

In Retrospect: Writing and Reading *Oryx and Crake*

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This article will explore the use of retrospect in Margaret Atwood's 2003 novel, *Oryx and Crake*. Like many of Atwood's earlier works, *Oryx and Crake* is a dystopian text which alternates its narration between the protagonist's present and past.¹ Unlike the earlier texts, however, *Oryx and Crake* recalls a present which is, as yet, the reader's future: a grimly depicted future based on a projection of the present. While this projection may appear an extreme exaggeration caricaturing the third millennium, it is also an important addition to the collection of utopian and dystopian texts that have steadily emerged throughout the past several centuries. Examples include Morris's *News From Nowhere*, Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Yet Atwood succeeds in revising rather than simply repeating the direction of such texts. First, her revisions lie in subtle but dramatic manipulations to the framework of the story; in many ways she alerts us to the criminal potential found in reminiscence. The act of softening the past through nostalgia is not free from consequences, and these consequences have the potential to corrupt present and future society. This potential for corruption is linked to the postmodern notion of the past as a "hybridised discourse of varying modes" rather than a "static fact."² Secondly, Atwood's use of extra-textual material - issuing an authorised website to accompany the text (www.oryxandcrake.com),³ and a series of talks during book launch tours⁴ - demonstrates an abstruse desire to manipulate the novel past what is generally accepted as the perceived limitations, or boundaries, of authorial influence. Ultimately, this analysis will demonstrate the applicability to Atwood of Foucault's argument that 'modern literary criticism' still defines the author as providing

the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social position, and the revelation of his basic design).⁵

Imaginary Retrospect: Envisaging Pasts that are Yet to Occur

Oryx and Crake issues a warning no less dire than that found in George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or in Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night*. As is the case with most utopian and dystopian texts, its primary preoccupation is with presenting a mirror to the reader that reflects, often with only minimal distortion, the current dilemmas of his/her society on a local, national or global scale.⁶ The generally unflattering image is confederate in the sometimes opaque, but usually undisguised, author's intention to trigger a reaction from readers. Atwood's narrator in *Oryx and Crake* muses while living in the ruins of his post-catastrophe landscape that "[i]t's discouraging how grubby everyone gets without mirrors."⁷ A parallel is thus established between the use of actual mirrors to scrutinise the physical condition, and the use of the figurative 'mirror' to reflect upon moral condition.

Many dystopian novels use a depicted future that casts an occasional and often nostalgic eye over the author's present. It is this technique that is used in Atwood's renowned text: *The Handmaid's Tale*, (1986).⁸ It is also used in Octavia Butler's dystopian texts: *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). However, *Oryx and Crake* is hinged between two futures, both of which are arguably removed from either Atwood's or the reader's present. While Atwood maintains that nothing 'new' occurs in her novel, and even places a section in her website listing the newspaper headlines which evidently supplied her with her material,⁹ the envisaged scenario as a whole is new. While using some familiar scientific practices such as genetic engineering, *Oryx and Crake* differs from its predecessors in that it does not base its narrator's reminiscences in a past which is, in its entirety, familiar to the reader. Where Butler's fifteen year-old protagonist, Lauren Olamina, living in a walled Californian community in 2024, has known no other type of life *personally*, she is audience to the memories of the older members of her family and community. She participates in conversations which enlighten her as to what used to be, while at the same time passing a judgement on what has subsequently come to be:

"We couldn't see so many stars when I was little," my stepmother says to me. She speaks in Spanish, her own first language. She stands still and small, looking up at the broad sweep of the Milky Way. She and I have gone out after dark to take the washing down from the clothesline. The day has been hot, as usual, and we both like the coolness of early night. There's no moon, but we can see very well. The sky is full of stars. [...]
I look up at the stars and the deep, black sky. "Why couldn't you see the stars?" I ask her. "Everyone can see them." [...]

“City lights,” she says. “Lights, progress, growth, all those things we’re too hot and too poor to bother with anymore.” [...]

“There are city lights now,” I say to her. “They don’t hide the stars”.

She shakes her head. “There aren’t anywhere near as many as there were. Kids today have no idea what a blaze of light cities used to be – and not that long ago.”

“I’d rather have the stars,” I say.

“The stars are free.” She shrugs. “I’d rather have the city lights back myself, the sooner the better. But we can afford the stars.”¹⁰

Butler’s text uses its older characters to provide brief interludes to the past, generally a past determined as existing between the 1980s and the early years of the new millennium. Each interlude creates a stable landing for the reader, quite different to the fluctuating territory that accompanies the futuristic setting of Lauren’s life. The past itself is rarely depicted in a sentimental way. Most authors of dystopian novels do admit that the flaws of the past have created the flawed present.¹¹ However, in the novel’s perspective of the past preceding the reader’s present (which has purportedly created this future) the viewing, rather than the view, is often softened or nostalgic.

Atwood’s novel, in contrast, has removed the possibility of accessing a past which is, in its entirety, immediately familiar to the reader. *Oryx and Crake* is set in an undetermined future. Her narrator is a male in his twenties who, for most of the narrative, appears to be the last remaining human. He has survived an ecological catastrophe that has wiped out the rest of the human race. It is only towards the end of the novel that Atwood shares with her readers the details of this catastrophe:

At first Jimmy thought it was routine, another minor epidemic or splotch of bioterrorism, just another news item. The boys and girls with the Hotbiosuits and the flame-throwers and the isolation tents and the crates of bleach and the lime pits would take care of it as usual. Anyway, it was in Brazil. Far enough away [...] Then the next one hit, and the next, the next, the next, rapid-fire. Taiwan, Bangkok, Saudi Arabia, Bombay, Paris, Berlin. The pleebands west of Chicago. The maps on the screens lit up, spackled with red as if someone had flicked a loaded paint-brush at them. This was more than a few isolated plague spots. (324)

For company, Atwood has given her protagonist, Jimmy/Snowman, the “Children of Crake” – a genetically-modified species resembling humans, but of a new and improved model which is “amazingly attractive.” (8) The last human,

once known as Jimmy, renames himself "Snowman." He bases his name choice in a folkloric definition taken from his twentieth century past:

The Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints. Mountain tribes were said to have chased it down and killed it when they had the chance. (7,8)

Like this mythological creature, Snowman is forced into retracing his footprints. He embarks on a search for the necessities of survival, as well as the answers to the catastrophe in which he now lives. The majority of the text is driven by this journey, interrupted by Snowman's reminiscences of his early childhood and adolescence. *Oryx and Crake* is concerned with questioning the time-efficiency principles of Frederick Taylor,¹² upon which its world has come to depend:

Out of habit he looks at his watch – stainless-steel case, burnished aluminium band, still shiny although it no longer works. He wears it now as his only talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is.¹³ (3)

Snowman has found himself in a world where time literally has no meaning.¹⁴ In the novel's circuitous history, the ending of Jimmy's biography occurs before the beginning. Foreseeing the millennium, Baudrillard argued that humanity is involved in a 'countdown,' of which

the digital clock on the Beaubourg Centre showing the countdown in millions of seconds is the perfect symbol. It illustrates the reversal of the whole of our modernity's relation to time. Time is no longer counted progressively, by addition, starting from an origin, but by subtraction, starting from an end. This is what happens with rocket launches or bombs. And that end is no longer the symbolic endpoint of a history, but the mark of a zero sum, of a potential exhaustion. This is a perspective of entropy – by the exhausting of all possibilities – the perspective of a countdown to infinity... We are no longer in the finalistic, historical or providential vision, which was the vision of a world of progress and production. The final illusion of history, the final utopia of time no longer exists, since it is already registered there as something potentially accounted for, in digital time, just as man's finalities cease to exist at the point where they come to be registered in a genetic capital and solely in the biological perspective of the exploitation of the genome. When you count the seconds separating you from the end, the fact is that everything is already at an end; we are already beyond the end.¹⁵

Baudrillard's point is vital for Atwood's structural technique in *Oryx and Crake*. Atwood's narrator is obsessed with his end as well as the end of humankind. Snowman emphasises "the end" by prioritising a countdown, page by page, to finality. His final words are "[z]ero hour [...] Time to go." (374) Atwood also plays with the ideas suggested in Baudrillard's reference to the "biological perspective." Indeed, Atwood's entire novel rests on a consideration of how far humans will take the Genome Project, as well as how far it will take humans. Yet Atwood also refutes the argument upon which Baudrillard depends. By writing "beyond the end" she demonstrates, through her technique of allowing present time and past time to fluidly transpose into future time, that history is still applicable. History is continuing and continuous with 'the ends.' Like most dystopian authors, she is more concerned with presenting humanity with a portrait depicting its "grubbiness" rather than with resorting to a nihilistic finale, or a ridiculously improbable future-scenario. Her choice of an epigraph from Swift emphasises this:

I could perhaps like others have astonished you with strange improbable tales; but I rather chose to relate plain matter of fact in the simplest manner and style; because my principal design was to inform you, and not to amuse you.¹⁶

Snowman's trip into the past coincides with his present physical trip into his previous dwellings. Subsequently, *Oryx and Crake*, like *The Blind Assassin*, consists of chapters which alternate between current time (where our narrator thinks of himself as Snowman) and retrospective time (where he is Jimmy). Through this structure, we learn more and more about the world in which humans are on the verge of extinction. This, in itself, raises the paradox of the need to go back in order to move forward. As Jimmy, Snowman's earliest complete memory is of a bonfire disposing of disease-ridden animals. The disease was caused by a germ which infiltrated the community in which Jimmy's family lives, despite its being "sealed up tight as a drum." (18) The community is known as "OrganInc Farms," a place where scientists grow and transplant human-tissue organs in a "transgenic knockout pig host."¹⁷ (22) The world of the text is divided into three types of environments. Jimmy's family belong to the increasingly large, walled "Compounds," where scientific research is conducted in relative safety and its members can live and work without becoming contaminated by the outside world. Each Compound, however, is competing with the next for the latest in genetic

innovation. Life outside the Compounds consists of the “Modules.” These are suburbs surrounding the cities, filled with the people not chosen by the select communities within the walls. The cities are detested by the inhabitants of the Compounds:

Compound people didn't go to the cities unless they had to, and then never alone. They called the cities *the pleebands*. Despite the fingerprint identity cards now carried by everyone, public security in the pleebands was leaky: there were people cruising around in those places who could forge anything and who might be anybody, not to mention the loose change – the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies. So it was best for everyone at OrganInc Farms to live all in one place, with foolproof procedures.

Outside the OrganInc walls and gates and searchlights, things were unpredictable. (27)

In Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren's stepmother recalls memories of a society she preferred to her present situation. Jimmy's father, however, uses his memory of the past only to idealise and justify his present:

Long ago, in the days of knights and dragons, the kings and dukes lived in castles, with high walls and drawbridges and slots on the ramparts so you can pour hot pitch on your enemies [...] and the Compounds were the same idea. Castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everyone else outside. (28)

Atwood's text highlights the way in which retrospect can be used as a weapon by those who brandish it. In a post-DNA version of H.G. Wells's character divisions in *The Time Machine*, Atwood's novel divides its characters into “Haves” (those who have and use their memory to their advantage) and “Have Nots” (generally the younger characters who will inherit, usually unquestioningly, a world of deadly competition between Compounds). The very word ‘Compound’ suggests the compression and annihilation of the anarchic freedom that characterises the Pleebands. *Oryx and Crake* is structured in to emphasise Jimmy/Snowman's observations about this inherent danger in remembering. By removing time as it is known by the reader in Atwood's present, and restructuring it, albeit with modifications, according to a vision similar to that of Baudrillard's countdown; Atwood is problematising retrospect. Memory, and all that it involves, becomes one of the crimes within the narrative. Earlier novelists who employed similar scenarios (according to the concerns of their times) have been

content to allow their already overwhelmed narrators this one seemingly innocent pleasure of recalling a less-troubled past. Atwood however, complicates, criminalises, and ultimately denies the pleasure of retrospect. Snowman's world becomes a postmodern dystopia in accord with Rob Pope's definition of postmodernity's task to "expose and sport with the superficial artifice and glaring contradictions of contemporary life rather than smoothing them over and concealing them."¹⁸

Metafictional Retrospect: Pre-empting the Criticism of the Future

Yet Atwood's repudiation of official time, and its subsequent remembrances and re-viewings, in the dystopian text, destabilises and at times even removes the solidity of a past because it opens up the arena of time to interpretation. This is essentially demonstrated by the lack of closure that is offered in *Oryx and Crake*. Should it then follow that in creating a framework that is structurally more adventurous than a conventional novel, that the novel too is free from the restrictions of overt authorial control? Given the website which accompanies the work, Atwood paradoxically appears to be demonstrating exactly the opposite. In proportion to her fictional relinquishing of temporal closure, Atwood has displayed a desire for increased control over the text by supplementing her fiction with additional material. This appears to be where Atwood aims for a resolution missing in her text, as well as anticipating control over the potential retrospective critiques to which the work might be subjected. Furthermore, the accompanying website appears paradoxical, given that one of the foremost concerns that colours Atwood's work is use of the internet. As several critics have noted, "internet culture, with its casual voyeurism and exhibitionism, its insidious erosion of the notion of the private, is a frequent target of some of Atwood's most mordant barbs."¹⁹ Jimmy and Crake, we are told, "surf the net" in their after-school hours,

they'd watch animal snuff sites, Felicia's Frog Squash and the like, though these quickly grew repetitious: one stomped frog, one cat being torn apart by hand, was much like another. Or they'd watch dirtysockpuppets.com, a current-affairs show about world political leaders. Crake said that with digital genalteration you couldn't tell whether any of these generals and whatnot existed any more, and if they did, whether they'd actually said what you'd heard. Anyway they were toppled and replaced with such rapidity that it hardly mattered. (82)

Without appearing to acknowledge a climate of postmodern analysis, Atwood contrives to maintain authority over her novel while simultaneously promoting speculation and freedom from nostalgic recollections *within* her work. This is evident in the existence of the website www.oryxandcrake.com. While it could be interpreted as a publisher's attempt to promote the work,²⁰ the site goes further than merely advertising; functioning as a source of reference in conjunction with the narrative. www.oryxandcrake.com supplies the ultimate in hyper-text potential. This corresponding online material appears to have been designed for three principle reasons. The first is that Atwood realises the potential for someone other than herself to create an 'unofficial' version. By including an essay about her novel on this site, Atwood is claiming the responsibility and the right to frame her tale. The essay, containing some explanation of the novel's subject, purpose and scope, and the method of analysis, informs the reader of how Atwood would like *Oryx and Crake* to be received:

Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* is a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper. It contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians. As with *The Handmaid's Tale*, it invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent. Every novel begins with a what if, and then sets forth its axioms. The what if of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us?²¹

The second ostensible purpose for this website is the supplemental display of quirky visual material that can be shown to advantage in the hypertextual realm. This includes advertisements for genetically-spliced creations from the Compounds, as well as a section for Atwood's captions such as those used on fridge magnets throughout the text:

Siliconconsciousness.
Little spoat/gider, who made thee?
I think, therefore I spam.
Where God is, Man is not.²²

If the website consisted entirely for the purpose of these 'pop up features,' then it would appear that Atwood's reasoning behind the use of this website is 'tongue-in-cheek.' It contains the potential to be seen as a lighthearted method designed to please fans and demonstrate the humour that can be found in analyses of genetic engineering, advertising, and beauty regimes, among other areas of modern life.

The third possible reason for this website is that by including it in the material given with the novel - it is referred to twice in the Acknowledgments at the end of the book²³ - Atwood has attempted to demonstrate the flexibility of the boundaries of her novel. By providing access to the newspaper clippings which apparently triggered the tale – an assorted collection from 2001 taken from *The New York Times* and *Scientific American* among other sources – Atwood suggests that her novel is too extensive to be contained within its pages. She also provides a list of recommended readings; non-fictional titles mostly concerned with the environment. Atwood includes a “Questions for Discussion,” aimed less towards literary study and more towards raising consciousness of areas of her concern. For example, question three: “Margaret Atwood coined many words and brand names while writing the novel. In what way has technology changed your vocabulary?” Despite posing as a question, it is no great leap of the imagination to realise that such a tactic works as a subtle form of manipulation designed to further the outcome of the text itself – to increase its field of influence by such hypertextual links.

The method by which Atwood has chosen to house her very real anxieties over the present is what distinguishes her work from earlier novels that share comparable concerns. The novel’s approach is to deliver her reader into a very plausible two-fold future scenario, and remove the safe and comforting nostalgic glow which infuses many other similar texts. Her protagonist is left to wallow in a series of open-ended questions:

What next? [...] He could finish it now, before they see him, while he still has the strength. While he can stand up. His foot’s like a shoeful of liquid fire. But they haven’t done anything bad, not to him. Should he kill them in cold blood? Is he able to? And if he starts killing them and then stops, one of them will kill him first. Naturally.

“What do you want me to do?” he whispers to the empty air.

It’s hard to know.

Oh Jimmy, you were so funny.

Don’t let me down.

From habit he lifts his watch; it shows him its blank face.

Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go. (373,74)

Even when faced with the threat of aggressive neighbours, Snowman comes to realise that the biggest danger in his present dystopian hell is not locatable in an external threat, but rather, within his own mind, and the potential it has to distort the past through reminiscence:

[P]erhaps the danger was in him. Perhaps he was the danger, a fanged animal gazing out from the shadowy cave of the space inside his own skull. (261)

By refusing both Snowman and her reader the easy vehicle of retrospect, Atwood is maintaining contact with a realism made more effective through its excursion into speculation. However, by supplementing her text with additional, 'authorised,' commentary, Atwood reveals a need to retain control over her work. Foucault's argument that the author determines the work is demonstrated superbly: even with the allowance of a 'tongue-in-cheek' attitude towards these extra-literary paraphernalia, the level of command cannot be ignored. Atwood anticipates via retrospect the potential for unauthorised versions – just as her characters in the text are revising via retrospect the versions given as accurate. Ultimately, Atwood is herself participating, via the digital medium itself criticised in the narrative, in the misdemeanours of remembering that *Oryx and Crake* attempts to revise.

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¹ Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (Toronto, Ont.: McClelland & Stewart, 2000) uses this technique, as do earlier novels *Cat's Eye* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) and *The Robber Bride* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

² Christy L. Burns, "Postmodern Historiography: Politics and the Parallax Method in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon*," *Postmodern Culture* 14.1 (2003). Available from: <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/issue.903/14.1burns.html> [accessed Feb. 2005].

³ The use of a website would have, in the early years of the internet, aligned Atwood with science fiction authors who are noted for embracing the new technology of cyberspace, both in and out of their texts, much earlier than more 'mainstream' authors. However, as Joel Ricket's article, "Author's of their own Fortunes," in *The Bookseller* (4 May, 2001) makes clear, many authors are now relishing the chance to control their own website. Jeanette Winterson and Alain de Botton are two such authors, who use their websites to promote closer links with their readers: "Authors have niche, fanatical audiences that crave more information...They have a unique relationship with their readers. And the readers in turn want to feel that the site is being run by 'their' authors." Available from: <http://www.warrenadler.com/articles-thebookseller.shtml>

⁴ Atwood has also written critical commentary on her works. See, for example: Margaret Atwood, "The Handmaid's Tale and *Oryx and Crake* in Context," *PMLA* 119:3 (May 2004): 513.

⁵ Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, Josue V. Harari, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 151. Both Foucault and Roland Barthes shift the focus to texts in context as intertextual constructs, insisting that cultures are expressed through, not simply by, writers and producers.

⁶ It is a preoccupation that substantiates the claim that utopian texts are not necessarily as non-realist as some critics would argue. The selection of epigraphs with which Atwood introduces *Oryx and Crake* underscores this blend of realism and fantasy: she quotes from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as well as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Her website highlights her choice, and asks readers: "why do you think these two were chosen?" (www.oryxandcrake.com).

⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), 8. Subsequent references will be included within the text.

⁸ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986). Ingersoll notes that "in the publicizing of her novel *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood has emphasised that the novel functions as a 'book end' to *The Handmaid's Tale*." Earl G. Ingersoll, "Survival in Margaret Atwood's Novel *Oryx and Crake*," *Extrapolation* 45:2 (2004): 167.

⁹ For example, headlines include: "March 2001: US Eco-Arsonists Put Heat on the F.B.I." "April 2001: Suspected Child Slaves May Be Dumped Ashore," and "June 2001: The Mice That Warred." (www.oryxandcrake.com).

¹⁰ Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (London: The Women's Press, 1995), 4,5.

¹¹ Philosopher Ernst Bloch emphasises dissatisfaction as "a condition that ignites the utopian drive." Ernst Bloch, quoted in Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (London: Heinemann, 1979), 139.

¹² Taylor was an engineer whose 'time-and-motion' studies lay the foundations for the twentieth century assembly-line.

¹³ Atwood's earlier text, *Cat's Eye*, anticipates this world with its opening paragraph: "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backwards in time and exist in two places at once." Atwood, *Cat's Eye*, 3.

¹⁴ Making it an embodiment of the debate voiced in Jean Baudrillard's 1997 article, "Paroxysm: The End of the Millennium or the Countdown," *Economy and Society* 26:4 (November 1997): 447-50.

¹⁵ Baudrillard, 447-48.

¹⁶ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, as quoted in Atwood's epigraph to *Oryx and Crake*.

¹⁷ Atwood's quirky naming of these farms, "AnooYoo" and "RejoovenEsense," adds an element of light-hearted humour to the work.

¹⁸ Rob Pope, *The English Studies Book* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 125.

¹⁹ Daniel Mendelsohn, "After the Fall," *The New York Review of Books* 1:11 (July 2003): 44.

²⁰ Ricket's 2001 article acknowledges the marketing potential of such websites, and the 1500 author homesites listed on the U.K's HarperCollins website, www.fireandwater.com, attests to this.

²¹ Margaret Atwood, "Writing *Oryx and Crake*," available from: <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/atwood/essay.html> [accessed 1 Dec. 2004].

²² Margaret Atwood, "Fridge Magnets," available from: <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/atwood/oryxandcrake/fridge.html> [accessed 1 Dec. 2004].

²³ Tom Porter, co-founder of *Pedalo* (a company which builds author's websites) asserts that writers have a "ready made brand" with which to market themselves online: "The majority of Internet companies fail because of the cost of advertising - but authors just need to put domain names in books, and the job is done." Ricketts, 2001.