

A Review of Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*

Atwood, Margaret. *The Year of the Flood*. New York: Doubleday, 2009 (originally published in Canada by McLelland & Stewart, Ltd., Toronto).

More explicitly than her other novels, Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009) is a book about radicalism and resistance in the Americas. *The Year of the Flood* returns to the dystopian future of *Oryx and Crake* (2003), significantly expanding the scope of that earlier novel. A "simultanequel," narrated from multiple points of view, *The Year of the Flood* expands the story of *Oryx and Crake*, offering a more thorough set of critical perspectives on capitalism and collapse. Taken together, these two novels constitute a "critical dystopia," insofar as they operate, in Tom Moylan's terms, "inside the ambient zone of anti-utopian pessimism with new textual tricks," exposing the "horror of the present moment."¹ Atwood's novel plays these tricks, among other ways, by appropriating the phonetic shorthand of text messages with an enthusiasm that borders on the obnoxious, until one remembers that she's actually toned down the language of the internet at the same time as she has made it more clever, filling it with puns.

Entering this ambient zone of anti-utopian pessimism, Atwood knows that she is writing in a genre with a long genealogy, and the dystopian world of these two novels reads something like a tribute album, with explicit allusions to Orwell and Huxley, spiced with references to *Soylent Green* (1973) and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). Atwood also draws heavily upon the Bible and Blake, and her more canonical literary allusions argue for the inclusion of speculative fiction alongside the ranks of high literature, if that argument still needs to be made in the 21st century. Finally, Atwood's own interest in dystopia is longstanding; although she won the Booker in 2000 for *The Blind Assassin*, she is perhaps more famous for her 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Though they arguably participate in the same genre, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* offer something different than *The Handmaid's Tale* – they present a broader socioeconomic and technological critique of contemporary society.

Atwood's novels are world-historical in their scope, but American in their focus. She imagines a future in which corporations have privatized the last vestiges of the public sphere, strangling and then replacing the government as it withers away. It is a dystopia extrapolated from Naomi Klein's description of disaster capitalism in *The Shock Doctrine* (2007). As a form of sociological thought-experiment, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* amplify certain characteristics of contemporary society in order to achieve the descriptive insights such manipulation produces -- Atwood writes in her acknowledgements that "*The Year of the Flood* is fiction, but the general tendencies and many of the details in it are alarmingly close to fact."² In this sense her novels operate as a form of scenario-thinking and as an important warning. Atwood warns against bioterrorism, internet terrorism, and corrupt corporate security agencies. Indeed, her novels tackle such relevant and timely scenarios that judge Richard Posner has weighed in with his opinion on the risk of a bioterrorist catastrophe like the one she describes.³ Through the landscape she constructs, Atwood also offers prescient commentary on consumer desire, corporate advertising, food production, income disparity, health care, education, and climate change.

According to Moylan, critical dystopias "adopt a militant stance that is informed and empowered by a utopian horizon that appears in the text—or at least shimmers just beyond its pages."⁴ In *The Year of*

¹ Tom Moylan. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000. p. 196

² Margaret Atwood. *The Year of the Flood*. "Acknowledgements."

³ Richard Posner's *Catastrophe: Risk and Response* (2004) was inspired by a review of *Oryx and Crake* Posner wrote for *The New Republic*.

⁴ Moylan. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*. p. 196

the Flood, this utopian horizon moves to center stage in the form of the “God’s Gardeners” intentional community. The Gardeners represent a form of radical resistance, and through their praxis, they offer a vision of change. Atwood’s portrayal of radicalism in *The Year of the Flood* is decidedly agrarian; radicalism in this novel is about roots, about growing resistance from the ground up – starting with the realm of necessity. For Atwood’s Gardeners, radical change reconstructs our engagement with the realm of necessity – food, water, clothing, shelter, sex – to produce a principled social order. Through her portrayal of the Gardeners, Atwood raises critical questions about the role of subsistence in resistance, about the importance of ritual and myth, and about the never-ending influence of gender and sexuality on human relationships.

Ostensibly a nonviolent community, the Gardeners rehearse for a post-apocalyptic world, and with good reason – it quickly becomes clear that they are working to bring about the prophesied “Waterless Flood” that will take down the dominant social order. *The Year of the Flood* illuminates the horizons of *Oryx and Crake*, and see that two utopias hang together in these novels – one a eugenics project, the Crakers, and the other a behavioral engineering project, the Gardeners. What is insightful about Atwood’s most recent novel is the way in which it reveals these two utopian visions to be in collusion with one another, both problematically class-bound and authoritarian, and ultimately reliant upon a collapse that they must bring about themselves. With traditional forms of civic engagement rendered obsolete, resistance in Margaret Atwood’s novels thus looks like a kind of biological eco-sabotage. In this sense, Atwood’s novels should also be considered alongside Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) and Neal Stephenson’s *Zodiac* (1988) (Atwood’s novel might aptly be described as “biopunk”). And like Abbey’s novel, perhaps what is most useful about *The Year of the Flood* is that it is dialogic. Atwood’s shifting point of view creates a comparative analysis as readers are exposed to a multiple forms of resistance in dialogue with one another, from the non-violent lifestyle resistance of the Adam One and the Gardeners to the violent radicalism of Zeb and the MaddAddam group.

The utopian horizons within these two texts are so clear that Atwood’s novels almost constitute a critical utopia, but Atwood’s portrayal is so negative that they might as well be considered anti-utopias. In both novels, Atwood maintains a critical lens on the resistance by narrating the story from the perspectives of characters who join the resistance accidentally, rather than based upon ideological commitment. This critical lens is important; Atwood thereby points to some of the problems associated with agrarianism as a form of resistance to capitalism -- for example, the ways in which, to be financially viable, the Gardener’s market enterprises depend upon a bourgeois consumer ethics. Moreover, through a limited third person perspective, Atwood also levels a critique at violence. Narrated primarily from female points of view, the more violent strains of resistance in these novels are overwhelmingly portrayed as adolescent and male. *The Year of the Flood* thus reads a bit like *Transcendental Wild Oats* (1873) meets *Fight Club* (1996). Atwood maintains an ironic distance from the resistance and its radicalism that allows for critique, but which also undermines the architectural functions her novels could perform. Her portrayal of the Gardeners lacks the sincerity necessary to envision a positive alternative useful to productive change.

More than anything else, Atwood’s novels tap into an eschatological apocalypticism that is very much in vogue these days. Consider just a few of the films released in just the last months: *2012*, *The Book of Eli*, *The Road*, *Avatar*. It is disconcerting the extent to which we have internalized these narratives of catastrophe. We believe ourselves to have already destroyed the planet, to have severed our connection with the non-human world. Part of the problem with this version of apocalyptic rhetoric is the extent to which it produces political apathy by blaming human nature for the problem. Human institutions are the problem, not human nature. Human nature gives rise to various forms of social institutions, each of which works to emphasize different aspects of human nature in different ways – in ways with meaningfully various political and ethical significances, in ways more or less harmonious with non-human nature.

Atwood's novels expose the extent to which our visions of change are often reliant upon a narrative of catastrophe, at the same time as she indulges in our voyeurism about disaster and wallows in anti-utopian pessimism. My real critique, then, and really my only critique, is at the level of genre and tone. Why not utopia? Why so much irony? What we need at this moment is not another tale of catastrophe – our imagination of disaster is overdeveloped. Now is the time to develop our utopian imagination more fully. What radicalism needs, is a better vision of utopia than the Gardeners. We have not given up so much that this need be our future.