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**Writing and Reading Inside and Outside an Apocalyptic Paradigm: *Oryx and Crake, The Road* and the End**

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## ABSTRACT

Most people are familiar with the term *Apocalypse*. As a term, and a concept, it appears again and again in literature and the media. However, despite its apparent familiarity, when explored in depth apocalypse is very hard to pin down. Apocalypse is a time of destruction, but it may also provide an opportunity for renovation and renewal. It is the end of everything yet may be followed by a new beginning. It is an event that may provide revelation, clarity and redemption, and yet it also often involves the obliteration of humanity. It is a paradoxical term, which is closely linked with the ways humans try to make sense of their world; and as such, the sense humans make, based often on apocalyptic patterns of thinking, is contradictory.

The paradigm of apocalypse profoundly influences the way people see the world. It influences politics, business, the way people think of time, of beginnings and endings. For those who write about apocalypse, it is very easy to simply write inside the apocalyptic paradigm and support the conventional ways of thinking about apocalypse. However, some writers attempt to situate their perspective outside traditional ways of thinking about apocalypse, and in doing so critique this way of viewing the world that is so often taken as fixed.

Through the analysis of Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* and Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, this essay considers the conflicting ways people think about apocalypse, and explores the ways in which thinking about apocalypse influences understandings of the world. It investigates the ways both authors, in these novels, initially subscribe a traditional conception of apocalypse, but then try to step outside apocalyptic thinking and question it; at times they fail to do so convincingly, because the apocalyptic paradigm is so influential. This essay also explores the role of the reader and the influence of his or her attitudes when interpreting fiction, and concludes that while the authors' attitudes seem to reflect the contradictory, paradoxical ways that people think about apocalypse, so generally will those of readers.

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## Introduction

Here at the beginning of 2012 the predicted doomsday of the twenty-first of December looms over us. It is, thanks to the internet and mass-media, the most widely-disseminated apocalyptic prophesy in human history; a history that has seen many, many similar predictions, many of which have undoubtedly been forgotten, unrecorded. Such prophecies have been lost to the time which, contrarily, grew over them, and to events that insisted on still taking place.

It can be said that the doomsday looms over 'us' because even those of us who think of ourselves as logical people, who do not rationally believe in ancient predictions of apocalypse (or even believe that the Mayans predicted apocalypse at all), can feel the touch of anxiety when repeatedly hearing assertions of our species' demise. How is it that we can feel this anxiety from what reason tells us is a story? Why do such stories, of our death and devastation, have such a strange appeal to us, so much so that we tell them again and again to each other, through word-of-mouth, through the media, through literature? The thinking about apocalypse begets questions that open out from each other. Indeed, while the study of apocalypse is ostensibly the study of ends, as soon as one starts thinking of apocalypse as an end one cannot help but begin to think about beginnings, and what constitutes an end in the first place, and which narratives humans tell ourselves to make sense of our world. How does the persistent belief in apocalypse shape our world? Why do we think this way? How does literature reflect, and sometimes unwittingly feed back into and support, these accepted ways of seeing the world, and the ways we view ends? How does it challenge the apocalyptic narrative? What are alternative ways in which to view our world and does literature offer these? This essay attempts to offer answers to some of these questions, while at the same time identifying those questions that evade definitive answer.

The traditional apocalyptic narrative of human overreaching, destruction, revelation and renovation is so familiar to contemporary society, has been re-imagined and re-represented so many times in religious texts, news articles, opinion pieces, documentaries, films, novels and scientific tomes, that it seems that apocalypse is no longer simply an event which has yet to happen, or an intriguing concept on which to base a story. It is an idea that fundamentally shapes the way many people make sense of the world. In the preface of her book, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, Catherine Keller writes that apocalypse "metabolises both within us and outside of ourselves" and that she does not "believe we *can* step outside of it if we want to" (xii). Frank Kermode, too, believes that "the paradigms of apocalypse...lie under our ways of making sense of the world" (28). If apocalypse is indeed a concept that wields such influence over humans, it is possible that an exploration of the ways apocalyptic narratives are written, and read, can in turn reveal the fundamental beliefs that humans hold. This is important because patterns of thought can influence actions. Apocalypse, in helping to mould the way people think, affects real events: so while apocalypse is embedded, in this essay, in the study of literature, the questions raised by the very thinking of apocalypse require answers that are rooted in the theological, philosophical, psychological, sociological and historical.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) are both contemporary, popular novels that deal with apocalypse and post-apocalypse. They both begin post-apocalypse: they begin at the new beginning. Atwood's novel follows the lonely Jimmy-Snowman, who believes himself the sole human survivor of a pandemic that was created in a laboratory by his best friend. He must scavenge for food and somehow work through the desolation and often conflicting emotions triggered by having found himself the sole human being in a world that is in the

bloom of its recovery from human exploitation. In McCarthy's novel there is no such environmental recovery. The landscape has been razed by an unnamed catastrophe and appears to be ruined beyond repair. A man and his son walk down the road through the debris of the previous world: a grey, ash-filled, poisonous atmosphere above them and blackened, dead trees around. While Jimmy-Snowman strives desperately for understanding and closure, the man and his son fight to stay alive. While the catastrophes, characters, plots, writing-style and tone of the novels are very different, the ways the authors explore apocalypse and post-apocalypse, how they uphold, challenge, and uphold again the traditional apocalyptic narrative, how they both work inside, and attempt to work outside – sometimes succeeding, sometimes not – the frame of apocalypse, is very similar. The ways these authors present their apocalyptic visions in turn reflect the inconsistent ways that many people think of apocalypse.

In order to contextualise the concept of apocalypse in Western society, the first chapter of this essay, "History of Apocalypse", describes the traditional apocalyptic narrative and explores the religious and historical background of apocalypse, tracing it from its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition to its evocation in times of political turmoil and revolution, and to the continuing presence it has in the post-modern psyche. The chapter titled "Critical Discourse" is a discussion of the discourse surrounding apocalypse, concentrating on literary theorists such as Frank Kermode and Jacques Derrida, sociologists such as Christopher Lasch and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. This chapter offers explanations as to how imagining apocalypse shapes our world, why it is such an enduring concept, how our conception of it has changed over time, alternative ways of viewing apocalypse, and the place of literature in perpetuating apocalyptic ideas. The third chapter, "Apocalypse Now", focuses on the endings and visions of post-apocalypse in *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake*. This chapter will investigate the ends imagined by the authors, whether they envisage any hope for a better 'after', as well as the critiques they provide of contemporary society. The fourth chapter, "Post-Apocalypse: The Search for Meaning", is a study of apocalypse and its relationship to trauma, anchored again in the two texts, which explores the ways that trauma and apocalypse are similar and traces the symptoms of trauma in the main characters of the two texts: *Oryx and Crake's* Jimmy-Snowman and *The Road's* the man. This chapter also surveys the way the ever-appealing apocalyptic concept of revelation is dealt with in the texts. It looks at the way both authors move towards endorsing the idea there could be revelation and human redemption post-apocalypse, while simultaneously attempting to critique and refuse such notions.

Apocalypse is a paradox. The idea of it causes people to hold conflicting beliefs simultaneously, and the attitudes of these two writers, present in their novels, as well as the attitudes of the characters in the novels, illustrate this. Ultimately, it is proposed that reading these texts is an active rather than a passive act. Atwood and McCarthy, novelists writing both inside and outside an apocalyptic paradigm, sometimes subscribe to apocalyptic thought and sometimes critique or refute it; and so does the reader. Where Atwood and McCarthy's writing is ambiguous, the reader can choose to read into the text what they prefer. They may read the texts as sending the message that there is always hope for humanity or as saying that a fundamental meaninglessness underlies everything humans do. They may read the texts as promoting alternative ways of viewing apocalypse. As always, the writing and reading of literature can be used to shine light on the ways and beliefs on which society is structured, the unveiling of which can lead to new ways of making sense and, perhaps, new ways of being.

## History of Apocalypse

The many-nuanced word apocalypse comes from the Greek *apokalupsis*, which means ‘uncovering’ and can be “literally understood as a revelation or unveiling of the true order” (Heffernan 4), or of “the world’s destiny” (Weber 2). The ancient idea of destruction accompanied by revelation and renovation is present in both the Jewish and Christian traditions that together form the “backbone of Western history” (Weber 1-2), and the Christian Bible’s New Testament ends with the Book of Revelation, which has become popularly known as Apocalypse. Written by a man who several times refers to himself as John and in the Christian religion has come to be known as ‘John the Apostle,’<sup>1</sup> this Book prophesies the establishment of a New Heaven and a New Earth and stresses the difference between the corrupt present world and the Godly world to come; a duality that is an important and recurring feature of apocalyptic thought.

According to Revelation, John has a series of eschatological visions, prompted by a visitation from Jesus Christ, who tells him to write down and disseminate what he sees. The first vision John has is of God holding a scroll that contains his divine plans for the world. The only one who can open the seals is a Lamb with ‘seven horns and seven eyes’ (Revelation 5:6), who opens the seals one by one. Historian Eugen Weber, in his work *Apocalypses*, describes the progression of the Apocalypse:

As the Lamb begins to open seals, he brings forth four horses and their riders, all agents of destruction; reveals the souls of those who had been slain for bearing witness to the word of God; and, with the sixth seal, shatters the universe as a token of the great day of God’s wrath.

(8)

Following this there is a “respite”, and 144,000 of God’s servants are promised a better future, “for them there will be neither hunger nor thirst, ‘and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes’” (Weber 8). However, the opening of the seventh seal “ushers in...terror, torment and great woes presented in unnerving detail” (Weber 8). There is much conflict, including a great war “between diabolic swarms and the hosts of heavens” and Satan, death and hell are eventually vanquished and subsequently condemned to a lake of fire. However, they will return again after one thousand years (Weber 8); the duration of this banishment coincides with Christ’s Second Coming (Keller 3). After the return of Satan and a last battle, a new “gem-adorned Jerusalem” takes the place of the old world (Keller 3). This is the “new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away” (21:1). The Godly are allowed through the gates and into this new Paradise, where there is “no night” (22: 5), while outside “dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie” are condemned to languish for eternity (22:15).

For all its detail of the destruction of the old, the Apocalypse of Revelation equally looks toward the creation of the new world; indeed, the old is purged *in order* to make way for the new. Revelation has even been described as being of “utopian nature”, a narrative in which the “mass annihilation” is “only the beginning of a process that will allow the righteous to enter into the ultimate, eternal Utopia, heaven, and the unjust to be sent to that dystopia *par excellence*, hell” (Knickerbocker 347). However, as scientific thought has replaced the Judeo-Christian narrative as the foremost way of making sense of the world, it has become increasingly easy to overlook the promise

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<sup>1</sup> Some modern scholars now refer to the author of the Book of Revelation as ‘John of Patmos’ and there is some contention over whether or not John of Patmos is the same person as John the Apostle.

of Paradise for the graphic descriptions of death and destruction. Thus, “the revelation of God’s plan for the world...narrows into predictions about how times (history) and time will end; ‘eschatology’, the doctrine of end times, becomes the chief aspect of the apocalypse” (Weber 29). In the popular culture of the twenty-first century, apocalypse has been stripped down, has lost much of its more positive – and some would say cyclical – implications of renovation and rejuvenation, and the emphasis is now on its devastation. Apocalypse’s original message was largely about accepting cycles and change; the end of *a* world was, and still is, an important thing to come to terms with in a very uncertain and changeable world. However, the understanding of the term evolved over the centuries to be more focused on catastrophe, so that people nowadays equate the end “of *their* world with the end of *the* world” (Weber 17). As has already been said, however, the ways apocalypse is viewed in Western society are very contradictory. So, while perhaps more emphasis than in the past is now placed on the end-times, the hope for a better new world and for revelation *after* remains – even if, often, this hope is portrayed in literature, and felt within individuals, in ambiguous terms. Despite intellectually disbelieving in the prospect of an improved world after the violent obliteration of the old, humans cannot seem to let go of the idea that things might be better after the end, and this is reflected in the two novels investigated in this essay.

The preoccupation with apocalypse, whether the end of *a* world or *the* world, has persisted through millennia, partly because Revelation’s symbolic imagery can be interpreted as the representation of myriad actual events. In their attempts at interpreting the Bible literally, people generally focus on the events that are most significant in their own lives; someone who hates a powerful public figure such as George Bush or Barack Obama may believe that the object of their hatred is the Antichrist mentioned in Revelation, and therefore that the presence of this person in the public sphere signals the impending end. The result of this is that the “great majority of interpretations of Apocalypse assume that the End is pretty near” (Kermode 8). Then, when the perceived Antichrist passes from power, rather than rejecting the idea of apocalypse, people simply find new signs that the end is nigh, so apocalypse is “disconfirmed without being discredited” (Kermode 8). Apocalypse, forever lying in the future, is perpetually a possibility.

Historically, the official position of the Catholic Church was that the events foretold in Revelation would indeed happen, but no one could know when. Most people who lived before modernity “ignored abstract chronology” (Weber 7) and focused more on the cycles of the seasons or religious festivals than particular dates. Therefore, eschatological anxiety that is attached to specific dates appears to be a relatively new phenomenon. Historically, anxiety about the end was attached to *events* that people thought portentous. One of the most famous cases of widespread eschatological anxiety was that which many believe occurred at the turn of the first millennium, although the extent of this anxiety is now generally downplayed by historians, partly because, as previously mentioned, the majority of people living one thousand years ago did not pay close attention to specific dates. The writings of Ralph Glaber, a wandering Burgundian monk, provide insight into how people reacted to the prospect of apocalypse over one thousand years ago, although some historians have cast doubt on his reliability as a source (Danziger and Lacey 181). When writing about reports of an unusually bright light in the sky that “remained visible for nearly three months” in 989, Glaber declared: “what appears established with the greatest degree of certainty is that this phenomenon in the sky never appears to men without being a sure sign of some mysterious and terrible event” (Danziger and Lacey 180). He also recorded that many large and destructive fires broke out in the big cities of Europe in the last decade of the first millennium, which he thought was surely ominous. As a result of this, people apparently “as one, gave out a terrible

scream and turned to rush to confess to the Prince of the Apostles” (Danziger and Lacey 181). A transcript of sermon by Abbo of Fleury from around the same time adds weight to the idea that people of the 900s indeed felt anxious about the possibility of apocalypse:

This world is in haste and is drawing ever closer to its end, and it always happens that the longer it lasts, the worse it becomes. And so it must ever be, for the coming of the Anti-Christ grows ever more evil because of the sins of the people, and then truly it will be grim and terrible widely in the world. (Danziger and Lacey 185)

It is doubtful that these men felt this way because of the impending millennium; they were probably reacting to events rather than dates. However, it is evident in previous centuries people did live, to some extent, in the shadow of apocalypse.

While it may be a new phenomenon that eschatological anxiety is attached to certain dates (as it is attached to the twenty-first of December 2012), it has been asserted that anxiety about the end was actually felt more powerfully in the past than it is now, due to the widespread religious belief and narrow scientific knowledge. For example, Teresa Heffernan asserts that the “belief in the actual or imminent end of the world as foretold in Revelation receded with the rise of modernity” (4), which would suggest that humans would now be free from eschatological narratives. However, one look at the amount of apocalyptic literature continuously being produced reveals that this is not the case. Another point of view would suggest that when, with the Enlightenment and foregrounding of reason, apocalypse’s status began to change from certainty to story, “it did so only partially and incompletely” (Weber 3). Ideas of apocalypse are too deep-seated to simply disappear; it is just that largely, old fears of God’s wrath have given way to fears about new technologies or eco-disasters. Reason and science have provided new things to be afraid of. The biblical writings about Apocalypse were what people were exposed to, one generation after another during hundreds of years: “that is what they grew up and grew old regarding as history, and as premonitory history, as real as the seasons were real and as sure” (Weber 2), and as a result these writings continue to have an impact on the way people think about apocalypse, and thus on the way we make sense of the world.

Apocalyptic ideas and rhetoric have been used throughout history by prophets and revolutionaries in order to instigate change; the ability to imagine another, better world can provoke people to act. On the other hand, ideas of apocalypse have also been used to create fear and justify political conservatism. During the Reformation of the 1500s, “radical” apocalyptic rhetoric helped to destabilise both the Catholic Church and State (Weber 67), while Luther’s break with Rome in itself “spurred eschatological expectations” (Weber 67-8), particularly amongst those who believed that the collapse of the Church preceded the end of the world as predicted by God. Likewise, Cromwell used the apocalyptic narrative against Charles I during the English Civil War, and with the Restoration of the English monarchy in 1660 “speculation about the Second Coming was made a criminal offense” (Weber 74). The American and French revolutions of the late eighteenth century also followed the traditional destroy/regenerate apocalyptic model, with revolutionary rhetoric in both countries promising the establishment of a state of peace and plenty after the necessary bloody cleansing. After the French revolution it was even decided to begin counting the years from ‘Year One of the French Republic’ in order to symbolise the entirely new world the revolutionaries were trying to create and their attempt to break completely from the past.

Apocalyptic thought found its way into the nineteenth century, when “apocalyptic communism [in its original manifestation focusing on shared resources, rather than the more

political Marxist or Leninist communism] and communitarianism” were “reproducing themselves in America’s new-found lands” (Weber 152). Underlying such ways of living was often the wish that the corrupt world would fall and a new one based on peace, equality, sharing and community would take its place. Those who subscribed to this kind of lifestyle also often looked back with nostalgia at an Arcadian and, of course “largely imaginary” past (Weber 17), when people lived in small communities, close to the environment.

As well being used as a means to an ideal new world, the apocalyptic narrative has been associated with horrific abuse of power, and at times can be seen as both the cause and the justification of historical abuses. The idealisation of the ‘blank slate’ is a part of apocalyptic thinking: in order for the new world to come into being the old must usually be destroyed. The benign metaphors we use to discuss this possibility do not hint at what would be required for a ‘blank slate’ to actually come about. This type of apocalyptic thinking can affect reality in terrible ways, “thus the world is changed to conform with a fiction, as by the murder of Jews” (Kermode 109); in order for the Third Reich to prevail and for the future to unfold as Germans were told it rightfully should, it was believed that various groups of people needed to be eradicated in order to create a ‘clean slate’. Marxist ideology, too, “has not only an inherent utopian element but an element of annunciatory violence” (Kermode 99). Likewise, Saint-Just, a political and military leader during the French Revolution, declared that “what constitutes a Republic is the total destruction of that which is opposed to it” (Weber 231), and when in 1975 the Khmer Rouge took power in Cambodia they not only started, like the French revolutionaries, to keep time from Day One, but renamed Cambodia the Democratic Kampuchea and even tried to establish a new Khmer language in an attempt to eradicate old ways of thinking. They also exterminated millions of people. In a different eschatological vein, President Ronald Regan “worked in the perspective of imminent Apocalypse and Armageddon” (Weber 202), the result of which was policies that had no need to be future-oriented. His Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, “felt little need to worry about environmental protection” as he felt sure the apocalypse would happen soon (Weber 202). Obviously, apocalyptic thinking in the hands of politicians can have dire results.

Post-modernity the apocalyptic narrative is thriving; it reveals itself in popular literature, of course, but also in politics, in science, in business and in the way we talk about the future. Weber wrote his book on apocalypse in 1999, when Y2K fever was reaching its peak. Proving that even the most knowledgeable of critics can subscribe to prophesies of endings, Weber ends his book by stating that “when the millennium ticks over computers will be lost, stumped, baffled” and so will “traffic lights, air traffic and other control systems, power stations, chemical works, communications, libraries, savings accounts, and electronic data banks of every sort” (222). It was only time that proved him wrong.

## Critical Discourse

Frank Kermode published his work on apocalyptic thought and literature, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies on the Theory of Fiction*, in 1966. This book, based on a series of lectures Kermode delivered, became a significant part of apocalyptic studies and his ideas are almost invariably discussed by those undertaking an analysis of apocalyptic thought. In his book, Kermode sets out the idea that Judeo-Christian belief, held as fact for millennia, has influenced the way humans think not only about apocalypse but also about narrative and, as a result, about the way we think about life. He suggests that we require endings in order to help make sense of our lives, and that regardless of

whether we are religious or not, “there is still a need to speak humanly of a life’s importance in relation to [the world] – a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end” (2-3).

For Kermode, apocalyptic thought “belongs to recti-linear rather than cyclical views of the world” (5). The Bible, with its beginning at the beginning of the world (Genesis) and ending with the end (Revelation), is an excellent example of a recti-linear text in that “it is a wholly concordant structure, the end is in harmony with the beginning, the middle with beginning and end” (Kermode 6). Indeed, the ending of a text like the Bible can be seen to give ultimate meaning to the text as a whole – Kermode calls such fictions “end-determined fictions” (6) – which, when looking at fiction in general, is why readers are often disconcerted when a novel finishes abruptly or, in other words, without ‘closure’ or revelation. He explains the appeal of such “end-determined fictions” to humans by pointing out that humans live and die in the “middest” (7), that is, in the middle of time; they are born when the world has already been established, and die before its end. Therefore, in order to “make sense of their span” they “need fictive concords with origins and ends” (7). Weber, who agrees with this point of view, states that “chaos [is] the law of nature, order [is] the dream of man” (Weber 21). In order to help create order, humans create simplifying narratives to place over time. Apocalypse is also appealing in that it suggests the existence of a higher order or destiny. It defines “human suffering in cosmic terms, as part of a cosmic order...catastrophe is dignified, endowed with meaning, and hence made bearable” (Weber 235).

To help explain the process people go through when thinking of apocalypse, the simultaneous belief and disbelief of it that many people exhibit, Kermode employs the phrase “clerkly scepticism,” so called because of the Church’s regular protestations during times of historic eschatological anxiety that it is impossible for people to predict the end, which is only known by God (10). The phrase “clerkly scepticism” refers to the *disbelief* in apocalypse, which Kermode suggests is almost always present in individuals and societies along with the *belief* in, and anxiety about, apocalypse: “Each manifests itself, in the presence of the other, in most of our minds. We are all ready to be sceptical...but we are most of us given to some form of ‘centurial mysticism’” (17). In other words, “hearts have reasons that reason does not know, and hearts continued to swing between trust and terror” (Weber 100). Thus, we hold two contradictory beliefs about apocalypse at once and manage to somehow believe in both of them simultaneously.

Science and reason should provide challenges to our ability to create linear, concordant narratives that end in apocalypse. However, Kermode does not believe this is the case. Instead, humans look for new apocalypses that accord with the new ways that we understand the world. The new “plots” we create “honour the increased complexity” of our ways of making sense of the world (30). Instead of the four horsemen, we fear global warming, pandemics and nuclear war. At the same time, we discount the eschatological anxiety of our ancestors as irrational. However, Kermode says of our predecessors that “many of them felt as we do. If the evidence looks good to us, so it did to them” (95) and goes on to say that “it would be childish to argue...that nuclear bombs are more real and make one experience more authentic crisis-feelings than armies in the sky” (95). In Kermode’s opinion, while the “song” changes, the same “primeval pattern underlies its notes” – a pattern of thinking that reaches back through history (31).

This desire for endings and a perpetual sense of what Kermode calls “crisis” also help explain the “sense of an ending” that people often think is unique to their own time. Kermode’s “sense of crisis” (93) refers to the feeling felt by people of every age that the world has gone wrong, and that things are not only wrong but worse than they ever were. The writings of Glaber and Fleury at the

turn of the first millennium help demonstrate the perennial nature of this belief. The New Testament's Book of Revelation, with its imagery that can be interpreted as symbolising endless combinations of real-world people and events, and then re-interpreted when the end does not arrive, has contributed incalculably to this perpetual sense of being in crisis and on the verge of an ending. In addition to this, the feeling that we are at the 'worst' time is reinforced by the media and even academia, and repeated again and again until it is held as truth. As Kermode writes in *The Sense of an Ending*, to believe that one's age is on the verge of apocalypse is "no more surprising than the opinion that the earth is round" (94).

Jacques Derrida published an article in 1984 called "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)", which discusses nuclear apocalypse and agrees with Kermode's position that this sense of crisis and ending is perennial. While expressing his reservations about the Nuclear Age, Derrida advances the opinion that, though humans often believe their time in history is special, simply believing this or feeling this is not truth. Echoing Kermode, he says that "of all the dimensions of such an 'age' we may always say one thing: it is neither the first time nor the last" (21). History shows us that, however bad things are, things have been just as bad before; however keenly we feel that things are different this time and that this time the idea of apocalypse really may become a reality, others have felt the same way before. However, Derrida warns against dismissing the possibility of apocalypse completely, and goes on to deliver a warning not to be too willing to reject our fears of apocalypse as hackneyed: "the critical zeal that leads us to recognize precedents, continuities, and repetitions at every turn can make us look like suicidal sleepwalkers, blind and deaf *alongside the unheard of*; it could make us stand blind and deaf alongside that which cuts through the assimilating resemblance of discourses" (21). Just because our predecessors worried about apocalypse and it never happened does not mean that *it will never happen*: "One may still die after having spent one's life recognizing, as a lucid historian, to what extent all that was not new" (Derrida 21).

In the same article Derrida also posits that nuclear war is "fabulously textual...to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it" (23); nuclear war "can only be the signified referent, never the real referent of a discourse or a text" (23). These ideas can also be applied to apocalypse. Apocalypse, like nuclear war, does not have a real referent. Any time we think or talk about it, we are thinking or talking about something that only exists in our imagination. Derrida calls nuclear war (as opposed to the isolated use of nuclear weapons) a "fable," an "invention," a "speculation," a "phantasm" (23), and apocalypse is all these things too. Similarly, Derrida's ideas about the expanding discourse on the subject of nuclear war, which he believes is part of a "process of fearful domestication, the anticipatory assimilation of that unanticipatable entirely-other" (23), can be applied to apocalypse. The growing body of literature, both fiction and non-fiction, on the subject of apocalypse, can be seen perhaps as a way for humans to try to work through their fear of this "fable" and as well as a way to control something that is fundamentally uncontrollable, for if you "articulate the unspeakable" you can "begin to exorcise it" (Weber 235).

Ultimately, Derrida corrects any romanticisation of a possible end of days. Not only would the destruction of the literary archive and subsequent erasure of knowledge preclude any revelation (26), but the collectiveness of the death would also prevent any kind of post-apocalyptic clarity. For Derrida, literature is a way for humans to understand and move through, and even overwrite, small catastrophes such as individual death. The process of symbolically interpreting events helps us, to some small extent, accept and understand these events. The more shocking the event and the larger

its scale, the more difficult and necessary this process is. This is similar to his theory that writing about apocalypse is a process of “fearful domestication”, linked closely to trauma, which I will explore in more detail later in this essay. There are some events, like the Holocaust, that have been symbolised and re-symbolised in literature over and over again. Humanity is attempting to come to terms with these events in an ongoing process. But there would be no literature and no one after the end of the world, making revelation and understanding impossible. Annihilation of our species would be the worst death, because it would be the death of *all*; death without memory or interpretation or commemoration. Apocalypse, with no one around to interpret events and devoid of a religious second-coming, is no apocalypse – that is, no revelation –at all. It is complete destruction without revelation. And for Derrida, unlike for the characters in the novels I am going to be investigating, after the destruction there is no more story to tell.

In *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (1999), James Berger agrees with Derrida that the very notion of apocalypse is in many ways paradoxical and that, from one perspective, the very idea of apocalypse in its revelatory sense is impossible. This is because if there was an end-of-the-world apocalypse there could be no revelation. However, instead of discounting the idea of revelation, Berger explores this paradox and attempts to explain what we mean when we talk about post-apocalypse, or after the end. Berger asks: “What does this mean, this oxymoron ‘after the end’?...Before the beginning and after the end, there can only be nothing. At the beginning, something begins; and at the ending, it ends” (xi). He answers his own question by explaining that, if we refer to ‘after the end’, we mean that any meaning or significance for us lies “between that beginning and that end” (xi). If we are to accept Derrida’s assertion that apocalypse is “fabulously textual”, Berger’s words can only apply to characters in post-apocalyptic texts. Thus, for the few survivors of an apocalypse such as the man and boy in McCarthy’s *The Road*, most meaning or significance has been lost along with the rest of humanity. Focused solely on survival, and with old world shattered, they look back to the apocalyptic event that reconfigured everything for them.

The way we think about apocalypse is reflected in apocalyptic literature. The very nature of apocalyptic texts is paradoxical: “The end is never the end. The apocalyptic text announces and describes the end of the world, but then the text does not end, nor does the world represented in the text, and neither does the world itself” (Berger 5). In most apocalyptic representations the obliteration of humankind is not complete: there is a much-changed world left behind after the end. As Berger notes, the actual apocalyptic event in a text is often simply a vehicle used to eliminate the disappointing existing world. In the popular imagination, apocalypse would be “not only final but absolutely clarifying. It would unmistakably separate good from evil, true from false. The apocalypse would replace the moral and epistemological murkiness of life as it is with a post-apocalyptic world in which all identities and values are clear” (Berger 8). It is only after this cleansing and clarifying summary event that the writer can begin to portray the post-apocalyptic world. Often the primary reason for writing about apocalypse and post-apocalypse is to “put forward a critique of any existing social order” (Berger 7). Margaret Atwood, in particular, clearly uses apocalypse for this reason. Apocalyptic writing often reveals and represents writers’ beliefs as to what is amiss with their world and what is valuable in it, and provides them with a forum to show how they think the world should be.

Thus far, it appears that Berger concurs reasonably closely with traditional apocalyptic criticism. However, he departs drastically from Kermode and Derrida in his definition of apocalypse. Firstly, like Kermode and Derrida, he uses the term apocalypse to mean the “*eschaton*, the actual imagined end of the world”, as presented in the Book of Revelation or as “imagined by medieval

millenarian movements, or today in visions of nuclear Armageddon or ecological suicide” (5). Secondly, and importantly, he uses the word apocalypse to represent “catastrophes that resemble the imagined final ending, that can be interpreted as eschaton, as an end of something, a way of life or thinking” (5). He lists the American Civil War, the French Revolution, slavery in America, the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Japan at the end of the Second World War as types of definitive, apocalyptic, events (xii). Berger believes events such as these “function as definitive historical divides, as ruptures, pivots, fulcrums separating what came before from what came after...New understandings of the world are generated”, and in its “destructive moment” the event would “clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end” (5). So, while Derrida believes apocalypse “textual”, it is not an imagined event for Berger.

Writing in 1999, Berger thought the Holocaust the most significant apocalypse to occur in living memory. The world after such an apocalyptic event is “traumatized”, full of traumatic “symptoms” that must be worked through (xiv). Berger believes, as Derrida does, that literature is one outlet we have of working through the aftermath and trauma of such events. While Derrida puts forward the idea that the body of literature that has built up on the subject of apocalypse is a process of “fearful domestication”, an attempt to contain the unknown future event, Berger sees the literary representations of the Holocaust, for example, as a post-apocalyptic working through of the unknown *past* event; an event that has already occurred but cannot yet be understood. In this way, Berger sees human society as being *always* post-apocalypse: apocalypse is a layering of events and of traumas, which have to be worked through in literature and media in general.

In *Post-Apocalyptic Culture* (2008), Teresa Heffernan appears to agree that we are living after the end. Heffernan states that her book “employs the term post-apocalyptic to suggest that we live in a time after the apocalypse”, meaning that that the rise of modernity brought about a decreased faith in and reliance on the apocalyptic narrative structure as described by Kermode, and that this decreased belief in straightforward and linear narratives was reflected in the modernist and post-modernist literature of the twentieth century (7).

Heffernan cites various horrifying and seemingly incomprehensible events of the twentieth century, such as the Holocaust and bombing of Hiroshima, as having undermined people’s faith in the traditional, linear and progressive apocalyptic narrative (8). According to Heffernan, humans in Western societies are living ‘after the end’ in a state of “discontentment and impatience with the very investment of the idea of the end” (11). Asserting that the world for the most part is almost devoid of the notion of real revelation, Heffernan states:

[The] faith that the end will offer up revelation has been challenged in many twentieth-century narratives. The present world is portrayed as exhausted, but there is no better world that replaces it – these [twentieth century] narratives refuse to offer up a new beginning or any hope of rebirth or renewal; the end is instead senseless and arbitrary. There is no over-arching critique, there is no cataclysmic destruction that promises to cleanse the world and separate the righteous from the damned, good from evil, and there is no resolution or salvation. (5)

While many works of literature mimic the Christian apocalyptic narrative in that the end of a work gives everything that comes before it its meaning and makes the work complete, a type of narrative that is “not arbitrary but already moving towards its destiny” (Heffernan 21), Heffernan posits that many twentieth and twenty-first century narratives move towards exhaustion rather than renewal (7). She believes that in the twentieth century narrative there is disaster without revelation

or redemption. Many twentieth century apocalyptic works are dystopian in their outlooks and there is no reason, no conciliation, and no brave new world order: "There is death but there is no birth, and memory and language fade as books are burned" (Heffernan 5). Things "disappear," people and storylines "peter out" (Heffernan 5). Main characters die unceremoniously. Narratives end abruptly and ambiguously, without 'tying up loose ends' or satisfying the reader by offering resolution or the revelation of important truths, mimicking a "randomness and pointlessness to life" (Heffernan 6). The lack of finality and resolution in these narratives also "suggests infinite possibilities and openings, where no one ending can foreclose all others" (Heffernan 11), reflecting reality, where the end of one experience or phase of life can bring one to the beginning of myriad possibilities. Many of the observations Heffernan makes about modernist and postmodernist apocalyptic literature can be applied, to at least some extent, to the two apocalyptic novels that I am going to explore in this essay.

For Heffernan, our reaction to this living 'after the end' is two-fold. Firstly, the lack of definitive ending and the unfastening of ordering and anchoring ways by means of which we view the world engender epistemological anxiety. After all, if we let go of the traditional ways of sense-making, how are we meant to know the world, understand it, or recognise our place in it? Secondly, and much more positively, the more open narrative engendered by taking away the idea of definitive endings "keeps alive infinite directions and possibilities" (Heffernan 14). This is an idea Heffernan, who at times appears to be impatient with end-driven narratives and criticises them as having influenced us to "think that there is some point to reach, some final destination", evidently finds appealing (25). Again, this new outlook is often reflected in post-modern fiction. The ambiguous ending that has come to be a feature of many texts leaves them open to "infinite directions and possibilities". Readers are not given closure, but are instead left to speculate about what exactly happens next.

Interestingly, after making her case for a reduction of faith in apocalyptic narratives throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, Heffernan points out that apocalypse, "with its strange pleasure in the catastrophic cleansing of the world, its reassuring division between the righteous and the damned, and its disturbing comfort in knowing absolute finality and order" has of late reasserted itself in the contemporary imagination (150). To support her contention she points to the righteous rhetoric of 'them' and 'us' employed by George W. Bush during the 'War on Terror', the belief in Armageddon held by evangelical Christians; *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore's film that warns of eco-disaster, and various novels including *Oryx and Crake* and *The Road* that warn of the possibility of catastrophe if humans do not change their ways (150). It is interesting that Heffernan interprets both of these novels as endorsing the traditional linear, progressive apocalypse, because, as I will argue in this essay, both novels have ambiguous endings and are far more nuanced in their portrayals of apocalypse than this statement would suggest. Nevertheless, the success of both novels indicates the public's current enjoyment of apocalyptic fiction. Trying to explain this contemporary interest in the apocalyptic, Heffernan says that it "suggests both the cultural anxiety that we may have reached, like the dinosaurs, the end of our species and the cultural arrogance, common to apocalyptic narratives, that we live in a unique moment in history" (151): and so we have gone full circle and returned to Kermode.

It seems that we cannot get away from the sense of an ending. This sense of an ending can be the belief in an end that will be revelatory, or it can be the belief in a finality that is devoid of meaning. Holding and having faith in two conflicting thoughts at once, we can believe in an end at the same time that we demonstrate "clerkly scepticism" about endings. We can hope that there will

be some sort of revelation at the same time that we doubt it will happen. It is possible to simultaneously believe and disbelieve in, feel yearning for and terror of, and idealise and rationalise an end. While at certain times in history perhaps human society as a whole leaned more towards belief or disbelief, faith or scepticism, it can be seen that many of the features of apocalyptic thinking that these critics explore have been present at any one time. This essay is an investigation of the varying and often contradictory ways that apocalypse is experienced in twenty-first century writing. Thus, in this writing there is rationality and idealisation, apocalypse is revelatory and yet not, ends are ambiguous and yet provide closure and there are positive beginnings after the end as well as chaos. The complexity of the ways these novels portray the experience and thinking of apocalypse reflect the complex ways humans have always viewed their ends.

### **The Impact of Apocalyptic Thinking on Behaviour**

So far, I have explored theories of the ways we think about apocalypse in Western societies. However, as Kermode would suggest, patterns of thought affect action, so what follows is one theory on the impact apocalyptic thinking has on the way humans behave. In 1978 Christopher Lasch wrote a bestseller called *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*. As the title of this book indicates, it is a critique of American society, but, interestingly, Lasch situates much of his critique in the context of the 'sense of an ending' that he believes permeates society, and explains how this 'sense of an ending' manifests in people's behaviour. Indeed, Lasch's introduction is highly reminiscent of Kermode's work, and the first mention of Kermode is on the second page. Although it was published in 1978, Lasch's work remains an important sociological text when thinking about the rise of the individual and cults of youth and beauty in Western society.

Lasch is highly cognisant of the way that apocalyptic thinking permeates Western – and particularly American – society, saying that in the "popular imagination" the "Nazi holocaust, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the depletion of natural resources [and] well-founded predictions of ecological disaster" have fulfilled apocalyptic prophecy (Lasch 3). He goes on to say that:

Impending disaster has become an everyday concern, so commonplace and familiar that nobody any longer gives much thought to how disaster might be averted. People busy themselves instead with survival strategies, measures designed to prolong their own lives, or programs guaranteed to ensure good health and peace of mind. (4)

Indeed, Lasch believes that this belief in the End has contributed to a kind of 'age of the individual', where fears about the changing society and insecurities caused by a decreased sense of historical time are ineffectively suppressed by "the cult of expanded consciousness, health and personal 'growth' so prevalent today" (4). According to Lasch, people in the twentieth century lost the "sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future" (5). This idea – that people *ever* felt a sense of belonging to a succession of generations – contrasts with Kermode's belief that the 'sense of an ending' has been a more or less constant feature of human thinking throughout time, and is also antithetic to Heffernan's idea that in the twentieth century people in Western societies actually lost faith in endings. Nevertheless, Lasch obviously believes that, in the twentieth century at least, many people felt like they were living at the edge of time, and he believes that this feeling contributed to the perceived necessity 'to live for the moment': "To live for the moment is the prevailing passion – to

live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity" (5). Lasch condemns the growing propensity for narcissistic Americans to need an "admiring audience" to "validate [their] self esteem" (10), as well as the incessant promotion of ever "more vivid experiences", which is the result of an "inability to feel" (11). Much of Lasch's critique of aspects of Western society, such as the need for instant gratification, the idolisation of youth and beauty and the need to live for the moment is still applicable, and indeed resonates very strongly, in 2012. A well-known internet acronym, YOLO (You Only Live Once), has become popular in 2012. It has gained notoriety for being a convenient way of justifying much behaviour that could be called narcissistic, and its widespread use aptly demonstrates that the feeling of urgency to live for the moment has not dissipated in post-modernity.

### **Why the Appeal of the End?**

Reading about the end of humanity in literature, seeing it visually represented in films and speculating about its occurrence individually and collectively obviously has an enduring appeal for people in Judeo-Christian cultures, who have been writing stories about apocalypse for at least two thousand years. While, as this essay suggests, the way we think about apocalypse is a reflection, and extension, of the ways we try to control and make sense of our world, and that fictional literature, despite being fictional, often bolsters the belief that the end is nigh, humans' fascination with their end requires some explanation. Kant's idea of the sublime is one theory that can be used to help explain the often conflicting ways humans feel about their own extinction.

The sublime became an "important aesthetic category" in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, partly due to increased travel by the wealthy classes who began to enjoy travel as an end in itself (Young 131). Travellers writing home began describing sights that "could not easily be accommodated within the category of the beautiful" (Young 132) but that had a quality that was something more than beauty. The infinity of the sky at night, the enormity of a mountain range and the openness and vastness of an ocean are some sights that call for a descriptor separate from that of 'beautiful'. What sets experiencing these sights apart from simply seeing something beautiful is the "bitter-sweet quality of the experience" (Young 132). This quality of the sublime has also been described as "agreeable horror" or "delightful horror", and was referred to by Kant as a "negative pleasure" (Young 132). Hurricanes and other demonstrations of the power of nature fit into the category of the sublime, and "representations of sublime objects in art are also sublime" (Young 133). This is an important point if we are to describe apocalyptic texts as sublime.

According to Kant, the bitter or negative side of the sublime is the fear that it inspires. However, this fear must be felt from a position of "security", or people would want to "fly" from the object and the object would be solely horrific (Young 132). Therefore, while people may be able to appreciate a hurricane as sublime they are not likely to do so when they are in its midst and are actually fearful for their own safety. Appreciation of the sublime requires safety and distance; it is a kind of vicarious fearful excitement.

Things get more complicated when Kant suggests that the fear we experience is not actually brought on by the object we are contemplating itself; if it was this simple, then representations of an object could not be described as sublime. Instead, what causes us to be fearful is that, "confronting the vast forces pent up in the object, we realize our total fragility in the face of the forces of nature, realize that one day they inexorably *will* tear us apart". Thus "the real object of fear...is not the object but *our own death*" (Young 133). What scares us about the vastness of space is not the

vastness of space but how fragile and feeble we are in comparison to it. What scares us about apocalypse is not apocalypse itself but what it represents to us. The faraway death of humanity becomes a metaphor for our own death, and while the inevitability of this event seems to preclude its being experienced from a position of 'security', psychological ideas of death and the human consciousness' denial of it help explain how our own death can be witnessed from a position of psychological security. Kant, writing before modern psychological theory, believed that the sublime joy of being part of something so much greater than ourselves is a "God-centred, religious experience" (Young 134), and that the horror of being confronted with insignificance and corporeal mortality is tempered by the soul's immortality.

When thinking specifically about apocalypse, Kermode's notion of "clerkly scepticism" can also help to explain how people can view it from a position of security. It could be that people feel both fear and a strange delight when they are able to read, or see, representations of the end of humanity because, while being confronted with the end of humanity, and as an extension of this, their own deaths, people at the same time *disbelieve* both things. For example, a person can be fearful of the apocalypse while still dis-believing that it will ever happen in their lifetime. They see it as an event for someone else's future, certainly not for their present. Much of humanity seems to view death in the same way: as something fearful, but which is not of any real concern to them at present. Using this kind of 'doublethink', the holding of two contradictory beliefs that is in some ways analogous to knowing you will die and yet having faith in an afterlife, people protect themselves from fear: I am going to die but surely I can't die; I am going to die but my soul will live forever; I am fearful that the world is going to end but it will not end *now*, not for us here in the midst. It is in this way that people can enjoy reading about the end of their race, which inevitably reminds them of their own death, without being exclusively fearful.

Another theory that can help explain the enduring appeal apocalypse holds, this one psychological rather than philosophical, is Freud's theory of the Death Drive, which he first outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920. A complex theory, Freud used it to attempt to explain a wide range of violent and aggressive impulses. The most important aspect of his theory, for this essay, is his exploration of the position of death in the human consciousness. One explanation of Freud's Death Drive suggests that "an *inauthentic conscious* attitude to death is possible and pervasive, the unconscious cannot grasp its own death" and "the prevalent attitude towards death is one of repression", as well as that our understanding of death consists of "the death of *another*, while the kernel of death, negation, is absent from the unconscious" (Georgescu 229). This latter statement is evocative of Kermode's assertion that "if you imagine yourself being shot, your body being rolled away in a barrow by soldiers, you are cheating yourself by substituting for your own body someone else's, or perhaps an impersonal dummy" (161).

The problem is humans cannot actually imagine their own ends. Essentially, "the unconscious can only respond to the idea of its own death with *disbelief*" (Georgescu 230), and thus real knowledge of our own death will remain forever out of reach. Indeed, our very language conspires to keep the reality of our death from us: all the ways we have of talking of our own deaths in English imply *presence* rather than *absence* or negation. In the sentence "He is coming to steal my eyes. To seal my mouth with dirt" (McCarthy 280) the use of the word 'my' when talking about the body after death implies continuity. Likewise, in Margaret Atwood's 2009 novel *The Year of the Flood*, sequel to *Oryx and Crake*, Crake declares that "the reason you can't really imagine yourself being dead was that as soon as you say, 'I'll be dead,' you've said the word I, and so you're still alive inside the sentence" (117). It is very difficult to imagine "the kernel of death, negation" while being

so affirmatively alive. Because “the End is a figure for [our] own deaths” (Kermode 7), this projection by means of language, of the self to *after death*, is similar to the projection by means of the imagination and literature of humanity through apocalypse to *after*. If we want to imagine post-apocalypse here in the pre-apocalypse, we perform the, as styled by Berger, oxymoronic act of imagining it with people necessarily in it. Thus, the end we imagine is no end at all, just as the death we envisage is no death.

Humans treat death and apocalypse similarly, and it is possible that imagining apocalypse is a way of attempting to imagine death. Apocalypse can be seen as metaphor for the individual death; the larger scale of it makes the end more impersonal and so easier to deal with, more sublime than terrifying. Psychological theories of trauma also come into this idea. It has been mentioned that representations of apocalypse can be seen as part of a process of attempted ‘domestication’, that humans imagine that by imagining apocalypse, they will be able to control it. Representations of apocalypse can thus be seen as part of Nietzsche’s ‘taming of horror through art’. It is possible that the human fascination with apocalypse is fascination with their own incomprehensible death, and that reading about apocalypse and watching apocalyptic representations is likewise an attempt to understand, and so tame, the individual death.

## Apocalypse Now

### *Oryx and Crake: Engineered Ending*

This section of the essay investigates how the above ideas are evident in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Road*. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood appears to follow the pattern of the traditional destroy/regenerate apocalyptic model: she critiques contemporary society and suggests that people will be responsible for their own downfall, she portrays a clear apocalyptic event that divides before from after, and she represents characters living after the end, characters who may be able to create a new, better world. Interestingly, at other times she appears to move away from traditional portrayals of apocalypse and even appears to satirise conventional apocalyptic thinking.

Atwood’s apocalypse occurs in the form of a pandemic that swiftly kills its victims and leaves few survivors. This is no act of God; the virus has been genetically engineered and its spread carefully planned by one of the novel’s main characters, Crake, a genius with a God complex, who designs a new species of person that he believes is far superior to humanity. The Crakers have all sorts of special modifications, the most important of which include lack of sexual jealousy or desire, the ability to self-heal, and a biology that allows them to live entirely on plant material. Importantly, the Crakers are also unable to symbolise, which Crake believes will prevent the kind of sectarian strife that has beleaguered humanity throughout millennia. Traditional apocalyptic thinking, as Kermode has said, often begets the idea that “universal bloodshed” (107) is required in order to provide a ‘clean slate’ from which to start again, and it is this kind of thinking that Atwood lampoons in her novel. In order to give the Crakers the best start as a species, Crake decides to wipe out the entire human race, apart from his friend Jimmy who is needed to look after the Crakers.

James Berger explained that many writers use the apocalyptic narrative to critique their society, and Atwood certainly uses apocalypse to illuminate various aspects of twenty-first century society that she finds objectionable. The first of these is to be found in the method of the pandemic’s dissemination throughout the world. Initially, the virus, a “rogue hemorrhagic” for which “the time from visible onset to final moment” is “amazingly short” (380), is spread around the world

under the guise of a sex pill called BlyssPluss. BlyssPluss is supposed to enhance sexual desire, prowess and experience, as well as protecting against all sexually transmitted diseases and even prolonging youth (346), and is marketed using slogans such as “Throw Away Your Condoms”, “BlyssPluss, for the Total Body Experience” and “Don’t Live a Little, Live a Lot” (367). Inevitably, this drug is extremely popular and there is a high demand for it around the world. When enough people in enough places have taken the pill, Crake activates the hidden virus. The virus therefore does not gradually spread across the world as is usual. Instead it appears to be “breaking out” in cities “simultaneously” (380). After its activation the virus spreads through human contact, but this first thorough distribution means that there is no time for a vaccination to be developed, ensuring the almost total obliteration of the human race. Thus, Crake – “sitting in judgement on the world, thought Jimmy; but why had that been his right?” (398) – invents the method of destruction, but it is people’s own stupidity, or rather lack of self-control, that leads to their demise. It is possible to read this as a condemnation of human flaws and thus, in a way, as a reflection of the biblical Apocalypse in which the shortcomings of humans are responsible for their end.

In *The Road*, as will be explained, the apocalypse is so instant and comprehensive that even the principal characters are unaware what exactly happened, but in *Oryx and Crake* the spread of the pandemic is covered in detail by the media, coverage that is watched by Jimmy who is safe in isolation in the Paradise Dome. This gratuitous media coverage of the apocalypse, which continues even as news presenters and commentators die of the disease and are replaced by others, is clearly designed to parody the pervasiveness of the media in the twenty-first century. Atwood might also be commenting on the blurring of reality into fiction that has been caused in part by the mass media when she writes that, to Jimmy watching in isolation from the safety of the Paradise Dome, “the whole thing seemed like a movie” and the only way he can remind himself it is real is to look at the bodies of his dead friends “any time he found himself thinking it was all an illusion, a practical joke of some kind” (399). Jimmy is captivated as he watches a map pinpointing centres where the virus hits: “The next one hit, and the next, the next, the next, rapid fire. Taiwan, Bangkok, Saudi Arabia, Bombay, Paris, Berlin...The maps on the monitor screens lit up, speckled with red as if someone had flicked a loaded paintbrush at them” (379). In a macabre twist the people in Atwood’s novel, almost all of whom are going to die, excitedly watch their own demise on television and the internet. Atwood writes:

At first the newscasters were thoroughly into it, filming the action from traffic helicopters, exclaiming as if at a football match: *Did you see that? Unbelievable! Brad, nobody can quite believe it.* (397)

Later, “pundits in suits appeared on the screen; medical experts, graphs showing infection rates, maps tracing the extent of the epidemic” (397), and Atwood wryly juxtaposes the extreme events and Jimmy’s awareness of the drama of it all when later still “a couple of the anchors, news jocks to the end, set the cameras to film their own deaths – the screams, the dissolving skins, the ruptured eyeballs and all”, and Jimmy thinks: “How theatrical” (401). Seeing the disaster play out on the internet or television offers the certain, desensitising, removal from immediate reality that is a part of life for humans in Atwood’s novel, and for many people in the ‘real’ world also. Watching events unfold through the media is evocative of watching an apocalyptic film or reading an apocalyptic novel: it adds a certain amount of fiction to the proceedings. For Jimmy, and the rest of the audience, the “news jocks” are dying but not dying at the same time. They die but their deaths are presented to those watching them through a medium that allows distance enough that the event is comprehended as *not* real. This is something that Jimmy notices when he says that the “worst of it

was that those people out there – the fear, the suffering, the wholesale death – did not really touch him” (400). It is the deaths of his friends, Oryx and Crake, which affect him, not the deaths of strangers who are effectively providing entertainment. Atwood writes that “Jimmy watched with fascination as the points of light blinked out” (399). The word ‘fascination’ also indicates a remove: Jimmy is interested, enthralled by what is happening. But in many ways he is not personally touched. The difference between Jimmy and the rest of humanity, watching the apocalypse on the news, is that Jimmy is the only one who really is viewing the apocalypse from a position of security. The rest feel secure because they see the apocalypse through the media, which lends it a fictional tone. Jimmy in Atwood’s novel can be seen as akin to the reader of apocalyptic literature or the viewer of apocalyptic films: he witnesses the apocalypse from the safety of the Paradise Dome as readers and viewers read of apocalypse, safe in the knowledge that it is probably not going to occur for them any time soon.

Jimmy muses that, at the outbreak of the pandemic, experts gave the virus a name “to make it seem more manageable. Its name was JUVE, Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary” (398). Naming is linked with having knowledge of and power over something, and this naming, this useless attempt at *knowing* and therefore controlling what is destroying their species, clearly reflects aspects of Kermode’s thinking about the ways that humans frequently attempt to manage and control their world, and Derrida’s assertion of the human need to portray and thus try to domesticate that which is not wholly known. Atwood draws attention to the futility of humans trying to control the virus by naming it, but “Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary” clearly shows that humans know virtually nothing about the virus. This desperate attempt at making the unknown known and therefore containing it that Atwood satirises parallels what the critical discourse around apocalypse would suggest is the place of apocalyptic texts in society: that they are a pre-emptive attempt at controlling our end; that in describing possible futures, unknowns, we can make these unknowns known and therefore prevent, or at least manage, our own demise.

The apocalypse in *Oryx and Crake* in many ways resembles the biblical Apocalypse. It even has a God in Crake, who, tired of the shortcomings of humanity, wants to eradicate the old world and create a ‘new heaven and a new earth’ inhabited by ‘perfect’ beings. However, looked at another way, in this novel Atwood illuminates and satirises the long-held ways in which people think about apocalypse. She highlights the fascination that people have with seeing widespread death in the media from their own positions of safety, or of reading about apocalypse knowing that it is not going to happen to them *yet*, and then takes this idea further to provide a portrayal of humans feeling removed from the extinction of their species and so finding a strange, sublime, enjoyment in it. She shows up as ridiculous the human need to control things and the idea that by naming and knowing something we can manage it. Like McCarthy, who refuses to provide the reader with concrete answers about the end and thus largely prevents their ability to make his novel align with the traditional apocalyptic narrative of disaster to renewal, Atwood attempts to move away from portraying a straightforward apocalyptic narrative and instead questions the apocalyptic ways of thinking on which many of our assumptions about the world are based.

### **Atwood’s Satire**

As previously discussed, the notion of apocalypse serves an interesting social purpose in that it allows us to imagine a ‘clean slate’ on which we can rewrite humanity – perhaps this time ‘getting it right’. This perennial condemnation of the current and desire for the new and ‘better’, this belief

that it is necessary to completely sweep away the old in order to replace it with the new, has been a recurring feature of various political regimes throughout history. Kermode believes that this is the most “terrible element” of apocalyptic thinking (106) and notes that this kind of thinking can cause society to “regress into myth” (109): the myth that everything will be different, that the world humans create will finally be *better* and that we will not make the same mistakes as before, if only we would start again from a clean slate. The fact that this clean slate, in the past, has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands and even millions of people, and that in the event of an apocalyptic ‘clean slate’ most of humanity would have to perish, does not seem of consequence when humans are imagining how nice it would be to start again. In this way, apocalyptic thinking can be seen to be at times naïve and to endorse destructive ideologies that if put into practice politically almost certainly end up failing to do what they set out to do: to be better. Atwood’s *Crake* is depicted as naïvely subscribing to these apocalyptic myths of “cleansing renewal” (Cooke 63), while the characters who survive the apocalyptic event ultimately have any ideas of “cleansing renewal” destroyed by the post-apocalyptic realities they are forced to inhabit.

Despite the negative impact it can have on reality, as a literary device apocalypse can be very useful. An impending apocalypse provides the writer with the chance to illuminate the things they feel are wrong with the world using satire, and the blank slate that apocalypse provides gives an author the freedom to create any kind of New World that they like, whether a dystopia, utopia, or anything in between. As Berger notes, often the primary reason for writing about times before the apocalypse is to “put forward a critique of any existing social order” (Berger 7) while the post-apocalypse is often “the true object of the apocalyptic writer’s concern” (Berger 6). The apocalypse itself is often the least significant aspect of the entire process and is simply a vehicle used to eliminate the disappointing pre-apocalyptic world. Indeed, pointing out the failings of the current world can be used to illustrate the necessity of initiating a destroy/regenerate apocalyptic model. Like authors, who employ the apocalyptic narrative to critique society and sometimes to advocate specific social and political changes, politicians sometimes use the idea that society has reached its nadir to tout politics that they promise will help regenerate their worlds. Some heads of businesses create a sense of insecurity and urgency so that they can implement the changes that they believe are needed.

Most people are probably familiar with the commonly-held idea that Western society is swiftly degenerating. Atwood herself has stated on a number of occasions that she is anxious about various ways humans are living that she does not believe to be sustainable. In “Writing *Oryx and Crake*”, an essay published both in her book *Curious Pursuits* and on the *Oryx and Crake* website (the publication of which has been criticised as “an abstruse desire to manipulate the novel past what is generally perceived as the accepted limitations, or boundaries, of authorial influence” (Cooke 65)), Atwood writes that “the rules of biology are as inexorable as those of physics: run out of food and water and you die. No animal can exhaust its resource base and hope to survive. Human civilizations are subject to the same law” (322). Kermode examines the feeling that humans are in crisis in *The Sense of an Ending*, and advances the opinion that generally, humans have often, if not always, felt this way and that it is an aspect of apocalyptic thinking. In *Oryx and Crake* Atwood endorses the idea that contemporary Western society and the earth are in crisis, using satire to critique those aspects of society that she believes are harmful. In this way she reflects the traditional apocalyptic thinking as described by Kermode that almost reviles certain aspects of current society and, in a way, desires apocalypse so that the old can be destroyed. However, despite her fears for society, Atwood, like McCarthy, appears to have little hope that sweeping away the old will generate a brave new world.

In *Oryx and Crake* Atwood endorses the idea that as a society, we have become too focused on the wrong things, amongst which are money, work, status, sex and youth. She “questions the very survival of humankind in an era of environmental destruction, excessive consumption, unregulated biotechnological experiments and pandemic viruses” as well as the “male commodification of women” (Brooks Bouson 9) and positions technology, once thought of as being a means to “ease the burden of life”, as being used primarily as a way to generate, and accumulate, wealth (DiMarco 172).

Atwood’s satire has been described as a “strategy of ‘masquerade,’ of critique through hyperbole, [which] forces a second look at contemporary life” (Cooke 75). As this description suggests, the world that Atwood creates, while being undeniably different from our own in certain aspects, is simultaneously eerily similar in some of its features. This feeling of similarity becomes at times a jolt of recognition as, in the midst of reading some outrageous description of genetic modified animals, or the rich living in gated communities and the poor living in “pleeblands”, or the widespread tacit acceptance of human trafficking for sex, the reader realises that the world of *Oryx and Crake* is almost the world we live in. In an article about *Oryx and Crake*, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Catherine Keenan relates details of an interview with Atwood. According to Keenan, Atwood “sees the book as a kind of warning, in the tradition of Orwell’s *1984* or Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, in that it extrapolates from the present to show us how the future could be”. Atwood sees her vision as being of our *near* future, stating it is “much closer than [she] thought when [she] started the book...Jimmy is born. In fact, he’s probably about four right now. And next year he’ll be eight, because it’s growing exponentially” (Keenan). It is statements such as these that pay testament to the fact that, while Atwood may use her novel to critique some aspects of apocalyptic thinking, at the same time she subscribes to the ‘sense of an ending’. Keenan describes Atwood as being “acutely aware of how rapidly and effectively we are destroying the environment”, and Atwood also comments on her concerns about the direction science has taken. She believes that we have the technology portrayed in the novel, “or we’re on the road to having it”:

For instance, we’ve done the goat-spider, the goat that has spider silk in its milk, from which bulletproof vests are made. And a luminous green rabbit already exists ...We’ve already made [the polio] virus in a test tube. All they need is the recipes for the other ones and they can make those, too. (Keenan)

However, it is not the science itself that is Atwood’s main concern, but rather those who have the power to utilise scientific advances. She believes that, in general, humans cannot be trusted to use science responsibly or altruistically, and she airs this concern in *Oryx and Crake*.

A number of the aspects of society that Atwood criticises in *Oryx and Crake* are similar to those aspects of society that Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* suggests contribute, at least partly, to the prevailing sense of an ending. Lasch’s idea that, living with the feeling of impending doom, people feel the need to live for themselves rather than posterity – leading to the creation of the narcissistic individual whose needs must be gratified and whose youth and health must be preserved – is pertinent when read beside *Oryx and Crake*.

This flailing around for youth, health, individuality, experience, meaning and feeling that is seen by Lasch as a fervent effort to create permanency, or else to discredit its worth altogether and to ‘live for the moment’ in a world that is not secure in its own continued existence, is more than evident in *Oryx and Crake*. In creating a world in which people are obsessed with health, youth, sex, gratification and self-image, Atwood satirises elements of society that not only are of personal

concern to her, but that have their origins in the seemingly ever-present apocalyptic lens through which Western societies view their world. It is not clear whether or not Atwood knows that those aspects of society she critiques in her novel are also symptoms of apocalyptic thinking, or whether she simply sees them as negative aspects of her society. However, when her social satire is taken in the context of Lasch's argument, the frame of apocalypse within which Atwood's novel is set appears all the more significant. Indeed, even before Crake releases his deadly pandemic in *Oryx and Crake*, the world seems to be drawing to a close and events occur that can be as signs of impending apocalypse:

The coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes, and meat came harder to come by. (27)

Descriptions of environmental distress such as this make it easy to read the behaviour of characters in *Oryx and Crake* as influenced by thoughts of the end, just as Atwood herself seems to have been influenced by the pattern of apocalyptic thought. Writers who write about apocalypse are, after all, writing under the mythology of apocalypse and as such are influenced by the familiar narrative. In one way, it seems that the culture that is critiqued by apocalyptic fiction is itself the result of apocalyptic thinking.

Atwood's novel has been called "a dystopic and satirical fable" (Cooke 63) and this is undoubtedly true. However, satire requires familiarity, a feeling of knowing and not knowing, and it can easily be said that the world that Atwood has created in *Oryx and Crake* is in many ways recognisable as our own. While "when expressed concisely the scenario of the novel appears hyperbolic" (Cooke 63), there are certainly parts of the novel when, in the midst of feeling revulsion or disbelief at some kind of scientific or social practice, one realises that just such practices occur in the 'real' world every day – and this is partly what makes Atwood's satire so effective. The novel "places the human, as well as modernity and...civilisation in jeopardy, partially in *crisis*, and most certainly in *question*" (Cooke 64), and the familiarity of the society that is depicted serves to highlight this jeopardy, to bring it 'closer to home'. This is not just any society in jeopardy. It is us, now, in the early twenty-first century. In fact, "Atwood states that she has written speculative fiction not science fiction because she wants her novel to be understood as a direct extrapolation from, and thus critique of, contemporary society" (Cooke 64). It is easy to see that aspects of the novel have been extrapolated from aspects of society that Atwood is uneasy with. The power wielded by the Corporations who have replaced the government, for example, appears to be a more extreme version of the influence wielded by powerful lobby groups in contemporary society. The novel's portrayal of the Arts and Humanities, which exist in the world of *Oryx and Crake* simply to be put to practical ends, is a clear extrapolation from the current push by contemporary governments to ensure that people are primarily involved in 'practical', money-making, occupations. While ostensibly unrelated, most of the aspects of society that are subject to strident critique in Atwood's novel are in fact linked. They are all in some way related to that tendency towards decadence, selfishness, narcissism, and obsession with individual needs – the simultaneous holding on to youth and beauty, and profligacy and self-indulgence in the face of transience – which Lasch described in his book as being a result of apocalyptic thinking. *Oryx and Crake* was published twenty-five years after *Culture of Narcissism*, and one might wonder what Lasch would make of the 'cults' of youth and beauty, and the obsession with 'the moment', as they exist in the twenty-first century. Despite the passage of years, there is no doubt that Lasch and Atwood take exception to the same sorts of

things. The majority of the characters in the retrospective pre-apocalyptic world of *Oryx and Crake* are almost unboundedly obsessed with themselves, their own needs and their own images. Self-concern permeates the novel and leaves its characters almost entirely devoid of any kind of emotional connection or, indeed, altruism. In fact, most characters are so completely absorbed with themselves that Crake, the apocalyptic thinker and self-appointed exterminator of mankind, appears positive in comparison: he, at least, possesses ideals in a world in which anything goes; he, at least, is concerned enough about the environmental state of the world to try to make a change while most other people exist in a state of apathy towards anything but themselves. It is as though none of the characters in Atwood's novel, aside from Crake, are able to imagine a positive future, which is partly why they are so determinedly self-absorbed and living 'in the now'. Crake himself is only able to imagine that future in the context of a total re-ordering, the prerequisite of which is apocalypse. Of course, while Atwood has created a fictional society in which to portray these unpleasant behaviours, it is a given that they are all present – albeit to a lesser, or less obvious, extent than in the novel – in contemporary Western society.

The world of *Oryx and Crake*, much like our own, is at its foundation divided into the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The 'haves' live and work in "compounds", gated communities that have access to the advancements that modern technology has to offer. The 'have nots', the old, the unintelligent, the unproductive and those who are not protected by family influence, are forced to live in the dangerous 'pleeblands' along with the gangs, addicts, insane, sex workers and religious cults. In calling the poorer areas 'pleeblands', Atwood almost over-articulates herself and is almost too didactic. The term 'plebian' was first used in ancient Rome to describe those who were not slaves, but who were lower than the Aristocratic and upper classes of Rome. In its current usage, 'pleb' is often used to describe the 'common people' or those of the working or lower classes. Thus, even the name of the area where the 'common people' live calls attention to their lesser status and the history of social division. In addition to this, the physical partitioning of the socio-economic groups reinforces the material differences that divide them and brings them into very obvious contrast. In a world where the rich and poor live side-by-side it is perhaps easier to overlook differences, but when they are physically parted – and the Compounds are walled, gated and guarded – the differences are emphasised. Atwood could very well be commenting on the proliferation of gated communities, which are walled, gated and guarded and are becoming popular amongst the wealthy in many countries.

The Compounds in *Oryx and Crake* are basically small, walled towns. The HelthWyzer compound, for example, has "two shopping malls...a hospital, three dance clubs, even its own golf course" (61). In contrast to the safety, convenience and sterility of the Compounds, the pleeblands consist of "rows of dingy houses...factories with smoke coming out of the chimneys...A neon strip, with bars and girlie joints" (213) as well as "vacant warehouses, burnt-out tenements, empty parking lots" and "sheds and huts put together from scavenged materials" (215). Those living in the Compounds are acutely aware of the differences between themselves and those who live in the Pleeblands. It is understood that "Compound people" never went into the cities "unless they had to, and then never alone" (31), and even as a child Jimmy has conversations with his father about the differences between inside and outside the Compounds. In one of these conversations Jimmy's father likens the Compounds to castles, because, like Compounds, "castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside" (32).

There are downsides to living in the Compounds, though. Those in the Compounds suffer from a lack of freedom and they mostly just work to fulfil the objectives of the Compounds: to make

money in order to create more age-delaying, beauty-enhancing, work-saving products in order to make more money. Being closely protected from outside dangers also has a trade-off. Those living in the Compounds are closely watched for signs of dissent or for signs that they are selling Compound secrets. Jimmy's mother believes their phones are bugged by the CorpSeCorps, the Compound police, and complains that the Compound is like a prison, but Jimmy's father sees it in another way: "Didn't she want to be safe, didn't she want her son to be safe?" (60). It is suggested, when Jimmy makes his first foray into the pleeblands, that this yearning for safety, this 'culture of fear' that keeps people compromising their freedoms in order to live in the Compounds is perhaps unnecessary. In fact, Jimmy notices that the pleeblanders did not "look like the mental deficient the Compounders were fond of depicting" (339).

As explored in Keenan's article "She Who Laughs Last", Atwood is concerned about the direction science might take, being as it is in the hands of humans who are innately flawed. "You can't count on money to make ethical decisions" she is quoted in the article as saying, and this unease that the making of "ethical decisions" may soon be, or may already be, dependent on the whims of multinational corporations whose main aim often has little to do with ethics and everything to do with money and expansion is at the forefront of the anxieties Atwood explores in *Oryx and Crake*. There is no central government in the society of the novel. Instead, a proliferation of corporations with names like OrganInc Farms, NooSkins and HelthWyzer engineer new forms of technologies and create their own communities with the profits, all the while growing more powerful: perhaps a warning as to what privatisation would look like, taken to its extreme.

At times new products and species are created simply because people are able to engineer them and they might fulfil some perceived need in people's lives and thus make money. There are inventions for the most obscure of needs. The students at Crake's prestigious Academy, Watson-Crick (named after James Watson and Francis Crick, the discoverers of DNA) even design Rockulators. Rockulators weigh less than real rocks and so are more convenient to move around, as well as serving the secondary function of absorbing water, storing it and then releasing it "in times of drought, so they acted like natural lawn regulators" (235). Then there is a "smart Wallpaper that would change colour on the walls of your room to complement your mood" (237) – the ultimate in redundant displays of narcissism – and new species of plant, butterfly, and mammal have all been engineered: the wolvog looks like a dog but has the ferocity of a wolf while the rakunk looks like a racoon with its "black mask" and "black and white rings around its fluffy tail" but is also "placid" like a skunk but does not smell (58).

While some inventions appear to be frivolous and basically harmless (apart from their potential to unbalance ecosystems), others are much more sinister. A new "Happicuppa" coffee bean is created. This coffee bean comes from a bush that has been designed so that all of its beans will ripen simultaneously, and coffee can be grown on huge plantations and harvested with machines, which "threw the small growers out of business" (210). This, in fact, parallels events that have already happened in the 'real world'. American agricultural giant Monsanto, for example, patented a genetically modified disease-resistant soybean and then proceeded to prosecute anyone they believed was using it against patent: "Monsanto goes after farmers, farmers' co-ops, seed dealers—anyone it suspects may have infringed its patents of genetically modified seeds" (Barlett and Steele). From one perspective this may sound reasonable, but many of those Monsanto has targeted are small farmers who have effectively been faced with two choices: agree to Monsanto's demands to use Monsanto beans and to pay for the use of the patented product, or go out of business. It has been claimed Monsanto:

Relies on a shadowy army of private investigators and agents in the American heartland to strike fear into farm country. They fan out into fields and farm towns, where they secretly videotape and photograph farmers, store owners, and co-ops; infiltrate community meetings; and gather information from informants about farming activities. Farmers say that some Monsanto agents pretend to be surveyors. (Barlett and Steele)

In addition to this, many farmers claim that beans have been planted on their land without their knowledge, after which Monsanto agents have opportunely found the beans and they have been forced to comply with the soybean patent (*Food Inc*). The result of its aggressive tactics is that Monsanto holds an increasingly comprehensive monopoly on the soybean business in America. It is easy to believe that Atwood had such instances of huge corporations commandeering industry and pushing out smaller contributors in mind when she created Happicuppa.

Also ominous are Atwood's descriptions of the newly-created pigoon and ChickieNobs. A pigoon is an animal in which human organs are grown. These organs are engineered so that they would not be rejected when transplanted from the pigoon into humans. Furthermore, "a rapid-maturity gene was spliced in so the pigoon kidneys and livers and hearts would be ready sooner, and now they were perfecting a pigoon that could grow five or six kidneys at a time" (25-6). These animals can be kept alive and "reaped" of their organs again and again, simply growing more to replace them "much as a lobster could grow another claw to replace a missing one" (26). The speed at which the pigoons produce the organs, as well as their ability to produce many at a time, are measures of convenience, and pigoons are also a money-saving measure, as they are "much cheaper than getting yourself cloned for spare parts" (27). ChickieNobs are chickens with "no eyes or beak or anything" apart from a mouth into which nutrients are "dumped" (238). Like pigoons, these have been genetically engineered to have a rapid growth rate and each chicken matures in two weeks. The chickens are even modified not to feel pain, so that the "animal welfare freaks won't be able to say a word" (238). The special thing about them is that, like the pigoons, they grow multiple parts; some chickens grow multiple drumsticks, others grow multiple breasts. While the invention of the pigoon is connected to the desire for health and, ultimately, immortality, the development of such a species as a ChickieNob can be viewed as part of the campaign of convenience. It seems that there is a belief that if as little work as possible can be done for maximum profit then the individual is free to pursue their own happiness, to 'live for the moment', *more*. In addition to this, while some of the genetic modifications described in the novel seem implausible, it has been pointed out by more than one critic that similar things are already occurring in 'real-time'. Brooks Bouson cites Steven Best and Douglas Kellner's *The Postmodern Adventure: Science, Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millenium* as stating that scientists have already created "tobacco plants with firefly genes, mice and pigs with human genes, potatoes with chicken genes, fish and tomatoes with antifreeze genes" (139) and that scientists often show "a dangerous one-dimensional, reductionist mind-set that is blind to the social and historical context of science and to the ethical and ecological implications" (139-140).

In the pre-apocalyptic world of *Oryx and Crake*, as in the real one, youth and beauty are paramount. Disease and disability have been eradicated, at least in the compounds, and Jimmy is fascinated when during his first trip into the pleeblands he sees "asymmetries, deformities" and "even bad teeth": "the faces here were a far cry from the regularity of the Compounds" (339). Jimmy's first job is at the AnooYoo Compound, writing slogans to promote its products. AnooYoo exists to "prey on the phobias and void the bank accounts of the anxious and gullible", and offers a

wide range of cosmetic treatments including a treatment plan that within a few months claims to eradicate “depression, wrinkles and insomnia all at the same time” (290), while at NooSkins, a subsidiary of AnooYoo, scientists attempt to “find a method of replacing the older epidermis with a fresh one, not a laser-thinned or dermabraded short-term resurfacing but a genuine start-over skin that would be wrinkle- and blemish-free” (62). The promise of good health, good looks and even the forestalling of death generates so much easy money for the corporations that the process by which they make money is described by Atwood’s narrator as “money osmosis” (246). Crake claims that “gender, sexual orientation, height, colour of skin and eyes – it’s all on order. It can all be done or redone” (340), and there are also “pills to make you fatter, thinner, hairier, balder, whiter, browner, blacker, yellower, sexier and happier” (291), most of which can cause embarrassing and painful side effects because, due to the lack of government regulation, there are no real health standards; cosmetic effect comes first. Listed in this way, the contrasting desires to be fat or thin, white or brown juxtaposed in the same sentence, the many cosmetic alterations that people can make to themselves sound bizarre, grotesque and obviously contradictory. Like Crake, the multinational corporations in *Oryx and Crake* appear to be trying to ‘play God’ in myriad ways and, as Atwood states on the *Oryx and Crake* website, such exercises in creationism beget a raft of ethical dilemmas. Then one remembers that there currently already exist pills that claim to make you thinner, hairier, whiter, browner, sexier and happier. A brief internet search for the different medications returns many options for each ‘malady’. Orlistat, Minoxidil, Glutathione Complex, melanotropin, Cialis and Prozac are drugs that aim to treat obesity, baldness, being too black, being too white, erectile dysfunction and depression respectively. All of these products are easily available on the internet for anyone with the money to buy them. While governments are still trying to regulate, and at times ban, pharmaceuticals that have been proven to have negative side effects, the rise of the internet is weakening the possibility of regulating these products, and thus contemporary society moves slightly closer to the pre-apocalyptic world Atwood portrays in *Oryx and Crake*. When compared to contemporary society in this way, Atwood’s claims that we are advancing towards a world such as that in the novel are easier to believe.

Also critiqued is the mass media, which has become something of a farce. It is here that the end-of-times “intense preoccupation with the self” with its attendant “dream[s] of fame” and egotistical need to be validated by an audience (Lasch 25) is most evident, and Atwood devotes almost a chapter of her novel solely to describing the internet. Amongst the sites Jimmy is able to visit are ones where one can watch live medical procedures (93), the appropriately named “Noodie News” (93), “animal snuff sites” such as “Felicia’s Frog Squash” (93) and the Queek Geek Show where contestants vie to be the fastest to eat a live animal or bird (95). On hedsoff.com, shortcircuit.com, brainfrizz.com and deathrowlive.com there is live coverage of executions (95), while alibooboo.com has footage of thieves having their hands cut off and adulterers being stoned to death. Of course, a wide array of porn can be found as well – there is even a site called HottTotts, which claims to show “real sex tourists, filmed while doing things they’d be put in jail for back in their home countries” (103). However, for Jimmy and Crake, who have grown up with these features of the internet, most of the sites “quickly grew repetitious”: “one stomped frog, one cat being torn apart by hand, was much like another” (93-4). “At Home with Anna K” is the voyeuristic site of a woman who broadcast the goings-on in her apartment live on the internet. “This is Anna K., thinking always about my happiness and my unhappiness” is the official motto of the site (96), which basically summarises the state of the pre-apocalyptic society in the novel, as well as, arguably, serving as an apt descriptor of many people in contemporary society.

Atwood draws attention to the narcissism as well as the voyeurism inherent in this inane, and sometimes horrifying, over-sharing. Even prisoners about to be executed had “started hamming it up for the cameras...you could watch them making faces, giving the guards the finger, cracking jokes” (95). Similarly, Nitee-nite.com is an assisted suicide site that includes “interviews with relatives, brave parties of friends standing by while the deed was taking place” and “taped testimonials from the participants themselves” (96). There is a “long lineup” of people waiting for a chance to appear on this site (96). Image and exhibitionism seem to have undermined life. Living their lives via screens, people are portrayed as being so divorced from the natural world, so successful is their denial of death, that death has simply become part of the act. The dogged ‘live for the moment’ attitude that permeates the society of *Oryx and Crake* pre-apocalypse, this ‘the world is a stage’ approach, taken to the extreme, even denudes death with theatrical flourishes.

Closely linked to the way that people appear to have become removed from community is the fact that, in the novel, the long-eroded status of the humanities in society has finally reached its nadir. The pre-apocalyptic society of *Oryx and Crake* has been described as executing a kind of “educational utilitarianism” (DiMarco 179), whereby only those subjects that are likely to make money are promoted and valued in schools and learning is seen as a means to an end rather than its own end in what is essentially a “complete commodification of knowledge” (Lawn 390). It is repeatedly demonstrated in the novel that “numbers people”, scientists such as Crake, are more important than “words people”, of which the Jimmy is unfortunate enough to be one. “Numbers people” are bought by the best Academies, are sought after to work for and live in the most prestigious Compounds, and of course earn the most money. “Words people” such as Jimmy, on the other hand, can only manage to go to the worst Academies (that is if they go to an Academy at all), and any job they can eventually attain is as a “utilitarian” function of a Compound (Atwood 220). Thus, Jimmy is forced to go to the Martha Graham Academy, “named after some gory old dance goddess of the twentieth century who’d apparently mowed quite a swath in her day” (218). This “Arts-and-Humanities” college was set up by “a clutch of now-dead rich liberal bleeding hearts” (219). Ultimately, when Jimmy leaves the Academy he works writing “spin” for AnooYoo (220). The writing of slogans and advertisements for the seemingly never-ending array of new and apparently life-improving products, created by “numbers people” working in the Compounds, is seen to be one of the only values of the “mostly nostalgic” humanities (219). The humanities, traditionally thought of as a bastion of critical thinking and less related to physicality than science, have become almost entirely obsolete in a world that is devoted to the immediate fulfilment of every physical desire.

“When did the body first set out on its own adventures?” muses Snowman post-apocalypse, and then answers his own question: “after having ditched its old travelling companions, the mind and the soul” (97). If *Oryx and Crake* is to be read as satire, it suggests that this rupture has already happened or at the very least is in the process of happening in Western society. Snowman believes that the body has “its own cultural forms. It [has] its own art. Executions [are] its tragedies, pornography [is] its romance” (98). None of the sexually abused girls on HottTotts “had ever seemed real to Jimmy” (103) and this reinforces this idea that a shift occurred in society, after which the ‘art’ of the body superseded the art of the mind.

As previously explored, Atwood apparently wrote *Oryx and Crake* partly as a reaction to what she had been observing around her, so it is no surprise that she had been “clipping small items from the back pages of newspapers for years, and noting with alarm that trends derided ten years ago as paranoid fantasies had become possibilities, then actualities” (Atwood, *Curious Pursuits* 322). However, while Atwood condemns various behaviours in her novel, she does not contextualise them

as Lasch and others have tried to do. If we attempt to place the behaviours that Atwood has written about in context, much of it can be seen as “grief in the face of inevitable death...The wish to stop time. The human condition” (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 344). The fervour with which this wish is pursued in the pre-apocalyptic society of *Oryx and Crake* is evident when Jimmy’s father helps “engineer the Methuselah Mouse as part of Operation Immortality” (25), and similar such operations are at work in our own society. The world in the novel is presented pre-apocalypse as a “fully altered world, and a fully alterable world” (Cooke 67); a world in which most desires can be gratified almost instantly. However, that definitive goal, immortality, is still beyond reach. It is possible to read Atwood’s moral thus: humans can play God, but they are not God.

If the stopping of time is impossible, the wish transforms to that of existing forever in time, of leaving something behind that will last forever. The obsessive prolonging of youth and attaining of beauty, the need to satiate every possible desire, and the phenomenon of life as entertainment can all be seen as aspects of the apocalyptic mindset that permeates society – and so can Atwood’s critique of it. The selfishness and decadence of humans exists because we have a feeling of our end. The “grief in the face of inevitable death”, this “wish to stop time” is also related to apocalyptic discourse as a whole. A discourse has grown up around apocalypse as a way to contain it and control it, just like many infinitely futile behaviours have developed that attempt to stave off death, while Atwood’s satire is itself part of the strange, almost idealistic, way that people sometimes view apocalypse as a means of sweeping away of the negative aspects of society in order to have another chance.

### **Crake’s Clean Slate and the Fall of the Crakers**

While humans as a whole in *Oryx and Crake* are shown to be committing hubris in myriad ways, Crake’s creation of the Crakers is positioned by Atwood as the ultimate in overreaching. Crake has been condemned by some critics as being the epitome of what is wrong with contemporary society, the personification of a corrupt world where science exploits nature and the gratification of the corporation-manufactured wants of the population seems to be the only goal. Danette DiMarco has written that Crake is the ultimate *homo faber*, a phrase meaning Man the Creator, which refers to humans’ use of tools to control their environment. *Homo faber* uses nature, including animals and humans, as a means to build the world as he imagines it (DiMarco 170). DiMarco believes that Crake, who deliberately alters nature rather than working with it, is unlikely to be the vehicle for “positive social change” (170). Instead, DiMarco points to Snowman as being in a position to choose a positive new future. He can either “repeat a past cycle of aggression against nature in the name of personal profit”, acting as DiMarco believes Crake does, or “re-imagine a way for future living grounded in a genuine concern for others” (170). However, Hannes Bergthaller argues against DiMarco’s view that Crake is the embodiment of a corrupt world. Instead, he sees Crake as being an idealist who “nourishes a deep disgust of the world he grows up in” and is motivated “not by greed but by a genuine desire to change it” (Bergthaller 735). Stephen Dunning states that Crake “clearly acts with therapeutic intent” (89) and Atwood seems to agree, saying that “from a certain perspective, Crake is the most altruistic person around” (qtd. in Brooks Bouson 149); Crake sees the impact people are having on their environment and decides to remedy it. This statement from Atwood suggests that, in some ways, she still believes in the idea that apocalypse can create renewal and regeneration, even while she critiques this pattern of thought at times in her novel.

Crake, from a young age, is assured of his own genius; he is even the cleverest at HelthWyzer High, “with its overstock of borderline geniuses and polymaths” (87). Interestingly, Jimmy’s mother – who is anti-Compound and questions the ethics of much of what is occurring in the pre-apocalyptic society, eventually running away to become a member of a resistance group – likes Crake and thinks he is “intellectually honourable” (79). She enjoys the fact that he can hold “objective” conversations in which “events and hypotheses were followed through to their logical conclusions” (79). Like Jimmy’s mother, Crake is an idealist who believes society needn’t, and shouldn’t, be how it currently is. He obviously subscribes to the ‘clean slate’ aspect of apocalyptic thinking. Snowman, when reminiscing about meeting Crake at school, thinks that “Crake could be a little too instructive sometimes, and a little too free with the *shoulds*” (80), and this early tendency to be domineering transforms, later, into the belief that he has the right to make decisions that have staggeringly complex ethical repercussions. Crake decides, Godlike, to replace what he sees as the fatally flawed human race with a race of his own creation. In having Crake occupy the position traditionally held by God, Atwood establishes a situation that is ideal for exploring the apocalyptic thought that moves beneath the ways people see their lives and society, and helps form our deep-rooted beliefs about the world. Atwood appears to subscribe to apocalyptic thought with her satire of current society in the novel and her essays detailing her concerns for the environment. However, she concludes *Oryx and Crake* by suggesting that things are not as simple as the apocalyptic narrative, and Crake, would imply, and that no matter how deft one is at ensuring that hypotheses are “followed through to their logical conclusions”, plans will go awry. Crake tries to use science to control the future, but Atwood suggests that people must accept that the future cannot be controlled as we would like. This will be explored further later in this chapter.

Crake designs his new species of hominid in order to curb many of the evils that he sees in the world. These evils include sexual obsession, violence, greed, the abuse of the world and its resources, and inequalities based on capital, ethnicity and physical appearance. The Crakers, in one way, are almost a kind of super-human. In another, devoid of the variety of desires, attachments and feelings that help make up ‘humanity’, they are more animal than human. Above all, Crake the improbable idealist tries to ensure that they are a peaceful people. Indeed, he tells Jimmy that most of the “destructive features” of humanity, many of which are driven by the “ancient primate brain” (357) have been eliminated. Those instincts responsible for racism, the creation of hierarchy and territoriality have been removed from the Crakers’ genetic make-up. The equality of the Crakers’ society is such that, in order to avoid any inconvenient admiration or jealousy brought on by appearances, each of them is genetically modified to be perfectly formed. They resemble models from “retouched fashion photos, or ads for a high-priced workout program” (115). These beautiful “animated statues” are completely devoid of any “human imperfection”. Ironically, seeing as these beings embody the achievement of physical perfection that his own society was aspiring to, Snowman finds that he has an aversion to them.

Vegetarian and designed to be perfectly suited to natural habitats, without the need of houses or clothes, the Crakers have no alternative but to be respectful of the environment. They even regularly eat caecotrophs: “semi-digested” pellets of vegetation that are excreted and then re-swallowed (187). Mating has replaced sexual appetites: every three years, the female comes into season, and she shows this physically. Her buttocks and abdomen turn blue, a trait “filched from the baboons” (194). The males sing to attract the female and present flowers to her “just as male penguins present round stones” (194). Their penises turn blue, and they dance in front of the female, “a feature suggested to Crake by the sexual semaphoring of crabs” (194), after which the

female chooses four males to have intercourse with until she becomes pregnant. The “sexual ardour” of those men who aren’t chosen immediately disappears, and so there are “no hard feelings” (194), as well as “no more unrequited love, no more thwarted lust”, “No more prostitution, no sexual abuse of children...No more rape” (194).

The Crakers reach maturity in four or five years, because “far too much time” is “wasted in childrearing” (187), and they will die at thirty, “suddenly, without getting sick” (356), thus eliminating old age, lingering illness, and the fear of death that can be seen as one of the motivators behind many negative human behaviours. This individual death-anxiety and the myriad and strange ways people try to alleviate it is also, as has already been mentioned, closely linked to apocalyptic discourse. Crake tells Jimmy that he has given the Crakers immortality, because “If you take ‘mortality’ as being, not death, but the foreknowledge of it and the fear of it, then ‘immortality’ is the absence of such fear” (356). Looking at it in this way, he has also withdrawn from them the possibility of creating traditional apocalyptic narratives.

Crake dies – he is shot by Jimmy – believing that the new species he has left behind are safe from many evils, protected by their genetics and with “no need to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money” (359). Indeed, the Crakers are above all, to Snowman living post-apocalypse at least, painfully literal. Without the need to symbolise, Crake’s new people are meant to be completely without religion. The Crakers’ human form belies the many ways they are without humanity, and, initially at least, they can be seen to represent the purely physical. While the humans before the apocalypse can be seen to hold a position of corrupt physicality, the Crakers’ physicality appears to be singularly instinctive and not complicated by the human flaws of greed, narcissism and sexual desire. Ultimately, they appear to be a people without choices, and without complicated desires, imagination, expression or art. Jimmy, ever the word-man, is aghast at the fact that Crake wants his people to be without things that he sees to be pre-eminent: “When any civilization is dust and ashes...art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures” (197). However, in a satire of the fashion for evolutionary theory being applied to literature, Crake believes that all art is just “a stab at getting laid” (198), and since the Crakers will not worry about “getting laid”, they will have no need for art.

One thing that Crake did not factor into his plan was the very human desire to understand *why* and *why not*. And, almost immediately after the apocalypse, the Crakers begin to ask this question of Jimmy. They want to know who made them, where Crake came from (“Crake was never born...He came down out of the sky, like thunder” (120-21)), and why they must do things in certain ways (“Crake has decreed it” (116)). They want to know where Crake is, where Oryx is, and how Snowman talks to Crake in order to get instructions; he converses with him by talking into and listening to his watch. Snowman has to deliver to them explanations for their *why* questions, and it becomes evident that this is a very difficult undertaking. Despite knowing that he must deliver a simple story and keep to it, Snowman was “stupefied with drink when laying down the laws”, and many of his explanations rely on an easy fallback: when the Crakers ask *why* or *why not*, he tells them stories that are reminiscent of myths or of the biblical Genesis. Thus, the Crakers are not able to kill rabbits because “rabbits belong to the Children of Oryx and are sacred to Oryx herself” (110). Eventually, a complex and intricate series of tales builds up around the ever-absent Crake and Oryx. An example of this is the creationist story that Snowman tells the Crakers:

*Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of*

*Oryx [the women] hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. (110)*

Initially, with no capacity to symbolise, the pictures they see on everyday items from before the apocalypse confuse them and whenever they see a picture they ask Snowman: "is it real?" (118). However, all the story-telling and imagining things that are not physically present has an effect on the Crakers, and they are eventually able to understand that a picture is a representation of something. Thus, when the reader encounters Snowman telling the Crakers about "the beginning" in which "there was chaos":

The people in the chaos were full of the chaos themselves, and the chaos made them do bad things. They were killing other people all the time. And they were eating up all the Children of Oryx [the animals]...the people couldn't be happy, because of the chaos. And then Oryx said to Crake, *Let us get rid of the chaos*. And so Crake took the chaos, and he poured it away. (119)

The Crakers know the story off by heart and often interject with enthusiastic statements such as "Oh, good, kind Crake!" so that the whole process has become "a liturgy" (119), the repetition of which contributes to Crake's "gradual deification" (120). Snowman notes that, while the first stories he made up were improvisations, now the Crakers were "demanding dogma" (120) and simply wanted to hear the familiar stories told again. With more and more *whys* answered during each telling of these apocalypse/genesis stories, the mythologies surrounding Crake and Oryx become increasingly complex, and the "prophet" Snowman struggles to remember them (120). Snowman, the "improbable shepherd" (353) – who, immediately after apocalypse herded the Crakers out of Paradise to their home near the sea – finds it easier to answer the questions with variations of the idea 'because Crake said so': "What is that smoke? It is a thing of Crake's. Why is that child lying down, with no eyes? It was the will of Crake" (412). Finally, Snowman, who has been absent on a return trip to Paradise, comes across the Crakers sitting around a "grotesque-looking figure, a scarecrowlike effigy" (418). They bang on drum-like instruments and repeat a single refrain: "Clank, Ping-ping-ping-ping. Boom. *Ohhh-mun*" (419). The Crakers create an effigy of Snowman to try to talk to him in his absence; they are able to symbolise which is the thing that Crake wanted to avoid the most, and they also have a basic religion. After these things comes "the after-life, and sin, and Linear B [the earliest form of Greek writing], and kings, and then slavery and war" (420). The Crakers seem to be becoming human.

Atwood seems to be suggesting a number of things with this humanesque development of the Crakers. Most importantly for this essay is the countering, and critiquing, of traditional apocalyptic thought that she offers. This countering seems to be at odds with her, at times, wholehearted subscription to apocalyptic structures. Atwood, after all, has written of her anxieties about the effects humans are having on the environment, and about the possible impact of various scientific practices, all of which would suggest that Atwood herself has a keen 'sense of an ending'. Indeed, Atwood's satirising – and condemning – of human society supports this view that she, to some extent, follows the traditional pattern of apocalyptic thinking – as she would, belonging to a society to which it is endemic. It has already been explored that one of the functions of the apocalyptic scenario is that it is an ideal medium on which a writer is able to project their social critique, and this practice is closely linked to the idea that *after the end* things could possibly be better, or at least would be different. It is here that Atwood departs from the traditional destroy/regenerate apocalyptic model. While she seems to believe that the end is looming, the

possibility of an *after* that is different, let alone better, is withheld in *Oryx and Crake*. Instead, Atwood suggests that societies are fated to repeat themselves, and she even goes so far as to suggest that, while God may be a “cluster of neurons” (186), the cluster that represents the belief in God, like the cluster that makes a body of atoms human, is much more difficult to pinpoint and identify than Crake thinks. In addition to this, she touches on the idea that what makes a human is something that lies beyond the body. Crake tries to control the body, and believes that in doing so he is controlling the destiny within it; a destiny that, as a scientist, he sees as being written in DNA. However, Atwood presents the suggestion that there is something Crake cannot touch, something that, in the end, makes the Crakers human and is more than their genetic material.

The idea that science is not able to control the destiny, or the future, echoes Derrida. As previously mentioned, in “No Apocalypse, Not Now”, Derrida urges people to recognise that “the critical zeal that leads us to recognize precedents, continuities, and repetitions at every turn can make us look like suicidal sleepwalkers, blind and deaf *alongside the unheard of*”. He urges his audience not to completely discount possibility of apocalypse, but his message is that, although humans often think that technology, science and critical thinking let them control the future, this is to some extent an illusion.

If Snowman wasn’t around to interfere, would things have turned out the way they did? The answer provided in the novel is ambiguous. Significantly, despite his best efforts, Crake could not eliminate dreams or singing, both of which the Crakers appear to be “hard-wired” for, and Snowman notices that “singing and dreams [are] entwined” (411). This would suggest that the capacity to symbolise, that road to religion, is also “hard-wired.” The Crakers also ask *why* without Snowman’s help: it seems to be innate. While Crake disparages the “monkey brains” of humans, the “monkey curiosity, the desire to take apart, turn inside out, smell, fondle, measure, improve, trash, discard” (114), it is this monkey curiosity that he fails to eradicate from the Crakers, despite having access to their DNA, and which, the reader is led to believe, leads them ultimately to those higher thought processes which offer them both the good and the bad of humanity. It is also possible that the symbolising will lead to a fear of death: the Crakers may want to imagine where others go when they die. Thus, the ‘immortality’ that was initially bestowed on the Crakers by Crake himself will cease to exist, and, it is probable that with this knowledge and fear of death, and subsequent imaginings of after the end, will come apocalypse.

The road to repetition that the Crakers are on can be seen as part of Atwood’s satire. However, it offers an interesting caveat to traditional apocalyptic thinking: even if humans are given the chance to start again, and even if they want to do things better and have a clement environment in which to exist and an abundance of resources, they may still repeat the old mistakes. They may be predestined to fail. Their destiny may be hidden in their DNA. Therefore, as attractive as the idea of the ‘blank slate’ is, perhaps it is this that should be closely examined, and questioned. Perhaps humans need to turn to other ways of thinking of the future, ones that build on and improve what already exists and that use our curious “monkey brains” to think of solutions to current and future problems instead of having the strange wish – always projecting ourselves after the end of course – that it would all disappear.

### **The End of *The Road***

The reader enters the world of *The Road* while it is in the midst of what seems to be total ecological destruction, although the cause of this is unknown. The landscape that the man and his son traverse is blackened, “burntlooking”, ash-covered, barren and incredibly cold (51). Snow falls,

and ash falls in turn on the snow “till it [is] all but black” (33). Navigating forests, the man and his son have to watch out for the falling branches of blackened “huge dead trees” (40). The man and his son are perpetually cold, perpetually wet and trying to get dry, perpetually tired and hungry and searching for food. As the novel progresses, despite the characters’ and the reader’s hopes, there is no suggestion that anything about this environment will ever change. In fact, the distinct possibility looms that there will be neither recovery nor renovation in this post-apocalyptic world. As the pair move south in search of a warmer climate they encounter no life that is not human. The man’s memory, which provides flashbacks, tell us that in previous years they occasionally saw other species, as when the man had once, soon after the catastrophe, “lay listening to flocks of migratory birds overhead in that bitter dark...He wished them godspeed till they were gone. He never heard them again” (54-5). At the time the novel is set, all other species appear to have become extinct, either killed by the opening devastation or eaten in the subsequent struggle for survival. As far as the man and the reader know, humans are the only species left on earth. Clouds of ash have settled in the atmosphere and block out the sun, and the people who inhabit this environment must wear masks as the air is filled with noxious ash and dust. Even the ocean, “vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag and then the gray squall line of ash” (230) appears to be dead, smothered by ash.

Though he offers much description of the environment the man and boy traverse, McCarthy seems to reveal as little of the actual apocalyptic event as possible. The focus of this novel is almost entirely on the events that occur *after* the event, and so the reader is left to conjecture what it is that altered the world so irrevocably, as indeed are the characters. The narrative voice of the novel, while being third person, is often from the perspective of the man. The man is usually the subject of McCarthy’s sentences and it is only his thoughts that the reader hears, until the last passages of the story when the man dies and the perspective changes to that of the son. As a result of this narrative style, the reader is ignorant of what the man is ignorant of and so the extent of the event, like the nature of it, is unknown. It is made obvious that the man does not know what happened to his world when he cannot explain the cause of apocalypse to his son. The boy, discussing with his father why the states that made up the United States do not exist anymore, asks: “What happened to them?” His father replies “I don’t know exactly. That’s a good question” (44).

The man’s remembrances provide flashbacks to the moment of apocalypse but do not provide a great deal of insight into what actually happened. McCarthy writes:

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions...He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass. (54)

In the days immediately after the event the man and his wife had sat at night and “watched distant cities burn” (61), and the man recalls that later, when they were on the move, they encountered “people sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes” (33). It is not explained why some people were seemingly burnt where they stood while others were relatively unscathed by those first apocalyptic moments. In the latter part of the novel the man and his son pass through “a country where firestorms had passed leaving mile on mile of burn” (202). The cause of these firestorms is unidentified, but the asphalt of the road “had buckled in the heat and then set back again” (202), and there are “figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling” (203).

McCarthy himself has said that he “imagines” the cataclysm as a meteor impact (qtd. in Cooper 218), which fits with the “long shear of light”. However, unlike Atwood who details exactly

how the apocalypse in *Oryx and Crake* comes about, he seems tentative about the end he conceived. This lack of certainty – the characters do not know exactly what has happened and even the author only “imagines” the end to be a meteor – leaves the disaster open to many different interpretations necessarily occasioned by a large amount of reader input. The reader must either play detective, and look for clues within the text in order to decide for themselves what kind of disaster befell Earth, or accept that they cannot know for sure exactly what form the apocalypse took. As Kemode argues, humans are compelled to attempt to make sense of their world. Thus, many critics have imagined a definitive disaster for *The Road* and accordingly written articles that move forward from their assumption. That the apocalypse was a world-wide ecocide is a popular theory, while many agree with Dale Knickerbocker’s assertion that “details seem to suggest it was a nuclear war” (348). However, apart from McCarthy’s meteoric imaginings, which he seems to suggest are his own personal imaginings and thus perhaps outside of the text, it cannot be known for sure what the catastrophe is as there is possible evidence for a variety of different readings, which is something that many readers may find disconcerting. This unease could perhaps stem from the withholding of the reason for apocalypse, which denies the reader any way of ordering, and thus potentially controlling or ‘domesticating’, the apocalyptic event. The lack of an omniscient narrator and thus the lack of total knowledge about what it was that caused the world’s destruction refuses the reader the opportunity to control this apocalypse. It refuses to fulfil the need to know where to place blame and thus to know how to prevent the problem. If apocalyptic literature can be seen as part of a discourse that exists, at least to some extent, to pre-emptively solve the problem of possible apocalypse, then *The Road* does not offer any distinct solutions.

The lack of definitive ending and slow but continuous decay and death of living things in the years after the initial world-changing event – whatever it was – leads to the characters of the novel inhabiting an almost purgatory-like state. In this way, McCarthy attempts “in many different ways to destabilise and provoke questions of the binary oppositions involved in [the] very discussion of redemptive ends (indeed, of the possibility of conceiving ‘ends’ at all)” (Skrimshire 2). The novel occupies the time after the initial moment of apocalypse, but it can’t be said to inhabit the post-apocalyptic space, because the apocalypse, like time and life, hasn’t really ended. Instead, the feeling of the perpetual permeates the novel. The characters appear to be suspended in the middle of time. Their world is in the midst of a long slow dying off; a long slow degeneration.

This continuous death and destruction that is portrayed in the novel subverts, and refuses, the traditional portrayal of the post-apocalypse as a time for recoupment and regeneration. In fact, in the novel there is no indication that there will be a traditional post-apocalypse. Skrimshire explores the idea that the future has “the effect of interminable non-occurrence” (9), and this statement can be applied to the concept of a future in *The Road*. In *The Road*, the end seems to have arrived, and yet it definitely has not arrived yet for those in the novel, and nor has any new beginning that could be definitively described as ‘post-apocalyptic’. Thus, the very concept of post-apocalypse in the novel, rather being about ends, is inherently about resisting endings: the end has been and gone and yet life continues. In any post-apocalypse, there is the “simultaneous presence of both the “end” and the refusal, or undecideability, of endings” (Skrimshire 5), and this paradox can be seen clearly in *The Road*. This refusal of endings is present in the same way for Snowman in *Oryx and Crake*. Snowman’s future, far from being foreshortened, is “sheer vertigo” (Atwood, 173), and “the prospect of his future life stretched before him like a sentence; not a prison sentence but a long-winded sentence” (221).

The end in *The Road* is clearly oxymoronic. In the world of the novel “time has already run out and is yet...opening out inexorably: nothing has really finished” (Skrimshire 5). However, the end cannot really be seen as a new beginning either. While travelling, the man and his son come across countless bodies and myriad scattered belongings. These once belonged to “pilgrims enroute to their several and collective deaths” (McCarthy 213). These words describe those who have already died. However, they can easily be applied to the man and his son, who ceaselessly cross the countryside searching for the means to survive a little longer. The man knows “that he [is] placing hopes where [he has] no reason to” (228), but still hopes that wherever they are going will be “brighter” while in all likelihood “the world [was growing] darker daily” (228). Throughout the novel, the road does not lead the man and his son anywhere better than they have already been. In fact, there is no indication whatsoever in the novel that anything is ever going to get better. Instead, McCarthy describes the pair’s journey using a simile: they are “treading the dead world under like rats on a wheel” (292). The man and his son walk and walk, but they go nowhere different, nowhere new. Everywhere is the same as they have been before: dead, devoid, barren. There is no sign at all that the environment will rejuvenate or that the people will stop feeding on each other and instead band together for a common good. The man and his son can be seen as enroute to their own deaths, or they can be seen as living in a state akin to limbo in that the entirety of the destruction of their world prevents them from beginning to construct a new life. They are not able to occupy the post-apocalypse. Instead of being able to share in the new beginning prevalent in traditional apocalyptic thought, they occupy an area both in and out of apocalypse, both living and always so close to death, both after and yet still within the end. The timelessness of the plight of the characters in *The Road* evokes words from T.S Eliot’s *The Wasteland*: “He who was living is now dead/ We who were living are now dying”. The contradictory post-apocalypse of McCarthy’s novel reflects very clearly the contradictory ways humans think about apocalypse. The end is not the end, as quite clearly, it very rarely is in apocalypse. However, neither does it signal a beginning. McCarthy does not provide a definitely regenerative *after* and thus does not conform with traditional destructive/regenerative dichotomous ways of thinking about apocalypse.

### **The Refusal of the New**

As Berger explains, one of the traditional functions of an apocalyptic representation is as a “means of banishing, symbolically obliterating, whatever the apocalyptic writer deems unacceptable, evil, or alien” (Berger xv), and in *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood conveniently supplies a *before* so that she can provide a critique of current society in which she explores many unacceptable and even evil features of society. McCarthy’s novel begins, like Atwood’s, after the end. However, unlike Atwood, he provides few flashbacks and little detail as to the state of society before the end. While Atwood created the *Oryx and Crake* website to give details as to her authorial intent, there has been relatively little explanation from McCarthy as to why he wrote *The Road*. The lack of explanation leaves the novel open to a wide variety of different interpretations, ranging from that it is meant to be read as complete fantasy to the declaration by the environmental-activist writer George Monbiot that it is “the most important environmental book ever written” (qtd. in Skrimshire 12). Those who share Monbiot’s view often see the novel as a “critical dystopia”, which “presents the horror of a possible future in order to galvanise a resistance to its fulfilment” (Skrimshire 12). It serves, in this way, the same function as *Oryx and Crake*. McCarthy, while accepting that many readers view his novel’s position as, in part, an environmental manifesto has said that “his money is

on humans destroying each other before an environmental catastrophe sets in" (qtd. in Skrimshire 12). This view can be seen as almost anomalous amongst the currently pervasive belief that humans will soon destroy the environment.

Reading *The Road* as a critique of society means that the reader can see that, like Atwood, McCarthy uses the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road* as an exploration of things that concern him in the world today. The novel's "careful and complex oscillation between that which is to come and that which is already upon us" allows the reader to be taken close to life while simultaneously being distanced from the world of the novel (Skrimshire 12). Thus, the reader of *The Road*, like the reader of *Oryx and Crake*, is liable to feel a strange familiarity when reading parts of the novel. Reading McCarthy's novel as a social critique, the reader begins to see the ways in which the world of *The Road* has many things in common with contemporary Western society, only in the novel they are taken to the extreme: vicious, self-interested groups literally prey on other people and consume them to survive; there is a desperation to gather resources and to have *more* than others; instead of banding together and co-operating, people are in competition with each other; there appear to be few people with integrity or morals anymore, and the environment has been obliterated. When articulated in this way, many aspects of the novel are reminiscent of aspects of Atwood's novel: there are the haves and have-nots, those who have taken or been given power and those who are powerless, those with resources and those without. It is clear that *The Road* can be read as an exploration of humanity as McCarthy sees it. In particular, it can be seen as an exploration of human morality and its construction. Morality in the novel is tenuous, is moribund, and is at times shown to be completely subjective.

The way that McCarthy describes the world of *The Road* is often resonant of hell. It is a world of death, of black, of fire, of "sulphur" (52). It is "autistic" (14), "secular" (188) and "godless" (2). It would seem that only hellish characters should inhabit such a landscape. However, as one critic has said, *The Road* portrays both "utopian and dystopian prophets" (Skrimshire 3). The striking contrast between these two groups of people provokes many significant questions, most of which cannot be definitively answered. The first group, the utopian "prophets", which includes the man, his son and the family who rescues the son at the end of the novel, do not eat people, or even dogs. They attempt to keep some kind of god, or at least morality, alive in the horrific world that they inhabit. In short, they fight for survival, but only within the norms of the – what could be termed – *decency* that was established pre-apocalypse. It is these kinds of people who could help bring about the traditional regenerative apocalyptic. The second group are the members of the 'bloodcults'. These men keep slaves and eat their own children. This group of people have, from the point of view of many readers and also, it seems, of McCarthy, effectively exchanged their humanity for survival. They have completely departed from the laws – judicial, but also moral – that governed their society pre-apocalypse. The juxtaposition, throughout the novel, of these two distinct groups, and the subsequent judgement of the two into 'good' and 'bad' elements, engenders questions: What have the "good guys" retained that the cannibals haven't? Which group is closer to the 'state of nature'? Are right and wrong so certain? Can we, reading and writing here in the midst, really judge as moral or immoral the actions of those living after global cataclysm? Are the bestial characters really as different from us as we would like to believe?

There are some shocking scenes in the novel. The man and his son come across a house in the basement of which people are being kept as a kind of living food supply: "Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened

and burnt" (116). In another scene they find a "charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (212). At one stage they hide, terrified, as a bloodcult moves past, "marching with a swaying gait like wind-up toys. Bearded, their breath smoking through their masks" (96). The comparison of men to wind-up toys evokes images of the automaton and suggests that, almost completely lacking volition and operating on the instinct to consume and thus live, these beings are essentially no longer human. When the man and boy encounter a cannibal, the man recognises the cannibal as his "brother". However, the label is rendered somewhat ironic by the description that follows it: "The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word" (79). This man, with his "reptilian" eyes, is not operating with his higher faculties but with his instinctive, "reptilian" brain. His main aim is to survive and human concepts such as morality, or indeed brotherhood, are void for him. So, on one hand, he is very different from the man. On the other hand, the actions of this bestial man hint at the transience of ideals – goodness, brotherhood, kinship, honour – that form the basis of human morality. The cannibal, with his "reptilian" eyes, is of the same species as the man and his son, who, being animal too, also operate largely on instinct. They, too, each have a "reptilian" brain. Perhaps the aforesaid phrase "bestial man" best sums up the tension that seems to exist in the novel between bestial tendencies and those we would deem as evidence of our 'humanity'. There are no clear answers as to why the animal part dominates in some people, while human morality dominates in others. While Atwood, with the Crakers, seems to suggest that there are some aspects of humanity that cannot be eradicated, McCarthy suggests that morality is much more unstable than we would like to think, but simultaneously advocates the idea that it endures in some people.

The subjectivity of morality can be exemplified by the way that critics of *The Road* have variously condemned or claimed understanding of different episodes in the novel. One of the most variably interpreted passages is that exploring the choice of the man's wife, the boy's mother, to commit suicide by razorblade. She leaves the two bullets in the gun for the man and their son. Lydia Cooper, in her article exploring *The Road* as Grail narrative, denounces the mother as having "abandoned" her child, and asserts that the "mother's abject lack of pity for or emotional connection to her child suggests that she has been poisoned by the internal and external death of her world" (223). She goes on to say that the mother is "an embodiment of the egocentrism and faithlessness that are swiftly killing the planet" (223), which seems a very limited response to an infinitely complex situation. Stefan Skrimshire, investigating redemption in *The Road*, has an entirely different take on the situation: "For the boy's mother, only death offered redemption, and the father's crime was to deny it to their son. Who may judge such a choice?" (12). Who, indeed.

It has been suggested that the "fundamental fear underlying the novel" is "the fear that human beings may not in fact deserve to survive" (Cooper 221). I would take this even further. The popular environmental reading of the novel, along with its strong nihilistic tone, suggests belief in a more extreme, eco-centric idea that has arisen out of eco-criticism: it would be better for the world if people did not survive. In the novel, this is most obviously articulated by an old man who the man and his son meet on the road. They give the old man food and he tells them "Things will be better when everybody's gone [...] We'll all be better off. We'll all breathe easier" (183). He goes on to say:

When we're all gone at last then there'll be nobody but death and his days will be numbered too. He'll be out on the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to. He'll say: Where did everybody go? And that's how it will be. What's wrong with that? (183)

Some critics have been so horrified by McCarthy's speculative representation of humanity that they have declared it "fantastic", "a striking departure from the realism of his earlier novels", and even a "stretch" of the "limits of credulity" (Cooper 218). However, McCarthy has said that he likes to write close to life, saying that "it's hard enough to get people to believe what you're trying to tell them without making it impossible. You have to make it vaguely plausible" (qtd. in Cooper 218). For McCarthy, *The Road* is more realist than fantastic. Indeed, in many ways, the characters of the novel, living in the end, are very similar to those people who lived before. They strive to stay alive. Some of them search for meaning. They want to know whether there is a god. McCarthy's characters grapple with the harshness of inevitable death, and, although death seems much closer to them than it does for most readers of *The Road*, one gets a sense, when reading the novel, that we in the midst are not as much further from death as we delude ourselves. The most important difference between *before* and *after* apocalypse in the novel, is that the *after* is stripped of the trappings of civility. Post-apocalypse, the world is shorn of the intricate web of human systems – law, government, society, media, community, entertainment, materialism, and consumption – that in the past helped create order. The post-apocalyptic world of *The Road* is not moderated by institutions and thus its severity and bleakness are emphasised. Post-apocalypse, humanity still has all its old faults. However, these faults are now amplified in a world of scarcity. While McCarthy could be commenting on humanity in general, it is also possible to read his novel as a critique of individualism in twenty-first century America, and perhaps the disconcerting familiarity produced by the bleak realism of the world of *The Road* causes some critics to want to distance themselves from it, by proclaiming it a complete fantasy.

The possibility of the post-apocalyptic creation of a 'better' society is refused in *The Road*, not only by McCarthy's refusal of the idea of endings but also by his suggestion that human fallibility will prevent idealised regeneration. Indeed, it is struggle enough to survive let alone to begin to build an idyllic New Earth when "any tangible social order has been destroyed by fire or hunger or despair" (Kunsa 57). *The Road* reveals just how insubstantial much of what we base society and notions of humanity on is. Reading *The Road* as social critique, it can be seen that in this novel McCarthy draws the reader's attention to the ethical constructs of society that help to distinguish our humanity from our instinct to survive. The two parts of this human/animal dichotomy are represented, respectively, by the man, boy and other "good guys", and by those who kill and eat others to survive. Reading McCarthy's novel, one gets the feeling that McCarthy is interested in questions of just how bestial humans actually are, and the extremity of the post-apocalyptic world gives him an ideal medium with which to explore this. His comments on society are provocative. However, unlike Atwood's satire in *Oryx and Crake*, McCarthy's investigation of society does not seem to be necessarily designed to bring about any social change.

McCarthy's novel conforms to apocalyptic thinking in that it is a complex exploration of the imperfections of humanity and of what is wrong with the world *now*, and yet it departs from the traditional apocalyptic idea of renewal in that it refuses the idea that after the end, things will be different. Instead, McCarthy presents a world where, after the end, humanity's flaws are amplified in a world of scarcity. The novel offers concurrently the end as traditional apocalypse – an event that wipes away the old world, old institutions, and old ways of being – and a lack of ending, whereby the new world can be seen as just an extension of the old one, with the same problems and cruelties. The vastly different interpretations of *The Road*, resulting partly from McCarthy's reticence, illustrate that constructing apocalypse is not just a writerly act but also a readerly one. Writers explore and expose those aspects of society that concern them, but readers also project their beliefs

onto a text. This is especially true in a novel like McCarthy's, which is so ambiguous. While Atwood seems, in many ways, to attempt to control the reading of her novel, McCarthy leaves the reading of his open. Thus, those who are anxious about the environment will project environmental catastrophe onto the novel. Those who tend towards nihilism will find their nihilism confirmed, and those who believe in an objective, measurable morality will look for its signs in the novel and will find a message of hope for humankind.

## Post Apocalypse: The Search for Meaning

### Apocalypse and Trauma

In this section, the novels are re-interrogated from a psychoanalytic perspective. It has already been established that according to Berger one way of looking at apocalypse, or redefining it in the post-modern world that is perhaps more sceptical of endings and of grand narratives, is that an apocalypse is any event that serves as a barrier or rupture between 'before' and 'after,' as a result of which new understandings or ways of looking at the world are created. Whether or not the term apocalypse in its entirety can really be applied as Berger applies it (to events that are perhaps the end of *a* world, if not of *the* world), and whether or not one agrees that we have lost faith in endings (it would seem that we have largely not), it is easy to agree with Berger's assertion that apocalyptic events are also those that "cannot be symbolized" (Berger 19), and that cannot be, at the moment of occurrence, understood. Partial apocalypse causes "shatterings of existing structures of identity and language" and can only be reconstructed by looking at its "traces, remains, survivors, and ghosts" (Berger 19). Derrida, too, relates the ideas of trauma and apocalypse. He suggests that apocalypse as an unknown future event, does not have a real referent, and therefore a discourse on apocalypse has built up in order to pre-emptively work through it. Apocalypse and trauma can thus be seen as parallel: they cause ruptures in people's understanding of the world. Neither the moment of trauma nor the moment of apocalypse can be sufficiently symbolised, and therefore "the texts produced by the witnesses of these events are inevitably incapable of adequately representing them", despite their repeated attempts to represent, and thus help develop people's understanding of, the traumatic or apocalyptic event (Berger 74). Further illustration of the relationship between trauma and apocalypse requires a short explanation of the concept of trauma.

Etymologically, the word trauma comes from the Greek word 'trauma', meaning 'wound'. Caruth explains that Freud used the term trauma to mean a mental rather than physical wound; specifically those mental wounds that come as a result of a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world", or an event that is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 4). Trauma is not usually associated with just any death or loss, but with shocking, incomprehensible and unexpected events that the sufferer was unprepared for. As a result of this unpreparedness, the sufferer is forced to relive or repeat the event.

Freud's psychoanalytic method of psychotherapy delves into the way that trauma repeats itself for the victim. He describes the post-traumatic process that a survivor endures:

He reproduces it [the traumatic event] not as a memory but as an action: he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it. For instance, the patient does not say that he remembers that he used

to be defiant and critical towards his parents' authority; instead, he behaves in that way to the doctor...He does not remember having been intensely ashamed of certain sexual activities and afraid of their being found out; but he makes it clear that he is ashamed of the treatment on which he is now embarked and tries to keep it secret from everybody. (Freud 150)

Trauma can present itself in myriad symptoms, including "persistent reexperiencing of the traumatic event", "persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma" and "persistent symptoms of increased arousal" (APA 424). Obviously, many survivors of a global apocalypse would in all likelihood suffer from traumatic repetitions. However, it is not only the direct survivors or witnesses of a violent event who can suffer from trauma. According to the American Psychiatric Association, those who hear about traumatic events experienced by others can suffer trauma themselves (APA 424). It is in this way that, for example, Americans who were not at the World Trade Centre when it was attacked could still be traumatised by the event.

Trauma is then, rather than an "escape from a death", the story of a violent event's "endless impact on a life" (Caruth 7). It does not denote a specific *event*, but is a result of an event's "unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance" and returns again and again to the survivor (Caruth 4). Thus, as previously stated, victims of a traumatic event are forced, against their will, to repeat the incomprehensible event: they have nightmares and flashbacks, they experience "painful guilt feelings about surviving", they dissociate or develop amnesia, and they have a sense of "foreshortened future" (APA 425). Ultimately, many of them attempt to move past the traumatic event by representing it and its aftermath using language. Freud's psychotherapy was centred on the now-commonplace notion of remembering in order to forget, and he noted that, when working with patients, "each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked...and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words" (Freud 150). In many ways the literature that proceeds from a traumatic event attempts to go through this process also: to analyse and thus understand the event that instigated trauma, and thus help bring about catharsis or peace. After a traumatic event, people attempt to symbolise and thus work through the trauma of the event by portraying it in literature. Because this literature cannot ever properly represent the event and subsequently always fails in its attempts to do so, there are waves and waves of literature that attempt to portray and somehow come to terms with the same event. In consequence, there is still literature being produced about the Holocaust even seventy years later. Derrida's assertion that the popularity of writing that examines apocalypse is a process of "fearful domestication" is basically the idea of working through trauma in reverse: writers who write about a traumatic event such as an 'end of world' apocalypse that has not yet happened are trying to provide a referent for, and therefore pre-emptively work through and understand, a future catastrophe.

Don DeLillo's post-9/11 novel, *Falling Man*, details the Berger-style apocalyptic: this novel can be seen as both arising from, and a portrayal of, the aftermath of a monumental catastrophe. While the world did not end it was fundamentally altered for Americans, who were forced for a time to examine their cultural identity. *Falling Man* speaks of the ruptures that were created on that day in September 2001, and it explores the traumas caused by the un-processable and in-expressible magnitude of the attacks. In his article "In the Ruins of the Future", DeLillo, a New Yorker, writes of the attacks that they were a "massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful

a thing to set into our frame of practiced response" (35) and that "some of us said it was unreal. When we say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions" (38-9). Thus, his ideas resemble psychological ideas of post-trauma and the human need to provide a referent for, explain, and thus overcome the incomprehensible traumatic or apocalyptic event. Because "there is no logic in apocalypse" (34), it disturbs and unsettles us and we want to control it by portraying it.

According to James Berger, "the effects of an event may be dispersed and manifested in many forms not obviously associated with the event. Moreover, this dispersal occurs across time" (26). An apt illustration of the way that trauma recurs, often in strange and unexpected ways, comes towards the beginning of *Falling Man*, when a doctor explains the meaning of the term 'organic shrapnel':

The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who's in striking range...A student is sitting in a café. She survives the attack. Then, months later, they find these little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin. They call this organic shrapnel. (16)

It seems that there is no better metaphor for trauma than this. Trauma depends on a person surviving an event and being present *after*. The event stays with the victim for a long time and resurfaces in seemingly inexplicable ways and when they are not expecting it. It is in this way that the trauma of living through apocalypse manifests in Snowman in *Oryx and Crake* and the man in *The Road*. These novels can also be seen as works that are part of the wider discourse of trying to symbolise and so pre-emptively work through the trauma of apocalypse. Unfortunately, because the end-of-world apocalyptic event is forever in the future and forever unknown, the literature that attempts to work through this scenario is forever bound to fail, just as Snowman and the man never fully come to terms with the trauma they have experienced.

As trauma can be related to apocalyptic discourse in general, the theory of trauma can also be applied to the experiences of characters. Characters in both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Road* help to demonstrate the close relationship between apocalypse and trauma. In her essay "'Time to Go': the Post-Apocalyptic and the Post-Traumatic in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*", Katherine Snyder focuses on tracing the trauma of Jimmy-Snowman, called so by Snyder because after the apocalypse Jimmy identifies himself only as Snowman, choosing the name because "he needed to forget the past – the distant past, the immediate past, the past in any form" (Atwood, 348). Snowman is now "marooned," in a future he was not meant to be in. He is "cut off from the past yet unable to move beyond it" (Snyder 472), unable to move forward in time at all. Instead, he appears to occupy a position of slow regression. Like some kind of early hominid, Snowman has even begun to live in the trees in order to escape predators.

Time is ordered in the novel "for both reader and protagonist, with respect to the breakpoint of apocalypse: pre- and post- are its main markers of temporality" (Snyder 471). The apocalyptic divide between 'before' and 'after' is aptly symbolised to Snowman, and the reader, by the "blank face" of his broken watch (Atwood 3). Snowman spends most of his time looking back at the moment when he lost time, and reflecting on the events that led up to it.

Trauma is comprised of two moments of time, these being the initial traumatic moment or event and the later moments when the trauma repeats or reasserts itself for the victim, and each of these moments in turn affects the other: "The future [latter] moment activates the meaning of the

past moment, but that past moment also endows the future moment with meaning” (Snyder 472). In this way, speculative post-apocalyptic fiction is very similar to trauma (Snyder 472). This is because, like trauma, apocalypse provides meaning to all that comes after it. But the post-apocalypse, like post-trauma, also provides new meaning to the past and allows survivors to see it in a way that they did not when it was occurring. Thus, when Snowman examines the past in *Oryx and Crake*, he often sees in his memories moments of significance that at the time did not seem important. In fact, in his revisiting of his past, Snowman sees entire plots that he did not see pre-apocalypse, hugely important occurrences that he did not notice until their being framed by the context of the apocalypse lent them meaning.

From one perspective, the traumatic disruption of life and time, symbolised by the blank face of his watch, manifests itself in Snowman in the form of traumatic symptoms. Snowman demonstrates many symptoms of trauma, including what Snyder calls “epistemological disturbances” (Snyder 474): “There are a lot of blank spaces in his stub of a brain, where memory used to be” (Atwood 5). As well as these blanks, Snowman experiences waves of fear and panic, intense feelings of guilt and despair and a terribly frustrated anger: there is no one around at whom he can direct it and the principal person who should bear it is lying, dead like all the others, in the airlock at the Paradise Dome. When, at the beginning of the novel, Snowman sees the blank face of his watch it “causes a jolt of terror to run through him” (3) and he seems at times to suffer from the physical symptoms of a panic attack: “His breath is coming in gasps, as if a giant hand is clenching around his chest – clench, release, clench. Senseless panic. ‘You did this!’ he screams at the ocean” (13). Snowman is unsure how he can release his intense feelings, so “he grunts or squeals like a pigoon, or howls like a wolvog...sometimes in the dusk he runs up and down on the sand, flinging stones at the ocean and screaming, *Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!* He feels better afterwards” (11).

Much of the time, Snowman hates Crake – not only for creating the virus that has wiped out humankind, but for keeping him alive in order to take care of the Crakers and thus keeping him stranded in a world in which he should not exist: “Get me out! He hears himself thinking. But he isn’t locked up, he’s not in prison. What could be more *out* than where he is?” (50). He regularly screams at Crake: “‘*Fucking Crake!*’ he can’t help yelling” (124) and “‘*Crake you dickhead,*’ he says. He feels like weeping” (193). At other times, he examines his own culpability in Crake’s actions. He carefully goes over events leading up to the human-extinction and concludes that he wilfully ignored signs that Crake was planning something. Snowman even examines his own humanity and feels guilty for the petty human hates and resentments that he had harboured against people: “He’d meant well, or at least he hadn’t meant ill. He’d never wanted to hurt anyone, not seriously, not in real space-time” (334). This guilt that Snowman feels is a touch indulgent and it is interesting that throughout the novel Snowman dwells almost exclusively on events as they relate to himself. Snyder argues that this is because the novel traces Snowman’s working through of trauma. However, it is also possible to read Snowman as simply pre-eminently selfish character who, like most humans, cannot help but place himself at the centre of the story. This contrasting perspective casts doubt on the veracity of Snowman’s memories.

The terribly lonely Snowman hears a variety of different, variously encouraging and disparaging, voices that seem to originate from somewhere outside of him: the voices of the dead. He recognises some of them. His father tells him to “*stop snivelling son...Pull yourself together. You’re the man around here*” (193). One of his teachers provides him with a stream of infantilising suggestions such as “*let’s pretend this is a vacation!*” (44) and “*see the wishing star? Now we will all wish for the thing we want the very, very most of all*” (111). The voice of a prostitute he visited once

at the Scales and Tails brothel tells him *"oh honey, don't beat yourself up"* (47). A motivational speaker encourages Snowman with *"a great man must rise to meet the challenges in his life"* (279). Lastly, Oryx's voice comforts him with the meaningless *"Paradise is lost, but you have a Paradise within you, happier far"* (308). At times, Snowman engages with the voices. When one of them advises him that *"Having to face a crisis causes you to grow as a person"*, Snowman counters by shouting: *"I haven't grown as a person, you cretin"* (279). When "an encyclopedia voice" tells Snowman that *"The body is ninety-eight per cent water"*, Snowman replies: *"Who gives a rat's ass?"* (127).

As well as the investigating "epistemological" and "temporal" disturbances of a character in her essay, Snyder also explores the relationship between the structure of the novel and Snowman's trauma. Firstly, she notes that, rather than following a more linear narrative that begins in the "post-apocalyptic present" and then flashes back to the pre-apocalypse, to explain how Snowman's post-apocalyptic present came about, the chapters of the novel alternate between the present story of Snowman and the past story of Jimmy (Snyder 475). Both stories move forward until "the past 'catches up' with the present" (Snyder 475). The continual interruption of the present-Snowman narrative by the past-Jimmy one mimics the continual, unwanted interruption of Snowman's post-apocalyptic life by memories of his pre-apocalyptic life as Jimmy.

Snyder sees in Snowman's physical journey from his post-apocalyptic post near the Craker encampment back to the Paradise dome, his home during the apocalypse, a parallel to the working through of trauma: a going backwards to go forwards. Shortly after the pandemic strikes, Snowman leads the genetically-engineered Crakers out of the Paradise dome to their new home near the sea. However, this part of the story, along with Snowman's actions during the pandemic, is "unrepresented during the bulk of the story's telling. It is a narrative blank, comparable to post-traumatic amnesia", which, vitally, only gets represented after Snowman returns to the Paradise dome in the final part of the novel (Snyder 475).

It is as if with Snowman's return to the actual scene of his trauma, where he relives the loss of humankind in general and Oryx and Crake in particular, he is ready to remember his post-apocalyptic trip out of Paradise. As mentioned previously, it is often only in the revisiting or remembering of the traumatic event that is possible for a victim of trauma to work through the trauma and come to terms with it. At the terrible moment when he sees dead Oryx and Crake again, a distraught Snowman is described as having "water running down his face" and a "giant fist clenching his heart", as he stares "down at his one true love and his best friend in all the world" (391). It is only after the return trip to Paradise when Snowman sees the bodies of these two most important people that it is revealed to the reader through the triggered memories of Snowman what happened to Oryx and Crake: in the midst of the pandemic, Crake slit Oryx's throat, and "Jimmy shot him" (385). After this revelation, Snowman considers that at the time the events happened "[h]e was in shock. That must have been why he couldn't take it in. The whole thing seemed like a movie. Yet there he was, and there were Oryx and Crake, dead, in the airlock" (399).

Snyder argues that when Snowman sees Oryx and Crake he is able to realise the reality of their deaths and thus the reality of the death of humankind, with which their deaths are inextricably enmeshed. After viewing their bodies he is finally able to move past their deaths and is somewhat closer to coming to terms with the situation he is now in: he is quite probably the last specimen of the almost-extinct human species. As previously mentioned, in her article Snyder makes much of Snowman's fragments of memory, linking his inability to remember certain events with the trauma of the apocalypse he experiences in the novel. She assumes that, by the end of the novel, he

remembers events accurately, and that his knowledge of what happened accurately informs his interpretation of earlier events. However, memory is staggeringly unreliable. As Snowman reconstructs his past, he puts himself in the centre of the narrative. It is possible that some of the memories that he retrospectively endows with significance are not significant at all. From this perspective it is possible to see Snowman's retrospective interpretation of events as being less of a working-through and remembering of actual events, than the grandiose thinking of a pre-eminently selfish individual. This does not exclude the idea that Snowman's trauma can be traced in the novel. However, it places less emphasis on the veracity of his memories and the importance of his part in the apocalypse. It helps explain why the story of Oryx and Crake – in which Jimmy takes a more significant part – seems to be more important to Snowman than the story of apocalypse.

Reinforcing the idea that Snowman has the tendency to place himself 'centre-stage', in many ways throughout the majority of the novel it seems that for Snowman it is the death of his friends Oryx and Crake that is the apocalypse, rather than the pandemic that killed billions of humans. Throughout the novel the story of Oryx, Crake and Jimmy is in the foreground of Snowman's consciousness, and the story of end-of-world apocalypse seems almost secondary to Snowman's story of more personal tragedy and the part he plays in it. Indeed, Snowman admits to himself that:

The worst of it was that those people out there – the fear, the suffering, the wholesale death – did not really touch him. Crake used to say that *Homo sapiens sapiens* was not hard-wired to individuate other people in numbers above two hundred, the size of the primal tribe, and Jimmy would reduce that number to two. (400)

Of course this could simply be another symptom of trauma. Snowman is unable to engage with the fact of the pandemic directly and so engages with it through the more meandering route of the Oryx/Crake/Jimmy story. It is very probably easier for a person to fathom the death of two people than the death of *everyone*. Whatever is most significant for Snowman – the death of his friends or the death of humankind – in returning to the scene of his trauma and thus making the unknown known, Snyder argues that Snowman experiences what appears to be a type of closure. This closure is represented in the novel when the Jimmy narrative – the flashbacks and repetitions – finally meets the Snowman narrative (Snyder). This final, linear progression perhaps hints at a more positive future for Snowman than could previously be expected. Snyder believes that, while subsequent to his second departure from Paradise Snowman will “undoubtedly remain haunted by the past,” this convergence of narrative suggests the possibility of hope (476). This, of all Snyder's discussion of Snowman's trauma, seems the most doubtful contention when read beside the novel. It is true that, if one takes Snyder's analysis as reasonable, Snowman recovers previously repressed memories of the deaths of Oryx and Crake upon returning to the Paradise Dome. However, any future Snowman may inhabit will hardly be positive. Snowman may, although it is very unlikely, come to terms with the apocalypse. However, he will still have to battle the terrible loneliness and isolation he feels, as well as the hunger. The most that can be said of Snowman's return to the Paradise dome is that it may allow trauma to give way to the struggle for survival in a world where he does not belong.

Reading *Oryx and Crake* on its own can, from one perspective, portray a rather harrowing view of the trauma of an apocalypse survivor. However, reading it alongside McCarthy's *The Road* means that the possible traumatic symptoms of Snowman can be seen in a slightly different light. They can be seen as the experiences of someone who is in a slightly privileged position and who is at least at *some* distance from the original event. Snowman lives in a clearly post-apocalyptic world. He is often hungry, distressed and worried about the genetically modified dogs and pigs that pose some

threat to him. However, he is also, up until the final pages of the novel, the only human in the post-apocalyptic landscape. He is able to roam around in relative safety, can sleep soundly in his tree at night out of the reach of the pigeons and wolvogs, and is able to forage for food and supplies in the belief that he has no competition for resources; the Crakers have been modified to exist solely on plant material and as such have no need for the alcohol, energy bars or vacuum-packed food that he finds. They also, helpfully, catch fish for him to eat. Environmentally, the earth that Snowman inhabits is flourishing; it has been saved from the waste that billions of people produce. While it is no doubt difficult for Snowman to be alone in a world that is strange to him, the initial traumatic event of the pandemic is well in the past and he is at leisure to lie around and reflect on it and the events leading up to it; reflections that make up a large proportion of Atwood's novel. In comparison to the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*, in which the initial event of the apocalypse seems to have never ceased and instead bleeds into the post-apocalypse to create an apocalyptic, traumatic event that does not seem to end for the man and his son, Snowman's existence seems if not idyllic then certainly preferable.

While it is no doubt difficult for Snowman to survive in his post-apocalyptic world, the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road* is one long, grim struggle for survival. Thus, although the man definitely experiences post-traumatic symptoms, there does not appear to be any working-through of these and the 'post' of it seems to be in doubt. The man and his son are still not in a place of safety or of distance from the apocalypse and thus the trauma appears to be more successive than repetitive. The man and boy experience trauma upon trauma upon trauma, and are unable to look back at the original trauma of apocalypse. In a memory of a conversation the man has with his wife when she was still alive, the man refers to them as survivors while his wife retorts "What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film" (57). She tells him "We used to talk about death...We don't anymore, Why is that?...It's because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about" (58). In this way it can be seen that while temporally the events of the novel have been set 'post' apocalypse, in some ways there is nothing 'post' about the man and his son's existence. In the novel, the man tells his son to be wary of what he sees, to look away when they come across scenes of suffering because "you forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget" (11). This is a simple and elegant articulation of the effects of trauma. While Snowman sweats profusely and shades himself from the sun in the middle of the day, the man and his son inhabit a land where the nights are "cold to crack the stones. To take your life" (13), where the only real aims of every day are to find food and a safe place to camp, and where people are a food source to be hunted down and consumed by gangs of cannibals.

It often seems that the man is less haunted by the apocalypse than by the old world and the fact that he can never return to it. When he and the boy meet an old man on the road, they offer to share their food with him if only he can tell them "where the world went" (176). It is not the series of explosions and fire that is the apocalypse for the man, but the loss of the old world and the terrible reality of the new. Instead of reliving the moments during which his world was destroyed, the man revisits his old life. Exploring the dead world with the boy, he visits the house where he grew up and touches "the pinholes from tacks that had held stockings forty years ago" (25). However, most of the time the man attempts not to think about his old life and tries to ration out his memories. He is worried that the more he reminisces, the further he will get from how things used to be. He believes "each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins. As in a party game. Say the word and pass it on. So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not" (139).

The man is disturbed regularly by dreams and suffers from nightmares, such as that of “a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool with eyes dead and white and sightless as the eggs of spiders” (2). However, it is “the dreams so rich in color”, of the world as it used to be, that agitate him the most. These dreams “all [turn] to ash instantly” upon his awakening (20). In his waking moments the man struggles to accept his terrible reality and the dreams of his old world make things even more difficult, such as when he dreams of “walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue” (17), or of his wife: “she was sick and he cared for her [but] he did not take care of her and she died alone somewhere in the dark and there is no other dream nor other waking world and there is no other tale to tell” (33). The dreams and their reminders of something that is lost to the man and the world, and can never again be recreated, torment him almost as much as living in the post-apocalyptic world, “but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds” (17).

In one of the man’s flashbacks of the conversations with his wife before her death, she tells him: “my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (59). Likewise, McCarthy’s narrator writes that there were “few nights lying in the dark” that the man did not “envy the dead” (245), and it appears that the only reason he does not kill himself is that he cannot bear to kill his child or leave him to face the world alone. There is the sense that the man and his son have been left behind by mistake. While there is perhaps the chance of redemption and moving forward for Snowman, the man and his son are in a kind of limbo or purgatory with very little hope of any escape apart from “eternal nothingness”. This is a world in which the man has to tell his son how to kill himself if they are caught by the cannibals. He instructs his son: “If they find you you are going to have to do it...You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it hard and quick. Do you understand? Stop crying” (119). This is a world in which, instead of lying awake analysing the past as Snowman does, the man lies awake thinking about the gun that he keeps with him, worrying “What if it doesn’t fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock?” (120). While post-apocalypse Snowman is able to feel and to some extent accept a series of varying emotions, the overwhelming emotion that the man feels is a primal fear, as if he and the boy are “two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover” (138). When he and the boy are in no immediate danger this gives way to a “dull despair”, “numbness” (93) and even a matter-of-fact indifference: “there was a good chance they would die in the mountains and that would be that” (29). Like Snowman, the man experiences violent emotion at times. While Snowman feels anger at Crake, who engineered the pandemic, the man feels anger at a god that has abandoned them, such as when “He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh god, he whispered. Oh God” (10). At other times when the boy is asleep “he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn’t about death. He wasn’t sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he’d no longer any way to think about at all” (137). The old world is slipping away for the man and there appears to be no moving past it, no hope that anything with any goodness will take its place.

If trauma is a reaction to an event that was shocking and *unknown* at the time it occurred – too unknown to be assimilated into the victim’s realm of experience – then describing the trauma of a character that has lived past apocalypse is part of the process of taming, or familiarising, the possible results of a future apocalypse. It is a pre-emptive attempt at making the unknown known. According to Snyder:

Post-apocalyptic fiction serves as rehearsal or preview for its readers, an opportunity to witness in fantasy origins and endings that are fundamentally unwitnessable. (479)

Such a “rehearsal” of disaster “stands as both traumatic symptom and potential cure” (Snyder 486); if the traumatic symptoms that characters in post-apocalyptic novels exhibit after an apocalypse can perhaps be described accurately enough, then the actual event may be easier to come to terms with, should it arise. From this perspective, post-apocalyptic speculative fiction can be seen as an attempt to control the future, to “assimilate that unassimilable wholly other” (Derrida 28), to provide a symbol for the yet un-symbolised.

When reading *Oryx and Crake* and *The Road* alongside each other it appears that recognising and working through traumatic symptoms almost comes from a position of privilege; one must be at some remove from the traumatic, apocalyptic event and must not be struggling to survive and experiencing further trauma on a regular basis. Perhaps it is a feature of Western society – and more specifically of North American society from which much of the particular apocalyptic discourse that I am exploring has emerged – that it is at leisure to think about these things and to create preparatory, pre-emptive apocalyptic literature.

### **A Yearning for Revelation**

I have already explored the fact that an important aspect of a biblical Apocalypse is the idea of apocalypse as providing revelation, that at the end of the old world, God will reveal his plans for the new world. In popular culture, the word apocalypse has lost many of its connotations of revelation and has been replaced by a straightforward extinction event. However, the importance of revelation in apocalypse has not been completely marginalised and the remnants of the idea of revelation remain. According to Stefan Skrimshire:

Implicit to all apocalypses there is an ethically loaded injunction that the truth of the world is not all that is visible or conceivable by human means. At its root, then, apocalypse claims that a deeper destiny and purpose lies underneath. (6)

This enduring idea that truth or destiny will be revealed to humanity at the moment of apocalypse, the end delivering clarity and meaning to *before*, is often less an explicit belief than a feeling, embedded in individuals by a lifetime of being exposed to Western society’s prevailing ways of viewing the world.

As previously mentioned, in his essay “No Apocalypse, Not Now”, Derrida argues against the possibility of any end-of-world revelation. Speaking of the possibility of a nuclear war, he suggests that should such a thing eventuate there will be an “absolute self-destructability, without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth, without absolute knowledge” (27). Such a catastrophe would “irreversibly destroy the entire archive and all symbolic capacity” (27) and would thus destroy any capacity for revelation. Derrida’s ideas can be applied to any world-ending event. If such an event occurred, there would be no ultimate human values left in its wake, and there would be no revelation of any ultimate human truths because post-catastrophe there would quite probably be no people to have truths revealed to them. Others, such as Heffernan and Dale Knickerbocker, argue that the post-modern world has seen a decline in the belief in definitive endings. Thus, contemporary texts seem to reject the old “grand narratives”. Whereas “biblical-style apocalypses could be counted on to grant meaning to all preceding events, it seems that recent ‘revelations’

reject, or at least avoid, offering closure and transcendent truth” (Knickerbocker 348). However, the way the two authors investigated in this essay contend with revelation in their novels seems to suggest that the idea of revelation holds a very complex position in the post-modern world. It has neither been entirely rejected for science and logic, nor embraced, and remains a paradoxical concept. Both McCarthy and Atwood appear to attempt to critique the notion of revelation, while at the same time endorsing the idea that, post-catastrophe, the complexities of the old world will be simplified.

This destruction of the literary archive and subsequent slipping away of language and meaning, and thus the slipping away of any meaning that was constructed by human societies pre-apocalypse, is explored in both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Road*, and this adds to the resistance in both novels to the idea of revelation. That is, in addition to revealing how paradoxical the idea of ends is, and how unlikely it is that there could ever be a different, better or regenerative utopian end, both novels resist, or at least question, the idea of ends offering revelation. The meaning and understandings that a society constructs are inextricable from its language and so the main characters in each novel, Snowman and the man respectively, find the old world slipping away along with the language used to describe it. In the texts, language “has been returned to its rudiments and now must be re-imagined” in the context of the new world (Kunsa 58). In other words, “as the past world itself becomes meaningless...the names of the past become meaningless as well. That is not to say that meaning has gone out of the world. The point here is that the nature of meaning has changed” and there must be a “refiguring of meaning in the language of the new, post-apocalyptic world” (Kunsa 63).

Post-apocalypse, the pre-apocalyptic place names and names of people are shown to be redundant. In *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman strips himself of his birth-name, Jimmy, and bestows on himself the moniker of Snowman, a recognition of his extraordinary new status as the last of his kind, “existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apeline man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints” (8). In *The Road*, the man and his son are simply known as ‘the man’ and ‘the boy’; the man’s old name is useless in this new, post-apocalyptic world and whether or not his son, who was born post-apocalypse, ever had a name is never even mentioned. Like Snowman, who feels like an abominable snowman, a throwback compared to the genetically engineered Crakers, the man feels that “to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect” (McCarthy 163). Compared to the Crakers, who live in an environment that they were designed for, and the boy, who was born post-apocalypse and thus has no memory of the old world, both Snowman and the man seem like foreigners, creatures from another land who are utterly ill-equipped to live in the new world that they have found themselves in. The identities that they had spent their entire pre-apocalyptic lives forging are now obsolete, and so are the ideas and ideals that were important to that earlier world.

Both Snowman and the man struggle with the way their memories of the pre-apocalyptic world are fading along with the language that was relevant to it. The man in *The Road* thinks of the Names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (93)

Snowman is often preoccupied with trying to think of the meanings of words that drift, unbidden, into his consciousness: "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. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space" (Atwood 43). This "dissolution of meaning" is a regular occurrence for Snowman, who finds it especially painful because he was a 'word-man' pre-apocalypse. Disembodied fragments of phrases often enter his mind: "'In view of the mitigating,' he says. He finds himself standing with his mouth open, trying to remember the rest of the sentence" (5). At other times "Rag ends of language" float in his head: "*mephitic, metronome, mastitis, metatarsal, maudlin*. 'I used to be erudite,' he says out loud. *Erudite*. A hopeless word. What are all those things he once thought he knew, and where have they gone?" (175). It is not only the loss of words that distresses Snowman so much. It is also that the last remnants – the ideologies, the values, the beliefs, the principles, the structures – of the old world slip away along with the language. In *The Road*, the man thinks that "if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory" (17).

This fading of the structures of the old world, along with its language, casts doubt on the possibility of apocalyptic revelation. The destruction of language takes the values and ideologies of the old society with it and yet whenever we imagine revelation we imagine a revelation in the mode of our current society. Such a revelation would be based on something obsolete, something that did not exist anymore. McCarthy describes the man as feeling a "rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row" when he stands in the "charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water" (199), and the idea of the foundations of the old world being a lie is one that McCarthy returns to again and again in his novel. Derrida believes that the end will bring about the destruction of the archive and so no way of having revelation, but even if it did survive the archive would be redundant in the new world, and the long-held ways of seeing the world that preceded apocalypse could be revealed as untruths.

We project ourselves and our structures past the end and imagine some kind of revelation based on extant paradigms, yet any apocalyptic revelation is unimaginable, and would probably be unrecognisable, to us here in our time before the apocalypse. However, this does not stop people from being enamoured by the idea of apocalypse revealing fundamental truths, it does not stop novelists writing revelations into their novels, and it does not stop readers seeking truths in the literature that they read. Indeed, perhaps one of the main appeals of texts that are set post-apocalypse is the idea that, in their portrayal of life after the end they may contain some key to living now in our time before the end.

From one perspective, McCarthy's novel seems to portray not only the relativism of current views, but an existential nihilism, while from another it seems to place faith in hope and ultimate goodness. In "Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*", Ashley Kunsu quotes two critics who have opposing views as to whether or not McCarthy's general philosophy is hopeful or redemptive. According to Kunsu, Vereen M. Bell writes in her book *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* that McCarthy's general "metaphysic" amounts to "none, in effect – no first principles, no foundational truth." However, Edwin T. Arnold believes there is "always the possibility of grace and redemption even in the darkest of tales" (Kunsu 58). Both of these critics wrote well before *The Road* was published – in 1988 and 1999 respectively – however, they aptly illustrate the opposing viewpoints that it is possible to take on the position of revelation in the novel. Many critics writing about *The Road* have found it to be redemptive, one writing that "what the boy takes from the

father is what readers might take from *The Road*: a commitment to broader ethical horizons and a hope, however fraught, that the future will bring new forms of care and community” (Pizzano 371). Kunska believes that “while grace and redemption are at best tenuous, unrealized possibilities in prior McCarthy novels, in *The Road* these aspects fundamentally drive the narrative” (58), while others have criticised its redemption as being out of place in the context of desolation of much of the novel. Stefan Skrimshire cites one critic as saying that the ending is “arguably absurd in the face of such overwhelming nihilism” (1). Skrimshire argues that any redemption in the novel is severely limited by the “ostensibly irredeemable *earth*” (2) and that the boy’s meeting of the family of “good guys” after the death of his father is, at best, a “hesitant and uncertain” salvation, the “guarantee only that others like him are alive” (3). Michael Chabon sees little positive revelation or redemption and writes that the novel exploits the modern parent’s constant “fear of knowing...that you have left your children a world more damaged, more poisoned, more base and violent and cheerless and toxic, more doomed, than the one you inherited” (26), and a book review written by Toby Lichtig in English newspaper *The Guardian* agrees with this view: “humanity’s redemption is ultimately slight – certainly on a macro level. We’ve screwed it, says McCarthy. Irreparably. And this realisation knocks us for six. It is part of what makes the book so powerful”(Lichtig).

The nihilistic, anti-revelatory aspects of McCarthy’s text are obvious. Throughout the novel, he seems to reject the idea of a Christian God, or at least suggest that God has fled from the land. This precludes any possibility of a religious revelation in his novel. The landscape of McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic world is “godless” (2). It is a place where “secular winds” blow (188) and where “thin black trees” burn “like stands of heathen candles” (50). It is a place with a sky that is “black as the cellars of hell” (188), under which “creedless shells of men” (78) eat one another in order to live. It is a world that is “Senseless. Senseless” (237). In the novel the man and his son meet an old man, the ultimate nihilist, who declares “there is no God and we are his prophets” (181). In John the Apostle’s Revelation the disasters suffered at the End were driven by God’s plan for the world, and He was present after the End to gift a new world to those who survived. In the ruined world that McCarthy presents in *The Road* there does not seem to be any hope of God or of a “new heaven and a new earth”, and while the Bible predicts that “whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie” will be cast out of the new earth, many horrifying characters litter *The Road*. Indeed, the man reflects that “on this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world” (32).

There are other clues in the novel that God has gone from the land – or was possibly never there in the first place. The man takes some comfort in small rituals that he and the boy perform, such as when they bathe and dry themselves in front of the fire “like some ancient anointing...Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (77-78). If, like Frank Kermode, one believes that the Judeo-Christian narrative was created so that humans could impose order on the world, then the absence of God could mean the absence of order and perhaps even of meaning. At the very least it would beget existential questions that would be difficult to answer. People may try to recreate God, to “evoke the forms” or “construct ceremonies out of the air” but if these measures fail then the “absolute truth of the world” as the man sees it will become evident, and “the frailty of everything” will be “revealed at last” (28):

The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable  
 ...The crushing black vacuum of the universe...Borrowed time and  
 borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it. (138)

It seems, with descriptions such as these, that McCarthy has rejected the idea of the revelation of some great secret about humanity or of some ultimate human truth – unless the truth is that there is no truth, only disorder. This is not the only time in the novel that McCarthy depicts existence as short and insignificant, and horror and meaninglessness as possible revelations. He highlights human insignificance repeatedly, and repeatedly zooms out from daily life on earth to the vastness and coldness of the universe: “the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond” (193). He also evokes the often overwhelming idea of the enormity of time to point to human insignificance and meaninglessness:

Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all. (28)

With time, all “the curious news” and “the quaint concerns” (28) that the man reads about in old papers have come to mean nothing, and while there may be no god there certainly is something greater and older than ourselves: the “indifferent sun”(234). McCarthy’s narrator asks “do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground” (209), while the old man says of the world pre-apocalypse: “people were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didn’t believe in that. Tomorrow wasn’t getting ready for them. It didn’t even know they were there” (179). Looking at *The Road* from this perspective it appears that, by rejecting the order and the revelation that apocalypse is so closely linked to, McCarthy perhaps reveals the ultimate, unbearable truth: that there is no meaning apart from that which humans try so hard to create, that disorder, not God reigns, and that “when you die it’s the same as if everybody else did too” (180).

While it is possible to focus on the lack of order and the doubt of revelation, at times it is possible to see why some readers see hope in McCarthy’s novel. Alongside his ideas of the futility, brevity and irrelevance of human existence sit ideas that seem to directly contradict the idea that life is insignificant. One aspect of this is the way McCarthy’s narrator treats the destruction of the environment: he seems to lament it. In the novel, the man and his son see a dam and the boy asks his father whether it will be there for a long time. His father replies “It’s made out of concrete. It will probably be there for hundreds of years. Thousands even.” The boy then asks whether there is fish in the lake, and his father replies “No. There’s nothing in the lake” (19). This juxtaposition of the permanency of man’s construction and brevity of the life it was created by serves to emphasise the fragility of life, and also to suggest the need to protect it. To drive the point home, in the next paragraph McCarthy’s narrator writes: “In that long ago somewhere very near this place he’d watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain” (19). Falcons, like fish, no longer exist. Regularly, the descriptions of the desolation of the post-apocalyptic world give way to descriptions of nature as it was before its destruction. Trout, which once the man had watched “swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath” (30), are a recurring motif. The man remembers seeing them “turning on their sides to feed. Reflecting back the sun deep in the darkness like a flash of knives in a cave” (42). In fact, the novel ends with an image of the trout: “Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains...On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery” (306-7). The very idea that the world “could not

be put back” or “made right again” has been read as suggesting that there was a rightness or an order in the first place, a rightness and order that is not dependent on god or people – after all, god is only as old as man and the things of which McCarthy speaks are “older than man”. However, this could also be read as a simple statement of fact: that along with humankind, species far more ancient have been destroyed, and that things as they stand in the novel can never be put back as they were because too much damage has been done. Those who want to believe in revelation and redemption can find it in McCarthy’s words, but it is often a question of interpretation.

The same reading of the novel that would suggest that McCarthy invokes a greater order also could also suggest that grace and hope are present everywhere people are, and that human life, as all life, is intrinsically valuable. Central to the reading of order and meaning in the novel is the man and the boy’s close relationship. It is made plain that the man endures so long, that he doesn’t commit suicide, because of his son, his “heart” (29): “the boy was all that stood between him and death” (29). The man performs all the duties of a father. He puts the boy before himself and gives him treats when he can, such as the single coca cola that they find (23). He holds him while he sleeps, he listens to his fears, he encourages him. He washes pieces of a man off his son and as he does he thinks “this is my child... I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. That is my job” (77). As much as possible, the man tries to protect his son from the world they have been doomed to inhabit. The man’s depth of feeling for the boy is not less for them living post-apocalypse. In one passage, the boy asks the man what he would do if he died, to which the man replied, “If you died I would want to die too.” “So you could be with me?” the boy asks. “Yes” replies his father (9). When the man dies his words leave no doubt as to his feelings about his son. “You have my whole heart” he tells him. “You always did. You’re the best guy. You always were” (298).

In a godless country, it is surprising how many times the man mentions God. This persistent belief is what sets the man and his son apart from other people. When the man dies and his son is found by some other “good guys” the boy knows they are good primarily because they do not eat people. However, they also believe in God, and the woman tells him that “the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” (306). These words, which end the penultimate paragraph of the novel and are the last words that speak of humanity, seem to rend the meaninglessness from the world of the text and reinstate order and hope. Many critics point out passages like this to support their conviction that McCarthy wrote grace and redemption into his novel. At the very least, they argue, he seems to suggest that “human beings create God...in the sense that they create what there is of meaning and morality. Where humans live, then, God also survives” (Cooper 229). Indeed, throughout the novel there is no suggestion that God is something separate from humans, and these words, describing the breath of God as passing “from man to man” suggest that God, or belief, or order, lives in and is created by people. However, it is easy to agree with the contention that the redemption at the end of the novel is limited and partial. The boy meets godfearing “good-guys”, but they still inhabit a destroyed environment, and such an ending simply investigates the construction of “agonal meanings of hope within the landscape of irretrievable loss” (Skrimshire 11). The ending may be optimistic compared with when the boy was alone and constantly on the move with his sick father, however, it is only optimistic compared to the possible alternatives for the boy, and must be read against the background of the dead earth. There is no indication that any great change is going to occur that would alter the harshness of the world and the fact that humans appear to be slowly dying, but the boy’s immediate needs will be looked after. Perhaps that is all there is to be hoped for.

From one point of view the ambiguity of the 'revelation' of the novel, the nihilism that is tempered with hints of God and morality, might suggest that McCarthy is an author who is reluctant to, or who cannot, depart from the long-held ways of thinking: that there cannot be darkness without light, that humanity will prevail, that after apocalypse comes the possibility of regeneration. Atwood's ending to *Oryx and Crake* is similarly ambiguous – she appears to attempt to neither offer hope nor discourage it – and her ending has been criticised as being “somewhat of a banal dénouement included for the purpose of tying up the narrative on a slightly hopeful, if ambiguous, note” (Cooke 81). This criticism could just as likely be levelled against *The Road*. Perhaps McCarthy yielded to reader expectations for, if not a happy ending, an ambiguous one in which the boy does not die and is not alone. Perhaps he was unable to escape from the routine ways of thinking of apocalypse.

### **The Revelations of Jimmy-Snowman**

Like McCarthy, Atwood seems to suggest that if anything is revealed post-apocalypse it will be our own insignificance and impermanence, and that the order we create can easily crumble. Snowman ponders that it is “strange to think of the endless labour, the doffing, the hammering, the carving, the lifting, the drilling, day by day, year by year, century by century; and now the endless crumbling that must be going on everywhere. Sandcastles in the wind” (50). Now that he is the only human left, the truth is revealed to him: everything that humanity built and strived for so determinedly is inconsequential when there are no humans, aside from himself, around to revere the efforts. Soon there will probably be no one who even knows who built these civilisations, or why they were built. Snowman imagines the Crakers' descendants finding the ruins of great cities, asking “*How did this happen?...Who made these things? Who lived in them? Who destroyed them?*” (261). He thinks that:

At first they'll say giants or gods, but sooner or later they'll want to know the truth. Like him, they'll have the curious monkey brain. Perhaps they'll say, *These things are not real. They are phantasmagoria. They were made by dreams, and now that no one is dreaming them any longer they are crumbling away.* (261)

Snowman, like the man in *The Road*, has the exceptional experience of living after death; not his own death, but the death of most of humanity. There is a wide-spread idea amongst people who believe in the afterlife that they will understand their lives much better after death – things they never realised about existence will be revealed to them. This parallels the way people see apocalypse, that things will only become clear *after*, that we cannot understand things properly from our position “in the midst”. The metaphor of life, and the stuff of life, as a dream or as “phantasmagoria” is a similar analogy. Like a person who wakes from a vivid dream and realises that the battles they fought and lost or won in their dream have little significance in their waking life, so Snowman has lived beyond the end of most of humanity and is able to see that all the individual and collective conflicts that were waged in the human world have come to nothing and it is the Crakers' turn to make sense of the world now.

Snowman is in the unique position of having actually watched the almost complete extinction of his own race. In such a digitally connected world he is able to see the confusion unfold live on television and the internet from the safety of the Paradise Dome. Snowman remembers that “street preachers took to self-flagellation and ranting about the Apocalypse, though they seemed

disappointed: where were the trumpets and angels, why hadn't the moon turned to blood?" (397). This rather cynical position, that humans would be disappointed should the end actually occur, can be seen not only to pertain to those who anticipate a divine end but to all expectations about apocalypse. Humans have built an enormous discourse pre-empting and planning, and imagining that they know about, something they simply cannot anticipate. The notion that people will be disappointed in the apocalypse reflects the fact that people's expectations, the almost arbitrary images and plots they have formed around the subject and which have been reinforced by fictional literature, are unlikely to be fulfilled.

McCarthy and Atwood appear to have used the man and Snowman, whether deliberately or not, to reflect and support commonly-held beliefs about apocalypse. Yet both authors, especially McCarthy, appear to vacillate between rejecting the idea of order and revelation and endorsing the belief that there is ultimate truth in the world, whether this ultimate truth is that humanity is truly insignificant or whether it is that life is that there is always cause for hope. One of the most telling indications of both authors' indecisiveness is perhaps their treatment of ending. *The Road* is largely a despairing novel – there does not appear to be much hope that the environment will ever recover from the catastrophe that befell it – but its ending, which could have been ultimately hopeless, is instead hopeful, even if it holds only personal hope for the boy. The man dies, severing the central relationship and the "grace" of the novel, and leaving his young son alone to face the bleak world, or to kill himself with the one bullet left in the gun. However, as the man tells his son before he dies, "Goodness will find the little boy. It always had. It will again." (300), and in an extraordinary coincidence another man, another "one of the good guys", finds the boy (302). In *Oryx and Crake*, the ending is ambiguous but also hopeful. In the last passages of the book, Snowman, who has been mourning the fact that he is the last of the human race, discovers some people camping close to him. His speculations as to how they will react to him – "What would they do? Scream and run? Attack? Open their arms to him with joy and brotherly love?" (431) – remain unresolved, as the novel finishes before the reader knows whether Snowman is going to attack, befriend or avoid the group.

If literature serves to both reflect and refract the beliefs of society, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Road* are ideal texts to investigate when trying to see how literature supports and adds to the way people view apocalypse. Both authors approach the notion of revelation in contradictory ways and neither manages to write a novel completely devoid of revelation. At times, both novels are nihilistic. Both authors can be seen to simultaneously believe in and disbelieve the notions of apocalyptic revelation and the idea that the end will give meaning and clarity to what came before it. They appear to reject the order that people have imposed on the world; an order that is so vital to the way we think about apocalypse. However, while both authors seem to be sceptical about Godly revelations, and ambivalent towards the revelation of ultimate human truth, neither completely rejects the popular idea that life *does* have meaning, even if they suggest that meaning is a human construction. Both novels reflect the values of our time, and viewed in this way both novels suggest that while the values of our time are no longer predicated on God, humans are still in many ways believers; or at least not entirely *dis*-believers. The Judeo-Christian narrative, with its clear beginning and end (an end that is not an end but that predicts eternity), still subtly influences many of us.

## Conclusion

Much of this essay has discussed the ways humans 'make sense' of their world. Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* is the most prominent exploration of the place apocalypse holds in this sense-making, but many other critics mentioned in this essay have investigated the ways humans 'make sense', and, taking a wider view of sense-making, each person who contributes to the discourse contributes to the sense-making in turn. Yet with all this making sense, little has been said about the phrase itself. The most important aspect of 'to make sense' is that it is an *action*. Sense is something humans create. It is a story that is placed over the world, often to contain it. Sense often changes over time; the way our ancestors made sense of their world is different to how we make it. Knowledge that the Earth is the centre of the universe has given way to knowledge that it orbits the sun. Things that we know now will give way to things that we learn in the future.

The sense of what apocalypse and post-apocalypse are has changed over time and, these being intricate, multifaceted and often contradictory concepts, often changes depending on individual outlook, beliefs and fears. Someone living in the twenty-first century is likely to view the idea of apocalypse differently than their predecessors living at the turn of the first millennium. A person for whom the environment holds preeminent importance will envisage apocalypse differently to a person who feels that the prospect of nuclear war is very real. Despite fluctuations in intensity of belief, variations in types of ends and even post-modernist revisions on how we see apocalypse and post-apocalypse, the enduringly appealing "the paradigms of apocalypse" continue to "lie under our ways of making sense of the world" (Kermode 28). Apocalypse and post-apocalypse are blanks on which are painted fears and hopes: fears about ends and death and the unknown and even meaninglessness, and hopes about renovation and meaning and new, better beginnings. At heart, ideas of apocalypse and post-apocalypse are about the tension that exists between the hope that there is a larger, more significant narrative that we are part of, and the fear that there is not. Notions of apocalypse and post-apocalypse reflect the hope that we will live forever and the intellectual knowledge that we must die. And as always, fictional literature continues to be an extremely important vehicle for exploring, and revealing, the subtly changing ways society and individuals imagine and engage with these complex concepts.

Literature is well-known for its function of mirroring the concerns of humans, and, according to Kermode and Berger, apocalyptic literature is part of an attempt to 'work through' human reactions to apocalypse and endings. The never-ceasing output of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic literature is reflective of the fact that this objective can never be accomplished. For many, apocalypse is a constantly receding event. For some, apocalypse is a world-changing event that has already occurred and under whose shadow we are living in a constant state of post-apocalypse. Either way, apocalypse is an event without a real referent, an event that cannot be signified. Novels such as *Oryx and Crake* and *The Road* attempt to provide signification to apocalypse, but what they really end up illuminating is the way people make sense of the world.

On their wanderings down the road, the man and his son visit the house in which the man grew up. Here, the man reflects on the "worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be" of which he dreamt when he was a boy (McCarthy 26). This speculation, this projection into the future, this envisaging of a clear, coherent narrative – part of the thinking of all human beings – helps to form ideas of apocalypse. Humans like to imagine *what if*. It is a way of containing the future. Margaret Atwood, writing in *Curious Pursuits*, states that "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?"* (323). In many ways, these are the *what ifs* that McCarthy is dealing with: *What if we continue down the road we're already on? What are our saving graces?* Yet this asking of *what if*, so central to the writer, reaches beyond the novel. The *what ifs* that these authors ask are the *what ifs* that humans struggle to answer in their lives.

Humans look to apocalypse to provide a blank slate on which to start afresh. We look to apocalypse to provide revelations, to clarify that which came before it. We believe in apocalypse and yet, being often cynical creatures, we disbelieve it – display clerical scepticism towards it – simultaneously. Atwood and McCarthy, with their speculative fictions, can be seen to demonstrate the contradictory way that humans think of apocalypse. Both authors conform to apocalyptic thinking in some ways: both seem to see the end as imminent. Neither sees generations of humanity extending into the future. Both use the apocalyptic scenario to critique the behaviour of humans and portray humans as having a negative impact on their environment, whether or not they caused the end. Both project humans after the end to portray a post-apocalypse and, with it, a chance to start again without the institutions of the previous world. Yet in other ways they depart from the traditional, appealing, destroy/renew apocalyptic. They question the possibility of positive renovation or profound revelation after the end, and depict language and human-created meaning as slipping away when the elements of civilisation are eliminated. The very idea of ends is interrogated as all three of the main characters are shown to be living past the end, with time opening up in front of them. Ultimately, the contradictions are such that both authors appear to confirm the idea that human life is inherently valuable while at the same time portraying sense and meaning as humanly constructed rather than immanent. Such contradictions do not make the texts flawed. Instead, they are simply part of the way humans think about apocalypse.

Perhaps we are the ones of all history living right before the *real* end, and it is looming, ever closer, and this time of all times the prophecies are right. Or perhaps we are living in a perpetual *after* the end, like the man and the boy and Snowman: forever trying to understand what came before us, forever living in a world where meaning, which we believe will finally give us a way to understand our world and our existence, remains just beyond our reach, indeed, where meaning proves to be even more elusive without the societies and institutions that helped create it in the first place. More likely, here in the middle of time, here in the “middest”, we will never get answers to our questions about ends because such answers do not exist. Perhaps not even those around at the end will know it for what it is. Whichever way, there is no doubt that humankind spends a huge amount of time imagining its end and yet finds it enormously difficult to think of any world without ourselves in it.

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