

Michelle Gadpaille
University of Maribor, Slovenia

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Sci-fi, Cli-fi or Speculative Fiction: Genre and Discourse in Margaret Atwood's "Three Novels I Won't Write Soon"

ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's short prose piece, "Three Novels I Won't Write Soon," poses a conundrum for anyone seeking to place it within a genre. With features of science fiction, speculative fiction and a postmodern prose poem, the text addresses the topic of climate change and its concomitant fiction without offering closure. After examining and attempting to resolve the issue of genre, the paper aligns Atwood's discourse of indeterminacy with the parallel discourse of climate change as expressed in science writing, in order to account for this text's unusual structural and stylistic features.

Keywords: Atwood, Margaret; speculative fiction; science fiction; slipstream; climate change

Znanstvena fantastika, klimatska fantastika ali spekulativna fikcija: žanr in diskurz v »Three Novels I Won't Write Soon« Margaret Atwood

POVZETEK

Žanrska opredelitev kratke zgodbe Margaret Atwood »Three Novels I Won't Write Soon« povzroča nemalo težav. Z združevanjem značilnosti znanstvene fantastike, spekulativne fikcije in postmoderne pesmi v prozi se Atwoodova v tej kratki zgodbi loteva tematike klimatskih sprememb in pripadajoče proze, toda brez zaključka. Analiza nenavadnih strukturnih in stilističnih značilnosti te zgodbe v smislu razjasnitve žanrske problematike pokaže, da Atwoodin diskurz nedoločnosti zrcali paralelni diskurz o klimatskih spremembah v znanstveni publicistiki.

Ključne besede: Atwood, Margaret; spekulativna fikcija; znanstvena fantastika; slipstream, klimatske spremembe

Sci-fi, Cli-fi or Speculative Fiction: Genre and Discourse in Margaret Atwood’s “Three Novels I Won’t Write Soon”

1 Introduction: Genre Matters

The place of a new publication on the bookshop’s shelves used to matter enormously; should a new book be displayed in the romance section or with the chick lit? Perhaps bundled with the thrillers, or among the detective fiction? “Go into a bookshop,” writes Anita Mason in *The Guardian*, “You are surrounded by classifications. Crime fiction, romance, science fiction, fantasy ... These are the genres; they specialise [...] There are limits and rules. Usually the book slots into its genre like a well-aimed dart” (Mason 2014). However, as readers switch to electronic shopping and digital downloads for their reading, genre categorization would seem to matter somewhat less in guiding reader choice. Nevertheless, authors still care about the location of their work along the genre spectrum, even as the tidy boxes of the previous century give way to more fluid generic markers and cross-genre production, both of which affect positioning by publishers and booksellers as well as reception by award committees. One genre critic even avers that “genre hybridity and border blurring” have rendered irrelevant the major publishing distinction between “mainstream” and other fiction (Frelik 2011, 22).¹

Against this background of permeable genre markers, I analyse and categorise a short work by Margaret Atwood, an author whose output, reputation and “oracular sheen” (Mead 2017, 38) assure her writing plenty of reader attention, whatever its classification. In the case of “Three Novels I Won’t Write Soon,” the issue is complicated – not just whether this short work is science fiction or speculative fiction or both, but even whether, along with its fellow-pieces in *The Tent*, it can be classified as fiction at all. The reviewer for *The Christian Science Monitor* classified the pieces as “musings”, while Hermione Lee suggested that the book contained “stories, fables, proverbs, dreams” in the pages of *The Guardian*. Like other pieces in the collection *The Tent* (2006), “Three Novels I Won’t Write Soon” eschews familiar genre boundaries, claiming kinship with the essay and literary criticism, while exhibiting some of the salient characteristics of science fiction (a concern with the future and with the place of technology and nature, in both causing and remedying future catastrophe). Below, I will place the work against the genre background of Atwood’s oeuvre, analyse its essayistic and fictional components, offer stylistic analysis of its rhetorical discourse, and situate this against the prevailing discourse of climate change. In brief, I seek to position this work, beyond science fiction, or even climate change fiction, as a socially-engaged science meta-narrative.

2 Atwood and Science Fiction

Atwood has often claimed to write speculative fiction rather than science fiction per se, asserting that real sci-fi must include Martians and space invasions (Atwood 2011 “Introduction,” *In Other Worlds*, 6). Ever since Ursula Le Guin opened the genre question (in a 2009 article in *The Guardian*), it seems to have become mandatory to repeat Atwood’s declared preference

¹ For example, Colson Whitehead’s award-winning novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016), could usefully be classified as both a neo-slave narrative and speculative fiction (of the alternate history type), or perhaps even as magical realism.

that her work be classified as speculative fiction rather than sci-fi (e.g., Mead 2017, 40–41; Brooks Bouson 2010, 142; Thomas 2013, 2; Harris-Fain 2005, 13). This could be seen as a safe preference, given that all fiction engages in speculation (Keeley 2015, 169). Nevertheless, an examination of Atwood's later writing shows that her fictional territory does overlap with the genre of science fiction in its setting and motifs. Moreover, despite her disavowal, Atwood readily admits to a lifelong engagement with the genre, as both creator and consumer. After having written science fiction as a child (Atwood 2011, "Introduction," *In Other Worlds*, i), Atwood produced a string of well-received novels, many deftly incorporating the then predominantly male discourse of natural science (Deery 1997, 470), such as *Cat's Eye* (1988), followed by several forays across the genre line. First came *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a dystopian exploration (called a "futurist novel" by Stephanie Barbé Hammer (1990, 39), who ends by categorising the novel as a satire), set in a recognisable near future featuring some gadgetry (compunumbers and pornomarts, and Soul Scrolls), which from the vantage point of 2018 seems both prescient and dated. Certainly, the science in that novel served as the deep background to the more prominent critique of the misogynistic fundamentalist regime. Overall, *The Handmaid's Tale* deals with social power, not with technological innovation. With the MaddAddam trilogy of the early 21st century, however, Atwood leaped squarely into the field of science fiction, as *Oryx and Crake* gave us genetic modification, pigeons, rakunks and a mad scientist, Crake, every bit as inspired as Dr Frankenstein two centuries earlier. The remaining two novels in the trilogy kept the focus on a dystopian future, or to use Atwood's coinage, *ustopian* (Atwood 2011, "Dire Cartographies," *In Other Worlds*, 66), where science had first triumphed and then imploded, leaving New Age gardeners surviving in the wreckage of the Toronto conurbation, a place "ravaged by ecological disaster" (Mead 2017, 46).²

Nevertheless, alongside this longer fiction Atwood was producing a stream of shorter pieces, generically unplaceable for the most part, in *Murder in the Dark* (1983), *Good Bones* (1992), *The Tent* (2006) and *Stone Mattress* (2014). *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood* sees these pieces as straddling "the gap between story, essay and prose poem" (Macpherson 2010, 87), suggesting some unease with genre positioning. Nevertheless, these prose efforts, far from being awkward fillers of inter-generic space, are dense hubs of speculation about the human condition, as in the title story of *The Tent*, which allegorizes human experience as a form of imprisonment within a tent of words that offers protection from the howling wilderness beyond. In this compact work, as in other materials from that collection, Atwood was freed from genre restrictions, and thus able to play with concepts from psychology, philosophy and environmental science, while adapting familiar genre motifs and structures, with amoeba-like flexibility.

3 The Shifting Topography of Genre

3.1 Science Fiction

Along the way, Atwood has offered considerable direct comment on her understanding of the genre of science fiction with its terminological "bendiness" (Atwood 2011, "Introduction," *In Other Worlds*, 7), notably in the Ellmann Lectures delivered in Georgia in 2010, and in the resulting collection *In Other Worlds*. In this, Atwood traces her own engagement with science fiction from an adolescent consumer of "creepy tales" (Atwood 2011, 39), to a viewer of B-movies

² See Chris Vials for an analysis of the MaddAddam trilogy as a dystopian critique of neoliberalism, and J. Paul Narkunas for a related placement of the trilogy as a speculative anti-capitalist work.

with sci fi themes (Atwood 2011, 40). Throughout her analysis, Atwood keeps one eye on the genre boundaries, apparently motivated by that remark made by fellow author Ursula Le Guin (Atwood 2011, "Introduction," *In Other Worlds*, 5–6). Anxious to disavow any disdain for what is often seen as lowbrow or popular, Atwood embarks on a history of the genre (2011, 56–57), followed by a persuasive anatomy of science fiction's functions: to "explore the nature and limits of what it means to be human," to "interrogate social organization by showing what things might be like if we rearranged them" (2011, 62), and to "explore the outer reaches of the imagination by taking us boldly where no man has gone before" (2011, 63). Crucially, Atwood associates science fiction with myth (in the mode of the theorist, Northrop Frye), claiming that this genre may have "subsumed the mythic areas abandoned by literature" (2011, 56) when realism took over. In the pages of science fiction, then, Atwood sees readers as seeking meta-stories that shape our conceptions of where we stand in the world, what mysteries beset us and what, if anything, we can do about the unknown future that haunts the normative work of science fiction (2011, 55). "It's never had a happy ending," Atwood affirms while reviewing another work of science fiction, "not so far" (2011, 131).

3.2 Speculative Fiction

Since Atwood prefers the label "speculative fiction" for her works, and some critics accept it as a close fit for "Three Novels I Won't Write Soon" (Rogerson 2009, 89), it is worth exploring the accepted definitions of the term, some of which immediately subdivide the field:

The term "speculative fiction" has three historically located meanings: a subgenre of science fiction that deals with human rather than technological problems, a genre distinct from and opposite to science fiction in its exclusive focus on possible futures, and a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating "consensus reality" of everyday experience. (Oziewicz 2017)

How likely it is that the fictional scenario will eventually occur forms the main foundation of Atwood's own distinction between science fiction and what she writes. The degree of probability of future events marks the boundary between Martians (science fiction) and climate change or genetic modification (speculative fiction). This, however, turns out to be a less secure demarcation than one might think. Any "predictive value" (Oziewicz 2017) could rapidly be overtaken by time and technology, not to mention that the scenarios presented in "Three Novels" seem to deliberately refuse prediction.

Juliet McKenna resorts to geographical metaphor to explain the elusive difference between science fiction and speculative fiction: "Speculative fiction prompts the reader to pay so much more attention, looking for the details that make sense of this strange world. Reading speculative fiction isn't arriving in Manchester. It's finding yourself in Outer Mongolia with no help from Lonely Planet or a Rough Guide" (McKenna 2014). Intuitively one feels that Atwood would appreciate McKenna's analogy, though it does not contribute much to a sound theoretical genre distinction, except for the sense-making details. Speculative fiction should offer a deep illusion of reality, unlike science fiction, where the scaffold of science may suffice.

Also useful is Oziewicz's assertion that speculative fiction began with an oppositional stance, one that flourished into a sub-genre of feminist speculative fiction in the 1970s and 1980s (for which Atwood and Le Guin are provided as prime examples). There is something tautological about explaining Atwood's work by reference to a category of which she is the co-constituent; nevertheless, the concept of oppositionality does capture the deliberate a-normality of her shorter pieces.

3.3 Related Genre Distinctions

A newer candidate for the classification of some of Atwood's work is "slipstream" fiction. Coined in reaction to the term "mainstream" (Frelik 2011, 21), slipstream still boasts only indeterminate definitions and boundaries – although, as Frelik explains, this is the point. "Slipstream is what falls through the cracks of exclusionary definitions," we are told (Frelik 2011, 27), even though a bookstore in London has apparently adopted the word as a useful shelving – and presumably sales – category (Frelik 2011, 30). Discussions of slipstream as an actual *sub-genre* of science fiction appear in comprehensive overview collections such as *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction* (2014) and *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (2009), suggesting its incomplete emergence as a free-standing genre. Atwood and her work are often among the "usual suspects" in a list of slipstream works (Frelik 2011, 32), and certainly the generic flexibility noted earlier does ally many of her shorter pieces with this classification. However, both as category and terminology, the term slipstream represents more a convenience for the critic and reviewer rather than a target genre parameter for the writer. Atwood, for instance, wrote many of the related short pieces in response to external prompts from the real world, to which she has been an active contributor.

Before adopting slipstream as a category for such literary leftovers, it is sobering to sample the proliferation of terms for other splinter factions of experimental fiction. In *21st Century Stories*, Beamer and Wolfe provide a useful list of the possibilities: "Slipstream. Interstitial. Transrealism. New Weird. Nonrealist fiction. New Wave Fabulism. Postmodern Fantasy. Postgenre Fiction. Cross-genre. Span fiction. Artists without Borders. New Humanist. Fantastika. Liminal Fantasy" (Beamer and Wolfe 2008, 16). Any or all of these could be argued as descriptors for Atwood's "Three Novels I Won't Write Soon," although some more readily than others. The immediately relevant aspect of the slipstream genre definition, however, is its common inclusion of the feature of meta-narrativity (Frelik 2011, 40).

4 Three Unwritten Novels

In reviewing her youthful enthusiasm for the *Martian Chronicles* and *The Attack of the 60-foot Woman*, Atwood establishes some of the narrative patterns that emerge to shape "Three Novels I Won't Write Soon." Taking the title as the first indicator of genre, it is apparent that the number recalls both the reflexive, absurdist play of a work like Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921: *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*) and the more contemporary habit of personal list-making (e.g. bucket lists and a Top Ten or Top 50 of anything and everything). The first deals with the deconstruction of literary genre into constituent parts, in a manner designed to draw attention to the playfully fictive nature of the work, which became a familiar feature of much mid-century writing. The second listing trend evokes the flattened life experience of the digital age, in which the quantifying of personal experience has become a substitute for lived experience.³ Thoughts and even experiences are transformed by digital omni-communicativeness into data points – to be rapidly consumed and equally readily discarded. Atwood's title harnesses the playfulness of the Pirandello title to the earnest, but shallow self-construction of the contemporary listing phenomenon. Atwood's characters, Chris and Amanda, are certainly capable of such list-making, just as they are assigned other deliberately trendy adaptations to their habitat: e.g., the decaf coffee and eco-friendly refrigerators in *Worm Zero*.

³ A similar recent Canadian example is Zsuzsi Gartner's "Eleven Orphaned Short-Story Openings, Looking for a Loving Home" in *Geist* 88 (2013): 31.

Each of Atwood's three projected un-novels uncoils through a series of formulaic futuristic scenarios – although invariably with Atwood's deflationary twist, they often feature the “ordinary dirt” of human lives (Atwood 2011, 127). Atwood's “three novels” are clearly derivative of the whole previous century of science fiction, having imported not just the hypotheses of science, but the motifs through which western popular culture has been explaining science to itself for 100 years (e.g., extinction, gigantism and survivalism). In recombining these, Atwood creates a “space of literary play” (Gadpaille 2008, 13; cf. Wisker 2011, 174), where unspeakable eventualities may be contemplated, even though Atwood's persona mainly softens the endings, being what one critic has called “a buoyant doomsayer” (Mead 2017, 38). In this short work, these three disastrous eventualities all involve eco-catastrophe, each one progressively more ridiculous, even as their implications become more extreme. Impressed by the bathetic parabola, one reviewer used the headline, “Beware the sponge that ate Florida” (Lee 2006). The three novels that Atwood's persona negates all evoke the parameters of climate change fiction, or cli-fi, and could be loosely paralleled to the parts of her *ustopian* oeuvre, the MaddAddam trilogy.

4.1 Word Play in the Titles

The three-part work is divided by its declared subject of “three” novels, the titles of which each involve multiple associative levels. The first, *Worm Zero* (Atwood 2006, 85), echoes several established phrasings, from the *ground zero* of the nuclear and 9/11 ages, through the scientific concept of *absolute zero*, to the name of a popular brand of soda. Only the bathetic substitute noun *worm* separates this title from serious issues of globalised consumerism and equally globalised destruction. It is by similarly dense connotation that *Spongedeath*, the second title, works on the reader (Atwood 2006, 88). *Spongedeath* recalls the medical concept of *brain death*, as well as the character from the children's television program *Sponge Bob Square Pants*, itself the creation of a marine biologist. The human finality of the first connotation combats the cheery environmental optimism of the second, to produce the overall burlesque effect of Atwood's negated novel scenarios. The choice of title for the third novel that won't be written differs from the first two. *Beetleplunge* is no sooner announced as an insight and gift “from the unknown” than called into question:

That word – if it is a word – might look quite stunning on the jacket of a book. Should it be “Beetle Plunge,” two words? Or possibly “Beetle Plummet?” Or perhaps “Beetle Descent,” which might sound more literary? (Atwood 2006, 90)

In this case, the speaker inserts an associative trail before the reader can even begin to ponder the possible relevance of *Beetlejuice*, the 1986 fantasy film by Tim Burton, whose title constitutes another strange amalgam of the normative (juice) with the lower forms of animate life (beetles).⁴ What differs about this third title is the metamorphoses it subsequently undergoes as the speaker entertains various grotesque mis-hearings of the phrase:

Maybe I misheard. Maybe it was “Bottle Plunge.” . . . But maybe it wasn't “Bottle Plunge.” Now that I think of it, the phrase may have been “Brutal Purge.” (Atwood 2006, 91–92)

With “brutal purge” there comes a serious shift in the genre and atmosphere of the projected third novel. Unlike the first two, which draw motifs from B-movie romps such as *The Thing* (1951), *The Blob* (1958), *Day the World Ended* (1955), *The Deadly Mantis* (1957), *The Giant*

⁴ And a pun on the name of the star Betelgeuse.

Claw (1957), *Attack of the Giant Leeches* (1959) or *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), this un-novel could never belong to the genre of science fiction, or even environmental fiction (cli-fi). *Brutal purge* connotes the world of fascist regimes and real mass killings, of which the 20th-century had no shortage. Atwood's speaker seems surprised by the direction this third novel's scenario has taken, and not in complete control of the script. The phrase "now I think of it," evokes the creative process, the mid-stream brainstorming about narrative parables that marks a writer's consciousness. As a result, the reader feels a privileged glimpse into the associative process of creativity, the spiral movement of the mind as it considers and rejects possibilities. However, this switch in genre shuts down the plotting of the third un-novel:

Anyway, if it's "Brutal Purge," I can't see a way forward. Chris and Amanda are very likeable. They have straight teeth, trim waists, clean socks, and the best of intentions. They don't belong in a book like that, and if they stray into it by accident they won't come out of it alive. (Atwood 2006, 92)

Stepping back from the constructed randomness of the drift from *Beetleplunge* to *Brutal purge*, it becomes apparent that Atwood has taken her writer persona on a journey from comforting formulaic fiction to discomfiting political realism. It would be tempting to read this as an autobiographical metanarrative or even political allegory, but the certainties of critical labelling are all undercut by the pervasive refusal to commit to any assertion, as a close look at the text will reveal in the next section.

4.2 Creative Indeterminacy

Atwood's voiced persona begins with an apparent statement of truth to describe *Worm Zero*: "In this novel all the worms die" (Atwood 2006, 85). It is finite, absolute and inclusive. However, the next few sentences progressively open the category of "worm" to speculate on what a "worm proper" is. Uncertainty begins to erode the first proposition before the end of paragraph one: "Should grubs be included? Should maggots?" (85). The persona displays considerable knowledge about the vital functions of real earthworms (soil creation, surface extrusion, rain penetration), but soon this science-based scenario ruptures on the writer's creative uncertainty about plot: "Who shall we follow in the course of this doleful story?" (86) Structure, characterization and dialogue are no more determinate; the persona cannot decide whether the projected novel's final words should be uttered by Chris or Amanda, the bloodless cardboard hero and heroine who had "great sex" in "Chapter One" (Atwood 2006, 86).

In shallow imitation of characters from mimetic realism, Chris and Amanda possess the trappings of modern lives, the eco-friendly refrigerator, the instant coffee and the summer cottage, so typical of middle-class Canadian life. Beyond these solid points of reference, uncertainty prevails in the projected narrative, as the persona debates whether giving Amanda the final piece of dialogue would show that her "character has developed" (Atwood 2006, 88). Sly satire abounds on suburban life, the clichés of fiction criticism, and above all on the timid sacrifices made by the low-carb, gluten-free, carbon-neutral generation, shoring up their lives against climate disaster with minor capitulations meant to appease the climate gods.

In the second un-novel, these stratagems are satirized as "décor", the one regrettable waste as the giant sponge approaches Chris and Amanda's condo from a reef off the coast of Florida (88). Unlike the scenarios from many science fiction movies, there is no mad scientist in *Spongedeath*, and thus no way to blame human pride or evil for the formidable "sponge on the rampage". Nor

will it yield to Amanda's pathetically optimistic home remedy: "Could we sprinkle salt on it?" (89). The writer's voice contemplates elevating Chris to narrative hero: "[S]hould he be allowed to defeat the monstrous bath accessory and save the day, for Florida, for America, and ultimately for humanity?" (89). However, the scenario undermines the horror of gigantism by seeing the sponge, not as a natural phenomenon, but as an accessory to 21st-century hygiene. Nor is this a climax, but a pastiche of narrative climax, one from which the voice retreats, claiming that "as a writer loyal to the truth" (90), they cannot yet attempt this narrative project. With a wave of textual hesitations, digressions, conditionals and modals, Atwood's voice abandons the scenario, leaving the beach condos still under threat.

With *Beetleplunge*, the third un-novel, the voice wastes even less time sketching in the plot. The syntax rushes towards indeterminacy, even discarding the title along the way: "Scrap the title! This is now a novel without a name" (90). Ironically, this refusal to name becomes one of the few assertions – though a negative one – in the short textual space before the plot careers off the road with Chris and Amanda's green Volkswagen to reappear in the plot of a thriller instead of a climate fiction novel.

5 The Language of Climate Change

If Atwood has a claim to science/speculative fiction, then it must rest on her eco-critical engagement with humanity's future in the MaddAddam trilogy. This classification might also fit "Three Novels", since, I will argue, it presents a progressive exploration of the necessary instability of language and of our treasured cultural discourses while the planet disintegrates around us. To advance this proposition, Atwood proceeds obliquely, advancing the three fictional climate change scenarios. Each posits a future in which the earth's natural systems have failed, some crucial link in the biological chain that binds the global habitat has snapped – worms, sponges or beetles – and humankind is left facing the consequences, denied even the comforts of modern technology. None of this description is emotionally engaging, the projected events in the "three novels" being as two-dimensional as a bullet-point list, and having what one critic called "a cartoon-like clarity" (Hammer 1990, 41). Hammer used this phrase to characterise *The Handmaid's Tale*, but it does capture the clear outlines of the disaster scenario in the short works under discussion: "In this novel a sponge located on a reef near the coast of Florida begins to grow at a very rapid rate. Soon it has reached the shore and is oozing inland" (Atwood 2006, 88). This cartoon-like clarity dominates *Worm Zero* and *Spongedeath*, but evaporates rapidly in *Beetleplunge*, replaced by a series of indeterminate "maybe" propositions.

Indeed, as readily as the three novels are proposed, they are withdrawn, in sentences that withhold meaning through denial, fragmentation, contradiction, questions, indecision and spontaneous digressions. Finding a plain declarative statement in the short text is a challenge after the opening sentence ("In this novel all the worms die."). It is almost as if Atwood had set herself the challenge of writing without the standard affirmation of the statement sentence: subject verb object, someone acting definitively upon something. Instead, there are fragments: "Those inside fish. Those inside dogs" (85). Questions dominate whole paragraphs: "Should these be his last words? Should the sponge fall upon him with a soft but deadly glop?" (89). Negative modal shading calls into question – not reality, for there is arguably no real object of relation in a projected novel scenario – but confidence-in-reality: "a small, still-wriggling worm *might be discovered* in the corner of the garden, copulating with itself"; "it *might be* as well not to begin" (88, 90; my emphasis). These stylistic markers of uncertainty function not to

describe climate change scenarios, but to re-enact the discourse in which western society has been discussing climate change.

The uncertainty that prevails in the discourse of climate change has been the subject of research by Hermine Penz, a contemporary theorist of eco-linguistics. After establishing that climate science expresses its findings in “degrees of certainty and probability” (Penz 2015, 8), Penz deals with the challenge of translating such discourse, relying as it does on risk and probability rather than 100% certain outcomes. Similarly, David Wallace-Wells has referred to the “timid language of scientific probability”, blaming it on “our uncertainty about uncertainty” (Wallace-Wells 2017, n. p.). Undeniably, early warnings about climate change (or global warming, as it was once termed) were hedged with probability expressions including *possibly*, *likely*, *probably*, and the range of modals from *might* to *could*.

More recently, Andrew Heintzman has even used the word “bipolar” to define the “sanest and most logical position for a Canadian environmentalist” (Heintzman 2016, 10). Like Penz, this Canadian reviewer deals with the uncertain, two-faced nature of the environmental debate.⁵ Unlike Penz, whose analysis involves the vocabulary and structure of modality, Heintzman addresses the dialectic of outlook in climate change analysis:

Being an environmentalist today is to be tossed back and forth between extreme pessimism and optimism. Seen from one angle, things have never been worse: species are going extinct at an alarming rate, forests are dwindling globally and greenhouse gas emissions are continuing to soar past levels that we used to think spelled likely planetary doom. And yet we have never been better positioned to remedy these problems than we are today (Heintzman 2016, 10).

In Atwood’s “Three Novels” we find echoes of both Penz’s linguistic probability dilemma and Heintzman’s “strange dialectic” – and his phrase “planetary doom” encapsulates exactly the mood to which Atwood’s piece responds. The first two of her narratively framed doomsday scenarios start from a plausible scientific base, project rapid environmental change, human inflexibility and the ultimate failure of the planet and its environment to support human needs and desires. Moreover, as in climate change writing, the text is dominated by negative modality – all of its syntactical features working together to withdraw any certainty about either the projected novel plots or the global future to which they refer.

6 Conclusion: Not Quite Cli-fi

“Three Novels” is thus debarred from the category of science fiction, because science fiction forms the topic rather than the genre, and from the sub-classification of speculative fiction – not because the work isn’t speculative, but because it may not be fiction at all. In its layered reflexivity, where the style becomes the meaning, it perhaps most closely approximates a postmodern prose poem, but one where climate science and the human will to tackle it, whether politically or linguistically – take the foreground. The clichés of ecotainment are paraded before us as the persona floats narrative scenarios, but even these are revealed as unsatisfying when placed against the indeterminacy that dominates the piece.

⁵ This is true even without the phenomenon of climate change denial. A study in 2008 established that news coverage of the issue of climate change had succeeded in giving more credibility to the denial side of the debate in the otherwise laudable quest for balanced journalism (Boykoff).

If, as Atwood has maintained, science fiction subsumed the mythical area abandoned by modern literature (Atwood 2011, 56), then the minimalist science factoids in “Three Novels” are feebly gesturing towards a mythical system that is continuously undercut by human insistence on a life without structured belief. Chris and Amanda act out the genre and gender scenarios of popular fiction and the tabloids, easy to satirise, but also deeply woven into the desires of a consumer culture. Worm death is plausible,⁶ giant sponges less so, but both allow for Northrop Frye’s mythical cycle of death, replacement and rebirth to unfold. Brutal purges are another matter entirely; they interrupt both real human lives and the cultural and literary activities that give meaning to such lives. Read in this light, “Three Novels” emerges less as speculative fiction than as an epistemological thought experiment, a suggestive hypothesis, unproven and unprovable.

“Maybe there shouldn’t be novels, anymore,” says Canadian writer Stephen Marche; “Maybe there should be something else, something new” (Marche 2017, 18). Speaking in response to the endless Canadian concern with appropriation of voice, Marche’s position would absolve writers of the dangerous responsibility of character creation and animation. Read in the context of this experimental, perhaps speculative almost-fiction, the remark voices the implicit suggestion at the end of “Three Novels”: that the genre of narrative fiction has exhausted itself in projecting entertaining pseudo-futures for humankind. Despite having great sex – “in Chapter One, or possibly Chapter Two” (Atwood 2006, 86), characters like Chris and Amanda may have no progeny, no literary future. Instead, the meditative persona, a “writer loyal to the truth,” ends in contemplating the extinction of the impulse or energy to create fiction in the realistic climate of global political oppression – the world of the brutal purge, of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in effect.

There is, however, a caveat: before reading “Three Novels” as a compact admission of artistic inadequacy, we must confront the destabilizing effect of its truth-allergic syntax. Distanced from the real by the I-persona’s playful digressiveness, the title denial of action and the endless regress of the three novel titles, the text ultimately asserts only its own inability to assert. Through fragmentation, questioning, conditionals and negative modality, “Three Novels I Won’t Write Soon” plays with the plastic material of science-fiction scenarios, only to dismantle the resulting construct as a radically inappropriate vehicle to contain global horrors much more contingent than blobs or giant sponges. The human world has been dreaming of disaster through the medium of popular science fiction. The indeterminacy haunting such works at the discourse level both echoes the prose of climate change science and implicates the reader – both the implied one and the real reader with a paperback or an e-reader in hand – in responsibility for the indeterminate future. For the future with climate change can be nothing other than a conditional sentence, tied to human reality only by the devastating banality of the lexicon of modern technology and its artefacts.

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⁶ Compare the real panic about disappearing honey bees. See, for example, the *National Geographic* feature by Catherine Zuckerman, “What Happens if the Honeybees Disappear?” (*National Geographic*, October 2017).