

## Paradise Redesigned: Post-Apocalyptic Visions of Urban and Rural Spaces in Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* Trilogy

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The paper discusses how Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* trilogy transgresses not only the opposition of rural/urban spaces but simultaneously also genre boundaries, human/alien, human/animal, nature/nurture and nature/culture oppositions.

In her utopian-dystopian trilogy (*Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, *Maddaddam*), Atwood presents a post-apocalyptic world, a Paradise prepared by Crake, where "a hierarchy could not exist" (*Oryx* 305). The visions of hell-like urban spaces and the patches of rooftop gardens of the first two books are brought to synthesis in *Maddaddam* (2013). Atwood suggests a hybrid space, in which a hope for a sustainable planet free of human-constructed hierarchy is restored and gardens are ever more lush: "It's the gloaming: deeper, thicker, more layered than usual, the moths are more luminous, the scents of the evening flowers more intoxicating." (*Maddaddam* 227). Although the *Maddaddam* trilogy is a disturbing warning of an ecological dystopia<sup>1</sup> that is all too likely, the last utopian "thing of hope" (*Maddaddam* 390) remains.

### In Search of the Perfect Genre: The Paradise Hybridized

In his stimulating book, *The End of Utopia* (1999), Russell Jacoby claims that "a utopian spirit is dead or dismissed" (159). Indeed, utopian literature in the classical sense of "the place where all is well" (Cuddon 750) has almost vanished. Like Jacoby, Krishan Kumar talks about "twilight of utopia" and pronounces utopia "dead – and dead beyond any hope of resurrection" (*Utopia & Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* 380). And although such skepticism about genres in their pure forms can be shared, utopia has survived under the hybrid genre of SF, speculative fiction. Dunja M. Mohr points out: "contemporary sf,

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<sup>1</sup> According to Tom Moylan, "[d]ystopia's foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic. Its very textual machinery invites the creation of alternative worlds in which the historical spacetime of the author can be re-presented in a way that foregrounds the articulation of its economic, political, and cultural dimensions. Formally and politically, therefore, the dystopian text refuses a functionalist or reformist perspective" (*Scraps of the Untained Sky*, xii). Nevertheless, I argue that Atwood's text, as a 'ustopia', presents a possible way out of the dystopian paradigm.

dystopia, and utopia overlap and borrow settings, stock conventions, and staple themes from each other” (39). As Atwood’s novels transgress the genre boundaries and avoid strict genre and aesthetic categories, an umbrella term like ‘speculative fiction’ is the most fitting one for her writing. (*Worlds Apart?* 37).

Atwood’s *Maddaddam* trilogy illustrates a range of different generic qualities although not all of them belong to the tradition of utopia and/or dystopia.<sup>2</sup> The novels *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *Maddaddam* (2013) represent a synthesis of Atwood’s environmental, political, social, and concerns transformed and hybridized into speculative fiction. Atwood constructs her novel around popular forms such as alternative history, science fiction, post-apocalyptic novel, thriller or cyberpunk, but the dystopian/utopian line is the most central.

Atwood hybridizes utopia and dystopia, and presents them as “two sides of the same coin” (154), to use Sicher’s phrase, rather than distinct poles, thereby challenging the traditional reading of utopia and dystopia as distinct genres and exposing the impossibility of such purist categorization. Tom Moylan identifies this kind of genre as “utopian dystopia” (154) and also “critical utopia” as the new “space for a new form of political opposition, one fundamentally based in difference and multiplicity” (Moylan 190). As an example of a “utopian-dystopian” genre, Atwood’s *Maddaddam* trilogy can be read as a dynamic and demanding text, which “requires consistent thought but also mental leaps that stretch the mind beyond the habitual or the accepted” (Moylan xvii). Atwood’s postmodern novel mixes (f)actual and fictional, urban and rural spaces, individualized narrative voices as well as corporate propaganda to create a polyphony of opposing voices and perspectives to express her environmental concerns and satirize “our contemporary corporation-controlled and technologically driven world” (Stein 320). Nevertheless, she suggests that we may change and re-think our greedy behavior and, hopefully, restore, however imperfectly, a version of quasi-utopian Paradise.<sup>3</sup>

In line with Moylan’s definition of “critical utopia”, Atwood’s *Maddaddam* novels “focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives” (*Demand the Impossible* 10–11). Atwood’s imperfect Paradise creates a dynamic interaction between the actual world with its destructive

<sup>2</sup> Shuli Barzilai, Brooks Bouson, Sharon Rose Wilson and others have discussed the hybridity and multiplicity of Atwood’s genre detecting features of science fiction, the *Bildungsroman*, quest romance, survivor stories, revenge tragedies as well as references to famous literary works and fairy tales. See Barzilai, S. “‘Tell My Story’: Remembrance and Revenge in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*”, *Critique*, (2008) 50: 1, 87-110; Bouson B., “‘We’re Using Up the Earth. It’s Almost Gone’: A Return to the Post-Apocalyptic Future in Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, (2011) 46:9, 9-27.

<sup>3</sup> I spell Atwood’s futuristic paradise as Paradise. Originally Crake’s (hence the C in the word) laboratory where he played dice and God and created the first humanoids, Crakers. The Paradise of *Maddaddam* is highly inclusive: cyborg animals like pigeons and liobams live in harmony with humans and humanoids.

tendencies and the fictional future, allowing for alternatives and multiplicity of perspective without imposing a perfect, fixed and rigid utopian society.

In her essay “Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia,” Atwood coins the term ‘*ustopia*’ by combining utopia and dystopia and she explains that “each contains a latent version of the other” (66). In this paper, I concentrate on the rural and pastoral imagery traditionally associated with utopias: heavenly utopias “[f]ed on visions of paradise and accounts of journey there. [...] many of the paradises are reminiscent of garden cities” (Cuddon 957). Many dystopias, in contrast, are situated on ‘new maps of hell’<sup>4</sup> within “the nightmarish society” (Moylan 148) and hell-like urban visions.<sup>5</sup> Atwood’s ‘ustopia’ is a synthesis of the mostly urban techno-spaces of *Oryx and Crake* and the patches of green roof-top gardens in *The Year of the Flood*, which come together in the hybrid Paradise. ‘Ustopia,’ being imperfect, is therefore able to function as a critical utopia, not a perfectionist utopia, because “we should probably not try to make things perfect, [...] for that path leads to mass graves” (“Dire Cartographies” 95).

### Dystopian and Utopian Spaces

*Oryx and Crake*, written in 2003, is mostly dystopian in the sense that almost the entire human race is wiped out by a deadly virus designed by Crake, a mad scientist. Snowman-the-Jimmy<sup>6</sup> is the last human survivor of the massive pandemic unleashed by Crake. Although Jimmy’s fictional present is very bleak, he continues to struggle to survive. The novel ends, leaving the reader with hope for some future of the human kind, as he sees three other human survivors.

The pre-apocalyptic society is hierarchically split into the technocratic numbers people (*Oryx* 31), living in walled-up Compounds, and anarchic masses in the pleeblands: “the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies” (*Oryx* 33). Even before the cataclysm, the pleeblands are dystopian in the sense of being controlled, dangerous, dirty, polluted and unhealthy:

[...] they were strolling through the pleeblands north of New New York. [...] Before setting out, Crake had stuck a needle in Jimmy’s arm – an all purpose, short-term vaccine he’d cooked himself. The pleeblands, he said, were a giant Petri dish: a lot of guck and contagious plasm got spread around there. If you grew

<sup>4</sup> A paraphrase of Martin Amis’s title *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction*, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> In the discussion following my presentation at the conference *Theatres of Existence: City and Country Spaces in Modernist Fiction*, we identified one dystopian novel, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, that is not situated in the urban setting, however, the seemingly innocent children and seemingly innocent island engage in dangerous and oppressive power-struggles, typically dystopian, despite our intuitive association of the dystopian genre with the urban setting.

<sup>6</sup> The main protagonist’s name is Jimmy and his nickname is Snowman. In the closing book of the trilogy, *Maddaddam*, he is called Snowman-the-Jimmy. I will use this name to refer to him.

up surrounded by it you were more or less immune, unless a new bioform came raging through [...] The air was worse in the pleeblands, he said. More junk blowing in the wind. (*Oryx* 287)

According to Roy Porter's *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind. A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present*, cities have always been associated with disease and other civilizational ills:

Cities assumed a decisive epidemiological role, being magnets for pathogens no less than people. Until the nineteenth century, towns were so insanitary that these populations never replaced themselves by reproduction, multiplying only thanks to the influx of rural surpluses who were tragically infection-prone. In this challenge and response process, sturdy urban survivors turned into an immunological elite – a virulently infectious swarm perilous to less seasoned incomers, confirming the notoriety of towns as death-traps. (23)

Atwood's world of the near future is very reminiscent of our present-day world, with the addition of a range of transgenic and genetically designed animals, like the Wolvogs, the liobams, and the intelligent pigeons. But, most importantly, the Crakers, a group of humanoids, who have been genetically spliced by Crake. Living in the laboratory called the Egg, they represent Crake's attempt at perfectionist utopia: "Everything was sparkling clean, landscaped, ecologically pristine, and very expensive. The air was particulate-free, due to the many solar whirlpool purifying towers, discreetly placed and disguised as modern art" (*Oryx* 291). Here, Crake uses the Paradice Method, selects pieces of genetic information (not only human but also animal and botanical) and combines them to craft a perfect human race according to his concept of a utopian society:

Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesses. For instance, racism [...] the Paradice people would not register skin colour. Hierarchy could not exist among them [...]. Their sexuality was not a constant torment to them, not a cloud of turbulent hormones: they came into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than man. In fact, as there would be anything for these people to inherit, there would be no family trees, no marriages, and no divorces. [...] They would not need to invent any harmful symbolism, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money. (*Oryx* 305)

Crake's perfectly utopian society would never suffer from hierarchy, racism, jealousy, religion, literature, and other problems of civilization.<sup>7</sup> Literature, art, in Crake's view, "[s]ymbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall [...]. Next they'd be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war." (*Oryx* 361) The Crakers also have some technological accessories that would help them to survive in an ecologically devastated world: built-in sun screen and insect repellent, the ability to digest grass and leaves, and thicker skin. Plus, they are breathtakingly beautiful and they recycle their own excrement. Crake's attempt at utopia is based on genetic and social engineering as well as behavioral conditioning which echoes Sicher's critique of the genre of utopia: "There is something inhuman (and potentially dysfunctional and dystopian) in the idea of utopia which requires that human society as currently constituted be replaced [...] by a social order based on different (implicitly non-human) characteristics" ("A World Neither Brave Nor New" 155). Clearly, Atwood's writing keeps its openness and ambiguity: a utopia grows into a dystopia and back.

### Leaky Boundaries

In Atwood's books, not only are the boundaries between utopia and dystopia permeable, the boundaries between humans and animals, machines and animals become invisible and the boundaries between the utopian and dystopian spaces, even though they are seemingly sealed up, the boundaries leak: "Compound people didn't go to the cities unless they had to, and then never alone. They called the cities *the pleeblands*. Despite the fingerprint identity cards now carried by everyone, public security in the the pleeblands was leaky [...] Outside the OrganInc walls and gates and searchlights, things were unpredictable" (*Oryx* 27).

Similarly, Atwood shifts the time boundaries: from the fictional past to the post-apocalyptic "zero time" (*Oryx* 3). The narratives of all three books oscillate between different moments in the fictional time: the past of characters, the near future and the post-apocalyptic narrative line; all of them interweave in the moment of environmental and humanitarian catastrophe of enormous proportions. Atwood's scenario logically and disturbingly results from our current environmental and moral tendencies: "wastefulness, arrogance, and greed of contemporary society" (Stein 313). The *Maddaddam* trilogy sends out danger signals as "a form of environmental consciousness raising" (Bouson 23). However, Atwood's warning tone, urgent as it is, retains its sarcastic undertone and thus remains ambiguous. Her (post)apocalyptic and prophetic tale is "a

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<sup>7</sup> Crake's version of the innocent Paradise did not include literacy (and humor). In *Maddaddam*, however, Toby teaches one of the Crakers how to write: "What comes next? Rules, dogmas, laws? The Testament of Crake? How soon before there are ancient texts they feel they have to obey but have forgotten how to interpret? Have I ruined them?" (*Maddaddam* 204).

cautionary tale *about* cautionary tales” (Jennings 11). *Maddaddam* ends with “a thing of hope” (*Maddaddam* 309), that is Atwood’s belief in the power of words.

*Oryx and Crake*’s sibling book, or, the simultaneouel,<sup>8</sup> *The Year of the Flood*, was published in 2009. In addition to the dystopian/utopian generic line, *The Year of the Flood* makes use of “legends, fairy-tale allusions, animal folklore, folk remedies, sermons, stories about the saints and songs as folk allusions or intertexts” (Wilson 346). The novel explores the world of *Oryx and Crake* from the perspective of three pleebland women survivors, the members of the God’s Gardeners. This religious sect is a small eco-religious cult living in the city pleeblands, where they face uncontrolled crime, violence and omnipresent materialism and consumerism. This dystopian setting is, however, relieved by the patches of utopian roof-top gardens. The God’s Gardeners grow vegetables, sing silly hymns and avoid technology. The CorpSeCorps view them as “twisted fanatics who combine food extremism with bad fashion sense and a puritanical attitude towards shopping” (*Year* 35). Their little space represents a true utopia situated in a roof-top garden:

The Garden wasn’t at all what Toby had expected from hearsay. It wasn’t a baked mudflat strewn with rotting vegetable waste – quite the reverse. She gazed around it in wonder: it was so beautiful, with plants and flowers of many kinds she’d never seen before. There were vivid butterflies; from nearby came the vibration of bees. Each petal and leaf was fully alive, shining with awareness of her. Even the air of the Garden was different. She found herself crying with relief and gratitude. It was as if a large, benevolent hand had reached down and picked her up, and was holding her safe. (*Year* 43)

The Gardeners foresee the Waterless flood and survive it due to their admirable survival skills and the sheltering Ararats they are instructed to build, “with canned and dried goods” (*Year* 59). But, most importantly, because they lovingly take care of each other. In this way, the God’s Gardeners represent an island of utopia amidst the dystopian. Their strong sense of unity fits Russel’s picture of utopia: “[f]rom Greek and Roman ideas of a ‘golden age’ to nineteenth-century fantasies of magical kingdoms, notions of peace, ease, and plenty characterize utopia; often they are linked to universal brotherhood and communal work” (*Picture Imperfect Utopia Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* x). The comic version of the God’s Gardener’s utopia is imperfect: there is no ‘peace, ease, and plenty’ in the years before or after the Waterless Flood, but they keep their sense of community and sisterhood and this is what helps them not only to survive the apocalypse but also to remain human.

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<sup>8</sup> Atwood explains that *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* “cover the same time period, and thus are not sequels or prequels; they are more like chapters of the same book.” (“Dire Cartographies” 93)

## Paradise Redesigned

The third part of the trilogy, *Maddaddam*, published in 2013, takes place in a post-apocalyptic countryside. It continues asking the same questions as the two preceding novels and Atwood's non-fiction works: "What if we continue on the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope?" ("Writing *Oryx and Crake*" 284–86). The closing book of the trilogy is full of inventive and (blackly) humorous details about the corpse-littered dystopian world:

[h]ow many others have stood in this place? Left behind, with all gone, all swept away. The dead bodies evaporating like slow smoke; their loved and carefully tended homes crumbling away like deserted anthills. Their bones reverting to calcium; night predators hunting their dispersed flesh, transformed now into grasshoppers and mice. (*Maddaddam* 313)

There are dangerous transgenic animals like Wolvogs, and pigeons, peaceful Crakers as well as sadist and rapist Painballers.<sup>9</sup> The post-apocalyptic reality is harsh: in particular, the Painballers who represent a threat to women, Crakers and to animals. This is the new Eden, Adam One used to preach about: "the Waterless Flood has cleansed as well as destroyed, and that all the world is now a new Eden. Or, if it is not a new Eden yet, that it will be one soon" (*Year* 345). The new Eden, or Paradise, is far from perfect, the humans struggle to search for food, heal wounds and complain about not having a decent cup of coffee: "[...] some coffee. Any kind of coffee. Dandelion root. Happicappa. Black mud, if that's all there is" (*Maddaddam* 31).

Despite the dystopian tones, the beauty of countryside has not diminished. If anything, the gardens are growing and blooming: "Luckily, everything in the garden is doing well: the chickenpeas have begun to pod, the beananas are in flower, the polyberry bushes are covered with small brown nubbins of different shapes and sizes" (*Year* 16). This is a new Eden, a new Paradise; it is much more inclusive, less picky about aesthetic preferences: "A morpho-splice butterfly floats down the path, luminescent. Of course, she remembers, it's luminescent anyway, but now it's blue-hot, like a gasfire" (*Maddaddam* 222). Atwood's Paradise cannot go back to the Golden Age of pre-slicing and pre-cloning times: this is a very sarcastic version of Paradise.

In *Maddaddam*, Atwood recycles and rewrites stories of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, so, those who have not read them, get their 'story so far'. She also recycles "a number of myths of an annihilating flood survived by one man (Deucalion [...], Utnapishtim [...]) or a small group, like Noah and his family" (Atwood, "Dire Cartographies" 93). In the same way as she hybridizes stories and myths, she splices utopian and dystopian spaces. Such inclusive

<sup>9</sup> The Painballers are brutal criminals who have survived the pandemic isolated in the Painball Arena.

hybridization, in fact, offers a utopian way out of the dystopian darkness: “Historically, utopia has not been a happy story. High hopes have been dashed, time and time again. The best intentions have indeed led to many paved roads in Hell” (“Dire Cartographies” 95).

In spite of some dangerous adventures, the story is moving slowly, returning back to Zeb’s past and intertwining with Toby’s mock-myth, sugar-coated bed-time stories for the Crakers: “In the beginning, you lived inside the Egg. That is where Crake made you. Yes, kind Crake. Please stop singing or I can’t go on with the story” (*Maddaddam* 3). The story ends with ironic symmetry, at the Egg. Despite the pacifist propaganda of the God’s Gardeners and peaceful nature of the Crakers, *Maddaddam* has a death-soaked sense of an ending: the final battle between the Painballers, the Pigoons and the rest of the Paradise population.

The finality and death of the Painballers as well as the death of Toby, one of the main narrators, stands in opposition to the hope, vitality and openness of Atwood’s writing, her version of Paradise: “It’s the gloaming: deeper, thicker, more layered than usual, the moths more luminous, the scents of the evening flowers more intoxicating” (*Maddaddam* 228). There is a relief in returning to nature and gardening: the survivors live a much simpler life, keeping bees, eating kudzu leaves and taking care of hybrid human/Craker babies: “Ren’s baby is also a green-eyed Craker hybrid. What other features might these children have inherited? Will they have built-in insect repellent, or the unique vocal structures that enable purring and Craker singing? Will they share the Craker sexual cycles?” (*Maddaddam* 380) The babies’ names mirror the blending/splicing techniques Atwood uses in creating her generically hybrid book: “The baby or Ren is called Jimadam. Like Snowman-the-Jimmy and like Adam too” (*Maddaddam* 380). In the *Maddaddam* Atwood seems to have faith in the future of mankind: although the future is not perfect and neither is the (post)human kind. The book ends with announcements of several new pregnancies, and that is a “thing of hope” (*Maddaddam* 390).

## Conclusion

The *Maddaddam* trilogy portrays the deserted world: most of the human population has been turned into “raspberry mousse” (*Maddaddam* 306) by the viral pandemic. Atwood’s critique of our moral and environmental behavior becomes more and more piercing. As Atwood writes in *Payback*, the companion text to her fictional writing, “[m]aybe we need to calculate the real costs of how we’ve been living, and of the natural resources we’ve been taking out of the biosphere. Is this likely to happen? [...] my best offer is maybe” (*Payback* 203). Although Atwood keeps some faith, her cynical voice is the loudest and replete with sarcasm. Nevertheless, the typical openness and ambiguity of her writing allows for hope in the power of words despite the gruesome perspective and



despite her own mortality: “Is this what writing amounts to? The voice your own ghost would have, if it had a voice?” (*Maddaddam* 283)

Atwood has written ‘ustopia,’ her version of critical utopia in line with Russell Jakoby’s words: “[i]f the future defied representation, however, it did not defy hope. The iconoclastic utopians were utopians against the current. They did not surrender to the drumbeat of everyday emergencies. Nor did they paint utopia in glowing colors. They kept their ears open for distant sounds of peace and joy, for a time when, as the prophet Isaiah said, ‘the lion shall eat straw like the ox’” (*Picture Imperfect Utopia Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* xviii). In Atwood’s Paradise, liobams, pigeons and the Crakes eat straw together, but mainly because there is not much else left to eat.

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