and his father for the pleeblands. Significantly, Killer had provided his only comfort, for she always licked and “forgave” him, no matter how “vile” his behavior (60). Jimmy’s sin usually involved turning the private trials of his parents’ marriage into public entertainment to ingratiate himself with his classmates. But his crimes against his mother were also ideological, given her deep-seated objections to the corporate world, which eventually drove her away from life in the compounds. Oryx, whose gaze combines both the articulate accusations of his mother and the inarticulate bodily forgiveness of Killer (clearly a substitute for his estranged mother), thus offers Jimmy the chance to “choose” himself courageously, to be both known and forgiven. In this sense, she represents the possibility of transformative penance.

While she likely arouses a similar ambivalence in Crake, unlike Jimmy, he refuses to surrender control, maintaining his analytic mastery to the end. In short, he refuses to love, and thereby asserts what Rieff refers to as his Freudian “psychological manhood”:

The analytic capacity demands a rare skill: to entertain multiple perspectives upon oneself, and even upon beloved others. . . . Such conscious fluidity of commitment is not easily acquired. . . . The best one can say for oneself in life is that one has not been taken in, even by that “normal psychosis,” love. (51)

Crake’s own analysis of “love” resonates closely with Freud’s. As Snowman suggests, it is a matter of mastery: “Falling in love, although it resulted in altered body chemistry and was therefore real, was a hormonally induced delusional state, according to him [Crake]. In addition it was humiliating, because it put you at a disadvantage, it gave the love object too much power” (192–93).¹⁶ Finding himself in an embarrassing delusional state with Oryx, Crake systematically asserts his independence by manipulating his

beloved, lying to her, and using her to pass judgement on the planet. He asserts his ultimate mastery by killing her, in a symbolic act “something like” suttee (for it is involuntary on her part), a tribute, as Jimmy correctly notes, to Crake’s “truly colossal ego” (321). He refuses the beloved’s call to move beyond his objectified scientific self, preferring death—even global death—to the possibility of life shaped in communion with another.

Thus, while *Oryx and Crake* may not offer much by way of substantial hope, it stands as a clear warning of what we must hope to avoid. Science, freed in the novel from all restraints, threatens human survival, even without Crake’s radical intervention. But Crake’s solution itself captures the ethos of modernity’s therapeutic project, an ethos that excludes all former qualitative distinctions or recasts them in quantitative terms. And this numbers world knows only the accountant’s bottom line, which leaves everyone at the mercy of the unarticulated (and in any case, quantitatively irrelevant) pathologies driving the “accountant” wielding the most convincing numbers, in this case Crake.

Although the novel is understandably coy about the status of Snowman’s sacred stories, it clearly suggests that we cannot do without such tales, not at least, if we wish to remain even marginally human. Thus, whatever solutions we may hope for must come at least partially by way of recovery, recovery of some form of great narrative that reestablishes culture firmly in the *cultus* from which science has torn it. Indeed, taken together, Atwood’s two dystopian novels demonstrate that even oppressive metanarratives are preferable to modernity’s anti-narrative. Love at least proves possible within the nightmare world of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (as it does in 1984), perhaps even more possible than in the permissive society preceding Gilead (or in the similarly hedonistic technopoly of *Brave New World*)—and certainly more possible than in any world conceived by Crake. It would seem that meaningful suffering remains preferable to mindless pleasure, with the true communion of love (at whatever cost) being most desirable of all, or so we may gather from Atwood’s grieving narrators, who have been violently stripped of the possibility of such communion.

In its treatment of the Other, science’s discourse proves most destructive, for it acknowledges nothing that escapes its quantification and manipulation. What it cannot possess, it destroys. Snowman’s abiding virtue is that he recognizes that his beloved remains forever elusive, beyond his capacity to know or hold in any net of words, let alone in any accountant’s ledger. Thus she appears as a seductive trace, long gone in one sense, but at least

testifying to the possibility of communion outside the ego's bound hermeneutical circle. Whether this model points to a less destructive human engagement with our world remains to be seen. If so, it will necessarily involve humility in the face of the Other, a humility, as Rothenberg insists, stemming from our recognition that "Nature, as it surrounds us, eludes the categories by which we judge it" (227). Given such humility we might carve out a home without destroying what we touch—a home, one might add, that is peopled not numbered. We have Atwood to thank for reminding us of our proper place.

NOTES

- 1 Jean-François Lyotard describes the primary characteristic of the postmodern (in my estimation, "late-modern") mind as "incredulity towards metanarrative" (xxiv). By metanarrative, he means any totalizing "story" that legitimizes the political, economic and social structure from which it emerges (and which in turn depends on it). A metanarrative, in this strict sense, either absorbs elements (differences) that initially resist it or forcefully excludes them. Some, of course, would refuse the distinction between Lyotard's metanarrative and Postman's "great narrative," arguing that all comprehensive narrative equally oppresses difference. Atwood's two dystopias, however, suggest that the distinction has legitimacy.
- 2 Modernity, an early seventeenth-century philosophical development, should not be confused with literary modernism, a late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century movement.
- 3 Significantly, Descartes regarded the mechanical watch as the ideal metaphor for biological life, a fact Atwood may allude to in her association of watches with both Crake and the man who initially purchases Oryx. See Lewis Mumford 85.
- 4 Karl Stern's *The Flight from Woman* contains a very instructive chapter on Descartes, toward the end of which he writes: "[We] encounter in Cartesian rationalism a pure masculinization of thought. There is nothing childlike left in man's gaze. The hand of Wisdom, *Sophia*, the maternal, is rejected, and a proud intellect lays claim to omnipotence" (104–05). Crake's murder of his beloved Oryx amounts to precisely such a rejection.
- 5 Snowman's name before the catastrophe is Jimmy. I will use "Snowman" either to identify him in his capacity as narrator or to help establish the temporal context.
- 6 The novel alludes to the vital connection between technology and capitalism, but does not explore the relationship in detail, its principal interests lying elsewhere. Numbers, of course, provide the common language; and base self-interest, divorced from qualitative restraints, the driving force. Georg Simmel's comment that "money by its very nature becomes the most perfect representative of a cognitive tendency of modern science as a whole—the reduction of qualitative determinations to quantitative ones" (267) provides a useful point of entry. But to treat the relationship properly would require a separate study.
- 7 Speaking of his former self, the narrator observes: "He'd grown up in walled spaces, and then he had become one. He had shut things out" (184).
- 8 See Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt for a disturbing account of the degree to which

higher education in the United States has already become an adjunct to corporate interests (5–10; 84–98). Indeed, their entire work testifies to a systematic privileging of numbers people that makes Atwood's cautionary tale all too relevant.

- 9 The use of the word "unit" here is telling. Both Jacques Ellul and Lewis Mumford, among many others, relentlessly detail the ways in which our mechanized technological society forces us to conform to the shape of the machine, thereby robbing us of human individuality. In a sense, we become just another interchangeable part within the system. Although this, too, is a relatively commonplace observation, Ellul in particular deserves attention given his claim that *all* transactions within the technological society inevitably conform to the dictates of technical efficiency *as an end in itself*. In his grim assessment, there is no possibility of remaining human within the current system.
- 10 Ken Hillis provides a very useful history of virtual reality (including its philosophical pedigree and assumptions), as well as a sobering analysis of the social and psychological consequences of our flight from embodiment.
- 11 Snowman's antecedents, in this sense, are Huxley's Shakespearean Savage and Orwell's Winston.
- 12 See Drew Leder's analysis of the link between vision and "the absent body" (117–119), which draws heavily on Hans Jonas (135–56).
- 13 Walker Percy, in *Lost in the Cosmos*, is particularly lucid on the plight of the transcendent artist/scientist vis à vis the appeal of pornography and the danger of suicide. Significantly, he traces the alienation to a feature of "triadic" linguistic consciousness whereby namers cannot name themselves.
- 14 The summary of Freud's position that follows owes a great deal to Philip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. See 1–107.
- 15 Kierkegaard defines the anxiety generated by the possibility of ethical freedom (and thus true selfhood) as "a *sympathetic antipathy* and an *antipathetic sympathy*" (42). In Kierkegaard's estimation, to attain selfhood, one must choose oneself in the full knowledge of one's failings, an act requiring great faith in the mercy of the Other. Jimmy's ambivalent fascination with Oryx suggests that he struggles with a similar possibility.
- 16 Compare Rieff's comment: "Indeed, the therapy of all therapies, the secret of all secrets, the interpretation of all interpretations, in Freud, is not to attach oneself exclusively or too passionately to any one particular meaning, or object" (59).

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