

Margaret Atwood's Apocalypses

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For the Margaret Atwood Society, my community of Atwoodians, which organised the MLA panel that inspired this book.

For the Margaret Atwood Book Group, which has met weekly at my house since 2005.

For Margaret Atwood, who writes about darkness so that we may see the light.

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INTRODUCTION

“[IT] WAS ZERO HOUR, YOU SAID BE BRAVE”: TRACING ATWOOD’S APOCALYPSES¹

Apocalypses and Beginnings

For much of my youth, I was put off by dystopic visions. I’m not sure if this was because I was so frightened of what my own future could become, if I was horrified by the dark glimpses into human nature that dystopias provide or because I’d been frightened by a childhood viewing of an HBO special on Nostradamus, featuring explorations of a coming apocalypse that were rather hysterical (in both senses of the word). I eschewed all of the texts that would later captivate me (like *Bladerunner*) and settled on comforting visions of the future (like the socialist near paradise that was *Star Trek*). Then, in high school, there was *The Handmaid’s Tale*. One relative, who had not read the book, but who had heard some rumours about it, tried to deny me access, even though it was required reading. Luckily, I prevailed. It entranced me, both with its ideas and its language—which could be poetic and tragic and comic all at the same time. When Aunt Lydia tells the girls that they are rare and valued, like pearls, our narrator contemplates the metaphor: “I think about pearls. Pearls are congealed oyster spit” (145)—it was exactly the type of close reading that I was prone to do.

Perhaps the text drew me in because I identified with it. Atwood wrote parts of the novel in Alabama, very near where I was growing up (in “Florabama”—the part of Florida directly underneath Alabama). Her world seemed very real to me—I was deep in the Bible belt; our world history teacher was forbidden to acknowledge that there was any history before the ancient Egyptians, as that fact offended parents who believed the Earth was only 6000 years old; abstinence only education was standard; an

¹ Many ideas in this introduction were originally shared at an MLA panel, organised by the Margaret Atwood Society, in 2012.

abortion provider, David Gunn, was murdered in my town right around the time we encountered the handmaid's repressive society.

I was electrified. Not all students responded the same way, of course. I remember one girl complaining that she didn't like the book because it was disturbing. And I remember the teacher's response: "Good. It's supposed to disturb you."

A fuse was lit—I went on to read all of Atwood and to expand my love of science-fiction so that it might include the dystopic, the disturbing. My trajectory has coincided with a rise in apocalyptic works in popular culture, providing more evidence to the theory among scholars that Atwood has an eerily accurate foresight of our culture's trends. The theme of apocalypse did not start with *The Handmaid's Tale*, however.

The first two poems in *The Circle Game*, one of Atwood's earliest works, are both concerned with the idea of apocalypse. "This is a Photograph of Me" presents a landscape in which the narrator is in a liminal space—there but not there—presumably drowned but still conscious enough to narrate. "After the Flood We" features a speaker heading to higher ground, wondering if anyone else besides the visible and oblivious companion has survived a flood that has fish "swimming / down in the forest beneath us" (18). These tropes appear throughout Atwood's oeuvre—we have liminal narrators suffering through catalytic changes in *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Penelopiad*. "The Flood" appears in another form in the *MaddAddam* trilogy. In other words, Atwood's interest in the apocalypse, interpreted as personal, national and global destruction, has roots in her earliest works. Is it Crake or Jimmy who might be conceived in "You did it" (*Power Politics*)—the one "who started the countdown / . . . on whom the demonic number / zero descended" (32); which man has begun the "zero hour" of the end of the world? Atwood, throughout her entire career, has been our Cassandra, describing "the howling that's going on outside, day and night, among the sand dunes and the ice chunks and the ruins and bones and so forth" (*The Tent* 144).

There are several definitions of apocalypse. One is extreme—an ELE—extinction level event. Others are end times, which can be defined more specifically—the end of a civilization, population, world, time, relationship or individual life. The older definition is of revelation—truth revealed in a time of darkness.

All of these definitions are inherent in Atwood's body of work. Most people, when they think of her apocalyptic work, focus on *The Handmaid's Tale* and the *MaddAddam* series. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we have the threat of the end of a certain kind of civilization due to low birth rates, pollution, a government overthrow, a war, and then, at the very

end, a discussion of a now-extinct civilization. *MaddAddam* gives us the end of the known world, first through scientific, cultural and environmental disasters, and then through Crake's waterless flood.

Earl G. Ingersoll claims that Atwood invites us to see *Oryx and Crake* as "book end" to *The Handmaid's Tale*, and thus we are to read the works together (162). Certainly, we can relate the other pieces she's written as well, focusing on her visions about what we do to the earth and to each other.

Let us first address general apocalypses of various kinds. As I've already mentioned, the first substantial poetry collection contained a death (perhaps by landscape) in "This is a Photograph of Me", with the second poem describing the actions of two survivors after a cataclysmic flood. In "Winter Sleepers" (*Circle*), the diluvian theme continues:

Outside, the land
is filled with drowning men (59)

The flood symbolises the narrator's father's stroke in "Wave" (*Morning in the Burned House*):

He was sitting in a chair at dinner
and a wave washed over him.
Suddenly, whole beaches
were simply gone.
1947. Lake Superior. Last year. (83)

Similarly, *The Labrador Fiasco* conflates the fading of the father with the failed Hubbard & Wallace expedition of the arctic. This is similar to watching "My Mother [dwindle]" (*The Door*): "It's like watching somebody drown" (16).

This reminds us of the personal apocalypse in every story—highlighted in "Happy Endings" (*Murder in the Dark*)—"John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die" (40). (I will not highlight every death in all of Atwood's work, for the sake of time, but since she's writing about us—and we inevitably die—there are many).

Thus, apocalypse is everywhere. In "Spring Poem" (*You Are Happy*): "apocalypse [is] coiled in my tongue" (23). There are dreams in "Tree Baby" (*The Tent*): "Will they call it Catastrophe . . . Or will they call it Beginning" (151). The narrator "had become a visitant from outer space, a time-traveller come back from the future, bearing news of a great disaster" (*Bluebeard's Egg* 23) in "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother".

Even the cat gets in on it when, in “Our Cat Enters Heaven” (*The Tent*), the cat is “raptured” (63).

Survival: As Plan and Theme

The other side of the Janus head known as disaster is survival, a theme so prevalent in Atwood’s writing and Canadian literature as a whole that we have Atwood’s foundational work about Canadian literature, *Survival*.

For stories of apocalypse to be told, someone must survive (at least temporarily)—long enough to be described or to narrate the end for an imagined future audience. This need for a narrator—for at least the hope of survival—has been with us since Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (which gave us one of the great tropes of science fiction).

The first poem in *The Animals in that Country*, “Provisions”, is about how explorers couldn’t decide what to take and now they’re “on the disastrous ice” with the wrong things (1).

In “The accident has occurred” (*Power Politics*), a question is raised:

The accident has occurred,
the ship has broken, the motor
of the car has failed, we have been
separated from the others,
we are alone in the sand, the ocean,
the frozen snow. . .
Which of us will survive
which of us will survive the other. (23)

An earlier poem in *The Circle Game* (“The explorers”), discusses what would happen after the skeletons of the explorers were found by others:

(they won’t be able
to tell how long
we were cast away, or why,
or, from these
gnawed bones,
which was the survivor). (93)

Planning how to survive an unnamed possible disaster is the main theme in “When It Happens” in *Dancing Girls* (the first short story collection). Mrs Burridge is putting up her pickled green tomatoes. Then she’s looking out the back door:

She isn't sure what she is looking for but she has the odd idea she may see something burning, smoke coming up from the horizon, a column of it or perhaps more than one column, off to the south. (127)

She worries that her husband can't protect her or will be dead when it happens:

Mrs. Burridge is not positive about what will happen next; that is, she knows what will happen but she is not positive about the order. She expects it will be the gas and oil: the oil delivery man will simply not turn up at his usual time, and one morning the corner filling station will be closed. . . they do not want people to panic . . . the phone goes dead . . . About now men begin to appear on the back road, the gravel road that goes past the gate, walking usually by themselves, sometimes in pairs . . . It is about this time too that she takes one of the guns . . . and hides it . . . With the electricity off they can no longer get the television . . . One morning she goes to the back door and looks out and there are columns of smoke, right where she's been expecting to see them, off to the south. (131-133)

Zero

Eula Biss, in her essay "The Pain Scale", notes:

The description of hurricane force winds on the Beaufort scale is simply "devastation occurs".

Bringing us, of course, back to zero. (42)

One of the major motifs that flows through many dystopian works is the number zero, symbolizing, among other things, the number of creatures we have alive after the process of extinction is complete. It is the number of annihilation.

In "The Line: Five Variations" (*The Door*), we have

The monster not a burning coal,
but ice-furred shadow. . . //
in the midst of his blizzard,
in the midst of his avalanches
of *nihilo*,
going about his business,
wringing stars out of zero. (88)

"At first I was given centuries" (*Power Politics*) details many different bad endings over centuries between our couple in the collection:

And last time (I drove to the airport
 still dressed in my factory
 overalls, the wrench
 I had forgotten sticking out of the back
 pocket; there you were,
 zippered and helmeted, it was zero
 hour, you said Be
 Brave . . . (28)

Of course, we can connect this poem from 1971 to the end of 2003's *Oryx and Crake*, as Jimmy considers his possibly suicidal and homicidal confrontation with the survivors on the beach:

From habit he lifts his watch; it shows him its blank face.
 Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go. (374)

When Bad News Is Old News

Through another motif (illustrated by a poem title), we are reminded that “It is dangerous to read newspapers” (*Animals in that Country*). The first story in *Moral Disorder* is “The Bad News”.

Environmental disasters, a specific type of apocalypse, are also signalled by the dailies. We are told that “Chicken Little read too many newspapers” (*The Tent* 67). In this fable, he is not wrong at all, just inconvenient for everyone (like Al Gore). He is murdered with the excuse “He’s against progress” (*The Tent* 71).

“The Age of Lead” mentions the Franklin Expedition. Then,

[the protagonist] began to notice news items of the kind she’d once skimmed over. Maple groves dying of acid rain, hormones in the beef, mercury in the fish, pesticides in the vegetables, poison sprayed on the fruit, God knows what in the drinking water. (*Wilderness Tips* 207)

In “Hack Wednesday”, our narrator considers a fate for humanity that we have only begun to consider seriously in the last decade, though Atwood was obviously concerned much earlier (*Wilderness Tips*):

For a moment [Marcia] pictures what these squeaky-clean tiled tunnels would be like overgrown with moss or festooned with giant ferns; or underwater, when the greenhouse effect really gets going. She notices that she is no longer thinking in terms of *if*—only of *when*. She must watch this tendency to give up, she must get herself under control” (291-2).

Later, she notes, “It’s all this talk of babies, at Christmas. It’s all this hope. She gets distracted by it, and has trouble paying attention to the real news” (297).

Many environmental disasters are about the way we make the news. For examples, in “Eating the Birds” (*Tent*), “We’re ankle-deep in blood, and all because we ate the birds, we ate them a long time ago, when we still had the power to say no” (129).

“Interview With a Tourist” (*Procedures*) gives us a foreign planet, with an inhabitant being interviewed by someone with a “camera and your spear”:

Once, when there was history
some obliterating fact occurred,
no solution was found

Now this country is underwater;
we can love only the drowned (23)

Ultimately, we are urged to follow the advice in “They are hostile nations” (*Power Politics*):

In view of the fading animals
the proliferation of sewers and fears
the sea clogging, the air
nearing extinction

we should be kind, we should
take warning, we should forgive each other. (37)

What Was At the Bottom of Pandora’s Box

This idea of how we *might* respond is tied to an idea of hope—the very idea that we *can* respond provokes a sense of hope for ourselves and for a time of “we” “after the flood”.

Although our author and her narrators “tell dark stories / before and after they come true” (*Door* 98), those stories are told to prevent the disasters foretold.

“Hopeless” (*Murder in the Dark*) notes,

Hope needs the future tense, which only makes you greedy and a hoarder:
the future is what you save up for but like thunder it’s only an echo, a
reverse dream. . . . This is as good as it gets, nothing can be better so
there’s nothing to hope for, but I do it anyway. (57)

Two works in *The Tent* explicitly discuss the need for hope. “Three Novels I Won’t Write Soon” includes a treatment for *Worm Zero* in which all of the worms in the world die, leading to famine. The narrator says she would probably end “on a note of plangent hope” because she prefers that type of ending (88).²

The title story, “The Tent”, vividly describes the act and purpose of writing as a struggle for hope:

Some of the writing has to describe the howling that’s going on outside, night and day, among the sand dunes and the ice chunks and the ruins and bones and so forth. (144)

However, there are no illusions that writers will be listened to any more than Cassandra:

they resent being cooped up in such a cramped space with you and your obsession with calligraphy. . . . It’s an illusion, the belief that your doodling is a kind of armour, a kind of charm, because no one knows better than you do how fragile your tent really is. (145-146)

Atwood’s dystopic novels garner the most attention—from critics and fans—and they allow us to see most clearly her ability to foresee social, environmental and scientific trends. However, as this brief overview shows, we should recognise that her concern for the earth and its species—including the one that reads and writes—has been evident in her writing from the very beginning.

Atwood’s career-long effort to bear witness is through her writing. Recently, she published a piece of short fiction (“Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet”) in *I’m With the Bears: Short Stories from a Damaged Planet*:

In the fourth age we created deserts. Our deserts were of several kinds, but they had one thing in common: nothing grew there. Some were made of cement, some were made of various poisons, some of baked earth. We made these deserts from the desire for more money and from despair at the lack of it. War, plagues and famines visited us, but we did not stop in our industrious creation of deserts. At last all wells were poisoned, all rivers ran with filth, all seas were dead; there was no land left to grow food.

Some of our wise men turned to the contemplation of deserts. . . . The number zero was holy. (192-193)

² Each of the three stories is similar. This short piece is followed by “Take Charge”, outlining several disastrous scenarios.

With just a few short paragraphs, Atwood gives us an apocalypse, how the social mores of the survivors evolve and a pun.

And in that, there is hope.

Across these man-made, man-helped, and man-indifferent apocalypses—in burned houses, blizzards and floods—we find the themes of survival and hope, even when survival seems unlikely. We read these stories as the characters read the newspapers—as a revelation of the truth. This focus on truth through observation, however, challenges us to do more than be a passive observer. We should not be Offred, waiting until it's too late to fight or run. We should not be Jimmy, claiming innocence through passivity.

We must not simply observe. We must bear witness. We must act.

Our Text

Lauren Rule Maxwell's piece, "[A]pocalypse coiled in my tongue': Apocalyptic Vision in Margaret Atwood's Poetry", is an excellent overview of our theme in what is arguably Atwood's first genre—in her exemplary close reading of several poems, she reminds us that while apocalypse may be coiled on the tongue, the Mobius strip of the possible end also contains a beginning.

Meredith Minister's essay, "The Languages are Being Silenced: Ambivalent Apocalyptic Vision in Margaret Atwood's Poems", also looks at poetry, digging deeply into the imagery of three poems in particular—"The Signer", "Marsh Languages" and "Half-Hanged Mary" (all from *Morning in the Burned House*)—to explore the relationship of language to agency, embodiment and apocalypse.

In our next essay, Patricia A. Stapleton's "Suicide as Apocalypse in *The Handmaid's Tale*", the personal apocalypse and the societal level apocalypse tragically come together. Stapleton convincingly argues that Offred's story of the Nazi mistress and other textual events foreshadow how Offred's own story will end—by the taking of her own life.

Anna Lindhé's "Restoring the Divine within: The Inner Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*" takes us to Atwood's apocalypse opus, the *MaddAddam* series. The essay explores how societal apocalypse opens the doors to personal redemption, concluding,

to restore harmony with the natural world as well as healthy social relations, humanity, Atwood suggests, needs to restore the divine within, or those ethical aspects of human life, which have somehow been lost: the caring other-oriented emotions of gratitude, charity, forgiveness and love.

Miles Weafer's "Writing from the Margin" also investigates *The Year of the Flood*, by combining Atwood's views on victim positions from her seminal study of Canadian Literature, *Survival*, and Harold Innis's conception of marginality. His analysis of *The Year of the Flood* indicates that "the more marginalised the victim, the better opportunity they have of achieving creative non-victimhood".

Finally, Anna Bedford's piece on the *MaddAddam* series, "Survival in the Post-Apocalypse", argues that Atwood's contribution to apocalypse literature is her modern ecofeminism, which holds that capitalism (one of the main contributors to the apocalypse in the series) exploits the most marginalised and powerless, including the poor, women and nature itself.

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CHAPTER ONE

“[A]POCALYPSE COILED IN MY TONGUE”: APOCALYPTIC VISION IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S POETRY¹

LAUREN RULE MAXWELL

With the recent publication of *MaddAddam*, much has been written about Margaret Atwood’s speculative fiction and its apocalyptic warnings. Scholars have revisited novels such as *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* to discuss their environmental and human disasters and the lessons that these dystopian visions offer us. This focus on Atwood’s speculative fiction, though fruitful, has largely overlooked the apocalyptic vision in Atwood’s poetry. In this chapter, I will consider a sampling of poems from several of Atwood’s collections—including *The Animals in That Country* (1969), *Power Politics* (1971), *You Are Happy* (1974), *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), *True Stories* (1981), *Interlunar* (1984) and *The Door* (2007)—to characterise what I call a sustained apocalyptic vision in Atwood’s body of poetry. Many of Atwood’s poems reference possible apocalypse; in them we find different apocalyptic visions that involve interpersonal, environmental and metaphysical relationships. These poems reveal in different contexts the potential of and for great disaster, not only underscoring a threat of utter destruction, but also representing the possibility for regeneration, rebirth and change that might be possible if the destruction does not go too far. In the poems that invoke apocalypse, Atwood suggests that there is a time for dying and a time for sowing, reflecting nature’s own seasons. But what I find most interesting about this potential for disaster is the poet’s ability—or lack thereof—to orchestrate it. This treatment of the word “apocalypse” asks us to consider

¹ A version of this paper was given at the MLA conference in 2012, at a panel organised by the Margaret Atwood Society.

the relationships of the poet and of language more generally to our conception of apocalypse itself.

One poem that raises these questions is “Spring Poem”, from the 1974 collection *You Are Happy*. “Spring Poem” uses a seasonal trope to convey the potential for rebirth associated with disaster, but it also focuses very explicitly on the relationship of language to apocalypse that I’ll focus on in this chapter. In the first few lines of the poem, the speaker discusses the decision to begin “burning / last year’s weeds” and tells us that “the earth / ferments like rising bread / or refuse” (1-3). The poem’s opening, by describing the fermentation as either “rising bread” or “refuse”, suggests that destruction caused by the burning can bring about a transformation that creates, alternatively, sustenance or waste. The entire first stanza, 20 lines in total, draws attention to ways that language itself both signals and brings about transition and transformation through its unconventional use of punctuation. Until line 17—where we see the end of the question “can I be this / ruthless?”—there is no end punctuation (16-17). The absence of terminal punctuation is pronounced because commas and virgules appear within the lines where one might expect periods. Instead of ending the thought “It is spring”, the speaker turns it, signalling shifts with the downward marks of the comma and the slash, creating with the words on the page what resembles a corkscrew. The images in this spiralling design pan around the fermented earth, showing us the changes to the landscape that the decision to burn has set into motion.

We first see what is happening to the atmosphere, the air above ground: “the smoke / flares from the road” (4-5). Then the frame moves downward to the “clumped stalks” that “glow like sluggish phoenixes” (5, 6). The images that follow “sidewind[]”, leading us closer and closer to ground level:

only my fault / the birdsongs burst from
 the feathered pods of their bodies, dandelions
 whirl their blades upwards, from beneath
 this decaying board a snake,
 sidewinds, the chained hide
 smelling of reptile sex / the hens
 roll in the dust, squinting with bliss, frogbodies
 bloat like bladders, contract, string
 the pond with living jelly

eyes, can I be this
 ruthless? I plunge
 my hands and arms into the dirt,
 swim among stones and cutworms,
 come up rank as a fox. (7-20)

Like the snake, the poem moves, swaying from side to side. And, like the snake, the poem’s spine reveals a chain: both lines and images are links interconnected. The poem’s speaker depicts the organisms that inhabit this ecosystem and thus are commonly affected by the burning—those damaged or displaced by the decision, which, the speaker asserts, is not actually “only my fault”. In the preceding line, she asserts that “it wasn’t”, emphasising that claim by separating it from the surrounding images with virgules— “/ it wasn’t” (6) and “only my fault /” (7). The line break after “wasn’t” creates some ambiguity about whose responsibility this chain of events is, shedding some doubt on the speaker’s initial statement that this is “my decision”. It does not seem, however, that the burning has been wholly destructive; the stalks are likened to “phoenixes”, and we see reproductive images, such as “reptile sex”, that are suggestive of life to come. As the speaker contemplates whether or not she is “ruthless”, she goes below the surface, submerging her hands and arms in the dirt. Earlier in the poem, the speaker actually prefigures this breaking ground with the words “my fault”, which, in addition to representing her responsibility, can suggest her own fracturing of the earth’s surface.

With this act of going underground, the speaker, as with other women in Atwood’s poetry, delves into the subterranean space of her own consciousness. Signalling a reflective pause, the first period in “Spring Poem” appears after the first word in the second stanza, “restless”. Having “restless” precede the period further emphasises the momentum of the first stanza, movement that resumes after the appearance of those she has hurt:

restless. Nights, while seedlings
 dig near my head
 I dream of reconciliations
 with those I have hurt
 unbearably, we move still (21-25)

Here, the seedlings, not the speaker, are doing the digging, and her subconscious tries to reconcile the fact that she has hurt. The word “unbearably” in line 25 might refer to those she has hurt, claiming agency as the one who has hurt them (or hurt herself), or those who “move still”. Regardless, there is a sense that aspects of this cycle of destruction and reconstruction are unbearable, perhaps unsustainable. During the day she goes for “vicious walks past the charred / roadbed over the bashed stubble / admiring the view” (29-31). It is not clear if she is admiring what remains, “those I have not hurt” or the “bashed stubble” from which will presumably eventually emerge new growth (32, 30).

Although the speaker is “avoiding / those I have not hurt”, she has the power, latent as it might be, of destruction more final and complete—of apocalypse (31-32). The last stanza evokes it explicitly:

yet, apocalypse coiled in my tongue,
it is spring, I am searching
for the word:

finished
finished

so I can begin over
again, some year
I will take this word too far. (33-40)

In these closing lines of “Spring Poem”, the speaker repeats the opening clause of the poem: “It is spring”, but in this context the line has a different meaning. At the beginning of the poem we assume that the word “spring” represents the season, the time of year, but at the end it becomes clear to us that the speaker is now figuring apocalypse itself as a spring coiled in her tongue. The placement of the words in this last stanza, as those in the first, resembles the shape of a spring with its spiralled corkscrew, suggesting that the words on the page possess—like a compressed spring—some latent power, some potential momentum that will be unleashed once they are unfurled. The anaphora in the poem, seen in lines like “it is spring” and “finished”, helps assemble the repeating turns in the helix. The turning is reinforced by the images in the poem, which run together, emphasised by the places where they are separated within a line by a slash. This stream of images, comprising the spring’s connected curves, builds tension until we reach the catalytic word—apocalypse.

That the poem’s form mirrors its content is important because it draws attention to the power of language itself, which becomes the final focus of the poem. As the speaker searches for a word to describe the “apocalypse coiled in [her] tongue”, she finally settles on “finished”, a word that she repeats, complicating its meaning. If “finished” represented a true finality, there would be no need for it to be repeated. This word, she tells us, counterintuitively allows her to “begin over / again”. In the very same line, however, she adds—connecting these ideas with only a comma—that “some year / I will take this word too far”. Thus the apocalypse is associated with an incomplete finish that could allow for a new beginning or—if she takes the word too far—could be the final end. It is as though the possibility for the true finish represented by the word “apocalypse” helps bring about these nonpermanent finishes that eventually give way to new life. The writer is like the persona, who burned the last year’s weeds

and cleared a path, in that she completes one work and moves on to the next. The landscape is marked by this change, as seen in the “charred / roadbed”, but nevertheless there are those who survive and move on—some with “living jelly / eyes”, who have seen but might not be able to bear witness to the destruction that changed their worlds. That is the job of the artist, who can warn of the hurt caused by our destructive behaviours by the mere mention of the word “apocalypse”.

With lines like “I dream of reconciliations / with those I have hurt / unbearably”, “Spring Poem” reflects upon failed interpersonal relationships. But the poem’s ending focuses more specifically on words: with its coiled apocalypse, it suggests that words themselves have the power to make things happen. Although we don’t see the words themselves hurting or terrorising, we know they have that power. Knowing that “apocalypse [is] coiled” in the speaker’s “tongue”, we are left to imagine what exactly it would mean for her to “take this word too far”, but we are nonetheless reminded why words matter. As Atwood emphasises in her much-anthologised poem “Spelling” (*True Stories* 1981), “A word after a word / after a word is power” (24-25). In “Spelling”, the speaker considers her daughter’s playing with plastic letters “learning how to spell, / spelling, / how to make spells”, a theme Atwood explores in another work from her collection *You Are Happy* (1974), the cycle of the “Circe/Mud Poems”. From the very beginning of this series, we see words’ importance in the creation of spells and even entire worlds.

In the first cycle of the “Circe/Mud Poems”, Circe says that Odysseus “move[s] within the range of my words” (*Selected Poems* 201). She goes on to describe the men she has changed to beasts, repeating—with an assertion that echoes that of the speaker of “Spring Poem”—“It is not my fault”, “it was not my fault”, but she nonetheless suggests that the change was brought about by her control of language:

It was not my fault, these animals
who once were lovers

it was not my fault, the snouts
and hooves, the tongues
thickening and rough, the mouths grown over
with teeth and fur

I did not add the shaggy
rugs, the tusked masks,
they happened

I did not say anything, I sat

and watched, they happened
because I did not say anything.

It was not my fault, these animals
who could no longer touch me
through the rinds of their hardening skins,
these animals dying
of thirst because they could not speak

these drying skeletons
that have crashed and litter the ground
under the cliffs, these
wrecked words. (*Selected Poems* 203)

Words shape everything in Circe's world, including the landscape itself, whose cliffs she calls "wrecked words". It is clear that her words control the fate of her former lovers—creating for them an apocalypse of life as they knew it—regardless of whether it is because she casts a spell on them or, in her words, "because [she] did not say anything". The men, transformed, are dying, Circe tells us, precisely because they cannot speak. But Circe empowers her chosen one, Odysseus, by naming for him the features of her island, observing that he "claim[s] / without noticing it"—that he "know[s] how to take" (*Selected Poems* 209). By "pronouncing these names" for Odysseus, she gives him knowledge, gives him power. But Odysseus responds by physically overpowering her body: in parentheses we read, "Let go, this is extortion, / you force my body to confess / too fast and / incompletely" (*Selected Poems* 210). Her words, her body's words, have become "tongueless and broken" (*Selected Poems* 210). In "Spring Poem", we see that the power of the word comes from the latent energy, the potential momentum building behind it. Instead of the coiled apocalypse there, the curved spirals of Circe's spells have been broken, at least for the moment. And because she is "tongueless", her words cannot spring forth: although words unspoken might have potential, those spoken (or written) can move others and cause the type of revolutionary change we see in the transformation of the men to beasts. Circe says that these transformations happened "because [she] did not say anything", but here we see the real difference between choosing not to speak and being unable to. As Circe and Odysseus jockey for power, its balance has apparently shifted; Odysseus writing his "travel book" worries Circe, who wants to be able to tell her side of the story (*Selected Poems* 217).

Circe later reminds us, however, "it is not finished, that saga": "The fresh monsters are already breeding in my head" (*Selected Poems* 217).

While she flippantly says, “So much for art. So much for prophesy”, she later clarifies that “[t]o know the future / there must be a death” and commands, “[h]and me the axe” (*Selected Poems* 217, 219). The future, she knows, “is a mess” (*Selected Poems* 217). But what in fact undoes Circe’s spell and wrecks her world is language, not an axe and not Odysseus. “It’s the story that counts,” she tells us:

In the story the boat disappears one day over the horizon, just disappears, and it doesn’t say what happens then. On the island that is. It’s the animals I am afraid of, they weren’t part of the bargain, in fact you don’t mention them, they may transform themselves back into men. Am I really immortal, does the sun care, when you leave will you give me back the words? (*Selected Poems* 221)

These questions, directed presumably at Odysseus, reveal that, ultimately, the things that constitute Circe’s world and her possible immortality are words. Without them, she, the animals, the entire island disappear.

The reordering of the world through language appears also in Atwood’s poem “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer” from the 1968 collection *The Animals in That Country*. In this poem, the pioneer proclaims himself from the first stanza of the poem the “centre” of the earth (3). But even from the very beginning, Atwood emphasises the constructedness of our worlds, the degree to which we rely on representation of the things themselves, by describing him as “a point / on a sheet of green paper / proclaiming himself the centre” (1-3). The paper, something that is made of vegetative material, might be a map, might be the page on which the poet writes her words or might be a metaphor. In “Murder and Mayhem: Margaret Atwood Deconstructs”, Lorna Irvine examines Atwood’s use of metaphor in works such as *Murder in the Dark*, focusing specifically on the following passage from “Spelling”:

At the point where language falls away
from the hot bones, at the point
where the rock breaks open and darkness
flows out of it like blood, at
the melting point of granite
when the bones know
they are hollow & the word
splits & doubles & speaks
the truth & the body itself becomes a mouth.

This is a metaphor. (275)

As Irvine asserts, Atwood “imagines an altered metaphor” that brings about “the visions and the thinking necessary to sustain, console and alter human existence—a new relationship to the universe” (275). Atwood’s use of metaphor, such as her use of the word “paper” in “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer”, can cause us to see the world in a different way, to reconsider our traditional relationships in it. Like the word “apocalypse” in “Spring Poem”, the right word in a poem has the power to transform our vision and our thinking. Irvine explains:

Only by the power of the right word, the generative word, will murder in the dark be changed, be transformed to birth in the light.

“Metaphor is dangerous”, she says, “but it can also perhaps save” (275). From the very beginning of “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer”, Atwood invokes the metaphors of the point and of the paper to highlight the disconnected relationship we have with the natural world and the ways our attempts to contain, control and possess become evident when examining the language we use out of context: papers might confer ownership of the land to the pioneer, but when he himself becomes merely a point on a green sheet of paper, we see more clearly how we have abstracted nature to the point that we do not really see it at all. In doing so, Atwood highlights “the tension / between subject and object” that eventually does the pioneer in (79-80).

When the pioneer stands in the middle of the green sheet, there are “no walls, no borders / anywhere; the sky no height / above him, totally un- / enclosed” (4-7). “Let me out!” he exclaims, feeling trapped in the open, free expanse (9). The pioneer needs to make his mark on the place—he is compelled to contain, organise, control—so he “dug the soil in rows, / imposed himself with shovels. / [and] asserted / into the furrows, I / am not random” (10-14). The ground, however, “replied with aphorisms: // a tree-sprout, a nameless / weed, words / he couldn’t understand” (17-19). By giving the ground a voice, Atwood both draws our attention to its existence, complete with life of its own, and demonstrates for us that it has its own ways of communicating that we do not understand. The disjunction in language becomes even more pronounced as the pioneer’s madness grows. Being “disgusted / with the swamp’s clamourings and the outbursts / of rocks”, he says, “This is not order / but the absence / of order” (34-36, 37-39). When the “unanswering forest” implies that “[i]t was / an ordered absence”, we see clearly the importance of word order itself (40, 42-43). By inverting the order of the words “absence” and “order”, the entire perspective of the poem changes, reversing who is in control and what the signs in the landscape mean. The pioneer is clearly

not in control here; something else, either the “unanswering forest” or his own madness is. There is also the implied threat—in the phrase “ordered absence”—of apocalypse, the forced end of human society as we know it, an end that would allow the natural order to begin again. In fact, the pioneer, “[o]n his beaches, his clearings, / by the surf of under- / growth breaking / at his feet” foresees “disintegration” (71-74, 75). This disintegration is brought on, at least in part, by language: “Things / refused to name themselves; refused / to let him name them” (66-68). One might argue that this apocalyptic scenario given life through words reflects only the pioneer’s declining mental condition, but, then again, it might conversely reflect that he—or at least the poet presenting what is going on inside his head—is, in fact, seeing the world, or what the world might become, more clearly.

It is the work of the poet, Atwood explains in “Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written” (*True Stories* 1981), to provide this premonitory vision: when one sees “[t]he facts of this world...clearly”, she asserts, “[w]itness is what you must bear” (42, 57). But as we see in the poem “Foretelling the Future” from *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), things appear differently depending on the various places from which they are seen. The poem reads: “you are like the moon / seen from the earth, oval and gentle / and filled with light”, but “[t]he moon seen from the moon / is a different thing” (17-19, 20-21). As Atwood shows us in the poem “The Words Continue Their Journey” (*Interlunar* 1984), poets have a unique perspective that is both driven by and constituted with words. The poem begins with a question: “Do poets really suffer more / than other people?” (1-2). Suggesting that poets really do suffer more, the speaker goes on to tell us that the poets’ occupying a distinct position makes them “members of some doomed caravan” (27). It is a collective condition in which they travel, “a pilgrimage that took a wrong turn / somewhere far back and ended / here, in the full glare” (34-36). The sun creates glare and shadows as the language does itself, the poets evoking their own “aureole of *stone*, of *tree*” (40). Ultimately the speaker concludes that, despite their words, the poets will have the same fate as everyone else:

we’re no more doomed really than anyone, as we go / together, through
this moon terrain / where everything is dry and perishing and so / vivid,
into the dunes, vanishing out of sight. (41-44)

That is what the apocalypse that the poets warn of entails—vanishing: “vanishing out of the sight of each other, / vanishing even out of our own sight” (45-46).

In “The Poets Hang On”, from the 2007 collection *The Door*, Atwood actually pokes fun at poets for professing to have this premonitory vision, for professing to know something the rest of the world doesn’t. The poem begins:

The poets hang on.
 It’s hard to get rid of them,
 though lord knows it’s been tried.
 We pass them on the road
 standing there with their begging bowls,
 an ancient custom.
 Nothing in those now
 but dried flies and bad pennies.
 They stare straight ahead.
 Are they dead, or what?
 Yet they have an irritating look
 of those that know more than we do. (1-12)

The poem ends with these lines:

They know something, though.
 They do know something.
 Something they’re whispering,
 something we can’t quite hear.
 Is it about sex?
 Is it about dust?
 Is it about fear? (58-64)

This delightful poem satirises poets’ pretensions of knowing better, but at the same time it suggests that there is something to the poet’s premonitions, something that I associate with Atwood’s larger apocalyptic vision. Is it about sex, dust or fear? Perhaps. The not-knowing makes Atwood’s premonitory warnings even more captivating. But it is certain that the apocalyptic vision in Atwood’s poetry consciously acknowledges the power of language itself to make us fear what we are capable of.

While the poet can control language and the power that comes with it, poems such as “Bluejays” (*True Stories* 1981) and “Disturbed Earth” (*The Door* 2007) show that there is much outside of the control of language and of order more generally. For example, in “Disturbed Earth”, despite the gardener’s attempt to create pristine perennial beds, a natural disorder “thwarts [her] will” (14). The speaker of “Bluejays” similarly predicts that next summer, after the bluejays eat her sunflowers, “something forgotten will bloom there” (26).