

Often seen as a postmodern writer, Atwood is noted for her openness and textual playfulness in foregrounding the indeterminacy of reality, identity, history, etc. Yet while apparently challenging the western mimetic assumption that knowledge, meaning, and truth or reality) are transparent, definite, something that can be fully articulated, Atwood's writing also reverberates with her social and political commitment. Indeed, as Linda Hutcheon points out, while postmodern representation, however self-reflexive it may be, cannot avoid being political, postmodernism is often "politically ambivalent" (167-68). When their stable identity and meaning is decentered or negated, social justice and political commitments often become questionable, if not impossible. Accordingly, the coexistence of Atwood's postmodern traits and her political commitment seem contradictory and self-defeating. Nevertheless, this paper argues that their coexistence could actually suggest that Atwood sees truth, reality, and language (or representation) from more than one dimension.

The seeming contradiction mentioned above may be explained by what M. C. Michael sees as a narrative strategy for some contemporary writers (e.g. feminist ones) who intend to maintain a certain social and political commitment in their writing, while also embracing postmodernism. That is, on the one hand these writers, Atwood included, challenge western mimetic realism and humanism; on the other hand, because they attempt to make real changes in society through their fiction writing, they usually do not engage in a dispersion of meaning and of the subject so "radical" that a connection between subject positions and social commitment cannot be maintained (10). Moreover, in order to reach "as large a readership as possible," such writers maintain certain narrative conventions of realism, not mimetic realism in its conventional sense but a revisionary realism that "reflects not the world but rather 'the world constructed in language...out of what is (discursively) familiar'" (9). The socially familiar and recognizable provides a provisional and necessary basis for making ethical judgments and gathering

political momentum for social change.

Prompted by the concerns illustrated above, this paper will discuss the notions of language, truth, history, and some relevant topics in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (hereafter *OC*). As this is apparently a large project, I narrow down my discussion to Snowman's interactions with the Crakers in the post-catastrophic world. But first, several textual examples from and of the pre-catastrophic world will be singled out to set the stage for the later discussion.

In *OC*, Atwood's postmodern awareness of the indeterminacy of truth and reality is clearly highlighted in the conversation between Crake and Jimmy (renamed Snowman after the destruction of human civilization). For example, in response to Jimmy's inquiry about the reality of internet suicide and execution shows, Crake replied, "What is *reality*?" (83). Similarly, when Jimmy first came to Crake's office at the RejoovenEsense and asked him "What are you really up to here?" Crake replied, "What is *really*?" (302). And earlier when Jimmy visited Watson-Crick and asked Crake whether the butterflies there were "recent" or not, we are informed that he was trying to avoid discussing "the *what is real* thing" with Crake (200).¹

Set in the United States in the near future,² the novel's pre-catastrophic world is presented as a post-industrial consumer society filled with what Jean Baudrillard calls replicas (or simulacra) and hyper-reality. To cite just a few examples, when Jimmy was very little, he once lived in a Cape Cod-style frame house with "*reproduction*" furniture (26). The narrator tells us that not until Jimmy was rather old did he realize what "reproduction" meant— "that for each reproduction item, there was supposed to be an original somewhere. Or there had been once. Or

¹ In the novel, Crake's tendency toward scientific objectivity and his unbending confidence in using scientific measures to solve all human problems suggests a dogmatic nature that eventually leads to his genocide plot.

² According to J. Brooks Bouson, Atwood once stated that Jimmy/Snowman was "born around 1999" and was close to 30 when the story comes to the post-catastrophic part (140).

something” (26). Also reflecting such a social milieu are the abundant internet shows and games teeming with violence and porn that Jimmy and Crake used to watch and play in their high school days. We are informed that the little girls on the kiddie-sex internet sites had never seemed real but had always struck Jimmy “as digital clones” (90). In a similar manner, we learn of “a current-affairs show about world political leaders” on dirtysockpuppets.com; as Crake told Jimmy, “with digital genalteration” people could never know “whether any of these generals and whatnot existed any more, and if they did, whether they’d actually said what you’d heard” (82). To cite just one more example, one day not long after the CorpSeCorps showed the grownup Jimmy the recorded execution of his mother, the following question appeared in Jimmy’s mind: “What if the whole thing was a fake? It could even have been digital...” (259).

These examples demonstrate Atwood’s awareness that with modern technology our world, especially the world of consumer mass culture, no longer guarantees any sense of authenticity or reality. Due to the incessant technology-driven (re)editing, mass reproduction and circulation, the world “produces” only large-scale confusion and skepticism about the signifying relations between original and referent. On the other hand, it is also important to point out that in recalling the notion of “the familiar” mentioned earlier, Atwood’s depiction itself embodies a kind of adherence to social realism. Together with other textual examples, Atwood’s depiction of the pre-catastrophic presents a macrocosmic reflection of our current world with all its forms of social unrest amplified.³ It is a world that has been dominated by materialism, utilitarianism, capitalist greed and aggression, resulting in global warming and food shortages, environmental pollution and the increasing risk of epidemics, over-population and poverty

³ Though, as Atwood explicates, “we don’t really get an overview of the structure of the society” in the novel but “see its central characters living their lives within small corners of that society, much as we live ours,” and “[w]hat they can grasp of the rest of the world comes to them through television and the Internet” (“*The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in Context,” 517).

(especially in the Third World), and a consumer-driven mass culture filled with sex and violence purely for entertainment and with controversial bio-transgenic products controlled by big transnational corporations. Though mainly based on the extension of logic,⁴ Atwood's imagination of the near future rings true in both social and historical terms.

In *OC* Atwood juxtaposes these glimpses of the pre-catastrophic world with the post-catastrophic world, in which the novel is mainly set. After briefly highlighting Atwood's postmodern consciousness as well as her adherence to social realism revealed by her depiction of the pre-catastrophic world, the ensuing discussion mainly focuses on Snowman and especially his interactions with the Crakers in the post-catastrophic world. My discussion juxtaposes the following two dimensions: Atwood's postmodern consciousness of the arbitrary nature of naming and her engagement in challenging conventional western ideas about grand narratives, such as History and Religion; and her humanistic concerns about love, meaning, and order. This paper concludes with Snowman's concerns with human atrocities throughout history, which make clear Atwood's historical outlook and further demonstrate her adherence to social realism.

Atwood's Two Dimensions

In *OC* Atwood creates for her bio-engineered species, the Crakers, living conditions that will prompt them to learn about their genesis and the creation of the world. Such a plot, however ridiculous it may appear, allows Atwood and her readers to imagine the initial state of naming and storytelling in the production of meaning and history. Accordingly, Snowman's interactions with the Crakers provide important clues by which we may detect Atwood's parodic challenge to

⁴ For example, as Earl G. Ingersoll points out, Atwood argues that "all of the science in *Oryx and Crake* represents a mere extension of present knowledge in genetic engineering" (164). In her "Acknowledgements" Atwood says that the "deep background" of the novel has been "supplied by many magazines and newspapers and non-fiction science writers" that she has "encountered over the years" (*OC* 376). In other words, what constitutes the deep background of the novel either already exists or could very likely exist in the near future.

western mimetic humanism. Here I will briefly introduce some postmodern ideas as a theoretical background for my further arguments.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard strongly criticizes western discourses as being full of meta-narratives, or grand-narratives, i.e., universalizing and transcendentalizing generalizations about the world such as the Hegelian narrative of History or the biblical narrative of a transcendental Absolute; and he characterizes postmodernism as being skeptical about any such narratives. In Hutcheon's words, the initial concern of postmodernism is "to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural'...are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us" (2). As postmodernism is mainly a western cultural product, what needs to be "de-naturalized" is largely based on the western humanistic tradition of classical Greece and the European Enlightenment, for it is from this that these so-called grand-narratives spring. The problem is that this tradition has always emphasized an anthropocentric confidence in scientific reason and knowledge—the belief that human consciousness can fully grasp and represent its (primarily perceptual) experience of the world, and that there is an ultimate reality and meaning which corresponds to this experience. In terms of linguistic expression, this humanism suggests that there is a stable one-to-one correspondence between word and world, sign and referent, signifier and signified.

Yet this sort of mimetic realism always conceals the actual power struggle between the two sides of the signification or meaning-producing process, the struggle between a knowing subject (as "center") and an object (or marginalized "other"). As Derrida, among other poststructuralists, points out in his deconstruction of Plato and western metaphysics, this hierarchical binary suggests the totalizing force of the subject, whose ideology and values are taken as being "universal," suppressing from recognition and representation any real *difference* or *otherness*. Employing a subversive or parodic strategy to work from within the

conventions, then, a postmodern text usually lays bare the involvement of power in the signifying process, that is, in the production of meaning. In other words, a postmodern narrative or text will tend to expose the fact that representation is not free from ideological preference, from the manipulation of the socially dominant. Accordingly, the formation of meaning and history through the mediation of language (or representation) often becomes “a matter of construction, not reflection” (cf. Hutcheon 41).

In *OC*, these postmodern parodic impulses can be detected from the interactions between the Crakers and Snowman, the supposed only human survivor until we come to the end of the novel. By having Snowman be set up by Crake to shepherd the Crakers after the destruction of human civilization, Atwood gives him the role of priest and name-giver (or law-maker)⁵. The gap in knowledge between Snowman and the nascent Crakers then leads to many miscommunications. Through dramatizing these miscommunications in her text, Atwood is able to demonstrate the arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified in Snowman's representational acts, such as his acts of naming and storytelling.

Here the problem is that though the Crakers are taught to use human language, they do not fully grasp the whole network of established knowledge that stands behind the sign system. Their surroundings were to them like pure, empty signifiers waiting to be “named” by them. But this naming actually became Snowman's role. To illuminate this role, Atwood often foregrounds the insurmountable gap in knowledge between him and the Crakers. For example, at the beginning of the story, the children of the Crakers found items such as “a hubcap, a piano key,” and “a chunk of a pale-green pop bottle” by the ocean, and they asked Snowman what these things were (7). The narrator made it clear that Snowman felt there was “no

⁵ Snowman's role as a law-maker, making laws mostly in the name of the apotheosized Crake and Oryx, is often highlighted in the novel. For example, once when he was starving, we are informed that he thought to himself, “He must have been stupefied with drink when he was *laying down the laws*. He should have made rabbits edible” [italics added] (96).

way of explaining to them what these curious items are, or were.” The difficulty of reaching full communication due to the lack of a fully-shared sign system was again highlighted near the end of the book. Before Snowman set out to meet three human survivors, he felt a need to warn the Crakers about them in case he was not able to return safely:

He should say something to them... He should say that if these people should become violent—*Oh Snowman, please, what is violent?*—or if they attempt to rape (*What is rape?*) the women, or molest (*What?*) the children, or if they try to force others to work for them...

Hopeless, hopeless. *What is work?* Work is when you build things—*What is build?*—or grow things—*What is grow?*—either because people would hit and kill you if you didn’t, or else because they would give you money if you did.

What is money? (366-67)

Obviously, the difficulty in communicating with the Crakers will make it impossible to warn them about the humans.

The insurmountable gap in knowledge between the Crakers and Snowman enables Atwood to plot a process of construction of meaning and history. In the text, this gap in knowledge propelled Snowman to make up stories and lies in his acts of naming and storytelling. One such case appears when Snowman was fed up with the Craker children’s curiosity. He told them that if they kept on asking questions, they would be “toast” (97). As Shu-chun Yen points out, this slang expression suggests that one is doomed or in trouble (77). It is noteworthy, however, that Snowman’s practice in explaining “toast” to the children also demonstrates how the naming process embodied in human language can be very arbitrary by nature. After making a few attempts and realizing the unavoidable difficulties he faced, Snowman started again and invented the following version.

Toast was a pointless invention from the Dark Ages. Toast was an implement of torture that caused all those subjected to it to regurgitate in verbal form the sins and crimes of their past lives. Toast was a ritual item devoured by fetishists in the belief that it would enhance their kinetic and sexual powers. Toast cannot be explained by any rational means.

Toast is me.

I am toast. [italics original] (98)

Despite the fact that it is unlikely for Snowman to really use such abstruse words and metaphorical expressions with the Crakers, the passage skillfully illustrates the arbitrary relation between the signifier (“toast”) and its supposed referent in an act of naming. Here the signifier “toast” has no fixed essence at all. Its definition depends completely upon Snowman’s personal and totally arbitrary decision; thus the supposedly transparent and natural correspondence between the signifier and the signified in mimetic signification is challenged. This example works as a reminder to the reader that meanings that have been considered natural could in fact be manipulated products in actuality.

In other words, by “re-naming” something known to the reader as “toast,” Snowman’s imaginary scenario suggests how, in certain circumstances, any items may be re-inscribed by the dominant, the law-maker, with different meanings. The conventional notion of a supposedly inherent, transcendental essence could turn out to be a “cultural,” not a “natural,” product. In addition, as suggested by the cited passage, by using abstract concepts and mysterious metaphors for reference and skipping all necessary ratiocinative steps, a sign (such as “toast”) can be endowed with a sort of apotheosized power. This process of abstraction may indicate a totalizing force that the speaking subject (Snowman) has exercised to cover up all logical gaps and contradictions. This said, the concluding statements (“Toast is me. I am toast.”) not only could ridicule Snowman’s wretched living condition, but also could suggest a climactic embodiment, a final end or telos of the totalizing force in Snowman’s explanation.

Reading the passage in this light, Snowman's imaginary scenario is a telling postmodern example of the production of meaning, that is, of the authority fabricated through this kind of act of naming; meaning and authority constructed in this way could themselves be similarly arbitrary and groundless. Therefore this case insinuates a certain power relation between the Crakers and Snowman in the production of meaning. As the two concluding sentences channel to Snowman all the mysterious power and awe generated in the process of naming, Snowman, the only authorized storyteller, apparently occupies the position of power, of dominance, of the priest or ruler. Again we are shown that the act of representation is always political, and that the power implicit in this act is far from being neutral and natural. Understandably, through Snowman's manipulative acts of naming, almost all of his belongings, including his broken sunglasses, watch, and baseball cap, could become "talismans" (7) to him.

The next case to be discussed is Snowman's myth-making which calls to mind the biblical stories about genesis and creation. In the novel, when Snowman was urged to speak about the creation of the Crakers and the world, the narrator made it clear that he knew he would have to make up something. "Internal consistency is best," he reminded himself; and he knew that even if "he's caught in a minor contradiction he can make it stick" because he was "the only one left who'd known Crake," their creator, and this fact enables him to "lay claim to the inside track" (96). As a matter of fact, we are informed that ever since Snowman encountered the Crakers for the first time and tried to lead them out of Crake's Paradise dome, the Crakers had accepted whatever he said (and made up) "without question" (350). Through these textual reminders, apparently, Atwood expects her readers to notice the fictitious aspect of Snowman's storytelling.

As in the case of "toast," because the Crakers lacked a complete referential system of signs and meanings for communicating more easily, there were a lot of logical gaps that could be easily covered up. Nevertheless, in this case Atwood

plots a line of development for Snowman's myth-making. When the links among signs and stories were better forged, their inner consistency became difficult to maintain, and apparent contradictions or ruptures could more easily be felt.⁶ For example, near the end of the story, when Snowman returned from a trip to the RejoovenEsense Compound, the Crakers, informed in advance that he was to take a private trip to see Crake, asked him, "Was it difficult, your journey into the sky?" (361). Here the narrator deliberately exposed Snowman's struggle in trying to recollect when and in what context he had suggested that Crake was in the sky, in order to keep his myths coherent (cf. 361-62). After a Craker child bluntly challenged the logic of his narration, he was saved only because a Craker woman kindly changed the topic. Nevertheless, through the narrator's deliberate depiction of Snowman's faltering process of myth-making, the readers are continually reminded of the fabricated aspect and logical fragility of this myth-making.

In terms of storytelling in relation to history, Snowman's case could be seen as a humorous parody of western grand narratives, including biblical ones. It reminds us of the possibility that all grand-narratives about genesis and history may be less a matter of "historical truth" than of "narrative coherence." Together with the "toast" case discussed above, Snowman's myth-making demonstrates Atwood's self-conscious employment of parodic strategies to challenge the solidity of western mimetic narrative conventions. By exposing the process of meaning-construction and storytelling, Atwood presents for us the possibility that there may be no inherent essence in what we have habitually taken as being true and solid. Rather, manipulation by the socially dominant may be a pivotal force in representation and meaning production; and yet, authority constructed or reinforced in this way is hardly immune to the threat of subversion.

As noted above, Michael points out that some postmodern writers with political commitments tend to challenge mimetic realism while simultaneously

⁶ As also pointed out by Yen, 90-91.

retaining, to a degree, realist conventions; we see the latter in their representations of what is socially and culturally familiar to the reader. Here we might think that what is familiar to us, or what is “real” and “true” for us, is also grounded in traditional “humanistic” (or anthropocentric) conventions of meaning-construction, and this is obviously true of the concept of “human nature” itself. And yet, perhaps here we reach the limit of that sort of interpretation or go beyond that limit; perhaps the habitual human desires for love, meaning, order, and social bonding contribute to *another dimension* in determining what we may consider as “true” or “real” in the human condition. Looking at things from this perspective, epistemological and ontological considerations may seem less relevant to how we see the notions of truth and reality.

Thus, coming now to Atwood’s humanistic concern with human desires and needs, with regard to Snowman’s interactions with the Crakers, even though Atwood underscores the arbitrary nature of reference and the manipulation of power in Snowman’s myth-making and naming acts, her portrayal also foregrounds love and care in social relations. For instance, even though we are informed that his myth-making is perpetrated out of spite,⁷ Snowman also lied for the sake of good will. When he led the Crakers out of the Paradise dome and the RejoovenEsense Compound proper to settle by the ocean, they were about to see human corpses and death for the first time. Passing by Crake’s corpse in the dome, he told them that the remains of Crake were only “a thing of no importance—only a sort of husk, only a sort of pod” because he surmised it “would have been a shock to them to have witnessed their creator in his present state” (351). When the Crakers saw a dead body on the way, Snowman told them that it was only “part of the chaos” that Crake and Oryx were trying, out of love, to clear away for them, although they hadn’t quite finished the clearing-away yet (352). When Snowman had to shoot a

⁷ Snowman’s “fabrication” is “not unmixed with spite” (104). Mad about his miserable condition caused by Crake’s genocide plot, he knew that Crake “was against the notion of God or of gods of any kind, and would surely be disgusted by the spectacle of his own gradual deification.”

man and then a mother and her child to release them from suffering, he told the Crakers that what they saw was only part of a bad dream that Crake was dreaming so that they would not have to dream it themselves. In addition, when Snowman tried to convince the Crakers to follow him out of Paradise, he told them “Oryx and Crake wish you to have a better place than this” (349). We are told that the Crakers nodded and smiled because “they’d always known” that “Oryx and Crake wished them well.”

It seems that although Crake was against religion and believed that he had “edited out” from the Crakers some supposedly useless human mechanisms, including those for developing art and religion, Atwood makes the Crakers develop similar human traits that we can recognize. Accordingly, we find them becoming anxious and insecure when a Craker child was attacked by a bobkitten and when Snowman had been absent longer than they had expected. Understandably, when Snowman returned from his trip to the RejoovenEsense Compound, he went to see the Crakers first to “demonstrate his safe return, explain why he’s been away so long, [and] deliver his message from Crake” (359); he did not directly go back to his resting place though he was tired and needed sleep. In addition, when they saw his wound and prepared a fish for him, even though he was not hungry, he tried hard to eat because he didn’t want his illness to frighten them and make them worried (363).⁸

It is likely that Atwood uses the development of the Crakers not only to challenge, or reflect upon, Crake’s Enlightenment confidence in using scientific measures to solve all human problems (Stephen Dunning; Yen), but also to show us the pervasiveness and resilience of a fundamental human nature that (even in

⁸ Near the end of the story, Snowman realizes that he might have to sacrifice himself for the sake of the Crakers’ survival. Before setting out to meet three other human survivors, Snowman knows he is frightened (372) but also realizes that the Crakers have become his responsibility. In a sense, at the end of the story Snowman has developed into a loving and “morally responsible human agent” for the Crakers (Brian Bethune 48; Coral Ann Howells 173).

genetically engineered organisms) desires security, care, and love. It is thus telling that Atwood makes the Crakers appear content with the illusion that they had been created and protected by the “sacred” Crake and Oryx, despite the fact that this “belief” was apparently not based on fact. Snowman would have hurt their feelings if he had told them the truth that there was no divine meaning and no love behind their creation.

Accordingly, Snowman’s well-intentioned words and deeds can be seen, not as calling into question the *essential meaning* of words and deeds in general, but as endowing words and deeds in general with *a sense of love and meaning*. Or even, taking words and deeds (including daily routines and religious rituals) as symbolic expressions of language, we could say that he infused the symbolic structure itself with love and meaning. Under his influence, the Crakers copied, in their own behavior, his acts and words and the values that they seemed to embody or express. For example, when they saw Snowman return from his trip with a wound in his foot, they thought of giving him an extra fish though this was against the rule. Recalling Snowman’s comforting praise of the virtually sacred Crake and Oryx mentioned above, they asked him, “Would you like a fish now, Snowman? We will ask Oryx to give us a fish, *to die for you*” [italics added] (362).

In a sense, the interactions between Snowman and the Crakers reflect Atwood’s observation of human nature in terms of human desires and human needs. It is thus pertinent and perhaps important to point out that we can elicit Atwood’s major ideas about human nature in relation to such diverse aspects as language, myth, religion, truth, fiction, and politics from her TV interview (mainly about her *Handmaid’s Tale*) with Bill Moyers. As revealed in the interview, for Atwood, human beings are by nature a species that desires love, meaning, order, and restrictions. Such an affirmation is drawn from her analysis of mythologies and of the repetitive pattern behind human history. Basing her observation on myths that have been with us for a long time, the author claims that human beings are

symbol-making creatures and that human languages are religious and symbolic. Significantly, all the languages of myths contain past and future tenses in their grammars, suggesting a built-in capacity in human intelligence that tends to imagine beginnings and ends to narratives (or, to put it in another way, to invent an order for events). With such languages, human beings tend to place themselves within a larger story about the universe; consequently, at a certain point they would “have to postulate either a god, an entity, or an unknown” as their origin.

Making it clear that she is a pantheist and a strict agnostic,⁹ Atwood believes that it is human nature to prefer making a large story with a god/God in it because a universe with an intelligence like us in it is more “understandable” and “human.” It is so because, as Atwood says, a universe without an intelligence is the scientific version “about atoms” which has nothing to say to us, while an intelligence like us in our origin suggests that there is someone who has an interest in us and whom “we can talk to in theory.” Not suggesting that a human history with a god (God) in it is true, or truer than one without a god or God, Atwood’s explication nevertheless reveals her notion that it is human nature to desire attention and communication. It thus also seems to suggest that it is human nature to desire care, love, and meaning in life.

Furthermore, we can infer from the interview that for Atwood the human capacity to construct or build meaning through organizing time and occurrences into a logical sequence manifests itself not only in the desire for a god or God, but also a desire for order and restrictions. As she points out, the human desire for order and restrictions and correlative fear of chaos and turmoil can often be manipulated by totalitarian systems for political benefits, as manifested in the American Puritan theocracy, for instance. Implicitly, for Atwood, religion is an institution that fulfils the human desire for order and restriction; on the other hand,

⁹ For Atwood’s explanation of what it means to be a pantheist and a strict agnostic, as well as of the difference between agnosticism and atheism, see her interviews with Moyers and the anonymous reviewer of Random House.

it is often utilized as a political weapon to tyrannize others.

In her TV interview with Moyers, when Atwood claims that human desires and fears, as manifested in myths that have been with us for a long time, haven't really changed, Moyers challenges her observation by asking her whether she thinks myths are true. Asking "What is true?" in response, Atwood says that truth could simply mean "prove it" in a "very materialistic society," and yet the following aspects or qualities of the term "truth" should also be considered: "Is it true about human nature? Is it true about who we are? Is it true about how we behave?" In short, for Atwood, one way of referring to truth is via a consideration of human nature and the human condition, not necessarily through proofs based on material measurement and scientific knowledge.

In the interview, Atwood uses the concept of "dream" to explain that the reality or truth about our world includes not only the visible world, but also subjective experiences with and in the invisible world (in "faith," for example) which cannot be proven nor negated. While scientific knowledge refers to what can be proven and repeated in an experiment, scientific expression is also a kind of storytelling; it also has to deal with "the unknown" in a literary or mystical manner. Replacing "God" and his Word "Let there be Light" with the notions of "a singularity" and the Big Bang, scientists are unable to explicate what this singularity is.¹⁰ Atwood's observation thus breaks down not only the classical Greek and Enlightenment "humanistic" hierarchy which places scientific knowledge above religious faith, but also the boundary between science and literature, or between so-called scientific truth and fiction. Hence we have Atwood's flexible attitude toward concepts like "truth," her sense of the complexity of truth, the sense that there is no absolute distinction between fact and fiction, or

¹⁰ For Atwood's relevant remarks, also see her interviews with Karla Hammond (115), Geoff Hancock (196), and Random House.

life and art.¹¹

We see this idea reverberating in *OC* when Snowman uses pictures in place of “real” things to describe things both abstract and concrete, such as chaos and flowers, to the Crakers. Here we are informed that he thought “*Not real can tell us about real*” [italics original] (*OC* 102). Reading in this light, similarly, though Snowman’s myth-making is apparently fictitious to us, it nevertheless can be used to tell us about certain truths regarding human nature and human needs.

Moreover, it is important to point out that in the beginning of the book, when Snowman felt he had to do something to better occupy his time in order to remain sane in the post-catastrophic world, he thought of diary writing or list-making as something that once could give life “some structure” (41). In a sense, despite the epistemological and ontological uncertainties regarding human language and representation, language in itself is a structuring *force*; it gives order to social bonds. Thus, as we have seen, it was through the influence of Snowman’s expressions and deeds that the Crakers were able to copy his acts and the values and meanings embodied in these acts. Near the end of the book, the Crakers eventually developed a primitive form of religion (cf. 360-63), which not only indicates the emergence of a tightly bonded communal structure but also foregrounds the value of love and care in such a structure. Their chanting, liturgy, statue-making, and healing purring for Snowman all demonstrate their care for him. Through the “enforcement” of a symbolic structure, human love and relations can be developed and encoded. Hence, upon his return, Snowman recognized the excitement in the Crakers’ way of expressing themselves, which had “more energy than they usually display about anything” (361). Even if fictitious, then, Snowman’s myth-making contributed to fulfilling the human need for love and care, as well as for order and restrictions. It also echoes Atwood’s contention that it is

¹¹ In her nonfiction book *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood claims that she believes art and life (or fiction and fact) are not two separate concepts; rather, fiction can generate a very “real” influence upon people (7).

more human and understandable for people to prefer a story about human history that contains an intelligence like us at its (or our) origin. In this sense, human nature and human needs may stand above the demands for absolute truth and reality.

On the other hand, it is important to point out that this does not mean Atwood would ever justify the existence of a tyrannical authority established through a sort of fictional meaning-construction. What ultimately concerns the author with regard to representation is how its power can be used to do both good and bad. After all, for Atwood language is a tool, and all tools are in themselves neutral, they can be used in both good and bad ways;¹² similarly, fiction (or any form of symbolic and artistic representation) is not necessarily bad, inferior to scientific knowledge, or far from truth.

Since her early days, the various forms of human aggressiveness and power have been Atwood's central concern.¹³ On more than one occasion, she has reiterated that the "novel is a social vehicle" that "reflects society," and that writers can combat social injustice by being eyewitnesses.¹⁴ For Atwood, it should be noted, being an eyewitness does not imply mimetic realism in the strict sense. It indicates a kind of realism based on social observation, but mixed with imagination. Atwood refers to this kind of fact in fiction as "enhanced fact" in her later non-fiction *Negotiating with the Dead* (118). Because its dramatic power can draw our attention to some social facts that are often overlooked, this kind of narrative appears particularly useful in identifying social injustice, which more often than

¹² For Atwood's relevant remarks, see her conversations with Victor-Lévy Beaulieu (27), Sue Walker (172), Eleanor Case and Maggie McDonald (42), and Random House.

¹³ And she believes that totalitarian systems are a fundamental threat to human rights. Her support of Canadian cultural nationalism and her feminist concerns can both be subsumed under this larger emphasis on human rights. For Atwood's relevant remarks, see for example her interviews with Hancock (217), Elizabeth Meese (182), and Moyers.

¹⁴ See, for example, pages 346-47, 360-62, and 393-94 in *Second Words*, and her interview with Alan Twigg (126). In addition, for Atwood's social and political commitment, see the section "Political involvement" under "Margaret Atwood" at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Atwood>.

not is one of Atwood's writing objectives. This may recall Michael's claim that the "discursively familiar" is fundamental to (social, cultural, political) realism in fiction. For as noted at the beginning of this paper, the issue of representation for writers with political commitments must inevitably be connected with political power and social realism. Furthermore, this sort of power refers not only to signifying relations but also to real human relations on the daily physical basis.

Atwood's humanistic emphasis on love, meaning, and social bonding through her depiction of the interactions between Snowman and the Crakers could then be seen as her socio-political critique of the pre-catastrophic world, a world which has been dominated by capitalist utilitarianism. In a sense, what Snowman demonstrates in these interactions are immanent values that are often associated with "useless"¹⁵ religious and artistic activities. Atwood's juxtaposition of postmodern inquiry about the epistemological and ontological aspects of signs with her humanistic emphasis on immanent human values could then be seen as her attempt to present a more balanced attitude—one with built-in checks and

¹⁵ Not really giving a hierarchical ranking to science/art (or art/science) or giving her characters one-dimensional designations, Atwood associates Jimmy/Snowman more with art and Crake more with science. Interesting indicators of such associations for Jimmy/Snowman include, to name just two examples, his once being a student of the Martha Graham Academy in which he developed an interest in collecting "useless" archaic words, and the caterpillar episode in the post-catastrophic world (cf. 41). The depiction of Snowman's encounter with a caterpillar suggests an inner respect for other creatures whose existence and beauty is an end itself, having nothing to do with egoistic human interests such as those behind the many transgenic animals bred for human benefit in the pre-catastrophic world. Echoed by Snowman's appreciation of the naturalistic landscape at the end of the novel (cf. 371), this episode makes clear his emphasis on the "irrational happiness" and irreplaceable uniqueness of aesthetic experiences. Sometimes displaying "a genuine concern for others" rather than simply being driven by instrumental reason, Jimmy/Snowman thus has the potential to change (Danette DiMarco 170). Once an irresponsible "scoundrel" in love affairs (cf. the section "Applied Rhetoric" in *OC*), an accomplice of phallic voyeurism that has perpetuated the system of sexual slavery (Dunning 97), a "wordserf" serving capitalist utilitarianism (Bouson 152, DiMarco 184) who is indifferent toward human aggression and social injustice and lacks the courage to show science "its heart" by revealing the mercantile motivations behind scientific research (Shannon Hengen 83), turning a "blind eye" to "whatever he doesn't want to see" (Sharon R. Wilson 187) and developing an "acquiescence" with regard to such inhumane products as ChickieNobs Bucket O'Nubbins (Traci Warkentin 98), he becomes a more committed, conscientious, and responsible human being with clearer insight at the end (Bethune 48, and Howells 172-3).

balances—toward scientific knowledge and materialism.¹⁶

Furthermore, reading about Snowman and his interactions with the Crakers in this light also reminds us of Atwood's concern about human aggressiveness in relation to human history. At the beginning of *OC*, one sees veiled references to the history of European colonization (cf. 4-5). Near the end of the story, when Snowman realizes that he will soon meet other human survivors, he thinks about the possibility of future human aggression against the Crakers. Appearing in his mind is a vast picture of human history filled with atrocities:

Images from old history flip through his head, sidebars from Blood and Roses. Ghenghis Khan's skull pile, the heaps of shoes and eyeglasses from Dachau, the burning corpse-filled churches in Rwanda, the sack of Jerusalem by the Crusaders. The Arawak Indians, welcoming Christopher Columbus with garlands and gifts of fruit, smiling with delight, soon to be massacred, or tied up beneath the beds upon which their women were being raped. (366)

As pointed out in the cited passage, those massive acts of human aggression are also historical materials for the Internet game "Blood and Roses." Like many Internet games and shows in the pre-catastrophic world, "Blood and Roses" features violence purely for the sake of entertainment. According to Snowman's recollection, it was apparently "a wicked game" because the player on the "violent" side, the Blood, usually won (79-80). The reference to this Internet game at the end

¹⁶ The theme of "science" (or scientific reason) in the novel has often been discussed by critics. To cite just a few examples, Bouson and Warkentin point out the dangers and ethical problems related to bio-genetic engineering; Dunning and DiMarco emphasize the harmful effects of instrumental reason: the resultant damage to the environment and the alienation produced by increasing social stratification and the internet culture; Richard A. Posner points out Atwood's anxiety about the "excessive decentralization" of the world order due to the unrestrained technological innovations created through capitalist competition. I would speculate, however, that the critical tendency to question the dominance of scientific reason and pragmatic utilitarianism in modernity somehow led Atwood to caution her readers that *OC* is not anti-science (the Random House interview). For Atwood, science is "a way of knowing" and "a tool," and is not intrinsically bad. As mentioned earlier, all tools are neutral and can be turned to both good and bad uses; for Atwood, the key lies in "the human heart" (Random House, Case and McDonald 42-43).

of the book binds together the pervasive violence reflected in the consumer-driven mass culture of the pre-catastrophic world, the immanent human aggressivity recorded throughout history, and Snowman's anxiety that similar human aggression might soon be perpetrated against the innocent Crakers. Atwood's symphonic narratives thus reveal a Yeatsian concern with history, with the repetition of human aggression and the fragility of human civilizations throughout history.¹⁷

Conclusion

Calling this novel "fact within fiction" (Case and McDonald 41) and "a speculative fiction" which "can speak of what is past and passing, but especially of what's to come" (Atwood, "*The Handmaid's Tale*" 515), Atwood believes that there exist too many variables for us to accurately predict the future, yet we are at a crucial moment in history that demands us to do something fast if we are going to prevent our current global situation from getting totally out of control (Irene D'Souza 45). As she told D'Souza, human beings "are a social species" and "[p]art of our survival and success has come from the fact that we do help [each other]." In a sense, it is this humanistic perspective on human nature that constitutes our faith and hope. Perhaps this explains why, even though Atwood seems to become "more pessimistic" in this novel (Wilson 187), she still claims that she has "a certain amount of faith in people" (D'Souza 45). For any writers with a serious social commitment, faith in humanity is perhaps something that could be darkened but never totally forsaken. To an extent, this aspect of Atwood also supports the central argument of this paper: in reading Atwood's literary representation, we cannot separate her postmodern awareness of the uncertain nature of language, meaning, and truth from her genuine, humanistic concerns about human nature and the human condition.

¹⁷ Also clear in the Random House interview, this is a central concern for Tony, a war-history professor in Atwood's novel *The Robber Bride*.

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