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< an intervention into the critical discourse around
Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* >

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I – The Beginning of the End

The threat of nuclear annihilation has been supplanted in the cultural imaginary by a subtler yet no less serious crisis: the prospect of ecological catastrophe and global climate change. Not that the nuclear threat has disappeared or even dissipated, but the contemporary collective imaginary now feels less the shadow of the mushroom cloud and more the steady rising of the oceans. Yet the question before us today is much the same as confronted Derrida when he spoke at a 1984 conference on nuclear war: what can an assemblage of non-experts do with the looming prospect of environmental disaster? Might we, scholars of “the humanities, history, literature, languages, philology, the social sciences” and as such “foreign to any exercise of power” consider ourselves competent to address a crisis that, like nuclear war, “may decide, irreversibly, the fate of what is still now and then called humanity – plus the fate of a few other species”?¹

Derrida's answer falls just short of an imperative: *For such a feat we may consider ourselves competent*. His reasoning is simple: because nuclear war is “a phenomenon whose essential feature is that of being *fabulously textual*, through and through.” This is because nuclear war, “has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event” which

1 Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now,” *Diacritics* 14.2, trans. Catherine Porter, Phillip Lewis, (Baltimore: John's Hopkins UP, 1984), 20, 22.

“...can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text.” As such, nuclear war exists *only* as “a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions.”²

The temporo-ontological moorings of climate change are distinct from those of nuclear war. As opposed to nuclear annihilation, which has not and cannot have happened, climate change not only *is* happening, it already has happened and will – barring some unforeseen event or invention – continue to happen regardless of what action we take in order to prevent, delay or avoid it. Yet it is this very temporal smearing which makes climate change’s representation *as* an event challenging. Nuclear war better fits the tradition of eschatology, with its near-instantaneous shift from “before” to “after.” That the world could end in a day is, while terrifying, temporally comprehensible to human beings – it is not so unlike the expectation of our own individual deaths. Climate change, by comparison, is temporally confusing. Rather than taking place in a matter of seconds, it is spread out over decades and even centuries, the result of ongoing human activity, an inheritance of our industrial epoch, a debt accrued and still accruing.³

Both of these apocalyptic prospects are symptomatic of the larger epochal destining of our era, an era dubbed by some climate scientists as the “anthropocene,” in which human society has become a force of nature unto itself, an unprecedented state of affairs whereby humans are collectively “pushing the Earth toward planetary *terra incognita*.”⁴ It is no longer a matter of decision, of whether or not to fire a missile. Such a disaster might be certain (certain in the totality of its disastrousness) but it was never

2 Ibid., 23.

3 Robert Henson and Duncan Clark. *The Rough Guide to Climate Change* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 19.

4 Steffen, Will, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill. “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature.” *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 36.8 (2007): 614-21. Web. 13 Mar. 2017. -- See also: Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 197-222.

assured. Climate change presses in on us from the other side, uncertain yet inevitable: it no longer matters if humans would opt to wield their power. Humanity, in its very manner of revealing and representing beings, will determine the fate of the world.

Humans achieved this power through what Martin Heidegger dubbed ‘enframing’ – *Ge-stell* – a method of ontological organization which makes possible the practice of modern science by securing a “ground plan” for experimentation. *Ge-stell* demands “that nature reports itself in some way or other that is identifiable through calculation and that it remains orderable as a system of information.”⁵ Thus all the beings of nature revealed through *Ge-stell* manifest as calculable, and thus convertible, exchangeable, and ready for use, much to the advantage of modern industry.⁶ Yet it is not only nature which undergoes the rigors of this revealing, as Hans Ruin notes: “In this situation the role of humans also obtains a new meaning; they are the ones who have to enact this ordering or commanding, this *Bestellen*, but at the same time are the ones exposed to it, as themselves something commanded and ordered about.”⁷

This is the third apocalypse we face: the end of what is understood as “the human” at its most fundamental. The anthropocene places the very essence of the human – our being-in-the-world – within the power of humans to change, and thus *be* changed; as never before the basis for our being is made subject to the myths and motivations, fantasies and fanaticisms, which will send what is still now and then called humanity to our common destiny. This cannot but concern those of us who fall under the

5 Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 23.

6 Indeed, the connection between *Ge-stell* and capitalism, which converts labor into exchangeable form in order to achieve “the maximum yield at the minimum expense,” is as fundamental as its link to science. *Ibid.*, 15.

7 Hans Ruin, “Ge-stell: Enframing as the Essence of Technology,” in *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*, ed. Bret W. Davis (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 191. – And indeed, modern biotechnology most fully realizes the essence of technology as primordially affecting humanity, through the prospect of control over the human genome.

disciplinary umbrella of “the humanities.”

II – Apocalypse Please

Published in 2003, Margaret Atwood’s novel, *Oryx and Crake*, remains a trenchant and troubling depiction of an all-too-possible future, married to an engineered apocalypse and the birth of a strange, posthuman Eden. Extrapolating political and cultural trends of the present – the waning influence of the disciplinary humanities, the predominance of commercialized biotechnology, the eclipse of national governments by global corporations, precipitous disparities in economic equality, cascading environmental destabilization due to unchecked development, and capitalism’s speedy “cashing in” on the very disasters it precipitates – the novel confronts some of the most pressing problems facing the world as it plunges into the 21st century. Following the friendship and lovers’ rivalry between the narrator, Jimmy (also known as “Snowman”), and the titular Crake, a biotechnologist of unparalleled brilliance, it functions both as a convincing example of speculative fiction in the realist mode, and as an allegorical critique of environmental discourse.

There has been some debate around how to view *Oryx and Crake*.⁸ It vexes generic categories by shifting between registers; it is both parable and *bildungsroman*, both cautionary tale and adventure romance. Foremost, however, are the charged terms “dystopic” and “post-apocalyptic”. Both pertain thanks to the structure of *Oryx and Crake*, in which the sole-survivor narrator Jimmy/Snowman ekes out his existence in a genre-appropriate post-apocalyptic

8 Initially Atwood herself argued against the term science fiction, preferring “speculative fiction” on the basis of its pressing potential reality, that instead of depicting “monsters and spaceships” it portrays a future that “could really happen.” To wit, the novel’s science was insufficiently fictional, its depicted future too pressing to be relegated to the “literary ghetto” of impossibility genre science fiction shares with genre fantasy. (Mancuso, Cecilia. “Speculative or Science Fiction? As Margaret Atwood Shows, There Isn’t Much Distinction.” *Public Books*. Guardian News and Media, 10 Aug. 2016. Web. 13 Mar. 2017.)

wasteland while recalling the dystopian society which preceded the catastrophe. The lynch-pin, then, is the apocalyptic event itself, towards which the narrative approaches from either end, backwards and forwards.

This apocalyptic preoccupation is timely. As Hui-chuan Chang states, in her own analysis of the novel's generic qualification, the "predominance of the apocalyptic in *Oryx and Crake*... is a reflection of the 'growing tide of eschatological sentiment in both genre fiction and mainstream cultural analysis' at the turn of the present century."⁹ Indeed, *Oryx and Crake* functions as a contemporary apocalypse, emerging from an apocalyptic tradition reaching back into antiquity. As Mark Bosco argues, "Atwood's novel grows out of [a] tradition," to wit the "...long line of oracular literary texts in Western culture."¹⁰ This connection rests not only in the novel's portrait of a devastated world, but more importantly in its depiction of transgressions of previously secure ontological boundaries. The novel's setting is replete with biotechnological innovations and hybrid creatures that defy such limits – pig/baboon, snake/rat, raccoon/skunk, chicken/hookworm and, ultimately, the hybrid humanoid Crakers – striking some characters with religious dread. Fearful of "interfering with the building blocks of life," they sense that "some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed," and that the result is "sacrilegious."¹¹

This troubling of boundaries is the condition of apocalyptic sentiment and discourse. As John R. Hall asserts, apocalypses proliferate when "[p]reviously taken-for-granted understandings of 'how things are' break down." While the process is frightening, it also contains radical transformative potential whereby "[h]

9 Chang, Hui-chuan. "Critical Dystopia Reconsidered: Octavia Butler's Parable Series and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* as Post-Apocalyptic Dystopias," *Tamkang Review* 41.2 (2011), 11; here Chang is quoting page 165 of Veronica Hollinger's *Apocalypse Coma*.

10 Mark, S.J. Bosco "The Apocalyptic Imagination in *Oryx and Crake*," in *Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, Alias Grace, Oryx and Crake*, ed. J. B. Bousson (New York: Continuum, 2010), 157.

11 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake: A Novel* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2003), 57, 206.

historically new possibilities are revealed, so awesome as to foster collective belief that “life as we know it” has been transgressed, never to be the same again. Events or prophecies mark a collective crisis so striking that it undermines normal perceptions of reality for those involved.”¹² Apocalyptic times are periods of epochal change whereby the certainty of *beings* is lost. Apocalypses emerge due to *ontological crisis*.

Oryx and Crake is appropriately concerned with ontological issues. The question of what things *are*, and how the collapse of certain social structures undermine the very terms by which beings can be described, plays out in numerous passages. Early in the novel’s “post-apocalyptic” temporality the narrator, Jimmy/Snowman, is asked by the adolescent Crakers, the children of the genetically modified “New Humans”, to account for objects from “before”:

Opening their sack, the children chorus, “Oh Snowman, what have we found?” They lift out the objects, hold them up as if offering them for sale: a hubcap, a piano key, a chunk of pale-green pop bottle smoothed by the ocean. A plastic BlyssPluss container, empty; a ChickieNobs Bucket O’Nubbins, ditto. A computer mouse, or the busted remains of one, with a long wiry tail.

Snowman feels like weeping. What can he tell them? There’s no way of explaining to them what these curious items are, or were.¹³

Some of these objects begin as unknown even to the reader, who is invited to ponder the setting’s obscured ontology. This doubt also extends beyond inanimate objects. Snowman’s own being is theorized over, subjected to experimental ontologies based on everything from species, to diet, to sexual differentiation:

12 John R. Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), 3.

13 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 7.

...[The adolescent Crakers have] accumulated a stock of lore, of conjecture about him: *Snowman was once a bird but he's forgotten how to fly and the rest of his feathers fell out, and so he is cold and he needs a second skin, and he has to wrap himself up. No: he's cold because he eats fish, and fish are cold. No: he wraps himself up because he's missing his man thing, and he doesn't want us to see.*¹⁴

Even the name “Snowman” – short for “Abominable Snowman” – is taken for its association with an ontologically uncertain hybrid, one “existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, known only through rumors and backward-pointing footprints.”¹⁵

Elana Gomel locates this tendency towards ontological questioning, and ontological resolution, within other contemporary apocalyptic narratives which,

...link both apocalypse and utopia with a plot pattern that might be called “the ontological detective story,” thus displaying an additional aspect of Western eschatology: its connection with the hermeneutics of secrecy. ... What I have called “the ontological detective story” comprises texts in which the world where the action takes place becomes an object of investigation, a mystery to be solved, a secret to be uncovered. ... The question to be answered is not “who done it” but rather “what is it?”; the secret of death is supplanted by the secret of being.¹⁶

Thus contemporary apocalypse narratives consist of a playing out of Barthes’ hermeneutic code, whereby “...this technical “end” very often appears in the lurid colors of the literal end of the world.”¹⁷ True to the etymological roots of apocalypse, the ancient Greek word for “unveiling,” such narratives tie the end of the world to a totalizing knowledge whereby “the world does not merely become visible, it is *made* visible, divested of its obscuri-

14 Ibid., 8.

15 Ibid., 7.

16 Elana Gomel. “Mystery, Apocalypse and Utopia: The Case of the Ontological Detective Story,” *Science Fiction Studies* 22.3 (1995): 346.

17 Ibid.

ties, clarified into total intelligibility.”¹⁸ Thus: “[i]n the ontological detective story the problematic of order is displaced onto the structure of the world as a whole. Secrecy equates a flaw in reality: knowledge – it’s apocalyptic rectification.”¹⁹ And there is something apocalyptic in the very constitution of *Ge-stell*, in its totalizing power, its drive to make all beings into objects of knowledge.

Oryx and Crake offers up its ontological mysteries but provides no such closure: its distinctly apocalyptic (and apocalyptically distinct) tone emerges from its refusal to do so. This, however, has not prevented numerous critics from attempting to foreclose this ontological openness with readings reliant upon a notion of clear oppositions, cast in disciplinary and moral terms.

III – The Ecocritical Paradox

Since its publication *Oryx and Crake* has quickly been adopted as a prophecy-cum-warning by a number of ecocritical works, an appropriate response considering the text’s foregrounding of ecological collapse and the motivations behind its apocalyptic climax. Particularly significant in the context of its critical reception is the dynamic between the two main characters – Crake the scientist, and Jimmy the rhetorician – which lends itself to analogies about the often distrustful dialogue between the humanities and the sciences, one that is already implicit within ecocritical discourse.²⁰

Unfortunately it is common for readings in this vein to default to one of the most problematic, yet popular, strains of ecocritical discourse – that of “pastoral ecocriticism”²¹ – as well as to foster a sentiment of sectarian division, using the text to direct a mis-

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 352.

20 Greg Gerrard, *Ecocriticism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 10-11.

21 The pastoral is premised on “the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy of human societies” which, while it is no longer supported by environmental science, “continues to shape environmental discourse”; it infers an ecocritical position that calls upon humans to assume a harmonious relationship with this alleged natural equilibrium. See, Gerrard, *Ecocriticism*, 64-65.

placed polemic.²² When viewed within the historical tradition this is unsurprising: apocalypses have long foretold not only the end of the world but further identified the parties that will engage in the eschaton's final struggle. Thus we find in *Oryx and Crake*, or rather in its critical literature, a modern instantiation of this kind of sectarian thinking whereby one group are deemed to have "access to truth" of which the guilty party are ignorant.²³

This struggle plays out across well-worn lines of opposition:

human vs. nature
 reason vs. emotion
 rationality vs. creativity
 secular vs. spiritual
 modernity vs. tradition
 artificial vs. natural
 instrumental vs. cultural

The struggle is ultimately summed up in that disciplinary opposition embodied in the friendship and rivalry between Crake and Jimmy: Science vs. Humanities. No oracular vision is needed to discern which element the critical literature tends to favor. Time and time again the critics exhort us to read in line with the author's presumed and oft-cited intention to "[show] the calamitous impact that scientific knowledge, if misused, has on the human realm."²⁴ Or, more succinctly, to level a "critique of scientific arrogance".²⁵

22 The range of ecocriticism is broad and includes many strains that address the inadequacy of the pastoral mode. However, much of the critical literature around *Oryx and Crake* emphatically leans towards the pastoral, for reasons that are symptomatic both of the text's content as well as the present anxiety about the fate of the humanities as an academic field. As the most Romantic instantiation of ecocritical discourse, it is called upon to refute the mastery of the sciences.

23 Martha Himmelfarb. *The Apocalypse: A Brief History* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 50-51.

24 J. B. Bouson, "It's Game Over Forever: Atwood's Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in *Oryx and Crake*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39.3 (2004): 140.

25 Karen F. Stein, "Problematic Paradise in *Oryx and Crake*," in *Mar-*

This line is often accompanied by an assumed counter-valuation of those things seen as classically opposed to the amoral, Godless science which rules the day: that is to say “traditional wisdom” and “ancient, enduring spiritual belief.” In this view *Oryx and Crake* is deemed a “Prophecy” whose purpose, ecological salvation, is “best achieved by those of us who, like Jimmy/Snowman, value the power of words.”²⁶

Yet at once we find an instability between the terms, most of all in the category of the “human” which falls on the side of “science” when opposed to nature, but which itself becomes “naturalized” when faced with the prospect of biotechnological modification. “Culture” too, is similarly naturalized to “the human” and the common critical response inevitably leads to the valorization of humanity through “the humanities”, the very discipline out of which the critical literature is born. Thus these pairs are not only reductive, they are pathological, emerging from the sectarian “fear and resentment” which apocalypses tend to generate, along with a concurrent assertion of the “elect” status of the humanities as opposed to the amoral efforts of the Frankensteinian scientists. In short, these critiques pay lip service to nature (or, rather, Nature²⁷) but end up valorizing *humanity* as defined by the *cultural humanities*.²⁸

Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, Alias Grace, Oryx and Crake, ed. J. B. Bouson (New York: Continuum, 2010), 146.

26 Shannon Hengen, “Moral/Environmental Debt in Payback and *Oryx and Crake*.” *Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, Alias Grace, Oryx and Crake*, ed. J. B. Bouson (New York: Continuum, 2010), 131, 140.

27 That is to say, nature as ideologically personified/reified/deified either through New Age spirituality or the Lovelockian formulation of the self-regulating “Gaia.” From an ontological perspective the pastoral ecocritic’s totalized “Nature” amounts to the role of God as *ens essendi* - the substance and guarantor of the authentic being of beings.

28 An attitude exemplified by Jayne Glover’s assertion that the stakes of *Oryx and Crake* are how “to create and ecologically ethical society without becoming instrumentalist or destroying that which makes us human” while defining “what makes us human” as “idols and funerals, kings and slavery,” which are worth preserving as they are what “separate us from animals.” Jayne Glover “Human/Nature: Ecological Philosophy In Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx And Crake*.” *English Studies in Africa* 52.2 (2009): 50-62.)

Far from confirming a pastoral-ecocritical attitude, *Oryx and Crake* challenges it. An examination of the more traditional, humanist takes on Atwood's work exposes the strain placed on these arguments when applied to a text which refuses to be domesticated into these particular discourses. Indeed, careful counter-readings uncover no small amount of guilt on the part of the "humanities," in its apparent inadequacy to, and even complicity in, the present crises within the very definition of *humanity*.

In the face of this threat to the "natural" constitution of humanity – a concept central to pastoral ecocriticism as well as traditional humanist ideology – it should come as no surprise that the critical literature is very concerned with what qualifies as "human" and "natural" in the text. This is most clearly seen when dealing with the Crakers, the "genetically modified, peaceful, sexually harmonious New Humans" who inhabit Atwood's post-apocalyptic terrain, establishing a "tiny utopia."²⁹ Modified to exist within a sustainable ecological niche, they are also designed to have cyclical sexuality and an incapacity to understand representations or possess religious reverence, mitigating or outright negating the intraspecies conflicts caused by sexual frustration and ideology.

Thus the Crakers formally answer the imperative that each being take their place within the natural order – they are designed to be just that which pastoral ecocriticism would have humans become, no longer alienated from or exploitative of our natural surroundings. For the Crakers, Nature is no longer the Other, and they are no longer Others to Nature. Yet the ecocritical paradox again rears its head as we find ourselves dealing with a definition of "human nature" which itself is a "separation" from our natural roots. Within the critical literature Crakers are frequently decried as insufficiently human,³⁰ yet what makes them inhuman is their

29 Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2011), 93.

30 E.g., "Crake's creatures... have been engineered ... to lack the emotional complexities of humans." Stein, "Problematic Paradise," 143; "... what has been bred out of the Crakers are the very fractures that define our humanity, the attributes that create culture and religion and... a meaningful history." Bosco, "Apocalyptic Imagination," 165; "...the Crakers are specifi-

very lack of that which alienates humans from nature – a capacity for culture and representation. Indeed, Crake has aimed to make them incapable of Ge-stell, never having “to create houses or tools or weapons” or the “harmful symbolisms” that lead humans, through abstraction, to enframe nature.³¹ The irony is that he accomplishes this feat through a supreme act of enframement, plundering the animal kingdom for adaptations, treating the entire biosphere as a standing reserve.³²

Thus the Crakers inhabit a complementary position to the paradoxical state of the human within the pastoral ecocritical utopia: whereas humans *ought* to play their “natural” part but stubbornly refuse to, the Crakers actually *are* able to exist in harmony to nature, but only by virtue of their “unnatural” origins.

IV – The Humanist Complicity

The blame must lie with Crake, then – or so this logic would suggest – using biotechnology to neutralize those harmful but “intrinsic” hierarchies like kings and slavery and thus “reject[ing] ... what makes us human.”³³ And indeed, the next step in the common critical discourse is to put Crake on trial and, by extension, science as such.

Much of the critical literature deploys Crake as both an ecocritical and humanist scapegoat, denouncing “the misuse of science” and “the arrogance of Promethean scientists who not only seek to manipulate and control nature”³⁴ In his “extreme instrumentalism”³⁵ Crake fails to “believe in God or Nature,” or even, “in the value of human life.”³⁶ He is painted as Jimmy’s constitutive other, drawing up clear disciplinary battle lines, portraying

cally designed without features like emotion, love, imagination or creativity. ... Crake’s rejection of ‘culture’ therefore is a rejection of part of what makes us human.” Glover, “Human/Nature,” 57.

31 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 305.

32 Ibid., 164.

33 Glover, “Human/Nature,” 57.

34 Stein, “Problematic Paradise,” 143. Note the capitalisation of terms.

35 Glover, “Human/Nature,” 55.

36 Bouson “*It’s Game Over Forever*,” 146

them as “opposites” whereby “Crake is the cynical, unsentimental, hyperrational, brilliant scientist; Jimmy is the humanist who loves language and art.”³⁷

Yet for all that Jimmy/Snowman serves as a humanist stand-in, he is a poor ecocritic. Indeed, Crake’s ethics – environmental and otherwise – frequently seem more developed than those of Jimmy, as their discussions reveal:

“When any civilization is dust and ashes,” [Jimmy] said, “art is all that’s left. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning – human meaning, that is – is defined by them. You have to admit that.”

“That’s not quite all that’s left over,” said Crake. “The archaeologists are just as interested in gnawed bones and old bricks and ossified shit these days. Sometimes more interested. They think human meaning is defined by those things too.”³⁸

Karen Stein believes these words provide “a clue to Crake’s dangerous thinking.”³⁹ Yet what should strike us is the danger of abjecting those aspects of human being, the shit and the bones - that Crake places on equal grounds with “imaginative structures.” While the humanist is invited to identify with Jimmy’s outrage and frustration, it is telling that in this, as in every debate Jimmy and Crake engage in, Crake triumphs. Our sympathy may lead us to echo Jimmy’s resentment at the implication that “human meaning,” the wheelhouse of the cultural humanities, can be reduced to the seeming obscenity of excrement or public masturbation.⁴⁰ However, the valorization of culture is hardly coherent with a robust ecocritical stance, which ought to view the biological and cultural as mutually entangled, and if we suggest Crake’s interest in them is somehow a moral failing, another symptom of his lack of empathy or his “scientific arrogance,” we must at least attribute to Jimmy an equivalent failure: “humanist sentimentality.”

37 Stein, “Problematic Paradise,” 149.

38 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 167.

39 Ibid., 150.

40 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 167.

Such a failure may indeed be the cause of our “fears and resentments;” Jimmy’s are written into the text, produced by just such an anxiety. The above passage continues, uninterrupted: “Jimmy would have liked to have said *Why are you always putting me down?* but he was afraid of the possible answers, *because it’s so easy* being one of them.”⁴¹

If it’s easy it may be because Jimmy makes it easy. One example of this emerges around a game they play as adolescents:

Blood and Roses was a trading game, along the lines of Monopoly. The Blood side played with human atrocities for the counters, atrocities on a large scale. [...] The Roses side played with human achievements. Artworks, scientific breakthroughs, stellar works of architecture, helpful inventions. *Monuments to the soul’s magnificence*, they were called in the game. [...] The exchange rates – one *Mona Lisa* equalled Bergen-Belsen, one Armenian genocide equalled the *Ninth Symphony* plus three great pyramids – were suggested, but there was room for haggling.⁴²

The game’s procedural rhetoric is pessimistic, as evidenced by the fact that “the Blood player usually won, but winning meant you inherited a wasteland.” Crake identifies this as the point while Jimmy bemoans it as pointless. To call the game pointless is at best an act of repression, as Jimmy’s unconscious later registers the lesson of “Blood and Roses” in “some severe nightmares... where the Parthenon was decorated with cut-off heads...”⁴³

This humanist repression is understandable. This idea is troubling not simply because the “priceless” Roses are considered exchangeable, but because they are made *directly equivalent* to the horrors of Blood. It constitutes, for humanists, an impossible choice between atrocity that should be unequivocally opposed, and a masterpiece that should be unequivocally cherished. The trick is that, in history, you don’t get one without the other. Thus Jimmy’s dream amounts to a chilling visualization of Benjamin’s

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 78-79

43 Ibid., 80.

maxim: that every achievement of culture is also a record of barbarism.⁴⁴ It posits the question: “what *is* humanity, after all, since it is capable of producing both a Bergen-Belsen and a Mona Lisa?”⁴⁵

This question of human *definition* is foregrounded in *Oryx and Crake* because that definition is up for grabs thanks to the advent of advanced biotechnology. And it is over the right to define what the human is and will be, and to what purpose, that we find the sticking point for the debate between Crake-as-scientist and Jimmy-as-humanist. Crake’s means seem extreme: he opts to re-define the human entirely, refusing to balance Blood and Roses and choosing instead a world in which neither need exist. Yet this intervention is only necessary because culture – the sacred cow of the humanities – has *failed* to deal with the problem of humanity’s “moral ambivalence.”⁴⁶

And indeed, a certain “moral ambivalence” may be constitutive of civilization in that the domestication of the human animal always amounts to a (potentially disastrous) program of social control. Hannes Bergthaller aptly describes the humanist enterprise as:

A discourse about the right means for taming the human animal in which the humanist casts himself in the role of the shepherd. What humanists have blinded themselves to is the fact that a shepherd does not only guide but also cull, that he is both a herder and a breeder. For all of its professed harmlessness, and largely unbeknownst to itself, humanism was thus engaged in what amounts to a eugenicist project *avant la lettre*. [This blindness accounts for why the humanities have failed to] muster an adequate response to the challenges of the dawning biotechnological age.⁴⁷

44 Walter Benjamin. “On the Concept of History,” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, et al., (Cambridge, USA: Belknap Press, 2006) 390-411.

45 Hannes Bergthaller, “Housebreaking the Human Animal: Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*,” *English Studies* 91.7 (2010): 736.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 734.

Thus Jimmy's conscious dullness to the sharp point of Blood and Roses is symptomatic of his complicity in the bloodier aspects of the humanist project. Jimmy and Crake may be "opposites", set on either side of a disciplinary divide that has only widened in the centuries since their institutionalization, but they are still playing the same game: both aim to domesticate the human animal. There is, after all, a deep genealogy linking the sciences and humanities. Derrida takes note of just this link, the "sudden 'synchronous' appearance, of a cohabitation of two formations: ... principle of reason ... the domination of the subject/object structure, the metaphysics of will, modern techno-science" and at the same time "the project of literature in the strict sense," both of which emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴⁸

Both born of the same metaphysical mother, the scientific and the literary have thus been caught in a sibling rivalry. Derrida refers to a document of this rivalry: Kant's *Von einem neuerdings erhobenen Vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie*. Criticizing both the methods and the pretensions of those whom he styles "mystagogues" – "not true philosophers" but deployers of "poetic schemas" which amount to a "perversion" – Kant accuses his rivals of miscegenation and presumption: they confuse the voice of reason with the voice of the oracle, speaking as if possessed of an authority that is not theirs, based on an intimacy with the truth, personified as a "veiled Isis".⁴⁹

Yet both Kant and the mystagogues, Derrida notes, "would accuse the other of castrating the *logos* and of taking off its phallus" and thus agree on one point, that "there is only male reason, only a masculine or castrated organ or canon of reason, everything proceeds in this just as for that stage of infantile genital organization wherein there is definitely a masculine but no feminine." Here Derrida points to the basis of a proposed truce between Kant and his rivals, a "peace treaty" based on what they "together exclude as the inadmissible". That inadmissible is "precisely the body of a

48 Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," 27.

49 Jacques Derrida, "Of An Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted In Philosophy," *Semeia* 23 (1982): 74-76.

veiled Isis, the universal feminine principle, murderess of Osiris all of whose pieces she later recovers, except for the phallus.”⁵⁰

I wish to suggest an alliance as well, the end to a sectarian resentment that cannot but paint aspirant ecocritics and ecologically-minded humanists as mystagogues claiming a privileged relationship to our own sublime goddess, whom we might as well call Gaia. Yet we must take Derrida’s advice very seriously, and avoid any exclusionary clauses. For even without an alliance in place, such an exclusion is already operative. Despite his perspicacity, Bergthaller falls into just this trap. Even as he states that “Jimmy and Crake thus represent two different but equally flawed answers to the problem of taming the human animal,” he claims that “[w]hat is absent from *Oryx and Crake* is a perspective that would, as it were, put these two half-understandings together.”⁵¹ Yet we find the true absence in the critical literature, since it is nothing less than the exclusion of the character of Oryx.

V – The Irresistible Inadmissible

All this time spent talking about Crake and Jimmy, science and the humanities, the bickering of brothers who insist they could not be more unlike one another. Yet within the text of *Oryx and Crake* the rivalry between science and humanities takes the form of a lovers’ rivalry, one of the most tried and true exclusionary measures of the homosocial.

Just who is Oryx? The critical literature often avoids engaging with her character, yet she looms so large in the text – it isn’t titled *Jimmy and Crake*, after all – that this avoidance strikes us as an oversight. The literature treats her as ancillary because it doesn’t know what to do with her, and thus tend to treat her as the men in the text treat her, as “a fantasized object of desire” possessed, at best, of a “general representative status as a female sexual victim and commodity” who serves to “instruct... readers about the baneful social and economic effects of global climate change on

50 Ibid., 77-79.

51 Bergthaller, “Housebreaking the Human Animal,” 737.

the poor of the world.”⁵² Sometimes she appears only as “Crake’s lover.”⁵³ Often, just as in Jimmy’s fantasies within the text, she fails to materialize at all.⁵⁴

Alluded to throughout the novel and introduced with grave fanfare, “... *Enter Oryx*. Fatal moment,”⁵⁵ Oryx’s history is both one of sexual exploitation and personal fortitude. Born into abject poverty in “[s]ome distant, foreign place,”⁵⁶ sold into slavery and pressed into various criminal and pornographic enterprises, she makes her way from the fringes of power to the very heart of Crake’s biotechnological complex. Tasked to teach the Crakers, as well as to provide Crake and Jimmy with sexual companionship, she is the bridge between the old humanity and the new. She obsesses both the scientist and the rhetorician, haunting the latter well after her demise at the climax of the novel, acting as a vehicle for their fantasies by dint of her beauty and her remarkable elusiveness. This elusiveness is perhaps her most significant feature; as stated above, she escapes critical capture as thoroughly as she eludes Jimmy’s many attempts to fix her history.

Susan Hall is one of the few critics who dare to make Oryx the central object of her investigation, and she too makes note of the critical reluctance around the character, asking “what of Atwood’s own representation of Oryx? When discussing Oryx critics frequently describe her as ‘elusive,’ ‘mysterious,’ and ‘enigmatic.’”⁵⁷ Yet when critics allege that Oryx is, “vague and evasive about her traumatic past”⁵⁸ it is this very insistence on the trauma of her past – a trauma which Oryx unequivocally refuses to avow – which should appear suspect. As a passage from the text illustrates:

52 Bouson, “*It’s Game Over Forever*,” 148.

53 Glover, “Human/Nature,” 59.

54 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 112.

55 Ibid., 307.

56 Ibid., 115.

57 Susan L. Hall, “The Last Laugh: A Critique of the Object Economy in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*,” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 4.3 (2010): 180.

58 Bouson, “*It’s Game Over Forever*,” 148.

“I don’t buy it,” said Jimmy. Where was her rage, how far down was it buried, what did he have to do to dig it up?

“You don’t buy what?”

“Your whole fucking story. All this sweetness and acceptance and crap.”

“If you don’t want to buy that, Jimmy,” said Oryx, looking at him tenderly, “what it is you would like to buy instead?”⁵⁹

Jimmy’s is the “new” Orientalism of contemporary liberal ideology, a benevolent othering of the victims of global capitalism which goes hand in hand with their continued exploitation.⁶⁰ But Oryx will not submit or admit to the role of victim, which – besides that of the fundamentalist, the “bad Other” – is the proscribed ontological position for all “good Others” of the third world.

Ontological uncertainty is Oryx’s hallmark. As Hall notes: “there is much uncertainty about even the most basic elements of Oryx’s identity, starting with her real name.” Rather than providing a definitive narrative, “stories about her past proliferate but never coalesce into a coherent account.”⁶¹ In lieu of a true name we get “Oryx,” the name of a creature mistaken for a unicorn. Jimmy’s subversive choice of the “Snowman” epithet turns out to be no innovation, but rather, a mimicry.

Oryx’s very ontological uncertainty generates her fascination for both Jimmy and Crake. Hall equates her position with that of the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the disruptive secret which incites masculine desire even as it eludes it. This relationship between masculine desire and the *objet a* should be read as strictly analogous to the relationship of the human subject and nature within the metaphysical constellation of *Ge-stell*. As Hall puts it: “By reducing her to the object of his fantasies and by turning her into an object that would complement or sustain his own identity, the masculine

59 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 142.

60 That Jimmy is implicated as an exploiter is more than inferred by the text - he seems well aware of it himself. His trick of talking to his watch, one of the many innocuous deceptions he uses on the Crakers, is borrowed from the slave trader that first bought Oryx.

61 Hall, “The Last Laugh,” 180-181.

subject fails to recognize the uniqueness of his partner's identity."⁶² So too does *Ge-stell* dissolve the distinctness of beings, ultimately transforming them into objects of exchangeability and transactability – appropriate considering Oryx's (alleged) background as a "professional sex-skills expert."⁶³

Crake and Jimmy are equally complicit in this sexual *Ge-stell*. Both wish to fix Oryx in place, to "get her into the picture" to borrow a Heideggerian formulation. This is dramatized in the text from the moment of her first (retroactively posited) appearance, when a young Crake and Jimmy visit the kiddie porn site "Hott-Totts." At first Jimmy, imagining himself a detached observer, is free to theorize about the structure of fantasy within pornography, enjoying it while placing himself above it. Then a young girl in the video, whom Jimmy will later insist is Oryx, returns the viewer's gaze:

Oryx paused in her activities. She smiled a hard little smile that made her appear much older, and wiped the whipped cream from her mouth. Then she looked over her shoulder and right into the eyes of the viewer – right into Jimmy's eyes, into the secret person inside him. *I see you*, that look said, *I see you watching I know you. I know what you want.*⁶⁴

The reversal here is stark. Jimmy performs an act of routine analysis, unpacking the system of fantasies at work in the pornography he is watching. For him, this is the real pleasure of viewing, the pleasure of critique. The moment his own interiority seems to be under attack, however, the moment he becomes the object of the gaze or, rather, receives the gaze of the object. In short, the moment he encounters something he is not prepared for, he is transfixed.

He's not alone. As Hall points out, "[e]ven Crake is not immune to her influence, as evidenced by his decision to freeze

62 Ibid., 186.

63 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 11.

64 Ibid., 90.

and then to print out the frame of her piercing look.”⁶⁵ Jimmy and Crake both save copies of the frozen image of this gaze for years to come, Jimmy on the printed scrap of paper, Crake as a digital gateway through which he eventually effectuates apocalyptic project.⁶⁶

When Jimmy shows the printout to Oryx, the “real” Oryx, she does not confirm his suspicions. Her answers are, typically, confounding and even infuriatingly evasive:

“I don’t think this is me,” was what she’d said at first.

“It has to be!” said Jimmy, “Look! It’s your eyes!”

“A lot of girls have eyes,” she said, “A lot of girls did these things. Very many.” Then, seeing his disappointment, she said, “It might be me. Maybe it is. Would that make you happy, Jimmy?”

“No,” said Jimmy. Was that a lie?

“Why did you keep it?”

“What were you thinking?” Snowman said instead of answering.

[...]

“You think I was thinking?” she said, “Oh Jimmy! You always think everyone is thinking. Maybe I wasn’t thinking anything.”

“I know you were,” he said.

“You want me to pretend? You want me to make something up?”

“No. Just tell me.”

“Why?”

[...]

“Because I need you to.” Not much of a reason, but it was all he could come up with.

She sighed. “I was thinking,” she said, tracing a little circle on his skin with a fingernail, “that if I ever got the chance, it would not be me down on my knees.”⁶⁷

65 Hall, S. L., “The Last Laugh,” 187.

66 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 215.

67 Ibid., 91-2.

Jimmy's fascination (and frustration) is with the indeterminacy of her interiority, the very grounds for ontological security within subject/object metaphysics. He wants, needs, the truth of who she is, what she is, because he is certain that *she* knows his own truth, knows "what he wants". The short circuit here is that what he wants, the innermost desire he thinks she has access to, is to have access to *her* interiority, an interiority that she does not simply refuse to divulge but of *which she questions the very presence*.

Thus from the beginning, as Hall notes, "[a]lthough Oryx is in the passive position of being viewed, her gaze as *object a* acts upon him in a disruptive manner, resisting a movement of simple assimilation whereby he would appropriate her as an object to satisfy his drive."⁶⁸ This unassimilability makes Oryx the object of longings which are definitively *apocalyptic*. The text is not ambiguous about this, though ambiguity itself is constitutive of that object which creates apocalyptic longing:

Because now he's come to the crux in his head, to the place in the tragic play where it would say: Enter Oryx. Fatal moment. But which fatal moment? ... Which of these will it be, and how can he ever be sure there's a line connecting the first to the last? Was there only one Oryx, or was she legion?⁶⁹

In hopes of answering the Oryx aporia, Jimmy takes on the role of Gomel's ontological detective, following up upon the least clue regarding Oryx's past – a red parrot painted onto the side of a truck for example:

Jimmy held onto it, this red parrot. He kept it in mind. Sometimes it would appear to him in reveries, charged with mystery and hidden significance, a symbol free from all contexts. It must have been a brand name, a logo. He searched the Internet for Parrot, Parrot Brand, Parrot Inc., Redparrot. ... He wanted the red parrot to be a link between the story Oryx had told him

68 Hall, S. L., "The Last Laugh," 188.

69 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 307

and the so-called real world. He wanted to be walking along a street or trolling the Web, and eureka, there it would be, the red parrot, the code, the password, and then many things would become clear.⁷⁰

No such clarity is forthcoming. Still, Jimmy takes solace within his rivalry with Crake by imagining his relation to Oryx as privileged – one which is also analogous to the role of nature/Nature within the ecological debate. While Crake, the scientist, has professional claim upon her, Jimmy, the humanist, satisfies himself in the belief that his (presumably) illicit affair with Oryx is the “real” thing, proper intimacy with the Other. Of course Oryx knows better. “All sex is real,”⁷¹ she says, turning one of Lacan’s formulations on its head, even as she plays her part in a Lacanian *matheme*.⁷²

Jimmy’s apocalyptic efforts, his attempts to fix and foreclose Oryx into knowability, are mostly restricted to an ineffectual narrative violence. All potential for real violence, while fantasized, is never realized.⁷³ He wishes to fix her past and thus apprehend her present, to unspool her narrative and thus the truth of her being, an endeavor proper to literary scholars and their inheritance from psychoanalysis. Willful anachronism that he is, Jimmy has little interest in the future. His mode of longing is proper to the disciplinary humanities, moored as it is in history (both personal, as with his obsession with his “dire, feathered mother,”⁷⁴ and collective, as in *Blood and Roses*) and nostalgia (as evidenced by his collections of obsolete, forgotten words). The deficiencies of this mode are its pettiness – if he could have, Jimmy would have given up the entire world if he could have kept Oryx; he will accept the “big picture” apocalypse if his own “small picture” still contained

70 Ibid., 138.

71 Ibid., 144.

72 S1 / S → S2 / a – describing the doomed totalization of the Master’s Discourse. Jacques Lacan, and Jacques-Alain Miller. *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge: Encore 1972-1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2005), 16.

73 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 135.

74 Ibid., 191. Of course, of all the women to whom Jimmy discloses his carefully groomed trauma, Oryx is the only one who is “not ... impressed.”

his beloved⁷⁵ – and its lack of self-reflection. Obsessed as he is with her “traumatic past”, as full of fury he is towards her exploiters, he never reflects upon his own complicity in Oryx’s exploitation, both individually as a consumer of pornography, and in the larger sense, as a member of the privileged elite whose luxury is sustained precisely by the exploitative relations it maintains with the rest of the world.

Crake, on the other hand, follows the apocalyptic longing to its absolute conclusion, deploying Oryx as a central part of his master plan to shape the future of the world, to seize control over human destiny. Decidedly future-oriented, Crake aims to undo history and exorcise the most deleterious elements of human consciousness. Crake uses Oryx as a point of transmission for his two creations, the Crakers and the virus he uses to annihilate the human race. Oryx is the go-between for him and the Crakers, teaching them survival skills, interacting with them so Crake does not have to reveal himself to them; he sees her as the bridge between the old, defective model of humanity and his new, ecologically perfect replacement. As noted above, her image, her eye, is the link to the communications network he uses to contact his fellow MaddAddam splicers who (unwittingly) help him to create the JUVE virus. She is, in short, a medium and inspiration for the transmission of his apocalyptic ideas, and eventually even serves as the primary vector for his virus: she delivers the pills which contain the inert virus to cities all over the world.

Crake’s last act is to cut Oryx’s throat, prompting Jimmy to shoot him an instant later. This murder/suicide is prefigured in a question Crake once asks Jimmy, about whether he’d be able to kill a loved one “to spare them pain”.⁷⁶ While this can most directly refer to Crake’s intention to prevent Oryx from living through the nightmare of the viral apocalypse, it also serves as a stand-in for his grand assisted suicide of humanity. In seeking a definitive end to the dangerous indeterminacy facing the human species, and indeed the whole biosphere, Crake forces apocalypse because he sees

75 Ibid., 318.

76 Ibid., 320.

no alternative. Crake's actions, whether he is aware of it or not, amount to an attempt to seal over the very ontological hole Oryx herself represents, the slitting of her throat an act of final symbolic suturing.

In both cases, the confrontation with ontological uncertainty generates unrecoverable disaster. Without Crake's interest in futurity and broad vision, not to mention his effectuality, Jimmy's nostalgia and self-absorption lead to complacency and resentment; let the world wither away, as long as his is the privileged relationship with the "veiled Isis". Yet, left to his own devices, Crake reproduces the fallacious pastoral notion that humanity must either destroy itself and/or assume a stable relation with regard to a presumable stable natural world, forcing apocalyptic closure. The Oryx aporia unites both men in desire, but divides them in action; Crake's decision to let Jimmy live, to entrust him with his final words – "I'm counting on you."⁷⁷ – hints at some consciousness of their interdependence, on an unfulfilled alliance, flummoxed by a basic failure to reconcile epistemologies. The problematic of past, present and future – a temporal confusion that echoes the difficulty of representing climate change – defeats both representatives of the sciences and the humanities. The Oryx aporia motivates both men, sets both disciplinary modes into motion, but in instrumentalizing they fall prey to the same error in epistemology even as their responses differ. Both defer to the apocalyptic as the only solution, closure as the only option.

The apocalyptic longing is, thus, a reaction to the ontological challenge Oryx embodies. The world, groaning under the pressure of its human inhabitants, still continues, threatens to go on and on, though how we don't know. Like Jimmy, we often assume a presence, a secret interiority to nature and we demand to know the consequence, to somehow settle the score, to know what nature must think of this. But the final judgment never arrives, and the openness of our universe's ontology both tortures and obsesses us. If God or Nature will not give us an apocalypse, the need for ontological completeness convinces us of the necessity to create

77 Ibid., 329.

one. We begin to long for it, that final disclosure, an ontological guarantee, “the assurance of the destination, but also death, another apocalypse.”⁷⁸

Thus, unless we are capable of receiving that openness *as* openness and *for* its openness, we are prone to apocalyptic resort. We mistake openness for oblivion, and take unassimilability as grounds for an attempted apocalyptic dis/foreclosure, even as we are drawn towards the very obscurity of our desired object:

The only “subject” of all possible literature, of all possible criticism, its only ultimate and a-symbolic referent, unsymbolizable, even unsignifiable; this is, if not the nuclear age, if not the nuclear catastrophe, at least that toward which nuclear discourse and the nuclear symbolic *are still beckoning*: the remainderless and a-symbolic destruction of literature. Literature and literary criticism cannot speak of anything else, they can have no other ultimate referent, they can only multiply their strategic maneuvers in order to assimilate that unassimilable wholly other.⁷⁹

Of course Oryx herself by no means constitutes a threat of “remainderless destruction”. This is a displacement by which she stands-in for the radical undecidability which confronts us in our historical moment. That is, the possibility not just of the destruction of the literary archive but the very definition of the human. While seemingly guaranteed as the “subject” among “objects” within the modern metaphysical constellation, it is, in turn, increasingly threatened by the implications of that very metaphysics. This undecidability is *our own*, and it is part and parcel with the essence of modern technology, of *Ge-stell*. It manifests as a *shadow*, and it is this shadow – the specter of ontological openness – to which we must now turn.

78 Derrida, “Apocalyptic Tone,” 84.

79 Ibid., 28.

VI – Ontological Hole-ness

In his writings on *Ge-stell*, Heidegger refers to a peculiar consequence of its reliance upon calculability, the power to predict cause and effect and thus be prepared for all foreseeable outcomes. While *Ge-stell* uses formal logics such as mathematics to manage potentialities and thus prepares humans *a priori* for whatever and however beings appear to us, this rigorous process generates a by-product – a shadow at its margins, the umbra of the *incalculable*:

...[M]an brings into play his unlimited power for calculating, planning, and molding of all things. Science as research is an absolutely necessary form of this establishing of self in the world; it is one of the pathways upon which the modern age rages toward fulfillment of its essence, with a velocity unknown to the participants. With this struggle of the world views the modern age first enters into the part of its history that is the most decisive and probably the most capable of enduring.⁸⁰

This emphasis on velocity, a speeding towards a destined fulfillment, is in keeping with Derrida's assessment that "no single instant, no atom of life (of our relation to the world and to being) is not marked today, directly or indirectly, by that speed race."⁸¹ The decisiveness, too, is constitutive of our era, but as Derrida would have us remember, there is insecurity in the very grounds of decidability. Our velocity is unknown. Time and space rush by, contracting as they do, warping and compressing being:

But as soon as the gigantic in planning and calculating and adjusting and making secure shifts over out of the quantitative and becomes a special quality, then what is gigantic, and what can seemingly always be calculated completely, becomes, precisely

80 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977), 135.

81 Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," 20; It is worth noting, too, that it is precisely the *rate* of carbon emissions, the *speed* of their release in excess of the abilities of re-absorption mechanisms, and the *momentum* of modern industrial development which drive anthropogenic climate change.

through this, incalculable. *This becoming incalculable remains the invisible shadow that is cast around all things everywhere when man has been transformed into subiectum and the world into a picture.*⁸²

This shadow appears at the sites of those aspects of Being which precisely cannot be revealed by the predictive mechanisms of *Ge-stell* – it marks possibilities and entities for which we are not prepared, and which no place within the formal constellation of *Ge-stell* and its ways of knowing:

Everyday opinion sees in the shadow only the lack of light, if not light's complete denial. In truth, however, the shadow is a manifest, through impenetrable, testimony to the concealed emitting of light. In keeping with this concept of shadow, we experience the incalculable as that which, withdrawn from representation, is nevertheless manifest in whatever is, pointing to Being, which remains concealed.⁸³

To the modern subject, formed and in-formed by *Ge-stell*, such an obscurity is almost always interpreted as a dangerous mystery. Its darkness makes us long for the light of revelation, even at the cost of a catastrophe of our own devising. As Michael Lewis elaborates in his own in-depth consideration of *Ge-stell* and environmental catastrophe:

In this way would things both “show and hide” themselves in the contemporary world. Things, Heidegger seems to say, can appear *only* in their own concealment, in their elision, which occurs today, and only today, in the technological spanning of distance and the rapid eradication of nature through exhaustive challenging-forth and induced catastrophe. But this is precisely what technology always does: to illuminate darkness, abolish distance.

[...]

This is precisely why Heidegger classes technology as a

82 Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 135. Emphasis added.

83 Ibid., 154.

revelation: “Technology is a mode of revealing [*Entbergens*].”⁸⁴

Lewis also deals extensively with Lacan within his work, and in so doing equates the shadow – that for which Oryx stands in – with “the thing”, the object that lies outside symbolic representation. Suddenly Lacanian terms are swirling around us, with Oryx appearing alternately as *objet petit a* and “the thing”. How to resolve this overdetermination? It might be worth suggesting that overdetermination is precisely in keeping with Oryx’s function as point of ontological openness, and any desire for a clear resolution might itself amount to an apocalyptic disclosure. But for the sake of our academic rigor, bound as it is to *Ge-stell*, I propose this resolution: *the thing is the objet a of Ge-stell*. When taken within the metaphysical constellation of *Ge-stell*, Oryx as the unassimilable *objet a* becomes a constitutive point of ontological incompleteness,⁸⁵ which generates ambivalent fascination in the modern subject, and its desire to disclose the thing in its entirety, to assimilate it into its system of regulation – to “reach it” and thus “reveal it” – constituting a properly apocalyptic (that is to say, revelatory) desire:

Science, therefore, which is the decisive influence on the way beings appear to us today, harbours the illusion that the thing has been reached, when all its properties have been discovered. But this belief in the abolition of darkness has forgotten two things: 1) that the thing is not susceptible of this, because it *is* darkness, it *is* void or “no-thing”, and 2) *because of this* it can appear *only* when everything is supposed to have been illuminated. This is the revelatory nature of extremes which so interests Heidegger, here at the extremity of metaphysics, where we dwell so precariously, under so many of Damocles’ swords. If the thing can never appear in the light of day, if it is essentially a nocturnal animal, then it is only when light becomes all penetrating and

84 Michael Lewis, *Heidegger Beyond Deconstruction: On Nature* (London: Continuum, 2007), 68.

85 Lacan considers this openness indicative of a “feminine” ontology, a view that fits in well with Atwood’s strong feminist leanings, and which femininity intercedes in the previously wholly-masculine dialogue between science and the humanities.

dazzling that in the very blindness caused by this dazzling the thing as non-apparent can be intimated.⁸⁶

Lewis is careful to note the potentials hidden within the shadow. That obscurity marks the presence of Being means that Being's presence can still be located – it can yet be recovered from the objectlessness of *Ge-stell's* standing-reserve. On these grounds he claims “this is why it is only today that the thing might appear, and appear, paradoxically, in the light of its impending exclusion...” and also, “at the same time, this is why Heidegger does *not* urge a return to some ‘rustic idyll.’”⁸⁷

To attempt a return to tradition would not only be futile, it would be amount to a refusal to confront the destiny, *Geschick* to use Heidegger's term, which comes about as a consequence of *Ge-stell* and thus to lose any possibility of an authentic encounter with Being. That concerned ecocritics and green-leaning humanists should wish to avoid this destiny is understandable, for it does appear likely that, as with a Blood player's victory, we are going to inherit a wasteland. But this destiny is not fixed and unavoidable. Indeed, *Ge-stell* is tied up with humanity's essential freedom, “as a demand inherent to the human being himself, as an aspect and a consequence of his freedom. It is not a destiny in the sense of being something ordained by some superior power, by nature or by being itself, but a way in which humans encounter nature, and themselves.”⁸⁸

The stakes of this freedom become even more pressing in the face of our burgeoning biotechnological mastery. Our *destiny* is necessarily tied up with *Ge-stell*, but our *destination* is uncertain. This is the crux of our current crisis, the profound uncertainty around the *sending* of human Being, which, under the reign of *Ge-stell*, “gives itself over, by calculation, to the incalculable, to chance and luck,” what Derrida calls the “missivity” inherent to Heidegger's conception of being:

86 Lewis, *Heidegger Beyond Deconstruction*, 68.

87 Ibid.

88 Hans Ruin, “Ge-stell: Enframing as the Essence of Technology,” *Heidegger: Key Concepts*, Ed. Bret Davis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 193.

This emission or sending of Being is not the firing of a missile or the posting of a missive, but I do not believe it is possible, in the last analysis, to *think* the one without the other. ... The destinerrance of the envois is connected with a structure in which randomness and incalculability are essential. ... That unthinkable element offers itself to (be) thought in the age when a nuclear war is possible: one, rather, from the outset, *some* sendings, many sendings, missiles whose destinerrance and randomness may, in the very process of calculation and the games that simulate the process, escape all control, all reassimilation or self-regulation of a system that they will have *precipitously* ... but irreversibly destroyed.⁸⁹

Nuclear war threatens the annihilation of the human race; so too, in the most dire of its predicted outcomes, does environmental catastrophe. Biotechnology, however, endangers the sending of being on an even more fundamental level. Insofar as human life, and indeed all life, consist of a series of codes which reproduce themselves in new forms in order to commit themselves to continuance, missivity, and the sending of being in its material-informational basis amount to one and the same. Biotechnology has placed this essential missivity of biological being firmly within the power of *Ge-stell*, exposed it to the human will.

Yet this power brings us no security, for the subject that changes its own material basis challenges the grounds of subjectivity itself, the sole guarantor of being within the subject/object order. This is why the prospect of the Crakers is so frightening: the possibility of extensive genetic manipulation is no longer a thought experiment, the “science” is no longer sufficiently buffered by “fiction”. The new figure of the human that emerges from this, what may be the most decisive and the most enduring epoch, may be something unimaginable, yet it will still be “our” doing, “our” destiny.⁹⁰ Thus Derrida’s observations on the looming apocalypse thus

89 Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now,” 29.

90 The stakes of just who makes the decision about what will endure are thus as high as those of who holds the power of decision in the matter of nuclear war.

appear even more urgent today:

Our *apocalypse now*: that there is no longer any place for the apocalypse as the collection of evil and good in a *legein* of *aletheia*, nor in a *Geschick* of the dispatch, of the *Schicken* in a co-destination that would assure the “come” of the power to give rise to an event in the certainty of a determination.⁹¹

No judgement, no assurance that the accounts will be settled. No certainty of determination. We know not to where we are bound, or what we will be when we arrive – the manner of our new being-there. This uncertainty of sending, both in origin and destination, which is the mark of the *apocalyptic tone* produces, in turn, the *apocalyptic drive*. You don’t get one without the other:

Verstimmung is called derailment, the sudden change of tone as one would say the sudden change of mood, it is the disorder or the delirium of the destination (*Bestimmung*), but also the possibility of all emission or utterance. The unity of tone, if there was such, would certainly be the assurance of the destination, but also death, another apocalypse.⁹²

In confronting this ambiguous situation we must avoid the apocalyptic drive, the urge to disclose or foreclose – such a forcing will result in annihilatory catastrophe. Rather, it is in just this ambiguity that Heidegger locates hope. As Ruin notes:

In the obvious danger inherent in contemporary technologically defined modernity, there also lies a saving potential. In his later writings Heidegger would often quote lines from Holderlin’s “Patmos”, “But where danger is, grows the saving power also”... [this line] summarizes the way in which he wants *Ge-stell* to be understood, namely as an “ambiguous” situation of (manifest) danger and (potential) saving at once.⁹³

91 Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone,” 94.

92 Ibid., 84.

93 Ruin, “*Ge-Stell*,” 193.

Lewis specifies this possibility of salvation in relation to the ontological-alethic dimension of the *Ge-Stell*:

This saving power rests precisely in the shadow of ontological uncertainty, the hole in the whole of being, for “the fact that such an empty place inhabits beings... opens up the possibility that in the future the whole might *change*.”⁹⁴

VII – Open Letter to Humanity

For change we must. The world will not wait for us. Our great fear is irrelevance, consignment to the role of steward in a moldering archive. In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy invites our identification because this is precisely the role he assumes:

Part of what impelled him was stubbornness; resentment, even. The system had filed him among the rejects, and what he was studying was considered – at the decision-making levels, the levels of real power - an archaic waste of time. Well then, he would pursue the superfluous as an end in itself. He would be its champion, its defender and preserver. Who was it who’d said that all art was completely useless? Jimmy couldn’t recall, but hooray for him, whoever he was. The more obsolete a book was, the more eagerly Jimmy would add it to his inner collection.⁹⁵

If we feel inclined to share his resentment, we can’t afford to adopt the same quixotic attitude towards our task. If we’re ever to have any influence upon the workings of real power we must renounce fatalism. We must first, however, examine our own complicity in the mechanisms we’d critique, before we can hope to advance some alternative.

What is the alternative? It may as yet be unimaginable or, rather, it contains the element *of* the unimaginable. For believe it or not, the end is nigh, and we cannot escape the fire by ignoring our role in determining if and how and what sort of being rises from

94 Lewis, *Heidegger Beyond Deconstruction*, 32.

95 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 195.

the ashes. We must accept indeterminacy as a crucial element of the openness that is required for an overcoming of *Ge-stell* in the inevitable confrontation with its implications. And this openness must be extended to those we mistake as rivals, even if we are not sure to what strange lands such a common path may take us.