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Melissa Roddis

Dystopian novels, in their concerns for worlds or civilizations under threat, often are deeply humanistic in outlook: protagonists long for a return to the imperfect human arrangements before the new order, arrangements often very familiar to the reader holding the book as well. The new society is someone else's utopia but it is presented as incompatible with even minimal requirements for human happiness and comfort.¹

Rudolphus Teeuwen

In this article I argue that an eco-posthuman reading of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) provides an alternative utopian perspective on what is generally considered to be a dystopian text. Although many other generically similar texts invite such readings by introducing eco-posthuman themes within the narrative – such as Michel Houellebecq's *Atomised* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* – it is the fact that *Oryx and Crake* often seems actively to resist these readings that enables significant debates to emerge about some of the text's main assumptions. By reading this text 'against the grain', we are able to confront and analyse the central beliefs, assertions and anxieties it vocalises regarding the future of humanity, nature and technology.

The critical response to *Oryx and Crake* has been extensive and diverse, drawing on a range of theoretical foundations to provide a wide variety of interpretations. Yet much of this criticism is united in its general agreement that the text is 'dystopian to say the least',² and some have argued that '[i]t is simply irrelevant to talk of any "utopian impulse" within the work'.³ An initial reading of the text certainly aligns with these statements, as the reader is presented with a devastated post-apocalyptic wasteland in which (it seems, until other survivors appear at the end of the novel) only one human being is left alive. The text's

central protagonist, Jimmy – who adopts the pseudonym ‘Snowman’ in the post-disaster world – is (he believes) the last surviving human, and introduces the reader to the post-apocalyptic wasteland and the pre-apocalyptic society (which is a satirical extension of the postmodern present) via a narrative that tells from two chronological perspectives the story of humanity’s demise. Snowman inhabits a desolate landscape of abandoned buildings and rotting corpses, home to genetically hybridised animal-mutants and the Children of Crake (or Crakers), a group of artificially engineered hominids. As the narrative proceeds, shuttling the reader back and forth between the present and the past, it is revealed that Crake, Jimmy’s friend and scientific genius, created the Crakers and, in ‘a supreme act of bioterrorism’ destroyed humanity by designing and disseminating a deadly virus under the guise of birth control pills.⁴ He inoculated Jimmy against the virus so that there would be someone left behind to take care of the Crakers, a species designed to inherit the earth following humanity’s demise.

Some critical accounts concede that the post-apocalyptic world of Crake’s making was created with a utopian vision in mind, but go on to argue that the utopia ultimately fails. J. Brooks Bouson writes that Atwood ‘voices a deep fear that has long plagued Western society and that has found expression, over time, in utopian hopes and their related dystopian fears: that scientific advances will lead not to a progressive utopian future but instead will result in humanity’s reversion to a savage dystopian (even pre-human) past’.⁵ In other words, for Bouson, the text voices concerns that the utopian principles of science may lead to a dystopian future. Ultimately, the general consensus is that ‘it would be difficult to find a reader of *Oryx and Crake* who would argue that Crake’s decision to destroy humanity in order to enact his [...] vision was the right thing to do’.⁶

Ecocritical and posthuman approaches, which seem particularly relevant to Atwood’s text, may also at first appear to confirm this sense of the novel’s dystopian vision. Ecocriticism, the study of literary responses to environmental issues, is pertinent to the text’s depiction of Crake’s post-apocalyptic wasteland, composed as it is of animal hybrids produced by genetic manipulation. Allison Dunlap observes that in his actions, Crake ‘seeks [...] to move beyond human-dominated hierarchy and its associated suffering; to achieve this goal he creates the Crakers, thus enacting his ecotopian dream’.⁷ But her reading concludes that in this text Atwood is ‘presenting [...] the negative consequences of enacting one ecotopian vision’,⁸ arguing that the essential idea of an ecological

utopia is a 'sweeping plan' that must be approached 'with caution'.⁹ Ultimately, because of the inherent apocalyptic vision in the text, Dunlap argues that Atwood 'condemns the ecological utopianism inherent in that vision'.¹⁰

Posthumanism, in its fascination with human-technology relationships, is similarly relevant due to its interest in evaluating the human consequences of the technologies (particularly bioengineering) depicted in the novel. Bouson argues that Atwood excites 'posthumanist concerns, as she questions the very survival of humankind in an era of environmental destruction, excessive consumption, unregulated biotechnological experiments and pandemic viruses'.¹¹ These ecocritical and posthuman readings seem to offer similar results: the utopia turns sour and is replaced by a dystopia produced by scientific and/or environmental hubris.

In this reading of *Oryx and Crake* I propose that a combined approach that draws on ecocriticism and posthumanism together may provoke a radically different reading. In this article, I will discuss how an eco-posthuman reading may challenge these dystopian analyses, and even the text itself, in order to locate alternative understandings of the text's central issues. Ecocriticism and posthumanism, despite their divergent interests, share many common thematic and philosophical tropes, and by combining the approaches it is possible to establish a broader and more balanced understanding of the vital importance of environmental *and* technological issues in literature and society. Epistemologically, both theories challenge the anthropocentrism of humanism, reimagining the human subject as a component of 'interdependent communities, integrated systems and strong connections among constituent parts'.¹² The world is seen as a network of interconnected, fluid and changeable nodes rather than a pyramid of hierarchical certainties. Associated with the idea of networks comes a critique of conceptual binary dualisms such as 'Nature and culture, madness and reason, fact and fiction, human and animal, self and other, scientific and unscientific, civilized and primitive, even male and female, good and evil'.¹³ In an eco-posthuman schema, 'all these oppositions come under scrutiny, are revealed as artificial, biased, and oversimple, and are then somehow restructured'.¹⁴ By extension, this scrutiny of oppositional boundaries invites analysis of the generic conventions described as 'utopian' and 'dystopian' and suggests uncertainty about the rigidity of such classifications.

Jayne Glover describes *Oryx and Crake* as a text 'especially interested in asking where the boundaries lie between utopia and dystopia',¹⁵ an interpretation that suggests that the text may aspire to both. In the epigraph to this article, Rudolphus Teeuwen observes that '[t]he new society is someone else's utopia but it is presented as incompatible with even minimal requirements for human happiness and comfort'.¹⁶ This is certainly the case in *Oryx and Crake*, where the 'new society' belongs to the Crakers, and humans like Snowman struggle to survive. As such, the 'someone else' discussed by Teeuwen is the subject by which the utopia is defined. For the Crakers, the post-apocalyptic world *is* a utopia, but for Snowman it is the opposite; the question, therefore, of whether this text is utopian or dystopian must be one of perspective. Teeuwen argues that the 'eschatological *jouissance*' encountered in many dystopian texts can be tied to 'a refusal of humanism', insofar as they invite the human 'to extend its sympathies to non-human sharers of the planet'.¹⁷ In this way, such texts mirror the imperatives of the eco-posthuman position, which demands that anthropocentric and/or humanist attitudes be abandoned. From the humanist perspective of Jimmy, the protagonist, this world is a dystopia, but from an eco-posthuman perspective, it is not necessarily so. Because Atwood positions Jimmy as the narrator, an eco-posthuman reading tends to read against the grain of the text, drawing out not necessarily what the author intended, but alternative angles on the issues at hand.

The question this eco-posthuman reading poses is: which of the two sets of protagonists (Jimmy or the Crakers) is most easily identifiable as an eco-posthuman subject? To answer this question, we must locate the eco-posthuman subject in critical discourse. Central to posthumanism is the idea that 'our traditional view of what constitutes a human being is now undergoing a profound transformation'¹⁸ as a result of 'the climate of increasingly sophisticated technology' that pervades society.¹⁹ In other words, the relationship between human and technology inevitably alters the way we conceive the human subject. Yet many posthumanist writers claim that this phenomenon is not 'a modern development'.²⁰ Rather, eminent contributors such as N. Katherine Hayles argue that we should 'acknowledge that we have always been posthuman'.²¹ That is, technology has been so ubiquitous throughout human evolution, since the first primitive tools were invented, that the human-technology relationship has always been a 'cyborg' one, 'not merely in the superficial sense of combining flesh and wires but in the more profound sense of being human-technology symbionts: thinking and reasoning systems whose minds and selves are spread across biological brain and

nonbiological circuitry'.²² In other words, while posthumanism as an epistemological movement is only recently vocalising this phenomenon, the human subject's continually evolving relationship with technology means that it has always been ontologically posthuman, and posthumanism's observations about the human subject apply not only to contemporary society, but to the human throughout history. Vitaly, this means that posthumanism does not signal or celebrate the end of the human, but rather is simply an acknowledgement of humanity's continuous relationship with technology.

This understanding of posthumanism has significant impact upon readings of *Oryx and Crake*, as it fundamentally questions whether the Crakers should be read as inhuman mutants or (eco-)posthuman subjects. The Crakers represent the liminal space where technology and organics collide, and this combined with their effortless ability to adapt to their natural surroundings makes them all but synonymous with descriptions of the eco-posthuman subject. The intimate blending of human, nature and technology that the Crakers represent may seem to some perverse, but eco-posthuman discourse argues that it is not necessarily something to fear; it is, in actual fact, already among us.

This reading identifies the Crakers as a symbol of eco-posthumanism, and as a symbol of the cyborg-human subject that is already in existence. Meanwhile, Jimmy is a symbol of humanism, the values of which are questioned and challenged by the eco-posthuman position. As such, according to this reading, the 'someone else' of this utopia is not necessarily a new, 'other' kind of human, but rather the eco-posthuman subjects we *already are*, given that we are already posthuman. Glover, whilst acknowledging that 'the Crakers appear to fulfil the requirements of a kind of ecotopia based on the values suggested by ecological philosophers',²³ goes on to add that the novel's depiction of humanity's demise undermines the utopian lifestyle of the Crakers,²⁴ whom she identifies as the 'Other'.²⁵ I would argue, however, that the Crakers are not 'other', but rather a radical and idealised projection of the contemporary eco-posthuman subject, which contrasts with the ever-diminishing humanist tradition personified in Jimmy. Ultimately, this reading renders Atwood's novel an allegorical account of the clashes between conventional humanism and an emergent eco-posthuman discourse.

It is this discourse that leads me to question many of the novel's apparently dystopian assertions. Initially, the novel's premise does

indeed appear grim, presenting the reader with the end of humanity and a bioengineered replacement that is designed to play upon the general public's aversion to biotech sciences. Today, the topic of genetic manipulation is discussed with attitudes ranging from concern to hysteria, opinions that are fuelled by a general lack of trust in scientific corporations. Molly Wallace asks, 'confronted with the juxtaposition of an ever-growing catalog of unanticipated disasters – from global warming to mad cow disease to bisphenol-A – and an ever-renewable techno-optimism – from carbon sequestration to nanotechnology – how can one not feel uneasy'?²⁶ Yet in a related study it is suggested that many believe this uneasiness is catalysed, if not entirely conceived, by 'the media and NGOs [non-government organisations], rather than as ever being a spontaneous, considered or autonomous response',²⁷ because 'scare stories sell papers'.²⁸ The sense of uncertainty inspires inevitable anxiety about an industry in which 'no one is expert – especially not the experts',²⁹ fuelled by 'the breakdown of scientific authority in the eyes of the public'³⁰ and harboured in 'a context where trust in institutions that traditionally ensured safety, such as science and government, has deteriorated'.³¹

Atwood's text draws on the sense of fear and revulsion these technologies often inspire in order to create a nightmarish world that is full of the living, mutated results of genetic experimentation. Bouson argues that in her portrayal of the Crakers, Atwood is 'intent on sounding a warning about the potential baneful effects of gene manipulation. [...] Atwood emphasizes the growing, and potentially lethal, power of scientists to manipulate and alter human biology – and reality'.³² Similarly, Karen Stein argues that Atwood 'offers a compelling – and graphic – exploration of the consequences of the misuse of biotechnology and genetic engineering on human nature and the human imagination'.³³ But by investing in these discourses of fear, do these readings situate the text as another form of 'sensationalist' media that arguably overlooks the potential benefits of the bioscience industry?³⁴

In an illustration of the sense of revulsion Atwood aims to provoke, the novel depicts Jimmy's reaction to 'the latest' in in-vitro (lab-grown) meat:³⁵

What they were looking at was a large bulblike object that seemed to be covered with stipply whitish-yellow skin. Out of it came twenty thick fleshy tubes, and at the end of each tube another bulb was growing. [...]

'Those are chickens', said Crake. 'Chicken parts. Just the breasts, on this one. They've got ones that specialize in drumsticks too, twelve to a growth unit'. [...]

'That's the head in the middle,' said the woman. 'There's a mouth opening at the top, they dump the nutrients in there. No eyes or beak or anything, they don't need those'.

'This is horrible', said Jimmy. The thing was a nightmare.³⁶

Although the concept is, for many, thoroughly unappetising because there is a 'sense of gone-wrongedness',³⁷ it is argued by supporters of in-vitro technology that 'the procedure of growing meat without an animal would require between 7% and 45% less energy than the same volume of conventionally produced meat such as pork, beef, or lamb. The meat labs would use only 1% of the land and 4% of the water associated with conventional meat and Greenhouse gases would be reduced by up to 96% in comparison to raising animals'.³⁸ If these figures are accurate, its advocates argue that laboratory-grown meat could offer a solution to world hunger whilst significantly reducing the meat industry's impact on the environment.³⁹ This 'nightmare' technology presented by Atwood may in fact become a viable option in the near future, and one that holds great potential in terms of environmental and humanitarian benefits. Dismissing such technologies as 'chilling'⁴⁰ may be seen as a reactionary response that overlooks potential real-world benefits because of the inherent anxieties these technologies frequently generate, and in its depiction of this and other products of bioscience, *Oryx and Crake* is arguably complicit in perpetuating those anxieties.

Jill Didur writes that '[g]enetic engineering in the lab [...] is represented as a violent assault on nature',⁴¹ yet this claim is complicated by ecocritical claims that 'recent scholarship has clearly demonstrated that the natural world is far more dynamic, far more changeable, and far more entangled with human history than popular beliefs about "the balance of nature" have typically acknowledged'.⁴² Many fears about genetic engineering stem from an assumption that it subverts a nature that is 'capable of perpetuating itself forever unless something interfered with its natural balance',⁴³ but the idea that nature is (or should be) a pristine, static and remote entity has been challenged by a number of recent ecocritical thinkers. According to the second law of thermodynamics, every natural system tends towards entropy, change

and chaos. Chaos theory asserts that even the smallest 'fluctuations on the microscale could, under appropriate conditions, quickly propagate through the system, resulting in large-scale instabilities or reorganizations'.⁴⁴ The idea of a natural, stable state that is self-perpetuating and unchanging simply is not viable. In light of this, Ursula Heise argues that 'the environmentalist's task would not so much be to preserve pristine, authentic ecosystems as to ensure their continued ability to change and evolve'.⁴⁵

These ecocentric issues come to the fore in Atwood's description of the post-apocalyptic 'waste land' of *Oryx and Crake*.⁴⁶ Pastoral scenes are besmeared with the rotting remnants of human civilisation, the 'pink and pale blue of the lagoon' is littered with 'ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble'.⁴⁷ Deep ecology writers such as Bill McKibben (*The End of Nature*) and Stephen M. Meyer (*The End of the Wild*) have argued that nature's wildernesses have been invaded by human artifice and pollution to the extent that 'we are at the end of nature'.⁴⁸ For Meyer, the ideal wilderness is 'an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain',⁴⁹ and he argues that '[t]he problem is that there is virtually no space left on Earth that fits this definition'.⁵⁰ In contrast, Lisa Garforth argues that since the so-called end of nature, writers like Meyer have become 'preoccupied with images and ideals of natural beauty and integrity',⁵¹ but that in doing so they may be 'compensating for the loss of a nature that has never existed'.⁵² In other words, Meyer's definition of a wilderness articulates a sense of longing for a 'nature' that never was. Other writers have argued that the romantic pastoral idealisation of nature as a pristine wilderness is reliant upon the conceptualisation of nature as something that can be cut off entirely from human spheres, sterilised and preserved in a static bubble. This idea of nature contradicts eco-posthuman deconstructions of nature/culture divisions, as it enforces a feeling of alienation between the human subject and the natural world. Because Atwood's landscapes do not conform to conventional ideas about natural beauty they initially appear to form a dystopian and barren wasteland. But the different interpretations of nature brought to us by contemporary ecocriticism provide an alternative perspective on Atwood's wilderness, which is in fact teeming with life.

The landscapes of *Oryx and Crake* are reminiscent of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal in Colorado, which is a former chemical weapons manufacturing facility and has since become a haven for over 300

species of wildlife and plants. William Cronon argues that this site serves to 'blur the boundaries between "natural" and "unnatural"' by 'encouraging us to question our assumptions about what nature means and how we should relate to it'.⁵³ The Rocky Mountain Arsenal certainly subverts the conventional idea of what a wildlife haven should look like and speaks to an adaptability of nature that is often overlooked and undervalued in ecocentric discourse. Anthony Adrady argues that '[c]hange is the hallmark of nature. Nothing remains the same'.⁵⁴ The post-apocalyptic world of *Oryx and Crake* is far from barren and desolate – it is in fact home to many varied lifeforms (both engineered and not) that have adapted to, and indeed thrive among, the postnatural intrusions and old waste products left over from the human civilisation. This 'waste land' is only dystopian for Jimmy, who struggles to survive in its unforgiving conditions. By contrast, for the other creatures featured in the narrative, this world is a bounteous haven. By deconstructing the nature/culture binary that draws a dividing line between all things 'natural' and all things 'artificial', this reading renders the wasteland of *Oryx and Crake* postnatural in the same way that it redefines the human subject as posthuman. In this context, the term 'postnatural' does not mean the end of nature, but simply the end of certain conceptualisations of nature. In this new conceptualisation, the interweaving and overlapping of nature and culture is seen as an organic and inevitable process. This eco-posthuman reading shifts its focus to the Crakers as the subjects of the utopia by dismissing conventional humanist interpretations of the self. Similarly, it reads the postnatural landscapes of the novel as utopian and fertile wildernesses rather than the devastated remnants of civilisation the text presents them to be by dismissing conventional ideas about nature and transferring emphasis from human to non-human concerns.

The coming together of nature and culture is embodied in the Crakers themselves, who are simultaneously products of technology and intimately embedded within the postnatural environment. It is impossible to argue that the Crakers are not physically and psychologically better suited to surviving in the world than Snowman, the remaining human. The Crakers were engineered by Crake to be perfectly adapted to the post-apocalyptic world he created for them, and their technologically-enhanced biology allows them to blend seamlessly into their environment, without exploiting or degrading it. With their 'UV-resistant skin'⁵⁵ they are 'perfectly adjusted to their habitat, so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons'.⁵⁶ 'They smell like a crateful of citrus fruit – an added feature on the part of Crake,

who'd thought those chemicals would ward off mosquitoes'.⁵⁷ They are strict herbivores, eating 'mostly grass and leaves and roots',⁵⁸ and have a very rapid growth rate. They live for only thirty years and this short lifespan coupled with in-built mating schedules solves any potential population problems. In creating the Crakers, Crake has taken his inspiration from nature, but the resultant product is something entirely postnatural and posthuman. The Crakers are 'designed to live in perfect harmony, not in competition with, the natural environment',⁵⁹ and as such embody the ideal conceptualisation of the human in terms of the eco-posthuman position. Pepperell writes that 'human beings do not exist in the sense in which we ordinarily think of them, that is, as separate entities in perpetual antagonism with a nature that is external to them'.⁶⁰ As posthuman subjects, created by science and biotechnology, the Crakers represent the ultimate eco-posthuman being, existing in a postnatural landscape where the divisions between nature and culture have broken down.

In contrast to the elegance of the Crakers, Snowman does not fit into this world at all. The climate is too hot, food is scarce, and he attracts rather than repels the biting insects of the area. Aside from his biological maladaptation, as a concept he begins to destabilise: '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'.⁶¹ In this world, the human has become obsolete. Snowman is 'backward-pointing', an almost extinct species, a relic from a bygone age, and he does not belong here. *'I'm your past*, he might intone. *I'm your ancestor, come from the land of the dead. Now I'm lost, I can't get back, I'm stranded here, I'm all alone. Let me in!*⁶² He refers to himself as an 'orang-utang'⁶³ and 'dead meat',⁶⁴ images which conjure up his backwardness and obsolescence. By contrast, the Crakers embody a sense of timelessness and eternity, appearing both ancient and new simultaneously: 'Their singing is unlike anything he ever heard in his vanished life: it's beyond the human level, or below it. As if crystals are singing; but not that, either. More like ferns unscrolling – something old, carboniferous, but at the same time newborn, fragrant, verdant'.⁶⁵ This description generates the feeling that the Crakers are somehow an inevitable development of nature whilst they are simultaneously a new invention. Despite their 'artificial' origins, their complete immersion in the postnatural world they occupy makes them seem more authentic and more deeply connected to the world than Snowman, who is an oddity soon to disappear. As a result, it is much easier to locate the eco-

posthuman sense of self in the Crakers, who embody not the next iteration of humanity, but rather the next iteration of human thinking.

Hui-chuan Chang argues that although '[a]t first sight, Crakers seem to be rather promising as a posthuman race [...] problems arise as we become aware that whatever "virtues" Crakers may harbour, they lack intrinsic human nature. [...] They are] a posthuman dream turned awry'.⁶⁶ Yet this judgment stems from a humanist reading that values 'intrinsic human nature' as something that exists and should be preserved. Conversely, posthumanism argues that humanity is 'always already a construction, "disassembled and reassembled," like [the] cyborg, from the parts at hand – most crucially, from the other beings in our worlds with their own partial and fractured identities'.⁶⁷ This perspective challenges the idea that 'human nature' has ever been intrinsic, fixed or immutable, as Chang implies. Aside from this, the characteristics presented by the text as defining the human are, in fact, profoundly ignoble qualities. The stories Snowman tells to the Crakers are all lies and elaborate fabrications that mislead them about himself, the world they live in, and their own origins. Is this the 'intrinsic human nature' that is to be so valued? At the end of the novel, Snowman encounters a small group of human survivors on the beach. He ponders what might happen if he goes down to meet them:

What next? Advance with a strip of bedsheet tied to a stick, waving a white flag? *I come in peace*. But he doesn't have his bedsheet with him.

Or, *I can show you much treasure*. But no, he has nothing to trade with them, nor them with him. [...]

Or, *Get the hell off my turf before I blow you off* [...]. That wouldn't be the end of it though. [...] They'd sneak up on him in the dark, conk him on the head with a rock. He'd never know when they might come.

He could finish it now, before they see him, while he still has strength. [...] Should he kill them in cold blood? Is he able to? If he starts killing them and then stops, one of them will kill him first. Naturally.⁶⁸

What could be a joyous reunion and a hopeful new beginning for humanity is instead reduced to a paranoid battle plan that could well result in the end of the human race altogether. This passage surmises the spirit of the human protagonists in this novel, who are 'naturally' driven towards greed, territorialism, lies and murder. Chang observes

that '[t]hroughout all these possible scenarios [at the end of the text] the keynote is antagonism rather than cooperation, death rather than life, despair rather than hope'.⁶⁹ With this in mind, it is difficult to see, in the context of this novel, precisely which parts of 'human nature' (or humanism) ought to have been kept in the Crakers to make them less 'awry'. By contrast, the Crakers are peace-loving: they 'represent the state of innocence', they are 'free of the negative traits [found] in present-day humans. They live communally and respect the environment'.⁷⁰ What Crake considered human flaws have been edited out: 'Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it';⁷¹ 'What had been altered was nothing less than the ancient primate brain. Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesses'.⁷² In contrast to the pre-apocalyptic world of commercialisation and consumerism depicted in the novel's flashbacks, and the barbaric nature of Snowman and the other surviving humans, it is difficult to see the Craker society as anything other than utopian.

But, as Crake realises when he orchestrates his own death along with the death of the rest of humanity, there is no room in this posthuman, postnatural utopia for the human. Teeuwen argues that when reading dystopian texts as a 'slide out of humanism',⁷³ we must recognise 'without humanist hand wringing'⁷⁴ that '[a]ll humanist and metaphysical notions, morality, history, truth, God, and all human claims of freedom and (ir)responsibility will yield to ecology and natural selection'.⁷⁵ In this way, Teeuwen adopts the perspective of Crake, for whom 'goodness is constituted by the preservation of an important ecosystem while hierarchical struggles among human beings are irrelevant'.⁷⁶ From a humanist point of view, this does seem to be a grim, dystopian vision. But if Atwood's Crakers are reread not as a warning about the hubris of genetic engineering, but rather as an exaggerated symbol of the posthuman subject (that we have always been), then the novel's tone undergoes a shift. If Snowman is reconfigured as a representation of the old, humanistic, dualistically-immersed, static, pro-industrialist human, and the Crakers as the posthuman, the integrated chimera, the diverse, adapted hybrid, then *Oryx and Crake* ceases to be a dystopian nightmare and becomes an eco-posthuman utopia.

Returning to the idea that we have always been posthuman, it is possible to read the Crakers as an allegorical acknowledgement of humanity's enduring, and intimate, relationship with technology and

with nature. The Crakers are a product of technology and simultaneously a product of nature – and in this way, they do not differ from human beings as they are conceived by eco-posthumanism. The Crakers *are* humanity; at least, they are humanity as it is seen through an eco-posthuman lens. Ralph Pordzik writes that such a reading 'does not perforce imply an evolution or devolution of the human; rather it participates in what I prefer to call a redistribution of patterns of cultural difference and identity'.⁷⁷ In other words, the shift from human to posthuman – from Snowman to Craker – is not a physical transition, but a philosophical one.

This reading dissolves the conceptual divisions between nature and technology, describing technology as a natural mechanism of (post)human nature. Similarly, it describes nature not as the pristine wilderness of pastoral idealisation, but rather as the postnatural liminal space where organic and non-organic overlap. In both of these instances, the posthuman and the postnatural do not literally mean *the end of humanity* or *the end of nature*, but represent an epistemological shift from thinking about human and nature in one way, to thinking about them in another. This shift mirrors the paradigmatic shift from humanism to eco-posthumanism, as anthropocentric, hierarchical, oppositional and totalising narratives are cast aside. In short, 'What is at stake [...] is Western humanism at large'.⁷⁸

An eco-posthuman reading of *Oryx and Crake* does not produce a pessimistic dystopia, an apocalypse, or even the end of humanity – nor does it attempt to identify and consolidate the author's attitudes and beliefs. Indeed, it most likely flies in the face of Atwood's intentions, and certainly, like the intrusions of artifice into the landscape, generates ideas that 'stand out' and 'grind against' the impetus of the narrative.⁷⁹ But this does not make it any less valuable a reading when it comes to understanding the issues at hand; namely, the position of science in the eyes of the public, the potential green humanitarian benefits of certain controversial technologies, and, fundamentally, varying conceptualisations of the human subject and the natural world. According to this reading, the Crakers are not monsters that, born of scientific hubris, have replaced the human race – the Crakers represent the potential for humanity to embrace intimate, networked relationships with nature and technology in order to engage in a more fruitful, healthy and caring way of living, and their creation speaks to the very human exercise of 'the overstepping of given limitations'.⁸⁰ As the long-suffering, ashamed and barbaric figure of Jimmy shambles away from

the Craker paradise, so too does conventional humanism, superseded by a new way of conceptualising the human, nature and technology that is not misanthropic, but is based on an eco-posthuman interpretation of humanity's potential to be better, to work towards 'extending our sympathies and cultivating our communal wills toward a humility that can save both us and a good bit of the planet';⁸¹ in short, to be *someone else*.

Melissa Roddis completed doctoral research funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council at Nottingham Trent University. Her work on Margaret Atwood emerges from a larger project on the relations between ecocritical and posthuman approaches to literary texts.

Notes

- 1 Rudolphus Teeuwen, 'Ecocriticism, Humanism, Eschatological *Jouissance*: J. G. Ballard and the Ends of the World', *Tamkang Review*, 39:2 (2009), 40.
- 2 Traci Warkentin, 'Dis/integrating Animals: Ethical Dimensions of the Genetic Engineering of Animals for Human Consumption', *AI & Society*, 20 (2006), 83.
- 3 Hui-chuan Chang, '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.
- 4 Jayne Glover, 'Human/Nature: Ecological Philosophy in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*' <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.882003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:mla:R04291517:0> [Accessed 8 March 2013].
- 5 J. Brooks Bouson, 'We're Using Up the Earth. It's Almost Gone': A Return to the Post-Apocalyptic Future in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 46:1 (2011), 16.
- 6 Allison Dunlap, 'Eco-Dystopia: Reproduction and Destruction in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*', *Journal of Ecocriticism*, 5:1, 10.
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