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**New Windows**  
**on a**  
**Woman's World**

**Essays for Jocelyn Harris**

**Volume Two**

*edited by*

**Colin Gibson and Lisa Marr**

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# **The Word as Remnant: Margaret Atwood and Janet Frame**

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For the trumpet shall sound,  
And the dead shall be raised incorruptible,  
And we shall be changed.  
For this corruptible  
Must put on incorruption  
And this mortal must put on immortality.  
(1Corinthians 15.52-53)

This world is not conclusion;  
A sequel stands beyond—  
(Emily Dickinson)

“In the beginning was the word, and the word was made flesh,” writes the apostle John. What will happen at the end? The question is of some interest to those of us who profess literature, since it bears on the present status and future survival of poetry, the most fleshly of all words. By advancing formal signifying systems as the means by which nature will ultimately be revealed, modernity has exacted a long, slow crucifixion of natural language, particularly in its aesthetic, non-referential dimensions.<sup>1</sup> Galileo asserted, in *The Assayer*, that the universe is written in the language of mathematics, while the figurative and polysemic lability of words prompted Leibniz to conceive of a numerical *characteristica universalis*, by which all human problems could be expressed and solved by logical computation. The artificial language would serve as “an instrument of discovery and demonstration,”<sup>2</sup> so perfect in its representation of the objects of investigation that human error would be all but erased and “all heterogeneity [could] be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment, and exchange.”<sup>3</sup> J-J. Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* envisaged that, as “enlightenment spreads, the character of language changes; it becomes more precise and less passionate; it substitutes ideas for sentiments; it no longer speaks to the



heart but to the reason.”<sup>4</sup> Thomas Love Peacock pondered (albeit tongue-in-cheek) whether poetry, once the “mental rattle that awakened the attention of intellect in the infancy of civil society,” had become outgrown in the age of science;<sup>5</sup> a question that C. P. Snow answered dismissively two centuries later, with less evidence of irony, by claiming that scientists alone “have the future in their bones.”<sup>6</sup> “Poetry, the oracle, is gone,” lamented Allen Tate in 1924;<sup>7</sup> Theodor Adorno pronounced it barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz.<sup>8</sup> Even George Steiner, defender of a classical education, finds that the “commanding energy” and “forward dreams” which define us derive increasingly from “the language-worlds of mathematical and symbolic notations,”<sup>9</sup> and fears that “a new hierarchy of menial service and stunted opportunity may develop among those whose resources continue to be purely verbal” (100).

In their “future-haunted fictions,” *Intensive Care* (1970) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003),<sup>10</sup> Janet Frame and Margaret Atwood project an apocalyptic telos for this drive towards abstraction and stage a showdown between words and numbers.<sup>11</sup> In secular reworkings of the biblical span from the beginning to the end of temporal existence, these two great feminist ironists coolly observe the descent of Man into self-destruction. In *Intensive Care*, humanity is threatened when New Zealanders abdicate their responsibilities of social memory and compassion to the mechanisms of binary logic and abstract rationality embodied in the government’s “Human Delineation” regime. The instrument of genocide in *Oryx and Crake* is not a centrally administered eugenic programme but rather a biogenetically engineered sexual potency pill, which the psychopathic geneticist Crake wreaks upon a willing globe as the terminal desire of its consumerist culture of extinction. In both texts, the capacity of divine judgement upon humanity is appropriated by human agents, who attempt to engineer a technocratic paradise on earth—a fast-forwarding from Genesis to Apocalypse, as it were, like a needle scraping across a phonographic record. As satirists, both writers also subject this epochal scope to a historical and material framework, so that the eschatological moment is punctured with a bathetic, “what next?”

As these opening comments suggest, my reading concentrates on the eugenic final section of *Intensive Care*, though the text’s three parts should not be considered easily separable from each other: while the apparent formlessness of the novel confused early readers,<sup>12</sup> its compositional forces are, in fact, highly synthesised, even claustrophobic.



Imagistic, phonemic, generational, and fantasmatic repetitions throb through the text, creating an atmosphere of unrelenting terror which, as one reviewer put it, "makes George Orwell look like Rebecca of Sunnybrook farm."<sup>13</sup> *Intensive Care* is also singular, in Frame's oeuvre, in referring to or evoking historical events, all of them cataclysmic.<sup>14</sup> In the first two sections, relentless wars, on the domestic front as well as the battle front, spiral down through generations of men. Tom Livingstone and his grandson Colin Torrance violently amputate all unpleasure from their lives, such as non-compliant wives and girlfriends, in the narcissistic effort to maintain an absolute fit between will and the world, "smoothing the tracing paper, putting dream and reality edge to edge, the two in harmony" (32). The final section jumps ahead to the time when "old King Charles" occupies the throne (339). Acting under the advice of American consultants, the New Zealand government has declared a Human Delineation (H.D.) programme to improve economic efficiency; such is the natural progression of an agricultural nation built on the felling of trees and the slaughter of animals (214). A computer programmed by mathematician Colin Monk will divide the population into human and animal, the latter group comprising the old, the poor, the weak, and those with "unusual diamond-shaped views." One of Frame's "wise fool" figures, Milly Galbraith, diagnosed as a "dull-normal" autistic (224), is declared animal and put to death by incineration, but her textual traces remain in the form of her diary, with its unorthodox, punning spelling.

This spare plot outline conceals the more important underlying textual dynamic of *Intensive Care*. Two modes of return cut across each other throughout the novel: a reproduction and a repetition, a return *to* and a return *of*,<sup>15</sup> with the latter continually interrupting and displacing the former. The eugenic H.D. regime seeks a return *to* a paradisaical state without deficiency; this would be a self-enclosed world, one with no breach in the perfect social body to "[let] the difference flood in" (27). The H.D. project desires to close grand historical cycles through a double temporal movement: both a movement forwards, retrieving humanity from its allegedly degenerate present state, and a movement backwards, in the attempted recuperation of a national origin, when New Zealand led the world as a social laboratory (222 and 250). But this fantasy of self-sufficiency is troubled by the uncanny return *of* images and impressions: autumnal decay, blood on snow, cropped limbs, still water in deep pools; doll-like women with violet eyes; intimations of phantom

limbs; words looming out of the page with strange, knowing spellings. The cross-cutting of these two forms of return is signalled in the opening words, "In the dream in the dream": the desire for the perfection of dream is immediately deferred by a repetition that becomes, as it builds through the text, a nightmare compulsion. There is, thus, no point in asking, along with another bemused reviewer, "but what does it all add up to?"<sup>16</sup> The novel cannot "add up" because its textual energies remain in constant and irresolvable tension with each other, a point I will return to towards the end of my argument.

Structurally, thematically, and aesthetically, *Intensive Care* resists the ideology of progressivism. It attacks the misapplied social Darwinism of the H.D. regime, which mistakes evolution's adaptive mechanisms for a teleological journey toward perfection. For there is no evolution in society: contrary to Paul's biblical account in Romans 8, which "sees the whole creation longing for its liberation,"<sup>17</sup> in society there is no *necessary* epochal succession from historical time to eternity. The irony that a supposedly inevitable natural progression needs technological and political intervention to hurry it along is exposed in Colin Monk's exchange with his colleague Hugh Craig, who enthuses: "The formation and melting of ice, the shifting of a mountain, the youth and senility of a volcano; and now the separation of Man from Animal" (332). "I never heard of an Act which decreed that ice should melt and mountains move," retorts Colin Monk (333). Likewise, Milly's matter-of-fact character signals the very material impediment that she presents to the idealist systems of meaning that reinforce the H.D. project, particularly religion and mathematics. Here is her conversation with Reverend Polly:

"Such is life," the minister said to me when the tree was cut down and silly old yaws truly was grieving. "The reed cut down in the wind. The blossom perished. Such is man."

"It's a tree not a reed," I said.

"Metterfaw, Milly." (317-18)

Milly rejects, not only the centuries-long time frame by which a tree could be likened to a reed, but also Reverend Polly's rhetoric, through the morphemic spoonerism "metterfaw" (producing "fetter" and "maw" when the first letters of each morpheme are reversed, exposing the trap he sets with his words). Milly's time is not the accelerated, suprahuman temporality of H.D.'s "political cosmology,"<sup>18</sup> but rather time "pinned



human,”<sup>19</sup> a time which does not subordinate actuality to a transcendent future.

As we will find in *Oryx and Crake*, Frame’s text sets numbers against natural language, represented through a semiotic antagonism between Colin Monk and Milly. Colin Monk “despair[s] that words will ever catch up again” with mathematics (217), as if words were simply a way-station on the way to a more evolved mode of communication, as if “words were ‘over,’ ‘done with,’ just as a day or century is over, that numbers were the language” (178). By contrast, Milly’s stylistic thumbprint is her “special spelling” (243). The strategic puns irritate many readers, but I would suggest that they are more interesting for their typicality than their atypicality.<sup>20</sup> For puns highlight characteristics of natural languages as opposed to formal languages. Being polysemous—a single signifier attaches to more than one signified—the pun is imprecise. Because the pun’s effect relies on seeing the word on the printed page, it calls attention also to the materiality of language, the fact that communication has a physical as well as cognitive dimension. The language of mathematical symbols, by contrast, strives for pure denotation, allowing only a singular relationship between signifier and abstract concept. And, because the signifier itself is reduced to a minimal symbol, mathematical notation most efficiently reduces the graphemic “signifying expense” to “almost nothing.”<sup>21</sup> It is this Platonic “cleanness” that excites Colin Monk: “How I admire the immunity of numbers, their untouchability, their inaccessibility; every moment they shine, newly bathed, concealing, never acknowledging the dark work they do” (217).

Under H.D., writing systems can be viewed as technologies—as labour-saving devices which advance civilisation by enlarging both personal and cultural memory, and thus “free[ing] attention and consciousness” for the work of reason.<sup>22</sup> Milly’s attention to the materiality of words thus sets off a series of declining slippages between categories within the framework of H.D.’s evolutionary semiotics: non-standard script; redundancy; impeded reading; inefficiency; error; unreason; regression; the constraints of material nature; animal. Just as H.D. is promoted as “the greatest convenience of modern times ... a labor-saving device more to be praised, more wonderful than all the housekeeping inventions of peace and war: the vacuum cleaners and the bombs” (338), so mathematics is to succeed alphabetic writing. As the nation becomes the “Comfort Station of Civilization” (222), linguistic waste must go down the toilet, so to speak, together with the “deformed,



the insane, the defective, the outcasts" (342).

Frame's depiction of H.D. in some ways glimpses the future rhetoric and strategies by which the fourth Labour government launched its neoliberal economic experiment in 1984, a moment that has been identified as the arrival of postmodernity in New Zealand.<sup>23</sup> In particular, Frame astutely anticipated that the dismantling of the social web would be made in the name of efficiency and the purported need to "make the world safe for democracy" (244). However, the predominant discursive imprint on *Intensive Care* is modern: in the elevation of the computer as Machine, serving the depersonalised ends of power; the role of centralised government; the continuing presence (however threatened) of elemental nature; and the traces of hope (however distant) in the power of the poetic word. By contrast, *Oryx and Crake* fully inhabits the conditions of postmodernity: devolved governmental structures, disintegrated society, ever-more pervasive (and invasive) biogenetic interventions into daily life, complete mediatisation of experience, and complete commodification of knowledge. Atwood suggests that *Oryx and Crake* is not a classic dystopia because "we don't really get an overview of the structure of the society in it,"<sup>24</sup> though surely that is precisely the point: *Oryx and Crake* extrapolates the dystopic outcomes of the late twentieth-century transition from "society," with its state-managed central pool of resources, to "community, with its focus on localised, semi-autonomous arrangements, such as the gated community."<sup>25</sup> This fictional world is both a "recognizable version of today's United States" and "also a caricature—how much of one is the question."<sup>26</sup>

*Oryx and Crake* opens *in medias res* or, more precisely, in the middle of the end. A single man, Snowman, has survived a genocidal catastrophe of late-capitalist civilisation. His sole companions appear to be a tribe of genetically engineered hominids, the Crakers, who, in their nakedness, radical innocence, and self-sufficiency, parody Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Devoid of "official time" (3), symbolic ritual, and seasons, this post-apocalyptic world, indeed, seems eternal, though more hellish than heavenly. Snowman's excursion to scavenge supplies in an abandoned compound prompts a memory-journey, which proceeds, with quickening pace, to close the gap between past and present experience. As adolescent Jimmy, Snowman had befriended the brilliant Crake at HelthWyzer high school.<sup>27</sup> The two-tiered "society" that they grew up in accords to the spatial logic of the corporate tribe and the libidinal



logic of the “erratic excess.”<sup>28</sup> The families of elite scientists worked for biomedical companies in compounds monitored by corporate security corps, while the consumers and experimental subjects of biomedical products sloshed around in slummy Pleeblands, “porous” zones of unpredictability (*Oryx and Crake* 196). A decentralised commercial culture devoted to the preservation of youthfulness and convenience is satirically exposed as a matrix of death, from which Crake, not a “cheerleader for the human race” (294), emerges to virally sponge away the entire horizon.

It is important to register what is missing in Jimmy and Crake’s world. There is no mention of weather, nature, or physical exercise other than sex; no government, society, civic infrastructure, or forum for public culture; no fostering of parental values, in the broader sense of mentoring, supervision, or moral instruction. The sole industry, outside of biomedicine and sex work, consists in the endless reproduction of media images, virtual reality games, and the “impersonal circulation of affects bypassing persons” through which Jimmy observes his own dissociated drift.<sup>29</sup> And, although Crake and Jimmy engage in some not so good-natured ribbing about the antagonism between the humanities and the sciences, in fact, neither of C. P. Snow’s “two cultures” survives in this near-future scenario, except as nostalgic epistemological relics. Science, which proceeds from the apprehension of the natural world, holds no ground when virtual reality has superceded nature. Thus, Jimmy does not liken his stepmother’s “liquefying carrots” to a mosquito, a natural phenomenon, but rather to “an alien mosquito creature on DVD” (25). Likewise, the discipline currently known as literary studies has become completely absorbed into “applied rhetoric” to serve global marketing imperatives (188). Under this dispensation, language becomes purely instrumental, used rather than experienced, glossy and slick as “an eyeball on a plate” (260). People become incapable of any figurative sensibility that might prompt critical thinking precisely by impeding or recontextualizing the outpouring of corporate communications. Thus, Jimmy’s ironic satire on the self-help culture of the late twentieth century is welcomed by his job interview panel as a literal market-profiling report (245), and, when Snowman finds a copy of the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* in the post-catastrophe ruins, he surmises that the owner was an “ideological plumber” (233), a corporate advertising agent, like himself.

The sole motive for knowledge in the pre-catastrophe world of *Oryx*



and *Crake* is, thus, commodified technology. Where the natural sciences seek to know the world, technology seeks to control it, with the aim of commercializing products that minimise inconvenience; that is, the delay between desire and pleasure. Harold Fromm terms this immediacy of “want” and “get” “the Myth of Voluntary Omnipotence,”<sup>30</sup> which develops from “a mind so assured of its domination of Nature and its capacity to satisfy the flesh that it seems to be borne up on its own engine of Will, cut off from any nurturing roots in the earth” (34). Although fleshly pleasures appear to motivate the technological drive for gratification, in fact, the elevation of the will is ultimately inimical to the materiality of human existence.<sup>31</sup> For the corruptible flesh becomes viewed not merely as a cumbersome nuisance; it also embodies the prospect of death, which the fantasy of voluntary omnipotence cannot accommodate. Ironically, the very pursuit of the conveniences of life can reach the extent of threatening “the survival of the body that would make it possible to continue to fulfill the wish” (38).<sup>32</sup> The successes of physics and genetics in manipulating the world to gratify desire make it “no longer a pastime or even a duty but a necessity” to comprehend the technological imaginary, “because increasingly, if we can imagine something, we’ll be able to do it.”<sup>33</sup>

The urgent challenge to the humanities is thus set down: to interrupt the genocidal logic of this secular eschatological drive to transcend the body. Yet the characters that Atwood and Frame seem to offer up as the champions of resistance seem scarcely inspiring. In the figures of Snowman and Milly, we find the future flotsam of the humanities: bitter, poor, dumbly articulate, and caught in a strange twilight between the material and the ghostly, between too much and too little flesh. We find no heroics of the transformative imagination, no Blakean vision of art as searing revelation. This fact is all the more significant given that Frame explores this mode in some of her other fiction (particularly *Owls Do Cry*, *Faces in the Water*, and *A State of Siege*), while Atwood knows the tradition through the influence of her mentor Northrop Frye. Frye conceived of imagination as the poetic capacity, through analogy (simile) and identity (metaphor), to “show a world completely absorbed and possessed by the human mind”;<sup>34</sup> and he regarded the imagination as a protection against the imaginary, which he defined as an “inverted form of imagination,” consisting of “the illusions that society threatens us with” (141).<sup>35</sup> The ultimate horizon of literary symbolism for Frye is the anagogic phase of interpretation, in which nature is emancipated



into art through apocalypse, “the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body which, if not human, is closer to being human than to being inanimate.”<sup>36</sup> But this encompassing vision of the imagination mimics too closely the genocidal apocalyptic that it purports to counteract; one form of masculine totality is simply replaced by another. From the post-apocalyptic ruins, Frame develops instead a more hesitant and partial poetic, in which the broken word sustains and speaks for the brokenness of the social body. The more profound cynicism of *Oryx and Crake* glances at, but ultimately cannot endorse, a humanist art that would save *homo sapiens* from its own violent dreams of presence.

Frame announces her politics of form in a striking nuclear metaphor:

Unvoweled, unconsone[n]ted, unexclaimed, a man must soon die.  
Even the alphabetical atom may be subdued by the hydrogen atom,  
unless those who work with language, unless people who speak,  
learn also to split and solve the alphabet. (*Intensive Care* 166)

Writing under the weight of the Cold War, Frame conceives a world in which the physics of splitting prevails as the dominant metaphor, and in which authority functions as “a reactor smashing human atoms.”<sup>37</sup> Frame’s aesthetic response operates, one might say, homeopathically: it becomes the task of poets to create intense heat and pressure in language by splitting and solving the alphabet, by experimenting with the form of words and so making new forms of knowledge possible.<sup>38</sup> Consider a single pun: Milly’s comment that “the Prime Minister kept reminding us of our duty to dim-mock-crissy” (264). The special spelling redistributes the morphemic structure of “democracy,” which combines the Greek words *demos* (“people”) and *krateein* (“to rule”) with the derivational morpheme -y. The spelling “dim-mock-crissy,” by contrast, resegments the word to spell out “dim” and “mock,” and imply connections with “crassness” and “hypocrisy.” A homophone is created where none was before, and it is implied that either the practice of democracy mocks the theory—given that *Intensive Care* was drafted in the United States, which at the time was bombing Vietnamese civilians in the name of democracy to support an undemocratic South Vietnamese government—or the concept of democracy is inherently flawed, particularly for minorities.

In a further twist, however, we know that the pun’s semantic shock relies on the impossibility of fully extricating one meaning from another.



The meanings cross-infect each other, for a pun functions by simultaneity, rather than atomisation or sequentiality: “unlike physics, in which two bodies may not occupy the same space, language is a material in which the same names are capable of supporting several mutually exclusive meanings simultaneously.”<sup>39</sup> Milly’s puns, thus, embody her social ethic, that “two times can live together” without one feeling any compulsion to obliterate the other (240). The pun is, in miniature, a condensation of the social body, from which one part cannot be removed without destroying the whole. As the smoke from the incinerators drifts across the Taieri Plains, the perpetrators of the H.D. regime learn, too late to save Milly, that “the animal in man could not be subdued, and had the Government kept to its original plan the so-called human race might have been exterminated” (342).

Atwood’s faith in the subversive power of words is far shakier; neither poetry nor art in general emerge from the narrative as an effectual or unqualified good. In attempting to tease out the multiple ironies operating here, I will start with the observation that, in the character of Snowman, Atwood appears to agree with Frame that one’s sense of a continuing, substantial self is bound up with aesthetic language—that “unvoweled, unconsona[n]ted, unexclaimed, a man must soon die.” In the hierarchical division of knowledge between “numbers men” and “words men,” Jimmy classes himself in the latter group, but he is also, pre-eminently, a “flesh man.” Indeed, his sexual success with women seems to be his sole advantage over Crake’s intellectual and strategic mastery. That Jimmy’s pleasures of the flesh are inextricably bound to his pleasure in words is suggested by the fact that he first encounters Shakespeare through “At Home with Anna K,” a reality porn show (84). In his post-catastrophe circumstance as Snowman, he becomes even more engulfed in the demands of his “orangutang” body (169): eating, pissing, masturbating. But it is the absence of figurative language that most threatens his sense of survival. Here, Crake plays his final, post-humous trump card against the arts, for the Crakers are doggedly literal in their comprehension. Having been engineered to live an ecologically sustainable existence free from neurosis, desire, awareness of death, and any notion of personal property, they have no capacity for what Crake termed “harmful symbolisms” (305). Snowman tires of attempting to explain even the most moribund of metaphors, such as “you’re toast,” to the Crakers (98), and he finds that “irony is lost on the trees” (162). Without recourse to words in their material dimension, Snowman finds



himself a liquifying, “white illusion of a man” (224). Where once he could “[sink] down into the words, into the feelings” (317), now he finds himself amputated from language: “From nowhere, a word appears: *Mesozoic*. He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can’t reach the word. He can’t attach anything to it” (39). The structure of the sentence mimes its representational meaning: floating beyond repeated attempts to grasp it, the “word” repeats without pronominal substitution, echoing its own disappearance as a meaningful unit.

When the retrospective narrative arrives at the moment of catastrophe, in the murders of the two people who came closest to being friends, Snowman descends to his lowest level: “thick as a brick, dunderhead, frivol, and dupe, water running down his face, giant fist clenching his heart, staring down at his one true love and his best friend in all the world” (335). An ironic *pharmakon*, he embodies the simultaneous apotheosis and absolute abjection of the human condition—though, of course, the tragic anagnorisis arrives too late to share with any other humans. When he returns to his treehouse, he finds a disturbing development. The Crakers have devised a ritual, focussing their attention on “a scarecrowlike effigy”:

*Ohhhh*, croon the women.

*Mun*, the men intone.

Is that *Amen*? Surely not! Not after Crake’s precautions, his insistence on keeping these people pure, free of all contamination of that kind. (360)

Crake’s warning, “*watch out for art*” (361), is vindicated. The Crakers can now symbolise: they can substitute the present with the not-present. A chasm is beginning to open between what *is* and what *might be*, which is the engine of desire—the gap, in the line from Browning that Frame quotes in *Owls Do Cry*, between man’s “reach” and his “grasp.” Unless Snowman intervenes, the wheel of history is about to start turning again, and with it the technologies and behaviour that serve desire: work, agriculture, money, rape (367). The Crakers are hard-wired for dreaming (352), and so susceptible to nightmarish visions of hell similar to those of their maker (218), which technology would eventually bring to realisation.<sup>40</sup>

The final scene suggests that art is complicitous with technology, in the same way that alpha must lead to omega: art begins the process toward catastrophe, technology finishes it off. Must art, then, be de-

stroyed? Atwood has more to say, however, which directs us to the role of Oryx. Consider Snowman's parable of the flesh, which glimpses a tragic vision of impossible aesthetic synthesis:

When did the body first set out on its own adventures? Snowman thinks; after having ditched its old travelling companions, the mind and the soul, for whom it had once been considered a mere corrupt vessel or else a puppet acting out their dramas for them, or else bad company, leading the other two astray ... It had dumped the other two back there somewhere, leaving them stranded in some damp sanctuary or stuffy lecture hall while it made a beeline for the topless bars, and it had dumped culture along with them: music and painting and poetry and plays. Sublimation, all of it; nothing but sublimation, according to the body. Why not cut to the chase?

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

An execution is tragedy without redemption of the soul; pornography is romance without Austenian likeness or maturity of mind. However, like rock, scissors, and paper, body, mind, and soul cannot be present together yet cannot exist apart, having been enjoined in the same game: soul wraps body, body blunts mind, mind cuts soul. This logic of the "so close and yet so far" happens to be a formula of soap opera, and so the disallowed union of this trinity unfolds satirically through the tacky gestures of a melodramatic love triangle, where Jimmy plays body, Crake mind, and Oryx soul.

Oryx seems to function as an intangible feminine principle, somewhat comparable to the alluring but enigmatic violet eyes that recur in the women of *Intensive Care*. She is defined by negative qualities, such as the imprecise referentiality of her stories of her past and her contentlessness: "what is my will?" she queries (141), mocking both Crake's overriding volitional "will" and Jimmy's primary concern with his "will" in the Shakespearean bawdy sense. Playing Echo to Jimmy's Narcissus, she is an emptiness that echoes emptiness: "You think I was thinking?" (92). Her first two appearances to Jimmy are on-screen, first on a kiddy porn show and, then, some years later, on Crake's monitoring system in his laboratory, when "suddenly she was real, three-dimensional" (308). Virtuality is not a state of absence for Oryx but her essence, for she has no material significance beyond the fantasmatic. For her, "here and not here is the same thing" (340), and "all sex is real" precisely because it is



equally virtual: not a relation between two desiring people but between a man and the projection of his own desire. Thus, although she seems to look “right into Jimmy’s eyes, into the secret person inside him” (91), her function is not exactly that of conscience but rather that of pure receptivity and responsiveness; that is, pure femininity. Oryx manifests the illusion that there could exist a being who completely understands one’s desires, obviating the mediation of language, the humiliation of showing one’s need, and the messiness of relationship. Thus, Jimmy fails to prevent Crake’s masterplan not only because of his blindness to the implications of Crake’s warning, from Pope’s *Essay on Man*, that “the proper study of mankind is man.” Jimmy’s sexual desire for Oryx also follows the same specular structuration—the absolute prioritisation of desire over materiality—as Crake’s intellectual eclipse of the body. Because Oryx’s effect as a feline “microscope of potency”<sup>41</sup> is experienced as equally arousing and castrating, “pure bliss” and “pure terror” (308), both Jimmy and Crake strive to eliminate it. Jimmy tries to contain Oryx by embodying her, wanting to attach her to hard facts, names, dates, places, while Crake, of course, moves spectacularly toward a global *disembodiment*.

It seems to me that those of us who profess the humanities have most to learn from Oryx’s unhinging insubstantiality, rather than from the elements of Atwood’s text that present an “open invitation to moralizing” about what fools these mortals be.<sup>42</sup> I have suggested, in the necessarily condensed parameters of this discussion, that by comparing Milly with Jimmy we learn that words matter and that their destiny cannot be disentangled from that of the gross body. We learn something else by setting Milly next to Oryx, something that touches more upon the verbal aesthetic as a shifting, unstable force-field, rather than as crafted figurative play. In their opaque transparency, these “concrete ghosts of mankind”<sup>43</sup> both beckon towards and defeat dreams of a total consciousness or a total language. As mirrors, not to nature, but to fantasy, they personify the uncanny dynamic that Frame instantiates in the formal design of *Intensive Care* through the cross-cutting of the “return to” and the “return of.” They call us to develop a comparable “stammering and unsettling pedagogy,”<sup>44</sup> living precariously, “precipitated by our solutions, questioning our powers of resolution,” directing all the resources of our “wit and will” toward “the act of survival itself.”<sup>45</sup>



## Endnotes

- 1 I use the term "modernity" (and its adjectival form "modern") to refer to the period of Western history which is characterised by the rise of positivist science, the prolongation of life and concomitant marginalisation of death within systems of thought, and the increasing pace of technologies which reduce the impacts of distance and provide efficiencies in material production. "Postmodernity" I consider to be an exacerbation of these trends through the operations of transnational capital, digital communications technology, and the increasing penetration of biotechnology into nature. "Modernism" and "modernist," by contrast, refer to the aesthetic movements commencing in the late nineteenth century.
- 2 p. 50 of Jonathan Cohen, "On the Project of a Universal Character," *Mind* 63 (1954): 49-63.
- 3 p. 164 of Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 149-81.
- 4 p. 249 of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages," in *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Perennial Library-Harper, 1986) 239-375.
- 5 Thomas Love Peacock, *The Four Ages of Poetry*, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953) 18.
- 6 C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, introd. Stefan Collini (1959; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 11.
- 7 p. 36 of Allen Tate, "One Escape from the Dilemma," *The Fugitive* 3.2 (1924): 34-36.
- 8 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967) 34.
- 9 George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes towards the Re-definition of Culture* (London: Faber, 1971) 98.
- 10 Janet Frame, *Intensive Care* (New York: Braziller, 1970); and Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).
- 11 The phrase "future-haunted fictions" is Stephen Spender's, referring in its original context to science fiction (p. vii of his introduction, in George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [London: Heinemann Educational, 1965] vii-xxi). Atwood rejects the term "science fiction" to describe her writing, as it "denotes books with things in them we can't yet do or begin to do." She favours instead the designation "speculative fiction," which "employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth" (p. 513 of "The Handmaid's Tale and *Oryx and Crake* in Context," *PMLA* 119.3 [2004]: 513-17).
- 12 Reviewers have described the text as "unshapely" (Ian Reid, "The Dark, the Dull and the Dirty," rev. of *Intensive Care*, *Australian Book Review* 10 [1972]: 258), "incoherent" (p. 566 of Edward P. J. Corbett, rev. of *Intensive Care*, *America* [New York] 23 May 1970: 565-66), "dense, dreary, incoherent" (Thomas L. Vince, rev. of *Intensive Care*, *Best Sellers* [USA] 15 June 1970: 119), and "sprawling and invertebrate" (Julian Moynahan, "A Sort of Anzac

- Peter Ibbetson and Family," rev. of *Intensive Care*, *New York Times Book Review* 3 May 1970: 4).
- 13 Charlotte Cheney, "New Novel Called Terrifying," rev. of *Intensive Care*, *Pittsburgh Press* 10 May 1970, sec. 6: 6.
  - 14 Such historical references, in *Intensive Care*, include World Wars I and II, the Manhattan Project, the Holocaust, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and even cobalt radiation therapy for cancer ("the cobalt bomb treatment," 150). Colin Torrance's murder-suicide parallels that perpetrated by Frame's Cousin Bill Frame in 1965 (Michael King, *Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame* [Auckland: Viking, 2000] 287). In Frame's novels, one cannot assume that even the most extreme occurrences have no biographical referent.
  - 15 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 99-100.
  - 16 Corbett 566.
  - 17 p. 52 of John L. McKenzie, "Eschatology and History," in *Endtime: The Domsday Catalog*, ed. William Griffin (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1979) 51-53.
  - 18 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) 152.
  - 19 Janet Frame, *Owls Do Cry* (New York: Braziller, 1960) 11.
  - 20 The puns have been described as "unconvincing" (Patrick Evans, *Janet Frame* [Boston: Twayne, 1977] 184); "baby-talk [which] in itself is of little interest" (Reid); "laborious" (A. B. Wood, qtd. in Gina Mercer, *Janet Frame: Subversive Fictions* [Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1994] 167); "gratingly cute" (Elizabeth Easton, rev. of *Intensive Care*, *Saturday Review* 1 August 1970: 29 and 37); "more ingenious than profound" (L. J. Davis, "The Brittle Art," rev. of *Intensive Care*, *Book World* [Washington Post and Chicago Tribune] 3 May 1970: 8); and "sentimental and grossly repetitive" (Moynahan 4). As I hope my analysis shows, "grossness" and "repetition" are part of Frame's semiotic point.
  - 21 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 285. This signifying efficiency is the genius of the T-shirts with mathematical jokes worn by students at the Watson-Crick Institute in *Oryx and Crake*. "All that in symbols and numbers?" wonders Jimmy, after Crake explains the joke. Crake replies, "Not in so many words" (204).
  - 22 Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 286.
  - 23 p. 269 of Brian Opie, "Humanities in the Postmodern," in *After the Disciplines: The Emergence of Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael Peters (Westport, CT: Bergin, 1999) 267-87.
  - 24 Atwood, "Handmaid's Tale" 517. Atwood, then, enigmatically describes *Oryx and Crake* as "a combination antigravity ray and marshmallow toaster."
  - 25 See pp. 330-31 of Nikolas Rose, "The Death of the Social? Re-figuring the Territory of Government," *Economy and Society* 25.3 (1996): 327-56.
  - 26 p. 32 of Richard A. Posner, "The End is Near," rev. of *Oryx and Crake*, *New Republic* 22 September 2003: 31-36.



- 27 In keeping with Atwood's usage, I refer to the protagonist as "Jimmy" in the narrative past, and "Snowman" in the narrative present.
- 28 p. 293 of Slavoj Zizek, "The Ongoing 'Soft Revolution,'" *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (2004): 292-323.
- 29 Zizek 293.
- 30 p. 35 of Harold Fromm, "From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996) 30-39.
- 31 Narcissus offers the classical prototype for this adoration of the perfect image to the extent of bodily demise, and Frame alludes to the myth several times in *Intensive Care*. Compare Nate's disillusionment in Atwood's novel *Life Before Man*, when he watches his former lover, Martha, walk away from him: "The world exists apart from him. He's rehearsed this often enough in theory; he's just never known it with certainty. It follows that his body is an object in space and that someday he will die" ([New York: Ballantine-Random House, 1979] 321).
- 32 The context of Fromm's discussion is his correspondence with a woman who resists his concerns about atmospheric pollutants by asking a question evidently intended to be rhetorical: "Do we destroy our economy: eliminate many necessities of life; go back to living in tents for the sake of clean air"? (37). Clean air, as Fromm points out, *is* a necessity of life. "The world exists for my convenience," Fromm's correspondent seems to say, but it is not the self-centredness of this position that needs to be critiqued so much as the constitution of this all-important "me": as a disembodied entity, the transcendent "me" may bring about the obsolescence of "us" all.
- 33 Atwood, "*Handmaid's Tale*" 517.
- 34 Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964) 33.
- 35 Atwood seems to conflate the imagination and the technologized imaginary in "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in Context": "As William Blake noted long ago, the human imagination drives the world. At first it drove only the human world, which was once very small in comparison with the huge and powerful natural world around it. Now we have our hand upon the throttle and our eye upon the rail, and we think we're in control of everything; but it's still the human imagination, in all its diversity, that propels the train" (517).
- 36 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1966) 119.
- 37 Spender xiv.
- 38 The word "solve" deserves extra attention, given that it can mean both to make a solution (dissolve solids into liquids) and to find a solution (work out a problem). In the phrase "split and solve," the former meaning of "solve" is presumably active, by analogy with "split." Elsewhere in *Intensive Care*, Frame punningly suggests that efforts to solve "situations" (337) through the pursuit of a false clarity invariably invoke Nazism's "final solution." The result is not only social "dissolution" (320), but also a "dis-solve" (see 214); that is, a failure



- to acknowledge that human cannot be split from animal, or from the natural environment, without creating a haunting remainder.
- 39 p. 165 of Gregory Ulmer, "The Puncture in Grammatology," in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) 164-89.
- 40 I have not mentioned Jimmy's other disturbing discovery, the sight of three surviving humans who have powerful technologies: fire, the capacity to symbolise, and a spray gun. Both sexes having survived, they may reproduce. If pressed to guess Jimmy's final judgement, I would say that he must destroy the humans—but whether his motive is safeguarding the Crakers' harmonious existence or his own desire to eradicate any competition with Crake for the role of deity is less easy to assert (104). See also p. 153 of J. Brooks Bouson, "'It's game over forever': Atwood's Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in *Oryx and Crake*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39.3 (2004): 139-56.
- 41 Wallace Stevens, "Mountains Covered with Cats," in *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997) 318-19.
- 42 Richard Lacayo, "Science Project: In a Grim Tale of the Future, Atwood Gets the Gene Blues," rev. of *Oryx and Crake*, *Time International* 28 April 2003: 55.
- 43 p. 95 of Wilson Harris, "Scented Gardens for the Blind," in *The Ring of Fire: Essays on Janet Frame*, ed. Jeanne Delbaere (Aarhus, Den.: Dangaroo, 1992) 92-96.
- 44 Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 125.
- 45 p. 349 of Homi K. Bhabha, "Statement for the *Critical Inquiry* Board Symposium," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 342-49.