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Over the Brink of Environmental Collapse

Power, Religion, and Nature in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy

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Introductory Remarks.

DEFINITIONS AND TRANSGRESSIONS OF A NARRATIVE GENRE

Contradict yourself. In order to live you must remain broken up.
Wyndham Lewis

I. The Origins of a Literary Tradition: Science Fiction in Canada

Canadian literary identity is the subject of continuous debates, which constantly require careful delimitations and definitions. Thomas King, a Canadian writer of Cherokee ancestry, writes that «[i]n the beginning there was nothing»[1] and that *nothing* becomes the background for the continually disrupting and shifting identities of First Nations, colonizers, immigrants, and temporary residents of Canada. The question of Canadian identity constitutes a key factor in approaching its literature and cannot be ignored:

> A great deal has been made, from time to time, of the search for 'the Canadian identity'; sometimes we are told that this item is simply something we have mislaid, like the car keys, and might find down behind the sofa if we are only diligent enough, whereas at other times we have been told that the object in question doesn't really exist and we are pursuing a phantom. Sometimes we are told that although we don't have one of these 'identities', we ought to, because other countries do.[2]

Among the many intersecting identities that have crossed the Canadian territories, there is a significant number of authors that have voiced their

[1] Thomas King, *Green Grass Running Water*, Toronto: Harper Collins, 1993, p, 1.

[2] Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955, p. 7.

identities through science fiction and speculative fiction. While establishing the origins of Canadian literature is a task that outreaches the extent of this treatise, sketching the history of science fiction in Canada is a more attainable and appropriate introduction to the forms and contents of Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy.

In 1968 Judith Merril, an American writer, editor and science fiction enthusiast, realized that she «could no longer accept the realpolitik of being an American citizen»[3] and moved to Toronto, Canada, as a reaction to US militarist politics in Vietnam. Born in New York in 1923, Merril was a radical social activist and a member of the Futurian Society of New York, a group of science fiction writers and enthusiasts led by Frederik Pohl, whom she married in 1948. Merril's dedication to science fiction stands in a continuum with her commitment to the many subversive movements that she supported:

> The interest does not limit itself to the gender issues […]. I was born into the early Zionist movement and moved myself as a teenager into the Trotzkyism of the thirties and forties (the only political stance that was both anti-U.S.-imperialism and anti-Soviet-Communism). From there I moved on to emergent science fiction; then to anti-Vietnam protest and Canadian support of war resisters; which led to the Free University movement, hippie/yippie entanglements, tuning-in and turning-on; all of this accompanied (until they started yelling at us, "Honky, go home!") by involvements with Black issues.[4]

Merril's commitment to science fiction is strictly tied to her engagement with social and political issues, thus endorsing a view of the genre that is a far cry from the escapism to which it is often connected. Merril is a key figure for science fiction in Canada and she edited the first *Tesseracts* anthology, an

[3] Judith Merril and Emily Pohl-Weary, *Better to Have Loved: The Life of Judith Merril*, Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002, p. 162.
[4] Ivi, p. 11.

original Canadian science fiction series published by Press Porcépic[5]. A prolific anthologist and promoter of the genre, Merril housed her collection of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction at the Toronto Public Library in 1970. The original denomination Spaced Out Library was changed into Merril Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation and Fantasy in 1991 but, with either name, it still is among the most relevant public collections of its kind in the world.

Over the years, the collection continued to grow and to attract both the general public and academic researchers. Among these, Croatian born Canadian scholar Darko Suvin is another keystone figure who has largely contributed to the field of Canadian science fiction and whose critical work *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) is essential to any serious academic exploration in the field. Suvin was born in 1918 in the soon-to-be Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia of Josip Broz Tito, who ruled the federation between 1945 and 1963. He conducted his studies at Zagreb University and developed a critical approach that combined Marxism – especially through Ernst Bloch's highly influential theories on utopia and the *novum*[6] – and science fiction. He migrated to North America and settled in Montreal to serve as a Professor of Science Fiction, English, and Comparative Literature at McGill University until his retirement in 1999.

The entanglement of science fiction and social criticism is a crucial feature of Suvin's work and contributed to his definition of science fiction as «a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device

[5] Judith Merril (ed), *Tesseracts*, Victoria: Press Porcépic, 1985.

[6] Born in 1885, the philosopher is the author of *The Principle of Hope* (1954), in which he interprets utopianism as a way to overstep any human boundary through creativity and action.

is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment»[7]. A close relative of science fiction – «both an independent aunt and a dependent daughter of SF»[8] – utopian fiction is defined as a verbal construction that can never be totally disengaged from the author's sociopolitical community. Ultimately, utopian fiction is «based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis»[9]. Suvin is a pioneer in the study of science fiction as a literary genre, whose aesthetic features are complementary to its subversive power and sociopolitical charge.

Science fiction is commonly referred to as a popular phenomenon of the twentieth century, but literary works with elements that are now recognized as peculiar to the genre predate its flourishing and Golden Age in 1940s and 1950s. For example, James Gunn identifies some of these elements in the earliest known written narrative in human history, the Babylonian poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2000 B.C.): «*Gilgamesh*'s concerns are those of science fiction: social (people need a heroic king, but what do people do when a king rules too heavily?) and personal (can man live forever, or, if not, how does he live with the fact of death?)»[10].

Gunn maintains that no literary work prior to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) can be correctly identified as science fiction proper. However, the examples he draws from ancient literature «represent a continuing line of literary interest that eventually, when the conditions were right, became science fiction; and

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[7] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction. On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, pp. 7-8.
[8] Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction. On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, p. 383.
[9] Darko Suvin, "Theses on Dystopia 2001", in Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (eds), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York: Routledge, pp. 187-201, p. 188.
[10] James Gunn, *The Road to Science Fiction: From Gilgamesh to Wells*, New York: New American Library, 1977, p. XII.

the intellectual concerns they reflect were influential on later science fiction»[11]. More than two thousand years later, Syrian rhetorician and satirist Lucian of Samosata wrote the first fictional voyage to the moon, but the science fictional elements of the text are strictly subordinated to its satirical aims. Among others, Plato's *Atlantis* (ca. 360 B.C.) and Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) follow in Gunn's survey. Like a time capsule, these narratives reveal long-time interests and concerns that later developed into the science fictional form.

Both utopia and the voyage to the moon are topics that critics have identified as closely related to the Canadian literary imagination. Oriana Palusci[12] gives a detailed account of the invention of Canada as a utopian romance, which was fostered by historical and literary projections of the European imagination. Similarly to the seventeenth-century Puritans that sailed to Plymouth and founded the colony that would become the cradle of the United States of America, English, Irish and Scottish immigrants from Victorian England dreamt about Canada as a land in which they could start a new life based on economic and religious liberty. A fundamental difference marks their experiences, though. While the Pilgrim Fathers were consciously willing to found a City upon a Hill against the corruptions of the Old World, early settlers went to Canada to build a colony that would firmly remain a subject of the British Empire. New Canadians never rebelled against their former motherland nor declared a War of Independence, as their American neighbors did.

The representation of a utopian Canada is more the expression of a European fantasy than a revolutionary threat for the Old World establishment.

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[11] Ivi, p. XVIII.

[12] Oriana Paluci, "Inventing Canada as a Utopian Romance", in Paola Spinozzi (ed), *Utopianism/Literary Utopias and National Cultural Identities: A Comparative Perspective*, Bologna: Cotepra, 2001, pp. 245-260.

Moreover, it is a fantasy that does not take into account the unimaginably bitter winters and savage wilderness that the immigrants had to face once they finally reached the Canadian soil. The ambiguous image of Canada is sharpened by the compresence of English and French settlers, as *Nouvelle France* has a longer history than English Canada. The literary evidence of the French representation of Canada as a utopian place can be traced back as far as 1657, when Cyrano de Bergerac chooses the *Nouvelle France* as no less than the first trial step – even though unintentional – in the journey to the Moon that he narrates in his romance *A Voyage to the Moon: With Some Account of the Solar World* (1657). Cyrano's model would be followed by Swiss born Napoléon Aubin, who sets out for America in 1829 and then chooses Quebec City and Montreal as his homes from 1835 to his death in 1890. Aubin writes *Mon Voyage à la Lune* (1839), a utopian satirical short story of social criticism that is probably the first Canadian work of relevance to the genre[13].

The term "science fiction" was popularized in the late 1920s by American technician, inventor, and writer Hugo Gernsback, who established the genre as a separate publishing category for his pulp magazine *Amazing Stories* (1926-2005). Gernsback isolated science fiction from its previous tradition and contributed to create the literary ghetto in which science fiction has for long been secluded. However, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells as the most commonly acknowledged pioneering authors of the genre, thus antedating its birth in the nineteenth century and highlighting its connection with the utopian tradition. As a matter of fact, utopian fiction was already a flourished literary genre, which featured milestones like Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890). In the same years, the

[13] See David Ketterer, *Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

anonymous author writing under the pseudonym of Ralph Centennius publishes a pamphlet, *The Dominion in 1983* (1883), in which he or she gives a treble description of what would become of the Dominion of Canada[14] from a political, technological, and social point of view in a hundred year period.

A few years later, Canadian writer James De Mille writes *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888). It was published anonymously and, as it has been noted, it anticipates the works of better-known H. Rider Haggard under many aspects[15]. This pioneer text of Canadian science fiction is a dystopia disturbed by «flickering hints of a utopian subtext»[16], in which cannibalism emerges as another key theme that would become representative of a Canadian literary tendency. As Palusci notes, in De Mille's fantasy novel there are multiple metaphorical levels of cannibalism: the colonisers are cannibals because they impose their own culture, while native Canadians devour other cultures and hide their own. In this sense, the author is a cannibal too, as an expression of the fragile Canadian identity that forces him or her to consume other cultural forms to disguise his or her own lack of self-confidence.

However, Canadian literature has been marked for a long time by the proclaimed absence of any non-realistic literary work. A comparison with the United States can be useful here, because the different historical conditions

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[14] The proper designation for Canada was debated in the London Conference, which took place between 1866 and March 1867. In that occasion, Samuel Leonard Tilley suggested to use the word "dominion", borrowing it from Psalm 72 of the Bible: «He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth». Even though the religious context suggests a comparison with the birth of the United States as the City Upon a Hill, the Canadian "dominion" clearly refers to a submissive position instead of a contrastive one. See http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/confederation/023001-2700-e.html. Last access March 11th 2015.

[15] See David Ketterer, *Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy*, p. 9.

[16] Ibidem.

under which the two nations were born influenced their literatures as well. After an early period of American and Canadian letters, in which both traditions manifest a predominance of diaries, travelogues, and extensive descriptions, American literature reveals a deep symbolist tendency to suspend the physical reality, in favour of the creation and narration of a spiritual and mysterious world. Authors like James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Henry James are representative of the gothic non-realistic and sometimes gothic ambitions of American literature and science fiction authors would later adopt and mould their intuitions. There is an important distinction between realistic literature and symbolic literature[17], which originates in Nathaniel Hawthorne's distinction between romance and novel[18]. Atwood borrows this distinction to explore the boundaries of science fiction:

> The French have two words for the short story – *conte* and *nouvelle* – "the tale" and "the news" – and this is a useful distinction. The tale can be set anywhere, and can move into realms that are off-limits for the realistic novel […]. "The news", however, is news of us; it's the daily news, as in "daily life".

Canadian literature seems to be less interested in "the tale" than in "the news". The traditional conception remains solidly attached to the idea conveyed by nineteenth-century explorer immigrants like Catharine Parr Traill and Major Samuel Strickland, who see Canada as too harsh a land to stimulate the fantastic imagination. Earle Birney strengthens, even though in an ambiguous way, this belief in his 1962 poem "Can.lit.", which he concludes with the well-known claim that «it's only by our lack

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[17] See Carlo Pagetti, *Il Senso del Futuro. La Fantascienza nella Letteratura Americana*, Milano: Mimesis, 2012, p. 47.

[18] Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Custom-House", *The Scarlett Letter*, Boston: Ticknor, Reed, & Fields, 1850.

of ghosts we're haunted»[19]. Margaret Atwood expands on this topic in an essay published in 1977 with the title "Canadian Monsters"[20]. She writes is in an attempt to unify Canadian cultural memory through the exhumation of ghosts, monsters, and other creatures in order to prove that both an historical and an imaginary past exist in Canada.

«We want to be sure» – she writes – «that the ancestors, ghosts, and skeletons really are there, that as a culture we are not as flat and lacking in resonance as were once led to believe»[21]. As Marlene Goldman extensively explains, haunting and the uncanny are peculiar poetics of contemporary Canadian fiction, as they reveal «the dispossession and marginalization of Native peoples and cultures; transnational and diasporic migrations instigated by imperialism and colonialism; and, finally, conceptions of femininity and the female body»[22]. It is in this sense that Birney's ambiguous line, while upholding the accepted lack of supernatural and gothic elements in Canadian literature, elicits a reaction and opens up to the emergence and expansion of a Canadian non-realistic literature.

II. Discussing the Boundaries of Science Fiction as a Genre

Eminent Canadian critic Northrop Frye examines the hypothetical lack of non-realistic elements in Canadian literatures and concludes that the lack of ghosts depends on the fact that the center of gravity of Canadian literature is in the

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[19] Earle Birney, "Can. Lit.", in *Ice Cod Bell or Stone*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962, p. 18.

[20] Margaret Atwood, "Canadian Monsters. Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction", in David Staines (ed), *The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977, pp. 97-122.

[21] Ivi, p. 100.

[22] See Marlene Goldman, *DisPossession. Haunting in Canadian Fiction*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012, p. 7.

future, instead of the past[23]. However, this reflection confirms that Canadian literature is prone to imagine how the future could look like, which corresponds to the speculative attitude on which science fiction is grounded. Frye also writes that there are «two main forms of science fiction: a software philosophical fantasy descending from More's *Utopia*, and a hardware technological one of which the ancestor is Bacon's *New Atlantis*»[24]. The double ancestry of the genre is a recurring feature of the many formulations and definitions of science fiction and Frye maintains that science fiction extensively explores various forms of doubles[25].

However, time travels and parallel worlds are not the only kinds of doubles elicited by science fiction. Talking about one genre – even in one cultural context only – usually involves talking about more than just one. I have started this brief digression from a commonly accepted notion of science fiction as Darko Suvin defined it, moved to utopian fiction, and mentioned the origins of the fantastic in the uncanny. All these genres and subgenres share a focus on speculation and a dialogue between text and society that often draws forth split images and oppositions. For example, on the line traced by the evolution of utopian writing, Tom Moylan identifies its contradictory nature as an expression of the dominant capitalist ideology and, at the same time, as the force that creates an «open space of opposition»[26] to the affirmative culture of the dominant ideology. «Utopia – he writes – grew up with capitalism and

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[23] See Northrop Frye, "Haunted by Lack of Ghosts. Some Patterns in the Imagery of Canadian Poetry" (1977), in Jean O'Grady and David Staines (eds), *Northrop Frye on Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003, pp. 472-492, p. 492.

[24] Northrop Frye, "Natural and Revealed Communities," in *Myth and Metaphor. Selected Essays 1974-1988*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990, p. 301.

[25] See Northrop Frye, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990, p. 112.

[26] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible. Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. New York: Methuen, 1986, p. 2.

the new world as its godparents while the underlying social and personal yearnings and sufferings were its immediate progenitors»[27].

In the 1960s and 1970s, the oppositional culture against the affirmative ideology of capitalism found some of its chief concerns in feminism, ecology, and the resistance against hierarchies of dominance. Moylan argues that the utopian impulse responds to such historical events through literary *critical utopias*, which are «expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling, debunking, of both the genre itself and the historical situation» and cause of an «explosive reaction»[28]. Such structure is best represented by Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, and Samuel R. Delany's novels, which put a stronger emphasis on dynamic processes rather than on static truths and «reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream»[29].

Actually, Northrop Frye highlights a similar characteristic in the founding texts of utopian literature, such as Plato's *Republic* and Thomas More's *Utopia*: «the ideal state to More, as to Plato, is not a future ideal but a hypothetical one, an informing power and not a goal of action»[30]. The real goal of action is not to abolish the actual social and political context and replace it with the utopian state, but rather to «work within it, more clearly»[31], leaning toward the established utopian model. Critical utopias maintain traditional features and reverse their meaning in order to criticize the political and social system of utopia, which is observed more closely and represented as an ambiguous and imperfect system.

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[27] Ivi, p. 4-5.
[28] Ivi, p. 10.
[29] Ivi, p. 10.
[30] Northrop Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias", *Daedalus* 94.2 (1965), pp. 323-347, p. 334.
[31] Ibid.

My viewpoint is that of Canadian literature, with few excursions by means of comparison and derivation in foreign but close enough literary traditions – mainly the United States. However, the difficulty of defining science fiction or speculative fiction in Canada does not depend on its national literary identity, but on the dynamic quality of genre as a category. I will draw on Tzvetan Todorov's essay "The Origin of Genres"[32], which begins with the assertion that «[t]o persist in discussing genres today might seem like an idle if not obviously anachronistic pastime»[33]. However, he takes on an inductive method that brings him to maintain that genres and modes are still relevant today. As a matter of fact, contemporary literature has a tendency to disobey genre rules, but it is precisely this transgression that reinforces such rules and makes them more visible. As an institution, genres are transgressed and yet acknowledged, because they «functions as "horizons of expectations" for readers, and as "models of writing" for authors»[34].

Three elements in Todorov's reflection on genre are particularly meaningful in relation to Margaret Atwood: genre transgression; the readers' expectations; and the author's model. Dunja Mohr aligns Atwood among a number of women writers who have authored so-called «transgressive utopian dystopias»[35], which stands for narratives that «incorporate within the dystopian narrative a utopian undercurrent» and utopian strategies that «criticize, undermine, and transgress the established binary logic of

[32] Tzvetan Todorov, "L'origin des genres", English translation by Richard M. Berrong, "The Origin of Genres", *New Literary History* 8.1 (1976), pp. 159-170.
[33] Ivi, p. 159.
[34] Ivi, p. 163.
[35] Dunja M. Mohr, "Transgressive Utopian Dystopias: The Postmodern Reappearance of Utopia in the Disguise of Dystopia", in *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 55.1 (2007), pp. 5–24.

dystopia»[36]. Genre transgression is also a useful anticipation to Atwood's refusal to let her works be enclosed within specific boundaries that relate more to the author's gender than to the intrinsic characteristics of the text. In this sense, Atwood transgresses not only genre restrictions, but gender ones as well, as will be discussed further.

The readers' expectations and the author's model are of absolute relevance as we approach Atwood's own stance on genre and, more specifically, on the genre science fiction in relation to the MaddAddam trilogy. As a matter of fact, she believes that readers would be disappointed if they expected to read science fiction in her dystopian novels. The MaddAddam trilogy does not contain certain elements that are peculiar of popular science fiction and fantasy literature, such as other planets, dragons and extraterrestrials, spaceships, and silvery images on the books covers. Moreover, she maintains that her models for writing the trilogy are not Golden Age science fiction novels. She is in fact much more indebted to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) than to Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* (1950), and much more interested in inquiring post 9/11 contradictory dystopias, marked by dichotomies such as open markets and closed minds, state surveillance and engineered happiness – than intergalactic wars.

As a theme, space conquest has been extensively explored by classic American science fiction, as an extension of the conquest of nature. For Canadians, nature was just too vast and threatening to think about it in terms of conquest. To borrow a much discussed and contested interpretative grid that Atwood herself proposes, in Canada human beings are victims of nature

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[36] Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart. Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias*, Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2005, p. 3.

and their goal is not conquest but mere survival[37]. Canadian writers convey «a very palpable sense of the overpowering forces of nature and of the long evolutionary perspective»[38]. Instead of peculiarly American Promethean battles to win or perish, Canadian science fiction reveals a sensitivity towards the environment and its rules that puts it closer to the British tradition, rather than the classic American one.

Contemporary American science fiction has changed significantly in its attitudes toward the environment. As it were, post-nuclear science fiction cannot overlook the newly acquired awareness of the catastrophic consequences of overconsumption and abuse of natural resources. However, the two elements that Todorov has identified as decisive in any discussion about genre – the readers' expectations and the author's models – remain untouched for Atwood and contribute to her decision to separate her works from the vague but popular perception of science fiction and include them in the genre of speculative fiction instead.

III. Discussing the Boundaries of Genre and Gender: the Debate between Margaret Atwood and Ursula K. Le Guin

In the first decade of the twentieth century, two major North-American women writers engaged in a debate on science fiction. Ursula K. Le Guin and Margaret Atwood are the protagonist voices of this dialogue, which becomes all the more relevant in light of their mutually intersecting paths of life. Ursula K. Le Guin was born in Berkeley, United States of America, ten years before Margaret Atwood, who was born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada. They both graduated from Radcliffe College, Le Guin in 1951 and Atwood in 1962, and

[37] See Margaret Atwood, *Survival. A Thematic Guide of Canadian Literature*, Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972.
[38] David Ketterer, *Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy*, p. 22.

have built a long and well-established writing career. Starting from these basic biographical facts[39] and from their different approaches to literary criticism and theory, it is already possible to draw a profile of Le Guin's and Atwood's literary life that is relevant to the debate on science fiction as well.

Both authors grew up in mid-Twentieth century, when not only writing was a male job, but any kind of artistic aspiration on the part of women was considered futile at best. Interviewed on T*he Paris Review*, Le Guin recalled her beginnings as a woman writer in a man's world:

> women had to pretend to be men, or just use their initials [because] writing was something that men set the rules for, and I had never questioned that. The women who questioned those rules were too revolutionary for me even to know about them. So I fit myself into the man's world of writing and wrote like a man, presenting only the male point of view. My early books are all set in a man's world.[40]

The American author continues on the subject and recalls the coming of feminism as both a problem and a gift, because it encouraged her to fully acknowledge her role as a woman writer and give thorough attention to literature written by women – among which she mentions Virginia Wolf as a landmark in her feminist-conscious reading education. Ultimately, Le Guin's first approach to feminism is comparable to a process of learning and

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[39] For an account of Atwood's biography, see Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, Toronto: ECW Press, 1998 and Rosemary Sullivan, *The Red Shoes. Margaret Atwood Starting Out*, Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 1998. For an account of Le Guin's biography, see Susan M. Bernardo, "Biography of Ursula K. Le Guin", in Susan M. Bernardo and Graham J. Murphy (eds), *Ursula K. Le Guin. A Critical Companion,* Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006, 2-11.

[40]John Wray, "Ursula K. Le Guin", interviewed by John Wray", *The Art of Fiction No. 221*. *The Paris Review*. http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6253/the-art-of-fiction-no-221-ursula-k-le-guin. Last access May15th 2015.

appropriation, the development and achievement of which have merged with her fictional works[41].

Margaret Atwood's observations on the condition of women seem to be much more closely connected to her artistic life than Le Guin's. Recalling her formation years, she mentions the "red shoes syndrome", which she calls after a popular 1948 movie that very well described the dominant view on female artists and, more generally, on women who stepped out of the household into public life: «If you want to be good at anything, said the message, you will have to sacrifice your femininity. If you want to be female, you'll have to have your tongue removed, like the Little Mermaid»[42]. This message, she explains, was fully corroborated not only by stereotypical female characters drawn from the Western literary canon, but also by actual women writers who managed to be included in such canon. Atwood highlights that these authors corroborated the idea that most women could not enter the literary canon, unless they lived in a non-conventional way, like the Brönte sisters, George Eliot, and Emily Dickinson, or interrupted their existences tragically, like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. There certainly have been exceptions, but Atwood underlines how marginal they have been in changing the conventional image of the woman of letters as a mythological creature who, unlike male artists, is not allowed to be frail without being tragic or selfish without being a monster. Ultimately, the female artist is not allowed to merely be a human being, but only an exception to the norm.

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[41] *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) is considered as a ground-breaking work in the way it challenged conventional male/female relations. Le Guin discusses the novel and gives account of the process of change under which her opinions on the women's movement and feminism went. See "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places,* New York: Grove Press, 1989, pp. 7-16.

[42] Margaret Atwood, "The Curse of Eve – or What I Have Learned in School", *Canadian Woman Studies* 1.3 (1979), pp. 30-33.

Both Le Guin and Atwood discussed how gender issues have influenced their writings and the reception of their works. Le Guin acknowledges her debts to feminism and feminist literary criticism more easily than Atwood: «I am infinitely grateful to it for enlarging my understanding and my life»[43], she confesses with regards to the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. While Le Guin refers to *The Norton Anthology of Women Writers* as «the book of revelations!»[44], Atwood is less inclined to maintain that feminism, or any other ideology or theory, holds such a strong significance for her fiction. Reading her interviews and articles, especially from the 1970s, one perceives her reluctance to being identified as a writer following any social or political agenda. She often finds in the words of her interviewer a

> great attempt to get you to say something about an Issue and then make you into an exponent, spokeswoman or theorist. […] [N]o good writer wants to be merely a transmitter of someone else's ideology, no matter how fine that ideology may be. The aim of propaganda is to convince and to spur people to action; the aim of writing is to create a plausible and moving imaginative world, and to create it from words.[45]

Le Guin acknowledges the rise of the feminist movement and theory as a crucial force in changing her perception of herself as a woman writer and even her approach to her fiction. Likewise, Atwood does not deny her preoccupation with issues related to gender. Writers, she maintains, are observers of society who live in a specific political, economic, and social context and who translate social and political forms into literary forms[46].

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43 Susan Bernardo, "Biography of Ursula K. Le Guin", p. 10.

44 Ibidem.

45 Margaret Atwood, "On Being a 'Woman Writer'. Paradoxes and Dilemmas", in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, Toronto: Anansi, 1982, pp. 190-204, pp. 201-203.

46 Earl G. Ingersoll (ed), *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*. Willowdale: Firefly Books, 1990, p. 119.

However, Atwood is more suspicious about theoretical frameworks than Le Guin and, especially in the period of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, she has often laid claim to her autonomy as a writer: «[w]riters, as writers, are not propagandists or examples of social trends or preachers or politicians. They are makers of books»[47]. This brief overview on the two author's reaction to feminist theorists offers a good introduction to the debate on genre and, more specifically, on science fiction. Reingard Nischik notes how «genre and gender in Atwood's oeuvre intertwine in a combination of complicity and critique»[48] and Raffaella Baccolini[49] extensively examines this intertwining in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision[50], Baccolini offers an interpretation of Atwood's dystopic novel that underlines her strategy to transform the maleness of the dystopian genre. Just like gender, literary genres are cultural constructions concerned with boundaries and hierarchies, with norms and abnormalities. More specifically, utopia has largely been considered as a male genre, whose paradigm women writers have only recently started to revise and subvert.

Atwood employs irony to distance herself from classical dystopias and utopias and this detachment is pointedly elaborated in the appendix "Historical notes" that closes *The Handmaid's Tale*. Language is the ultimate means towards freedom for the female protagonist, who start to play

[47] Margaret Atwood, "On Being a 'Woman Writer'. Paradoxes and Dilemmas", p. 203.
[48] Reingard M. Nischik, *Engendering Genre. The Works of Margaret Atwood*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2009, p. 4.
[49] Raffaella Baccolini, "Breaking the Boundaries: Gender, Genre, and Dystopia", in Vita Fortunati and Nadia Minerva (eds), *Per una Definizione dell'Utopia. Metodologie e Discipline a Confronto*, Ravenna: Longo, 1992.
[50] «Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival». Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979, p. 90.

Scrabbles, a game forbidden to women as it implies that they read, write, and make conscious use of language. Letters and words become magic and represent the process through which women find their voice against a society that silences them. This feature recalls Atwood's poem "Spelling", from the 1981 collection *True Stories*, in which the daughter of the poem's author plays with coloured letters «learning how to spell, / spelling, / how to make spells»[51]. Narration is not just a matter of asserting one's identity, but of asserting and even reconstructing one's own existence. The female protagonist uses the diary form to state and define her existence: «I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech»[52]. From the tiniest units of language to the most complex forms of narration, Atwood employs letters, words, sentences, and storytelling as forms of empowerment because «[a] word after a word / after a word is power»[53].

Atwood is a resolute opponent of gender stereotypes and inequalities, but this subversion is reflected also in her refusal to let her works being read only as an expression of her gender. On the one hand, critics have sometimes narrowed the scope of her writings to a feminist political agenda or, on the other, overlooked their literary complexity and ended up being disappointed not to find «the plot of boy meets girl, happiness and understanding result» of the Harlequin Romances type[54]. Even though feminist theories have provided the necessary framework to spread awareness on gender inequalities, Atwood clarifies that feminism for her is «part of a larger issue: human dignity. That's

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[51] Margaret Atwood, "Spelling", in *True Stories*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 63-64.

[52] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985, p. 76.

[53] Margaret Atwood, "Spelling", p. 64.

[54] See the 1977 interview that Atwood did with Hana Gartner for CBC. The interview was never aired but is available online. http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/margaret-atwood-brandishes-her-caustic-tongue. Last access May 30th 2015.

what Canadian nationalism is about, what feminism is about, and what black power is about. They're all part of the same vision»[55]. In a recent talk that she gave at Penn State University titled "Genre and Gender", Atwood discusses how harassment is a typical manifestation of gender discrimination that excluded women from popular genres such as videogames in recent years or at the time of the "Golden Age" of science fiction in the 1930s[56]. Atwood acknowledges the value of literary conventions, but she is also very well aware that categorizations are often used not as descriptive terms, but as weapons of constriction. For this reason among others, she is reluctant to situate her works within the boundaries of science fiction.

The Canadian author wrote five novels with elements that may be – and have been – included in a broad definition of science fiction: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013). The first novel in this list, *The Handmaid's Tale*, won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction in 1985, but is more widely known as a dystopian novel. Atwood herself has acknowledged her debts to George Orwell and the dystopian tradition that the British novelist inaugurated with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*[57]. *The Blind Assassin* is a historical novel that contains a science fiction narrative, but it is only with *Oryx and Crake* and the subsequent parts of the MaddAddam trilogy that Atwood's work is thoroughly analysed according to the stylistic patterns of science fiction. To

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[55] Margaret Atwood with Karla Hammond, "Defying Distinctions" in Earl G. Ingersoll (ed), *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, pp. 99-108, p. 102.

[56] "Genre and Gender", lecture delivered on November 13th 2014 as part of Penn State Forum series, on the occasion of the awarding of 2014 Medal for Distinguished Achievement from Penn State's Institute for the Arts and Humanities.
http://sustainability.psu.edu/calendar/margaret-atwood-genre-and-gender. Last access May 15th 2015.

[57] See Margaret Atwood, "George Orwell: Some Personal Connections", in *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2011, pp. 141-149.

these analyses, she has answered explaining what the term means for her and why she is not totally satisfied with it as a definition for her novels.

In January 2004, Atwood delivered the Kesterton Lecture "Scientific Romancing" at the Carleton School of Journalism, in which she discusses the differences and peculiarities of science fiction and speculative fiction. She does not make a clear distinction between the two terms at first and basically uses them as synonyms. However, she points out that her novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* belongs to neither science fiction nor speculative fiction, but to the dystopian tradition. She adds that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a classic dystopia because its focus is society, while *Oryx and Crake* represents a variation from the standard because its emphasis is on the use of science. Atwood's dystopian novels are all based on facts that have already happened somewhere in the world or that could happen in the near future. On this basis, she rules out science fiction as an adequate description of her novels because she explains that science fiction for her is «fiction in which things happen that are not possible today»[58], but this definition is criticized by Ursula K. Le Guin as arbitrarily restrictive.

The American writer takes the opportunity of her review of *The Year of the Flood* to question Atwood on this subject. «To my mind – she writes – *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* and now *The Year of the Flood* all exemplify one of the things science fiction does, which is to extrapolate imaginatively from current trends and events to a near-future that's half prediction, half satire»[59]. The restrictive definition that Atwood suggests of science fiction seems

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[58] Margaret Atwood, "Writing Utopia", in *Writing With Intent. Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose: 1983-2005*, Berkeley: Carroll & Graf, 2005, pp. 92-100, p. 92.

[59] Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Year of the Flood by Margaret Atwood. Review by Ursula K. Le Guin". *The Guardian*, August 29th 2009. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood. Last access June 14th 2015.

designed precisely to save her novels from being forced in a genre that is still often undervalued by literary critics. Le Guin continues her review pointing out that, in order to respect Atwood's wish, she must abandon the more appropriate and «lively vocabulary of modern science fiction criticism» and restrict herself «to the vocabulary and expectations suitable to a realistic novel, even if forced by those limitations into a less favourable stance»[60].

The long-running debate between the two North American novelists leads Margaret Atwood to publish a collection of essays, *In Other Worlds* (2011), in which she provides a clarification of her position on the subject through «an exploration of [her] lifelong relationship with a literary form, or forms, or subforms, both as reader and as writer»[61]. Atwood recognizes that her very first imaginative excursions as a child laid in the realm of science fiction and fantasy and that they have come back in other forms. She acknowledges that *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood* are texts that clearly do not belong to the category of sociological realism, but she is still skeptical about defining them as science fiction according to a literary taxonomy that she feels to be too simplistic. She takes on a defensive attitude and decidedly rejects the accusation of being «a silly nit or a snob or a genre traitor for dodging the term»[62]. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not science fiction in the same way in which Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* are, and what lies in the distinction between them is the field she wants to explore.

Atwood's argument is developed by stressing a clear distinction between science fiction and speculative fiction as genres that derive from H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* – which treats «things that could not possibly

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[60] Ibidem.

[61] Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, p. 1.

[62] Ivi, p.2.

happen» – and Jules Verne's stories about «submarines and balloon travel and such – things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books»[63]. Atwood develops this distinction between Wells and Verne partly in contrast to what she had written a few decades earlier in her unfinished Ph.D. thesis. She was studying such authors as W.H. Hudson, George MacDonald, H. Rider Haggard, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien, whose works were interpreted under the definition of «"The English Metaphysical Romance" because [they] included other-than-human beings and treated themes that were, in origin and in subtext, theological in nature»[64]. In the manuscript of her thesis, she writes that «Verne and Wells [are] acknowledged founders of the genre», according to a «definition based on the so-called scientific element»[65].

As a matter of fact, science fiction has often been referred to as a genre that employs the same method of science itself. Just as in a scientific experiment, science fiction writers try to find out what would happen if certain premises are developed. In «the presence of scientific cognition as the sign or correlative of a method (way, approach, atmosphere, sensibility) identical to that of modern philosophy of science»[66] lies the main difference between science fiction and other supernatural literary genres – narratives that do not belong to the category of sociological realism – like mythical tales, fairy tales, fantasy, and horror. This approach is particularly appropriate if applied to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), which is often identified as the *urtext* of science fiction. Both Shelley and Atwood build their

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[63] Ivi, p. 6.
[64] Ivi, p. 79.
[65] Margaret Atwood Papers, MS Coll 200, box 50, folder 14.
[66] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction. On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, p. 65.

narratives on the exploration of the power of scientific progress, carried out through experiments that corrupts the natural order.

Atwood ascribes the reasons for her controversy with Ursula K. Le Guin to a misunderstanding of terms. «In short» – she writes – «what Le Guin means by "science fiction" is what I mean by "speculative fiction", and what she means by "fantasy" would include some of what I mean by "science fiction"»[67]. Le Guin remains critical of Atwood's definition of science fiction and maintains that «it doesn't really hold water, her definition. Science fiction is not about the impossible, the nonexistent — that's fantasy. And she says that she only writes about what is possible, and so on. Well, a lot of science fiction does exactly that»[68]. Margaret Atwood holds on to her statement that a significant portion of the genre envisages the existence of aliens, spaceships, and other planets, while she never included such elements in her texts «[n]ot because [she doesn't] like Martians[…]: they just don't fall within [her] skill set»[69].

It is not the aim of this dissertation to engage in the debate on what science fiction is and how it is different from speculative fiction[70]. However, the exchange between Atwood and Le Guin shows the writers' approach to the interpretative grids of literary criticism within which their works are analyzed. «When it comes to genre» — Atwood writes — «the borders are increasingly undefended»[71] and it is not necessarily the author's interest to defend such borders. She endorses Bruce Sterling's concern that science fiction

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[67] Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, p. 7.

[68] Ursula K. Le Guin, Interview on *The Geek's Guide to Galaxy*.
http://www.wired.com/2012/07/geeks-guide-ursula-k-le-guin. Last access June 14th 2015.

[69] Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, p. 7.

[70] For an overview on science fiction criticism, see Suvin (1979), Le Guin (1979), Moylan (1986, 2000), Seed (2005).

[71] Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, p. 7.

has turned into a mere category, «a self-perpetuating commercial power-structure, which happens to be in possession of a traditional national territory: a portion on a bookstore rack space»[72].

Le Guin suggests that Atwood's reluctance to be included in the genre of science fiction is a consequence of this commercial power-structure. Whether or not Atwood's position is ruled by an economic reason this aspect of the science/speculative fiction debate brings the focus back to the problems with gender/genre definition raised at beginning of this section, because establishing borders and boundaries is a matter of power in both gender and genre issues. In the 1970s, Atwood refused to be put in a category in which critics, both male and female, tried to push her basically on the mere consideration that she was a woman whose novels often included female characters and represented their private and social condition. The case of science fiction is different under many aspects, but it nonetheless expounds the power structures behind categories and boundaries. Discussing the genre of a text can provide descriptive indications that increase the quality of reading and interpretation. Yet, the debate between Le Guin and Atwood shows that other factors external to the text affects genre definition, which will be employed as a critical tool to engage with the distinctive features of the MaddAddam trilogy.

[72] Ibidem.

Chapter 1.

INTERPRETATIVE TOOLS FOR THE MADDADDAM TRILOGY

1.1. Methodology

Margaret Atwood envisages a near-future world devastated by climate change and ruled by international corporations, in which hard sciences have defeated the humanities in the long debated conflict between the 'two cultures'[1]. The Canadian author's representation of the future is strikingly familiar, not only because the society that she creates seems to be an evolution of the reader's own society, but also because Atwood retraces the mythical narratives recurring most often in world literatures from primeval times. In my dissertation, I rely on ecocriticism and its interpretative tools to analyze Atwood's writing in relation to the uses and abuses of science and technology. Moreover, utopian and science fiction studies provide the essential critical frame of reference.

More than others, this methodology requires a reflection on the existing relation between what is in the text and what belongs to the author's and the reader's shared perception of reality. As a starting point for this reflection, it can be useful to refer to David Ketterer's three-fold categorization of literature, which is applied in accordance to the relation «between the fictional "world" and the world of consensual reality»[2]. Literature is *realistic* or *mimetic*, when

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[1] "The Two Cultures" is part of 1959 Rede Lecture delivered by British scientist and novelist C. P. Snow, which soon became one of the most influential books in the debate on education in the Western world. See Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution. The Rede Lecture*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1961.

[2] David Ketterer, *Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy*, p. 4.

«the fictional "world" is understood as a reflection or representation of the world as we see and experience it»[3]. It creates *consequential other worlds*, when the relationship between the fictional world and the consensual world is not mimetic but credible, in which case there exists a metonymic relationship between fiction and consensual reality. It creates *hermetic other worlds* when there is a non-credible relationship with the consensual reality, which is not metonymical, but metaphorical or allegorical instead. These observations seem suggest that when literature deals with the environment, it does so on a realistic or mimetic basis, since the environmental crises certainly exists in the world as we see and experience it. However, nature has also been a source of metonymical and metaphorical or allegorical inspiration since the earliest records of literature. In the MaddAddam trilogy, all of these aesthetic uses of nature and the environment are employed.

In his review to *The Year of the Flood*, Frederic Jameson enters the debate on whether Margaret Atwood should be considered a science fiction author and argues that «at this moment of time, all fiction approaches science fiction, as the future, the various futures, begin to dissolve into ever more porous actuality: and the end of the world seems to approach more rapidly than the unified world market itself»[4]. In this sense, contemporary authors are aware of another compelling and unavoidable element in the fictionalization of the present day world, which is the possibility of its destruction as we know it. In the field of speculative imagination, a new term has appeared in the last few decades to represent the human-triggered global changes that the

[3] Ivi, p. 5.

[4] Frederic Jameson, "Then You Are Them", *London Review of Books* 31.17 (2009), pp. 7-8. http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n17/fredric-jameson/then-you-are-them. Last access June 30th 2015.

environment is going through: the *anthropocene*[5]. This new label was popularized in 2000 by chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen to replace the geological age of the Holocene, as the dramatic loss of biodiversity, the unprecedented mass extinction rate, and the pollution of oceans and atmosphere are all related to the human intervention on the planet and have lasting – some say geological – impacts. Whether or not scientists will officially accept the term, it certainly bear a huge significance in literary studies and it is particularly apt to describe the epoch that Atwood describes in the MaddAddam trilogy. Crutzen and Christian Schwägerl write that «[r]ather than representing yet another sign of human hubris, this name change would stress the enormity of humanity's responsibility as stewards of the Earth [and] highlight the immense power of our intellect and our creativity, and the opportunities they offer for shaping the future»[6]. As this dissertation aims to show, Margaret Atwood's efforts with her trilogy definitely move in this direction.

Nature is one of the main and earliest objects of artistic expressions. However, literary critics have stressed the need for a specific critical interpretative framework only in recent times, with the occurrence of a substantial change in the power relationships between humankind and the environment. The most frequently cited phrases used in reference to this methodological approach are *literary ecology*, which appeared in the subtitle of Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1972)[7], and *ecocriticism*, coined by

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[5] See Andrew C. Revkin, "Confronting the 'Anthropocene'", *The New York Times* (11 May 2011), http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/confronting-the-anthropocene/. Last access June 30th 2015.

[6] Paul J. Crutzen and Christian Schwägerl, "Living in the Anthropocene: Toward a New Global Ethos", *Yale Environment 360* (2011). http://e360.yale.edu/feature/living_in_the_anthropocene_toward_a_new_global_ethos_/2363 Last access June 30th 2015.

[7] Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, New York: Scribner's, 1972.

William Rueckert in an article published in 1978[8]. Since its beginning, ecocriticism has always faced definitional struggles, which increased with its recognition as an academic field in the early 1990s in the United States[9]. From this ongoing debate, it is possible to identify three main sets of critical approaches that, in spite of their internal differences, should be intended as complimentary – rather than mutually exclusive – methodological tools.

The first of these approaches refers to the inaugural and most quoted introductory anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as «the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment»[10] and marks it as a politically committed criticism, aligned with feminist criticism and Marxist criticism. Along this line and further on the political path, Richard Kerridge writes that «ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts, and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis»[11]. Greg Garrard aims for a wider scope and identify the subject of ecocriticism as «the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself»[12]. As these definitions show, ecocriticism is «an avowedly political

[8] William Rueckert, "Into and Out of the Void: Two Essays. Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism", *The Iowa Review* 9.1 (1976), pp. 62-86.

[9] For an overview on the Italian contribution to the field, see Patrick Barron and Anna Re (eds), *Italian Environmental Literature: An Anthology*, New York: Ithaca Press, 2003; Serenella Iovino, *Ecologia Letteraria. Una Strategia di Sopravvivenza*, Milano: Edizioni Ambiente, 2006; Serenella Iovino, *Ecocriticism and Italy. Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.

[10] Cheryll Glotfelty, "Introduction", in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (eds), in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology,* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. XV-XXXVII, p. XIX.

[11] Richard Kerridge, "Introduction", in Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammels (eds), *Writing the Environment. Ecocriticism and Literature*, London: Zed Books, 1998, pp. 1-9, p. 5.

[12] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism,* London: Routledge, 2011, p. 5.

mode of analysis»[13] and a methodology that often deviates from literary criticism *per se* and move toward cultural studies.

According to the second current, ecocriticism nestles in less politically charged studies on Romanticism, on nature writing, and on the pastoral. Jonathan Bate offers what he calls «a preliminary sketch towards a literary ecocriticism»[14] in his landmark study *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991). He opposes idealist and neo-Marxist readings of Wordsworth and argues that in his version of pastoral «there is not an opposition but a continuity between his 'love of nature' and his revolutionary politics»[15]. On the other side of the Atlantic, Lawrence Buell established the centrality of the American tradition of nature writing in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995). His work was hugely influential and contributed to anchor the American environmental imagination to its artistic and literary touchstones. Another prominent work in this current of environmentally informed literary criticism is Terry Gifford's *Pastoral* (1999). Gifford offers an introductory text of the genre that is credited, not only by ecocritics, for its accurate and up-to-date analysis of the concept of the pastoral and of its possible ecological concerns.

A third set of major traditions of reading texts ecocritically can be distinguished from the two previously mentioned. As a matter of fact, the earliest configuration of literary ecology was traced by Joseph Meeker and William Rueckert, and it is especially upon this current that I shall rely for my dissertation. The premise of Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* is that human

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[13] Ivi, p. 3.

[14] Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 11.

[15] Ivi, p. 10.

beings are the only literary species – a peculiarity that distinguishes humans in kind only, but not in rank. From this premise Meeker derives that the creation of literature «should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment – to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us»[16].

Similarly, Rueckert «experiment[s] with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology […] has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in»[17]. The aim is to persuade science and poetry «to lie down together and be generative after all» because

> poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow.
> Poems are part of the energy pathways which sustain life.
> Poems are a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewal source of energy, coming, as they do, from those ever generative twin matrices, language and imagination.[18]

Thus, literature is interpreted in an evolutionary perspective as an ecological concept and not as an instrument to reach environmentally conscious goals nor in relation to specific literary models such as nature writing or the pastoral.

In view of the fact that ecocriticism poses the question of the relationship between the fictional world and the reader and author's consensual reality, it is useful to carry on with Ketterer's observations on Canadian science fiction and fantasy. The UK born academic underlines that a «very palpable sense of

[16] Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, pp. 3-4.
[17] William Rueckert, "Into and Out of the Void: Two Essays. Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism", p. 73.
[18] Ivi, p. 74.

the overpowering forces of nature and of the long evolutionary perspective»[19] distinguishes Canadian science fiction and fantasy. As a matter of fact, the Canadian environment was perceived by early settlers from Europe as primeval, vast, and threatening, and its winters bore the signs of a devastating Ice Age. Regardless of the specific angle of Canadian literature, the linkage with nature-oriented writing is a characteristic of science fiction as a genre. As Patrick D. Murphy notes, a text of science fiction is «an aesthetic text that, on the one hand, directs the reader's attention toward the natural world and human interaction with other aspects of nature within that world, and, on the other hand, makes specific environmental issues part of the plot and themes»[20].

Murphy is not alone in this interpretation, as a growing number of publication in the last few years shows. Noel Gough notes that «[m]ost SF stories speculate on possible human responses to alternative conditions – such as an overpopulated earth or the strange environs of another planet»[21], thus making science fiction an environmental literature *par excellance*. As virtual reality and bioengineering call into question the boundaries between nature and culture, Gough claims that science fiction create a space in which the resulting ontological insecurities are elaborated. His insightful conclusions on the role of technological development are of particular interest in relation to the MaddAddam triogy. «By playing with words and imagined worlds – he maintains – SF writers can invite us to envision different and potentially less

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[19] David Ketterer, *Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy*, p. 22.

[20] Patrick D. Murphy, "The Non-Alibi of Alien Scapes: SF and Ecocriticism", in Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (eds), *Beyond Nature Writing. Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2001, p. 263.

[21] Noel Gough, "Playing with Wor(l)ds: Science Fiction as Environmental Literature", in Patrick D. Murphy (ed), *Literature of Nature. An International Sourcebook*, Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998, pp. 409-414, p. 411.

disabling relationships with people and environments»[22], which can be viewed as one of the main points of Atwood's trilogy.

However, the dialogue between science fiction scholars and ecocritics has not always been devoid of difficulties. In his review of history of ecology and science fiction, Brian Stableford points out that ecocritics «have tended either to ignore SF or to treat it as a Great Wen despoiling the landscape of "naturalistic" fiction»[23]. This claim is certainly consistent with the widespread opinion that ecocriticism concerns a narrow subfield of American nature writing, mainly focussed on such authors as H.D. Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and few others. However, Ursula K. Heise among others had already tackled this issue in 1999, writing that ecocriticism has nothing specifically to do with American literature, nor with nature writing. On the contrary, she claims, «science fiction is one of the genres that have most persistently and most daringly engaged environmental questions and their challenge to our vision of the future»[24]. In spite of his slight underestimation of ecocriticism, Stableford provides in his essay an exhaustive example of one of the main efforts of the field, which is «to promulgate environmentally enlightened works examin[ing] mainstream genres [and] identifying fiction and poetry writers whose work manifests ecological awareness»[25].

Stableford identifies proto-ecological literary texts such as W.H. Hudson's pastoral utopia *A Crystal Age* (1887) and J.D. Beresford's ecological parable "The Man Who Hated Flies" (1929), which anticipates Rachel Carson's fundamental criticism in *Silent Spring* (1962), the survey of an ecocatastrophe

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[22] Ivi, p. 414.

[23] Brian Stableford, "Science Fiction and Ecology", in David Seed (ed), *A Companion to Science Fiction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp. 127-141, p. 140.

[24] Ursula K. Heise, "Letter", *PMLA* 114.5 (1999), pp. 1096-1097, p. 1097.

[25] Cheryll Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, p. XXIII.

caused by the use of pesticides. In addition to these early examples, mainstream science fiction texts like H.G. Wells's *Time Machine* (1895) focus on ecological decadence and resource crisis, often caused by human incapability to conscientiously manage the natural resources of the planet Earth. An evolution of this approach can be identified in the highly influential pulp magazine *Astounding Stories* led by John W. Campbell Jr. who, since the late 1930s, promoted the publication of science fiction stories that followed the laws of ecology and kept rational plausibility in world building.

Science fiction writers reacted to the growing awareness of the burgeoning ecological dangers elaborating images of Earth-clone worlds that worked «as parables offering valuable lessons to the hapless custodians of the ecosphere whose model was being so profligately cloned»[26]. On the one hand, the fear for the nuclear holocaust initiated a subfield of science fiction that fosters the idea that a drastic retreat from technology is the only chance to slow down the spiral of environmental destruction. This tendency resulted in a renewed enthusiasm for pastoral utopias like, to name just a few, Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia: A Novel about Ecology, People and Politics in 1999* (1978) and Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1986).

On the other hand, there was a pessimistic leaning view that ecological negligence is irredeemable in the short term and that only «a wiser reconstitution of human society – and perhaps of human nature» could put an end to «a global ecocatastrophe that is already under way»[27]. Bioengineering and ramped up technological progress are the downside of the by now implausible pastoral utopian dreams. In Stableford's words,«[t]he speculative relocation of the "conquest of space" to a much more distant future involved

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[26] Brian Stableford, "Science Fiction and Ecology", p. 131.
[27] Ivi, p. 137.

the acceptance that if any such historical process were ever to happen it would be the prerogative of 'posthuman' or 'transhuman' species»[28].

Science fiction author Samuel R. Delany detects these opposing drives of pastoral nostalgia and technological aspiration in the juxtaposition of New Jerusalem and Arcadia, which he borrows from W. H. Auden. The biblical and classical myths from which these literary *topoi* derive assume the general dissatisfaction with the current human lifestyle and the projection toward an idyllic past or a futurist dream. In Auden's words, «[i]n their relation to the actual fallen world, the difference between Eden and New Jerusalem is a temporal one. Eden is a past world in which the contradictions of the present world have not yet arisen; New Jerusalem is a future world in which they have at last been resolved»[29]. Delany claims that this juxtaposition represents the world-views available in modernity, with a correspondent underside for each.

On the one hand, there is New Jerusalem, «the technological super city where everything is clean, and all problems have been solved by the beneficent application of science»[30]. The dystopian counterpart of this utopian view is the tyrannical city where «everything is regimented and standardized and we all wear the same uniform». On the other hand, there is Arcadia, «that wonderful place where everyone eats natural foods and no machine larger than one person can fix in an hour is allowed in». Its underside is the «place of provincial ignorance, fear, disease, and diet, where man is prey to the untrammeled demons of his own superstition, as well as any caprice of nature:

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[28] Ivi, p. 140.

[29] W. H. Auden, "Dingley Dell & the Fleet", in *The Dyer's Hand Other Essays*, New York: Random House, 1962, pp. 407-428, p. 409.

[30] Samuel R. Delany, "On *Triton* and Other Matters", *Science Fiction Studies* 17.3 (1990), http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/delany52interview.htm. Last access October 7th 2015.

fire, flood, storm, or earthquake»[31]. However, Delany believes that in the postmodern condition two more images should be added to this tableau of Audenian derivation: the Junk City and the polluted country landscape, both of which come into being at the peak of technological progress that leads to techno chaos and leaves its debris behind. Both new worldviews have a positively charged flip side that is the decadent and sublime aesthetics of urban bedlam or of a poisonous, polluted landscape. The utopian and dystopian blend of Delany's Arcadias and New Jerusalems will be further developed in this dissertation in relation to the MaddAddam trilogy.

In 2012 Eric C. Otto published a study that «attends to the intersection between transformative environmentalism and science fiction literature»[32], offering a reading of works of science fiction that contribute to discuss environmental degradation. He identifies three literary strategies that science fiction shares with environmental nonfiction in its attempt to engage with environmental issues. First, the narrative strategy of *estrangement* isolates the reader from his or her previous knowledge and revivifies it, giving him or her access to a poetic experience with ethical effects. Second, he borrows Patrick D. Murphy's observations on *extrapolation*, a strategy that «emphasizes that the present and the future are interconnected – what we do now will be reflected in the future, and, therefore, we have no alibi for avoiding the results of our actions today»[33]. Extrapolation connects realities that are spatially and temporally distant, thus making the here and now more meaningful to a faraway place and time. Lastly, the *sense of wonder* represents another

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[31] Samuel R. Delany, "Critical Methods/ Speculative Fiction" (1970), in The *Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2009, pp. 17-28, pp. 26-27.

[32] Eric C. Otto, *Green Speculations. Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism*, Columbus: The Ohio University Press, 2012, p. 1.

[33] Patrick D. Murphy, "The Non-Alibi of Alien Scapes: SF and Ecocriticism", p. 263.

intersection between science fiction and environmental nonfiction, even though a slightly controversial one. Environmental writers employs awe-inspiring images to foster transformational experiences to remind us that «*out there* is a different world, older and greater and deeper by far than ours, a world which surrounds and sustains the little world of men as sea and sky surround and sustain a ship»[34]. However, in science fiction texts the emotion often provoked by natural wonders might equally be inspired by technological marvels, thus addressing one's inspiration in a yet anthropocentric direction.

Technology is an essential feature and object of analysis in works of science fiction that address environmental issues as well. Its uses, abuses, and debris are pivotal in detecting aspects of the relationship between humans and nature that are peculiar to the present day society. Technology is one of the main responses that are offered in science fiction to the demands of biopolitics or biopower, defined by Michel Foucault as «the endeavour […] to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race»[35]. Biopolitics assumes life and its features as abstracted from its physical holders/carriers and denotes a *disciplinary* and *regulatory* power over individual bodies as well as population, a means through which the human species can be controlled and subjugated. Foucault sets the seventeenth century as the time when the power over life started to have this double and complimentary use:

> [o]ne of these poles – the first to be formed, it seems – centered on the body as a machine; its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities,

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[34] Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness,* New York: Ballantine, 1968. Quoted in E. C. Otto, *Green Speculations*, p. 12.

[35] Michel Foucault, "The Birth of Biopolitics", in Paul Rabinow (ed), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. English translation by Robert Hurley et al., New York: New Press, 1994, pp. 73–79, p. 73.

> the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines*: an *anatomopolitics of the body*. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body as the basis of the biological processes: propagation and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls*: a *bio-politics of the population*.[36]

In the MaddAddam trilogy, both forms of biopower are represented at their extreme limits and, more to the point, they are strongly influenced by the lively debate on the posthuman. Rosi Braidotti traces the line that links Foucault's biopolitics to posthumanism, underlining that «the common denominator for the posthuman condition is an assumption about the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself»[37].

According to Braidotti, the posthuman theory is a «generative tool» that help us re-think «the human in the bio-genetic age known as "Anthropocene", the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet»[38]. In rethinking the human, the posthuman denotes a shift from the individual characterized by a microscopic movement to the basic units that constitutes life and a macroscopic movement to humans as a species in its relationship with the other units, both living and non-living, on the planet. This shift in the perception of the individual implies new models of subjectivity. The individual subject is not only split in the sub-units that sustains his or her life, but also altered by the artificial interventions applied

[36] Michel Foucault, *L'Histoire de la sexualité*, English translation by Robert Hurley, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, New York: Vintage Books, 1980, p. 139.
[37] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p. 2.
[38] Ivi, p. 5.

to the body and by the assumption that humans are «information-processing entities who are *essentially* similar to intelligent machines»[39].

In her "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"[40], Donna Haraway depicts the powerful image of the cyborg – a cybernetic hybrid of machine and organism, belonging both to social reality and to fiction. While the fictional side of this organism has been extensively used – especially in science fiction –, Haraway argues that we are all cyborgs in a post-gender world that overcomes the female/male and nature/culture dualisms. The cyborg explicitly transgresses three major boundaries, the first of which regards animals. First, biology and evolutionary theory no longer support the ontological separation between humans and animals: «[f]ar from signalling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling»[41]. Second, the boundary between organism and machine is broken, as humans couple with machines especially for medical purposes. Thirdly, the distinction between physical and non-physical is slighter and slighter, since machines are now made of minuscule chips etched in molecular scales that seem to trespass the physical realm.

Cary Wolfe maintains that the best-known inheritor of the cyborg image is the trans-humanist movement, a branch of posthumanism that is defined by journalist Joel Garreau as a movement dedicated to «the enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities, the elimination of

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[39] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 7.

[40] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 149-182.

[41] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, p. 152.

disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life span»[42]. This definition stresses the possibility of technological evolution of the human species, which broadens the gap between human beings and the rest of nature, instead of erasing it. On the contrary, in Haraway's formulation posthumanism is not interpreted as an exasperation of humanist thinking – an engineered evolution of human beings that separate them from nature even further – but the re-embodiment and embeddedness of human beings both in biological and technological terms.

N. Katherin Hayles follows Haraway's description of cyborgs as both living beings and narrative constructions. She also supports her interpretation of posthumanism as a critical theory that contrasts the hyperbolic fantasies of genetic engineering:

> If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival[43].

Being a literary critic, Hayles sees scientific theories and cybernetic technologies as part of a complex model of cross-influence with literary texts. This means that the former and the latter are elements of a relationship of mutual exchange, which proceeds in both directions. She quotes the example of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), whose vision of the cyberspace has had a deep influence on the development of virtual reality technologies.

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[42] Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. XIII.
[43] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, p. 5.

Moreover, Hayles maintains that literary texts displays stories that comes from narrowly focused scientific theories but have the ability to illuminate their ethical and cultural implications while reaching the body politic. However, literary texts are not mere and passive conduits but, on the contrary, «[t]hey actively shape what the technologies mean and what the scientific theories signify in cultural contexts»[44]. Ultimately, narrative texts enable the articulation of the posthuman as a technical and cultural concept. Literature and science are so closely knitted that their entanglement represents «a way of understanding ourselves as embodied creatures living within and through embodied worlds and embodied words»[45].

1.2. *Oryx and Crake*

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (1943)

In 2003, Atwood published *Oryx and Crake*, a dystopic novel that she had started to write a few years earlier, at least before 9/11. In the novel, a global catastrophe wipes out the human population, whose apparently only survivor is Jimmy, also known as Snowman. Snowman lives in a former city park grown wild, not far from a colony of naked and beautiful humanoids, which he calls Crakers. After the global catastrophe, Snowman leads the Crakers out of the egg-lab in which they had been created and they all settle near a beach.

[44] Ivi, p. 21.
[45] Ivi, p. 24.

To the Crakers' eyes, Snowman is a kind of prophet, who fabricates for them a creation myth in which Oryx and Crake are their gods.

Before a human generated virus had wiped out the population, Jimmy and his best friend Crake lived in a totalitarian and hyper-technological society ruled by great corporations that strongly resembled the world that George Orwell describes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As Orwell imagines a dystopic society composed by two macro social classes – on the one side the Inner and the Outer Party and on the other side the proles –, Atwood puts almost insurmountable dividing lines between the different classes of her futuristic society. Physical barriers and checkpoints prevent any contact between the higher classes – that usually work for the great corporations – and the main consumers of the corporations' by-products – that live in the pleeblands.

There is apparently no political institution nor any nation as such, but only a global web of multinational corporations that take the place of governments and whose sole interests are the propagation of consumes and brutal control of rebellion. However, this last problematic aspect of society – the tyrannical silencing of dissenting voices – does not seem so dreadful, because its description runs over the edge of the accepted compromise for personal security. While Atwood explicitly acknowledges some important personal connections with George Orwell[46], in *Oryx and Crake* there is not a general description of the social structure and the oppressive regime operates in a subtler way. For the most part, the dystopic dimension of the novel consists of a qualitative vacuum of culture and the complete loss of great narratives that might have contrasted the totalitarian regime of economy and

[46] See Margaret Atwood, "George Orwell: Some Personal Connections", in *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, pp. 141-149.

technology. There is even no political authority to oppose, because order is kept by the precepts of consumerism.

While *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is Atwood's first science or speculative fiction novel and winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987, is a classic dystopia at least partly inspired by Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Oryx and Crake* is different under many aspects. It is defined by Atwood herself as «an adventure romance – that is, the hero goes on a quest – coupled with a Menippean satire, the literary form that deals in intellectual obsession»[47]. However, these academic reflections on the various possible definitions of her work come only *a posteriori*, while the creation process starts as a sort of dream vision: «I began *Oryx and Crake* when I was in Australia, land of the dreamtime; I "saw" the book as I was looking over a balcony at a rare red-headed crake, during a birding expedition – and birding is a trance-inducing activity if there ever was one. The details of the story got worked out later, but without the vision there would have been no book»[48]. On the role and power of imagination, Atwood refers to William Blake's famous remarks about vision and imagination as the drive of the world and claims that «[l]iterature is an uttering, or outering, of the human imagination»[49]. She concludes with and implicit quotation from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*[50] (1943) and the warning that «if we can imagine something, we'll be able to do it»[51]. *Oryx and Crake* casts new light on this concept, as it is a dream – or nightmare – of what might

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[47] Margaret Atwood, "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context'", PMLA, 119.3, Special Topic: Science Fiction and Literary Studies: The Next Millennium (2004), pp. 513-517, p. 517.
[48] Ibidem.
[49] Ibidem.
[50] Atwood's conclusion to the essay "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context'" is: «Therefore, not farewell, dear reader/voyager, but fare forward», which is an adaptation from the last lines of Eliot's "The Dry Salvages" – «Not fare well, / but fare forward, voyagers».
[51] Margaret Atwood, "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context'", p. 517.

happen if humanity perseveres in its fantasies of absolute control over nature, aided by the rampant potentialities of technology.

Jimmy and Crake belong to the privileged classes, but take different paths in life. Jimmy attends the Martha Graham Academy, in which he studies what is left of the humanities, that gives less expendable competences and is thus reserved to less gifted students. On the contrary, Crake is admitted to one of the most prestigious universities and becomes a scientist. His aim is to solve the environmental crises and he focuses on one of its main causes – overpopulation. There is a clear reference to the debate on the two cultures initiated by C.P. Snow, which «Atwood extrapolates into an apartheid future, where the separation of art and science, rich and poor, is further institutionalized, and where science is reduced to technology, art to advertising»[52].

The novel begins as a Last Man narrative, whose protagonist and focal point is Snowman, and it is told by a heterodiegetic narrator. Snowman's knowledge of the facts that have determined his present condition is limited, and so is the narrator's, because the bearers of such crucial information are all dead. The first chapter begins in the present tense with the gentle awakening of Snowman, which is accompanied by the pulse of the ocean that lulls him out of his sleep. However, the narrator very soon introduces disquieting elements that progressively sketch the post-catastrophic world. Mist, haze, and smoke frequently appear throughout the narration and a «greyish haze»[53]

[52] Diana Brydon, "Atwood's Global Ethic: The Open Eye, The Blinded Eye", in John Moss and Tobi Kozakewich (eds), *Margaret Atwood. The Open Eye*, Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 2006, pp. 447-456, p. 448.
[53] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 3.

introduces the description of the post-natural environment. The sun is obfuscated by it and it is only a «rosy, deadly glow»[54] that signals daybreak.

From the protagonist's perspective, the reader discovers a mixture of natural and artificial elements. The «offshore towers»[55] bear the sign of a wrecked society, which is akin to the reader's own society, recently claimed back and swallowed by nature. Objects of everyday life like cars and bricks are in ruin and become «ersatz reefs»[56], while the traffic-like sounds of the birds highlight the hybrid quality of this post-natural condition. Snowman's watch – no longer of any use for its original purpose of marking the time – becomes a talisman that he still wears as a painful reminder of the past and a symbol of the present in which he himself is stuck.

Along with the description of the surroundings, the narration composes also Snowman's inner dialogues. Coral Ann Howells insightfully comments that

> Snowman's "conversations" are with aspects of his old self (when he was Jimmy) and with the people who belong to the past. He […] exists in a state of double consciousness, working by associative leaps between "now" and "then" in an effort to escape from a devastated world littered with the wreckage of late twentieth-century civilization reminding him daily of what he has lost[57].

Structurally, Snowman's condition as a being trapped in the instant is reinforced by the use of the present tense. Atwood had already explored this narrative technique in *Cat's Eye* (1988), thus joining a number of authors that employ the present tense as a fictional practice peculiar of contemporary

[54] Ibidem.
[55] Ibidem.
[56] Ibidem.
[57] Coral Ann Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*", in Coral Ann Howells (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 161-175, p. 172.

literature. John Harvey examines present tense narratives in contemporary fiction drawing, by contrast, on Roland Barthes's claims on the narrative past. According to the French literary theorist, the past tense allows the narrator to put the events in a causal and consequential order, rescuing the narration from contingency and forcing it into a neat and secure framework:

> The narrative past is therefore a part of a security system for Belles-Lettres. Being the image of an order, it is one of those numerous formal pacts made between the writer and society for the justification of the former and the serenity of the latter[58].

Most narratives, are written in the past tense, from the Bible and the Epic of Gilgamesh, through the Homeric poems to the novels of the eighteenth century and until the beginning of the twentieth century. Interestingly, most exceptions concern the incipit of novels and represent a threshold that the reader is encouraged to pass in order to enter the narration proper. As a matter of fact, the past tense is considered the narrative tense *par excellance* and it still is the most commonly employed in prose writing.

However, as Harvey remarks, this cornerstone of literary prose started breaking down in the twentieth century, shaken by different modes in which the present tense is used in contemporary fiction, which might be called *avant-garde*, *oral*, *lyric*, of the *gaze*, and of *performance*. The *avant-garde* use of the present tense concerns the rule-breaking novelty introduced in the twentieth century by experimental authors such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Jean Paul Sartre, and Samuel Beckett[59]. The *oral* mode consists in the use of the present tense in less artistically accomplished texts to convey a simplistic and formulaic idea of narrative immediacy.

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[58] Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, 1953. English translation by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology*, London: Cape, 1967, p. 32.
[59] John Harvey, "Fiction in the Present Tense", *Textual Practice*, 20.1, (2006), pp. 71-98, p. 75.

However, this second and more prosaic use spurs from the oral roots of narration and, while Harvey gives it a mostly negative connotation, it is relevant to the description of the tense pattern in *Oryx and Crake*, as I will further show. With regard to the *lyric* use, Harvey claims that the present tense might be defined as the tense of poetry because it «is the tense of address – of saying something to someone else [and] the tense of emotion declaring itself»[60]. It is also, Harvey argues, the tense of the *gaze*, of seeing, and of describing what is in front of the narrating voice's eyes. Its optical energy, whether purely descriptive or intensely voyeuristic, captures what is being described, both static and dynamic objects, like a photo shoot. Finally, the present tense is the tense of *performance*, which strengthens the performative quality of the novel as a kind of silent theatre that the reader enacts while reading it.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood employs most of these modes. *Oral* storytelling is the foundation on which epic tales and myths are built and this is the same tradition to which the narration that follows Snowman in his life after the catastrophe belongs. The narrator builds an atmosphere of intimacy and fosters the reader's engagement with the protagonist's thoughts, while unfolding the events with the immediacy of an eyewitness. Atwood eases the inclusion of the reader in the scenes through *lyrical* passages that involve the stimulation of both sight and hearing. The prose often reveals a metrically constructed poetic rhythm, enriched by the use of typically poetic rhetorical figures, as in the following passage from the final part of the subchapter "Voice", at the end of the first chapter: «No answer, which isn't surprising. Only the waves, wish-wash, wish-wash. He wipes his fist across his face,

[60] Ivi, p. 78.

across the grime and tears and snot, and the derelict's whiskers and sticky mango juice».[61]

In the alliteration of the letter 'w' resounds the ebb and flow of the waves and the onomatopoeic 'wish-wash' summons Snowman's nostalgia. He longs for the sound of human voice instead of the deafening undertone of the natural elements and wishes to recompose the fragmented vision of the past with the ruins of the present. His loneliness develops into hallucinations of the voices of people from his former life: Oryx, most of all, but also his other lovers, his mother, and Crake. In order to keep control over the risk of burgeoning madness, Snowman «tell[s] stories in a desperate bid to reclaim his own identity, ironizing his present situation, and delighting in language and word play»[62]. Snowman's loneliness is emphasized by the lack of a narratee for his tale. The narrator never directly mentions the reader in the text and Snowman even questions his or her own existence: «he'll have no future reader, because the Crakers can't read. Any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past»[63].

The present tense compensates for this ostensible exclusion of the reader from the narrated events. The *visual* quality of the descriptions is a complementary strategy to involve the reader in the scene and to build a bridge between facts and fiction. Atwood designs a what-if scenario to spur a reflection on the actual risks in the reader's consensual reality, such as climate change, terrorism, and hubris in science and technology. In light of the current global crises, the *performative* function of the present tense is fundamental for Atwood to accomplish her purpose to engage the reader in a thought

[61] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 12.
[62] Coral Ann Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*", p. 172.
[63] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 41.

experiment, which starts from asking such questions as «what if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us?»[64].

Atwood's novel is structured in fifteen chapters, which follow a regular tense pattern, with the odd chapters mainly in the present tense and the even ones in the past tense. The timeline is fragmented and the reader is asked to assemble the different and often contradictory pieces of the story together. Coral Ann Howells writes that Snowman goes on a «wasteland journey [which] lead[s] him back to the heart of darkness where he has to confront his own skeletons in the closet, the bodies of Oryx and Crake, … scattered like pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle left for Snowman to fit together into a narrative»[65]. In *Oryx and Crake*, the presence of only one focal point does not secure the story from fragmentation and the reader is asked to interpret and organize the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle provided by Snowman to create meaningful narration.

In this sense, the fragmentation leads the reader on a path that leads to the solution of an enigma. Robert Cluett finds a similar pattern in the structure of *Surfacing* (1972): «[j]ust as the novel itself embodies a process of discovery, do the surface structure of its syntax. Things are not named, they are discovered even in parataxis»[66]. The sense of discovery can be found in *Oryx and Crake* too and it might be argued that the first novel of the trilogy follows the literary

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[64] Margaret Atwood, "Writing *Oryx and Crake*", in M. Atwood, *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent, 1982-2004*, Toronto: Anansi, 2004, pp. 328-330, p. 330.

[65] Coral Ann Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*", p. 172.

[66] Robert Cluett, "Surface Structures: The Syntactic Profile of *Surfacing*", in Sherril E. Grace and Lorraine Weir (eds), *Margaret Atwood. Language, Text, and System*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983, pp. 67-90, p 80.

form of mystery fiction[67], even though the clues and hints contribute to the mystification, instead of the solution, of the enigma. The chapter titles are prime examples of this mystification, as we can see in the first chapter "Mango" in which the tropical fruit is only a detail, an apparently unimportant distraction from Snowman's cogitations; or in "Crake in Love", in which it is Jimmy's – and not Crake's – love story with Oryx to be told; or the last chapter "Footprint", an obvious quotation from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* that hints at Snowman's crucial and unanswered question about whether or not he should take the risks of finding himself in human companionship again.

Along with the last questions with which the reader is left at the end of the novel – what did Snowman do? Did he try to kill the unknown humans around the fire or did he come out of the foliage waving a white flag? – the major enigma that remains unanswered is Oryx, the mysterious woman with many faces and not one real and clear identity. «Was there only one Oryx, or was she legion?»[68], Jimmy asks. Such multiplication and fragmentation of identity is a crucial element in the representation of the feminine, embodied by Oryx who, as Pilar Somacarrera aptly shows, is not a mere juvenile muse for Jimmy and Crake, but «a veiled commentary […] on Gayatri Spivak's sense of the subaltern, Judith Butler's understanding of gender, and Baudrillard's image of the simulacrum»[69]. Her multifaceted role will be analyzed in detail in the next chapter of this dissertation.

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[67] In Earl G. Ingersoll's words, «[r]eaders are immediately encouraged to get involved in some quick Sherlockholmesing to figure out when and where they have been dropped and what's happened to this world». "Survival in Margaret Atwood's Novel *Oryx and Crake*", in Harold Bloom (ed), *Margaret Atwood – New Edition (Bloom's Modern Critical Views)*, New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2009, pp. 111-126, p. 112.

[68] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 308.

[69] Pilar Somacarrera, "Power Politics/Power Politics: Atwood and Foucault", in John Moss and Tobi Kozakewich (eds), *Margaret Atwood. The Open Eye*, pp. 291-303.

There is also a cyclic framework, which is emphasised by the movements of the sun, contributing to make the temporal dimension of *Oryx and Crake* meticulously organized. However, the binary structure is progressively abandoned in favour of the present tense, which prevails in the last two chapters. The convergence of the past into the present tense, combined with the cyclic framework that involve the entire structure of the novel, is aimed at gradually including the reader who, by the end of the novel, becomes an informed witness. As it should now be clear, in Atwood's writings there is a strong ethical dimension in the dialogue between the inside and the outside of the text. Vision imagery is often repository of such ethical dimension and is explanatory of the author's role and responsibility in relation to the artistic creation. In "An End to Audience", Atwood writes that «fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community, [a litmus test] through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves»[70].

The importance of relating fiction to an ideal community is emphasized by Atwood's refusal to describe writing as a self-centered form of expression. On the contrary, and coherently with the ethical dimension of *Oryx and Crake*, «the writer is both an eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others. The writer bears witness»[71]. Bearing witness is a pivotal image to understand how the novel is constructed both structurally and conceptually. Just like in the book of Job to each catastrophe there is a witnessing survivor[72], in *Oryx and*

[70] Margaret Atwood, "An End to Audience?", in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, Toronto: Anansi, 1982, pp. 334-357, p. 346.
[71] Ivi, p. 348.
[72] Ibidem.

Crake the author entrusts Snowman as the survivor that bears witness of the catastrophe and informs the participating reader. Snowman's role as eyewitness of the catastrophe is mentioned in the guise of a premonition from his childhood. During one of the many quarrels between his parents, Jimmy feels compelled to listen to their yelling not only out of voyeuristic curiosity, but also in anticipation of a possible disaster yet to happen:

> Maybe there would be action, broken glass. He felt afraid – that cold lump in his stomach was back again – but he also felt compelled to listen. If there was going to be a catastrophe, some final collapse, he needed to witness it.
> Nothing happened though, there was just the sound of footsteps going out of the room[73].

Jimmy's predetermined destiny to witness a disaster looms over his life and is finally fulfilled at its worst with the nearly extinction of humankind, a catastrophe that the readers are compelled to witness with him.

1.3. *The Year of the Flood*

> There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless.
>
> Samuel Beckett (1959)

The second novel of the trilogy, *The Year of the Flood*, is not a sequel of *Oryx and Crake*, because the narrated events runs simultaneously and follows the parallel existences of both novels' protagonists, whose paths crossed in different moments of their lives. Its peculiarity is that the publication of novel was accompanied by innovative promotional practices that preceded and followed its release. *The Year of the Flood* proves Lorraine York's thesis that Atwood is not just an individual literary celebrity, but a bestselling writer and

[73] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 58.

public intellectual whose status is sustained and managed by a profitable cultural industry that Atwood herself has created. This industry includes both traditional aids, such as assistants, editors, and researchers, and innovative ones, such as social media, internet campaigns, and interactive technology[74].

The launch of *The Year of the Flood* was shaped around the concept of environmentally friendly ideas and actions. The name of some of the characters were auctioned off for specific causes listed on the website yearoftheflood.com, along with the many sponsors – or, "environmental helpers", as they are called on the website – that provided what was necessary to keep the tour and website as green as possible, from electrical energy, to energy bars and organic coffee, to the carbon footprint calculator. Coffee in particular was one of the focus of the tour for its connection to the health and number of bird population – a concern that Atwood shares with her partner, writer and fellow birdwatcher Graeme Gibson – and the intervention in this field is not only global, but also localwise. A short walk around Victoria College in Toronto, where Atwood herself studied, might lead to Ned's Café, a student dining hall that serves Balzac's organic Bird Friendly® Atwood Blend, created «to help raise funds and awareness for Canada's Pelee Island Bird Observatory (PIBO)»[75] and certified by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center[76].

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[74] See Lorraine York, *Margaret Atwood and the Labour of Literary Celebrity*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2013.

[75] "Balzac's Proudly Presents the Atwood Blend. Bird friendly Coffee Supporting the Pelee Island Bird Observatory. http://www.balzacs.com/about/atwood-blend. Last access September 14th 2015.

[76] See also Jennifer Bain, "Atwood's Coffee is (Literally) For the Birds", *The Toronto Star*, (July 27th 2010).
http://www.thestar.com/life/food_wine/2010/07/27/atwoods_coffee_is_literally_for_the_birds.html. Last access September 14th 2015.

The unprecedented book tour that accompanied the publication of the novel was conceived as a theatrical version of it, which was played in churches around Canada, the United State of America, and the United Kingdom, with Atwood as narrator and local actors as singers[77] in the role of the God's Gardeners[78]. Even though the artistic value of the tour and of the theatrical adaptation might raise some eyebrows, it seems to have accomplished its goals:

> [i]n an effort to keep the 2009 tour as green as possible, all those involved agreed to make the following choices wherever possible.
> To make the events as local as possible, by using not only local talent but also local food, organic if available.
> The author took the VegiVows for the duration of the trip, with the exception of non-avian and non-mammalian bioforms once a week. Like the Gardeners, however, she will permit eggs, viewed as a sort of nut.
> To carbon-neutralize the travel, with the help of the calculations of ZeroFootprint; to go by train when possible.
> To choose hotels and other sleeping places that have environmental policies, whenever available.
> To choose paper that is Ancient Forest Friendly and approved by the Forest Stewardship Council, with the help of Canopy.
> To choose CD covers that are environmentally friendly, and organic cotton only for the items in our Café Press store.
> To request the event venues to serve only shade-grown, organic, fair trade coffee, which is bird-friendly – unlike sun-grown and pesticide-sprayed, a huge destroyer of songbirds.
> To avoid bottled water.
> The biggest challenge for the author was keeping the luggage to a minimum. She did manage mostly wheel-it-yourself. The rules for the

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[77] The Gardeners' hymns had been set to devotional music by composer Orville Stoeber. Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2009, p. 433.

[78] See also the documentary *In the Wake of the Flood* (2010), directed by Ron Mann, which gives a detailed overview of how the tour was conducted and received by audience and commentators.

> wardrobe will be ONE OR MORE OF: Had it for years; organic cotton; hemp. And remember: Think pink, pack black. It dirts less.[79]

In *The Year of the Flood*, both the tour and the novel, environmental concerns often come with merchandise, whose retail revenues go to the above mentioned environmental charities, and naïve slogans, which are peculiar of the God's Gardeners style as well. The novel follows a similar structure to that of *Oryx and Crake*, but with significant differences. The novel is introduced by a hymn, followed by fourteen sections, each of which is introduced by a sermon spoken by Adam One and a hymn. There are two central focalizers, instead of just one, and they are both female, God's Gardeners Toby and Ren. The chapters bring chronological and religious indications in their titles and cover a time span of twenty years, starting from Year Five, when Toby joins the cult of the God's Gardeners. Most of the narration takes place in Year Twenty-Five but covers the twenty previous years through flashbacks that accompany the readers in the Gardeners' conflicts, strategies, and beliefs.

If it is true that beginnings hold a crucial relevance in the framework of a novel, as they represent «a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world the novelist has imagined»[80], the beginnings of *Oryx and Crake* and of *The Year of the Flood* reveal how the two novels are close-knit and integrate each other. *The Year of the Flood* ideally begins in the same sunrise that opens *Oryx and Crake* and many correspondences exist between the first few pages of both novels. While Snowman, «[l]eft hand, right foot, right hand, left foot, […] makes his way down from the tree»[81], Toby «climbs up to the

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[79] "Greening the Tour". http://yearoftheflood.com/greening-the-tour/. Last access September 14th 2015.

[80] David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction. Illustrated from Classic and Modern Texts*, New York: Viking, 1992, p. 5.

[81] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 4.

rooftop to watch the sunrise»[82]. Both characters are traced with a grotesque epic aura surrounding them, emphasized by the filthy toga bedsheet that constitute Snowman's attire, and the mop handle that Toby uses as a cane. The mixed natural-artificial imagery, the mist and smoke, the towers and the not far-off ocean that characterized the beginning of *Oryx and Crake* recur in the beginning of *The Year of the Flood* and emphasize the continuity between the two:

> As the first heat hits, mist rises from among the swath of trees between her and the derelict city. The air smells faintly of burning, a smell of caramel and tar and rancid barbecues, and the ashy but greasy smell of a garbage-dump fire after it's been raining. The abandoned towers in the distance are like the coral of an ancient reef — bleached and colourless, devoid of life[83].

The chirping of birds is again compared to traffic sounds in the post-natural environment of human-made catastrophe, as a confirmation of the by now undistinguishable boundaries between what is artificial and what is not: «[t]here still is life, however. Birds chirp; sparrows, they must be. Their small voices are clear and sharp, nails on glass: there's no longer any sound of traffic to drown them out»[84]. Sight and sound play a fundamental role as well. While Snowman «scans the horizon, using his one sunglassed eye»[85], Toby «lifts her binoculars, scanning from left to right»[86] and the onomatopoeic wish-wash of the waves becomes the «*katoush*, *katoush*, *katoush* [of Toby's] blood rushing in her ears»[87].

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[82] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 3.
[83] Ibidem.
[84] Ibidem.
[85] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 11.
[86] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 4.
[87] Ivi, p. 5.

The use of time tenses is dissimilar to that of *Oryx and Crake* and it reflects the different nature of the multiple voices that constitute *The Year of the Flood*. Adam One's sermons and the hymns follow a peculiar rhetorical style, which will be analyzed in detail in another chapter, but it is on Toby's and Ren's narratives that I will now focus. Their voices are clearly distinct from one another and bear the signs of their unique life experiences, their different ages and attitudes toward the events. As the analysis of the beginning of the novel shows, Toby is the counterpart of Snowman from certain angles: they both becomes reluctant leaders and reference points for their frailer fellows – Snowman for the Crakers and Toby for Ren – and they are represented in their efforts to survive alone in the post-catastrophic wilderness. However, their characters and life experiences are at the antipodes under many more aspects.

Toby is a few years older than Jimmy and has memories of a time in which the Corporations were still building their power that had become absolute and unrivaled in Jimmy's childhood. Both their mothers become targets of the CorpSeCorps' browbeating, but in ways that reflect the different social classes of their families. Jimmy's mother willingly chooses to challenge the Corporations from her advantaged position with an act of rebellion, while Toby's mother, followed by her father afterwards, simply succumbs to the Corporations' greediness. Jimmy was born in the most privileged environment and his downfall is due mainly to psychological pressures and not so alluring – but still acceptable – options, while Toby has to endure a much tougher childhood from an economic perspective as well and her choices are dictated by her struggle not for better options, but for bare survival.

Toby's narrative is in the third person, like Jimmy's, but in this context the most appropriate comparison is with Ren's narrative, which is in the first

person instead. Ren is about the same age as Jimmy and unconfident about herself and her identity. Like Jimmy, she was born in the Compound but moves to the God Gardener's Ararat when her mother Lucerne falls in love with Zeb. When their love affair ends, she is brought back to the Compound and in her teens she meets Jimmy, to whom she feels bounded for life by a feeling of unrequited love. Her existence is displaced both physically and sentimentally because, since her childhood, important and meaningful places and people were taken from her, leaving her with a sense of loss that only her friend Amanda seems capable to fill. Ren's first person narrative is not a sign of self-awareness but, on the contrary, she is steeped in the instant, unable to abstract from contingency and see the larger picture.

The fragmentation that in *Oryx and Crake* aims at building a mystery pattern with no solution, in *The Year of the Flood* holds a different quality that we might call accumulative. Toby's and Ren's fragmented pieces of narrative are not complimentary, but they give the resulting story a multifaceted feature, and Adam One's sermons and the God Gardeners' hymns add yet another dimension to it. This collection of versions of the same story sometimes adds up to a relativistic declaration of unreliability of the narration, as Toby seems to believe: «I wasn't in the picture because I'm the frame, she thinks. It's not really the past. It's only me, holding it all together. It's only a handful of fading neural pathways. It's only a mirage»[88]. However, in this ostensible relativism lies the main peculiarity of the role of storytelling, as opposite to that in *Oryx and Crake*. While the 2003 novel is built around unresolved mysteries, in *The Year of the Flood* the reader is not invited to find one official, definite truth. On the contrary, the multiplicity of the female points of view and their

[88] Ivi, p. 239.

protagonists' fragmented identities represent the richness of this form of storytelling.

The quotation from Samuel Beckett that opens this analysis of *The Year of the Flood* is a self-declared example of aporia, «a Greek word meaning "difficulty, being at loss", literally, "a pathless path", a track that gives out» which is used in classical rhetoric to denote «real or pretended doubt about an issue, uncertainty as to how to proceed in a discourse»[89]. In *The Year of the Flood*, the narration follows this strategy to convey the hesitancy and self-aware partiality with which Toby and Ren tell their stories. However, this caution and reluctance to identify any ultimate truth is also an affirmation of the power of storytelling even in the most extreme and unlikely situations. Finding the truth is not as necessary as telling stories is and, as David Lodge underlines, an aporetic text can be «funny, affecting, and in a surprising way affirmative of the survival of the human spirit in extremis»[90].

From the very beginning, Toby scatters across the narration her questions about both existential matters – «So, God, thinks Toby. What's your view? Supposing you exist. Tell me now, please, because this may be the end of it»[91] – and practical things, all of them with no manifest solution – «Should she lock the door when she goes out? What if she has to run back into the Spa building in a hurry? But if she leaves the door unlocked, someone or something could slip in when she's working in the garden and be waiting for her inside»[92]. Her genuine doubts and uncertainties help her focus on what comes next, instead of surrender to the circumstances. Even if unanswered, her questions make the narration proceed, as in the well-known last words of

[89] David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction. Illustrated from Classic and Modern Texts*, p. 219.
[90] Ivi, p. 222.
[91] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, pp. 414.
[92] Ivi, p. 19.

Beckett's *The Unnamable*, a textbook example of the rhetorical use of aporia: «you must go on, you can't go on, I'll go on»[93]. Even though Toby's and Ren's life experiences are tragic and even desperate from time to time, *The Year of the Flood* is not tragic in tone and a sense of hope is conveyed also by the religious intermezzos.

The genuine doubts and uncertainty that characterize the narration brings us back to the naïveté and simple-mindedness of which the book tour itself might be accused. Things are always more complicated than the slogan of a group of «eco-freaks»[94] can explain and the God's Gardeners themselves are hardly what they seem at first sight. Toby always feels like an outsider but becomes part of the restricted leadership – the Adams and Eves – around Adam One, after the death of her mentor Pilar, Eve Six. She then discovers that, even among the Gardeners, rules and beliefs require interpretation and are often stretched according to incidental needs: «[f]or instance: the Adams and Eves had a laptop. Toby had been shocked to discover this — wasn't such a device in direct contravention of Gardener principles? — but Adam One had reassured her […]. "It's like the Vatican's porn collection," Zeb told her. "Safe in our hands"»[95]. The over-simplification that characterizes the concepts expressed in the novel is employed because the Gardeners' aim is to reach the masses and popularization comes at the expense of substance, but can still be considered as a form of resistance against the multinational corporations. The identities and previous life of the Adams and Eves is surrounded by an aura of mystery and the mystery around Zeb will be displayed in the *MaddAddam*,

[93] Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, quoted in D. Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, p. 222.
[94] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 182.
[95] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 188.

to abandon the residual naïveté and get a complete overview on how the God's Gardeners came to be.

1.4. *MaddAddam*

> I will tell you something about stories […]. They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death. You don't have anything if you don't have stories.
>
> Leslie Marmon Silko (1977)

The third novel of the trilogy, *MaddAddam*, begins where the previous two end, with the Painballers[96] tied to a tree, Ren, Amanda, and Toby around the fire, Jimmy in hallucinatory state, and the torchlight procession of singing Crakers coming close to them. While in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* the narrative paths cross the sequence of events that led to the post-catastrophic present day, *MaddAddam* is built around the possibility of a future and leads toward the kind of society that might come after the catastrophe. When asked if she knew that *Oryx and Crake* would become the first novel of a trilogy, Margaret Atwood gives a resolutely negative answer, only to add that the idea that the story was not finished came shortly after.

> There were obviously going to be two groups we don't know much about in *Oryx and Crake*, but they are very much in there as part of that world. So, let's find out about them. Who is behind them and how did they get together? One of those would be the God's Gardeners, who we see early on throwing coffee into the Boston harbour. The other side is MaddAddam, this group of renegade biologists. So the second book was going to be about the God's Gardeners and the third book about the renegade biologists. What happens next? So the structure is like this

[96] The Painballers are extremely dangerous criminals that make their appearance in *The Year of the Flood*. They survive the Waterless Flood because they are locked in the Painball Arena, a facility where condemned prisoners have to fight and eliminate the other inmates. These Painballers chase the other human survivors to kill them and they become the main antagonists in the last novel of the trilogy.

> peace sign in which these two [lines] end at the same point, and then the third one goes on from there… And then how about the Crakers?[97]

In *Oryx and Crake* the author lingers extensively on the scientific foundation of the world of the trilogy and its technological potentialities, and in *The Year of the Flood* she focuses more on their consequences on people belonging to the lower social classes and on religion as a counterpart of and safeguard to their misuses and abuses. *MaddAddam* goes on from these two threads and completes them by putting together the group of surviving renegade scientists, the God's Gardeners, and the Crakers. In the last novel of the trilogy, Atwood gives much more attention to the description of the Crakers both as a community and as individuals, and of their cohabitation with the human survivors that try to protect them. However, they never become fully developed characters and their personalities are not convincing, with maybe the only exception of Blackbeard, the child whom Toby takes under her wing. Blackbeard is the joining link between the humans and the Crakers and harbinger of the hybrid species that represents the future of humanity.

The novel is composed of fifteen chapters, the exact same number of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, with an additional introductory resume of the previous two novels. The chapters alternate on the one hand a narration in the third person that follows the MaddAddam group, Toby, Ren, Amanda, Jimmy, and the Crakers in the present tense; and on the other hand, Toby's tales to the Crakers. Toby is the focalizer and main storyteller, as she takes Snowman's role of prophet for the Crakers. The stories that the Crakers obstinately ask her to tell are a continuation of Snowman's and, as a whole,

[97] Isabel Slone, "'Who Survives, Who doesn't?' An Interview with Margaret Atwood", *Hazlitt. Penguin Random House Canada*. http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/hazlitt/feature/who-survives-who-doesnt-interview-margaret-atwood. Last access September 14th 2015.

they create a sort of sacred scripture for the Children of Crake and reveal that Toby takes up her evangelical role more seriously and knowingly than Snowman. Her stories cover not only the mere foundations of the Crakers' theology, but comprise a set of adventures, many of which have Zeb, the survivors' leader and Toby's lover, as a protagonist.

These parts are introduced by Toby's explanation to the Crakers of what the object of the story is and they are written with a very simple syntax, short sentences with which Toby's answers to the Crakers' unwritten and incessant questions. This truncated style allows the storyteller to avoid a complexity level that would be too difficult for the Crakers to understand, but it also reveals the narrator's restrained exasperation towards their simple-mindedness. The episodes that Toby tells to the Crakers during their "bedtime sessions" complete the mosaic of the world before the catastrophe with accounts of Zeb's childhood and early adult life. His father was a preeminent spokesperson of the Church of PetrOleum and Zeb spent his childhood and adolescence among these people. This congregation raised in response to oil scarcity and the consequent price rise and its followers' prayers are addressed to «the Almighty for blessing the world with fumes and toxins, cast their eyes upwards as if gasoline came from heaven»[98].

Another crucial episode, which Toby delivers to the Crakers in the usual simplified and toned down version, is in the fourth chapter, "Bearlift". It tells about the time in which Zeb had to hide in the Mackenzie Mountains[99]

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[98] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 111.

[99] The Mackenzie Mountains have recently attracted the attention of researchers that consider the condition of the permafrost, soil, and wildlife in the area as important indicators to measure climate change. See Linheng Liang and G. Peter Kershaw, "Climate change in the Mackenzie Mountains, N.W.T., Canada", *Climate Research* 5.1 (1995), pp. 1-13 and the *Climate Change at the Mackenzie Mountains* research expedition, supported by the Earthwatch Institute, http://eu.earthwatch.org/expeditions/climate-change-in-the-mackenzie-mountains. Last access September 14th 2015.

and worked in the cities of Whitehorse, Yellowknife, and Tuktoyaktuk, in Yukon and the Northwestern Territories, which are among the rare precise indications of place in the trilogy. The Mackenzie Mountains, named after Canadian Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie, consist of several ranges between Yukon and the Northwestern Territories and were exploited for oil production during the Second World War. Zeb includes this information in his account of the period spent in the barrens and mentions the environmental problems of that time.

An edited version of the chapter "Bearlift" was published in advance on *Arc*, a magazine launched in 2012 by the editors of *New Scientist* to «explore the future through cutting-edge science fiction»[100] and satisfy those readers fascinated by all the possible temporal alternatives that fiction can foresee but to which science popularization cannot indulge. This episode, in addition to that of the Church of PetrOleum, contributes to reinforce the bond with which Atwood weave together facts and fiction and creates a link between imagined world and consensual reality. Her commitment to ventures like *Arc* aims at developing «outlets and markets for science fiction authors, and […] see the form grow into new forms and address new audiences»[101]. Science fiction is meant to create contexts for new ideas and, notwithstanding Atwood's rejection of such label and the consequent heated debate, the MaddAddam trilogy proves that labels are discussed most when their rules are questioned and transgressed. In the *Arc* editors' words, Atwood's point is that her writing is «not trying to "reinvent" the genre, or genres; nor is it ignoring,

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[100] "Announcing Arc: a new magazine about the future from the makers of New Scientist". http://arcfinity.tumblr.com/post/14260118887/announcingarc. Last access September 14th 2015.
[101] Ibidem.

circumventing or celebrating it. It's not a self-reflexive exercise in genre. It's interested in the future – of things, people and feelings»[102].

The improvement in the range of interest of the Crakers is a sign of their storytelling maturity: not only creation myths, but also a broader set of stories catches their attention now. This maturity also means that they are reaching a more accurate knowledge of the spectrum of human feelings and actions, thus increasing their possibilities of independence, survival, and adaptation. As a matter of fact, *MaddAddam* does not serve as a closure to the story that had started with the downfall caused by the human attitude toward the rest of nature and toward humanity itself. On the contrary, it introduces the beginning of a new world and society after Crake's destructive plan to give a new balance to the ecosystem of the Earth.

In this sense, *MaddAddam* describes the possible evolution of humankind and a metaliterary interpretation of the «impossibility of closure», as Marjorie Garber defines the openness and indefiniteness of literature. She writes, underlining the dynamic quality of literature, that «[i]f it progresses, it does so in a way that often involves doubling back upon a track or meandering by the wayside rather than forging ahead, relentlessly and single-mindedly, toward some imagined goal or solution»[103]. The reader is not given a denouement that explain what the future will be like, nor a satisfactory resolution of the problems that remain open in the new hybrid society of humans and Crakers. This is peculiar of Atwood's novel, who very often closes her works with unresolved endings that involve the reader in the creation process, leading him or her to think about the possibilities that the narration leaves open.

[102] Ibidem.

[103] Marjorie Garber, *The Uses and Abuses of Literature*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2011, p. 259.

Her attitude about endings as a writer is congruent with her attitude as a reader and it hints at the role of art and literature in life. In an interview, George Hancock asks her if she has an optimistic sense of resolution and if she believes there is hope in art, and her answer directly addresses the question of closure. «Hope for what? Let's put it this way. When I finish a book I really like, no matter what the subject matter, [...] I feel very good. I do feel hope. It's the well-doneness that has that effect on me. Not the conclusion – not what is said, *per se*»[104]. The ending of a novel is not meaningful for the ultimate truth that it might or might not bear on the narration, but as it signals the closure of the artistic composition and allows the satisfactory felling of «well-doneness».

In *MaddAddam*, the end of the novel is also a meta-reflection on how writing myths and fiction is an essential trait of human nature that is being passed on to the Crakers, through Toby's pupil Blackbeard:

> Now this is the Book that Toby made when she lived among us. See, I am showing you. She made these words on a *page*, and a page is made of *paper*. She made the words with *writing*, that she marked down with a stick called a *pen*, with black fluid called *ink*, and she made the *pages* join together at one side, and that is called a *book*. See, I am showing you. This is the Book, these are the Pages, here is the Writing.
> [...] And she showed me how to turn the marks back into voice, so that when I look at the page and read the words, it is Toby's voice that I hear. And when I skeak these words out loud, you too are hearing Toby's voice.[105]

In the simple syntax that characterize the Crakers' language, Blackbeard ushers in a new era for its people's: their coming out of prehistory and into artistic literacy. Their presence in the novel is functional to the progression of

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[104] Geoff Hancock, "Tightrope-walking over Niagara Falls", in E. G. Ingersoll (ed), *Waltzing Again: New and Selected Conversations With Margaret Atwood*, Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 2006, pp. 191-220, p. 219.
[105] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 385.

the plot and the exploration of the scientific or pseudo-scientific ruminations that are behind their 'invention' by means of Crake. However, as it has been already mentioned, the Crakers remain flat characters and the reader never gets a deep view of their mentality. Still, their upgrade as literary animals sheds a new light on their essential contiguity with the human species.

In his essential work *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode (1966) examines the necessity for humans to relate themselves to an end, which is understood both as the meaning of existence and as the closure of a narrative path from the beginning, through the middle, to the end. It is as a consequence of this need that the creation of myths and fiction is so crucial to their individual and social life, as «[m]en, like poets, rush 'into the middest', *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems»[106]. It might be argued that this is not entirely true, because human beings have an idea of what their birth might have been like and they can experience the end indirectly at least, through the deaths of their fellow humans.

This makes more sense if compared to the existence of the Crakers, who have no concept of mortality and who truly die *in mediis rebus*:

> they're programmed to drop dead at age thirty – suddenly, without getting sick. No old age, none of those anxieties. They'll just keel over. Not that they know it; none of them has died yet."
> "I thought you were working on immortality."
> "Immortality," said Crake, "is a concept. If you take 'mortality' as being, not death, but the foreknowledge of it and the fear of it, then

[106] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1966), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 7.

> 'immortality' is the absence of such fear. Babies are immortal. Edit out the fear, and you'll be…".[107]

One of the features that Crake valued most in the Crakers is that they have no foreknowledge of their death and this makes them theoretically immortal. Paradoxically, it is exactly this lack of the concept of death that, even though their end is truly *in mediis rebus*, should have made Kermode's statement on the need for «fictive concords with origins and ends»[108] meaningless for them, because they cannot desire what they cannot even think. However, in *MaddAddam* the author reveals that things are more complicated than they seem even for what concern the Children of Crake. They eagerly asks for stories: for Atwood, the need for myth and fiction is even more hardwired than the concept of death. *Oryx and Crake* shows a caricature of capitalistic society and unmask its power structures. *The Year of the Flood* provides an approach to contrast society through creativity and a renewd sense of community. *MaddAddam* suggests the possibility of a posthuman future in which humans will be part of nature again, by giving birth to a new hybrid human-craker species that employs storytelling as a strategy of survival.

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[107] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 303.

[108] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, p. 7.

Chapter 2.

Oryx and Crake: Power Politics and Resistance through Parody

Is it my choice that I'm dangling
like a turkey's wattles from his
more than indifferent tree?
If Nature is Your alphabet,
what letter is this rope?

Margaret Atwood, *Half-Hanged Mary* (1995)

Published in 2003, *Oryx and Crake* is the first dystopian novel written by Atwood in almost twenty years, *The Handmaid's Tale* being the only previous example. In an interview with Evan Solomon on CBC (October 12th 2003), she says that *Oryx and Crake* is informed by biologist Edward O. Wilson's book *The Future of Life* (2002), which suggests that rampant technophilia is putting at risk the core of adaptation, which is a mutual process of co-evolution.

Indeed, science plays a major role in the composition of the novel, as Atwood herself maintains: «Several of my close relatives are scientists, and the main topic at the annual family Christmas dinner is likely to be intestinal parasites of sex hormones in mice, or, when that makes the non-scientists too queasy, the nature of the Universe»[1]. Her concerns are not limited to the environmental crisis and the dangers of technological advancement only, but first and foremost to the development of human nature in such context: «no matter how high the tech, homo sapiens sapiens remains at heart what he's

[1] Margaret Atwood, "Writing *Oryx and Crake*", p. 330.

been for tens of thousands of years – the same emotions, the same preoccupations»[2].

2.1. A Taxonomy of Power

Margaret Atwood has always been concerned with power as closely related to identity and to the relationships that individuals have with other individuals and with society. In relation to her poetry collection *Power Politics* (1971), she articulates a definition of power that accompanies and shapes all her works:

> Power is our environment. We live surrounded by it: it pervades everything we are and do, invisible and soundless, like air. […] We would all like to have a private life that is sealed off from the public life and different from it, where there are no rulers and no ruled, no hierarchies, no politicians, only equals, free people. But because any culture is a closed system and our culture is one based and fed on power this is impossible, or at least very difficult. So many of the things we do in what we sadly think of as our personal lives are simply duplications of the external world of power games, power struggles [3].

The passage also implies many concepts that are essential to fully understand Atwood's writing intents, but two of them are particularly meaningful: the pervasiveness of power and its decisive influence on both individuals and relationships. With regard to the latter, Pilar Somacarrera provides insightful analysis of the strong connection between the public and the personal in *Power Politics* and other works, while highlighting the similarities with Michel Foucault's theory about power. Even though there are no direct references to the French philosopher in Atwood's words, Foucault and Atwood share a conception of power as a dynamic event that is performed in the

[2] Ibidem.

[3] Margaret Atwood, "Notes on *Power Politics*", *Acta Victoriana* 97.2 (1973), p. 7, quoted in Pilar Somacarrera, "Power Politics: Power and Identity", in Coral Ann Howells (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 43-57, p. 43.

multidirectional interaction between two or more elements. Foucault claims that

> [p]ower in the substantive sense, 'le' *pouvoir*, doesn't exist. The idea that there is either located at – or emanating from – a given point something which is a 'power' seems to me based on a misguided analysis, one which at all events fails to account for a considerable number of phenomena. In reality power means relations, a more-or-less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations.[4]

Hence, the French philosopher, just like Atwood, analyzes power as a means of expression and, among other things, of sexuality. *Power Politics* has often been studied as a representation of female subjugation but, actually, man and woman are both victors and victims:

> The relationship between them is perfectly illustrated by the drawing, conceived by Margaret Atwood, which appears on the cover of the first edition of the collection. The illustration is a parody of the Hanged Man card of the Tarot, representing a woman, covered in bandages like a mummy and hanging upside down, tied to the arm of a knight in armour. The woman is the apparent victim, yet he is also suffering from the pain caused by her dangling weight[5].

There are neither sources nor recipients of power, but relationships in which power is practiced on the subjects involved. This concept is yet another recurring theme in Atwood's poems, essays, and works of fiction, up to the MaddAddam trilogy, in which the character of Oryx can be seen as a compendium of Atwood's conceptions of relations of power. While the focus on the dynamics and relational core of power makes it influential on every aspect of life, like the conflict between the sexes depicted in *Power Politics*,

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[4] Michel Foucault, "Le jeu de Michel Foucault", English translation by Colin Gordon, "Confession of the Flesh", *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 198.

[5] Pilar Somacarrera, "Power Politics: Power and Identity", p. 46.

politics represents the most palpable web of power relations: «[b]y "political" I mean having to do with power: who's got it, who wants it, how it operates; in a words, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how»[6]. The moral implications are clear in this definition and Atwood suggests that, even though politicians might have abandoned this view, writers still cherish the moral dimension of their work.

2.1.1. The responsibility of the writer and the power of narration

The subject of Atwood's political and ideological stances and her position as a writer in political discourses are raised and answered in a number of interviews and essays. After the publication of her essay on Canadian literature, *Survival* (1972), and her second novel, *Surfacing*, her works have often been read as pieces of advocacy for Canadian nationalism or feminist criticism. Such interpretations might actually be correct to some extent, but they often go too far in reading the primary texts only as ideological declarations disguised as fictional works. She directly, even though somehow reluctantly, addresses this problem in her essay "On Being a Woman Writer. Paradoxes and Dilemmas"[7], in which she explains the «questionable value of writers, male or female, becoming directly involved in political movements of any sort»[8].

By analyzing the most frequent stereotypes that writers encounter when approached through an ideological point of view, there is one in which the «interviewer [or critic] [is] incapable of treating your work as what it is, i.e. poetry and/or fiction. Great attempt to get you to say something about an Issue

[6] Margaret Atwood, "An End to Audience?", p. 353.
[7] Margaret Atwood, "On Being a 'Woman Writer'. Paradoxes and Dilemmas", pp. 190-204.
[8] Ivi, p. 190.

and then make you into an exponent, spokeswoman or theorist»[9]. This stereotype originates in the interviewer failing to «handl[e] more than one dimension at a time»[10], which results, in Atwood's case, in her frequent inclusion in women's liberation and Canadian nationalism movements. In this sense, even writing and criticism are fields in which power is performed. However, Atwood's distancing from ideological positions is not a symptom of social and political detachment in favour of an esthetic retreat.

She acknowledges her «growing involvement with human rights issues, which for [her] are not separate from writing»[11] and declares: «I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me»[12]. Her idea of politics is closely linked to her opinion on the role of the writer, which, she believes, is never fixed and cannot be imposed. When asked about the role of the writer, she replies that he or she does not have a responsibility towards society, in the same way that society has no specific responsibility to the writer *per se*: «I think if you are going to save souls or save the world, you should be a preacher or a politician, so I don't see my role in any one-to-one relationship with society. I think anybody who does so is deluding himself. Books don't save the world»[13].

This can be read as a warning that Atwood issues against the uses and abuses of the human mind to fix and improve society, an issue that will become the core of the MaddAddam trilogy. Writers should be wary of using the language of preachers and politicians and they would better keeping asking questions, instead of giving – or imposing – answers. Her stance is that

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[9] Ivi, p. 201.

[10] Ibidem.

[11] Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, p. 14.

[12] Ivi, p. 15.

[13] Margaret Atwood with Graeme Gibson, "Dissecting the Way a Writer Works", in Earl G. Ingersoll (ed), *Conversations* pp. 3-19, p. 5.

writers are not entitled to be the saviors of humankind and readers should not yield to the temptation to read works of fiction as guidebooks for dealing with real life. Instead of developing a didactic approach to literature, Atwood embraces the idea of a moral art that illuminates human relationships and power relationships and dynamically engages in a debate with the readers. Since «power is our environment»[14] and includes all aspects of life, it is exercised in writing and storytelling as well.

What Atwood emphasizes through her writing is that the written word is fixed, but the act of writing is dynamic and implies an «aesthetic and oral exploration of the tensions between the process and the product»[15], which is, again, an exploration of the tension that the exercise of power creates. Politics is «how people relate to a power structure and vice versa»[16] and the dynamic process of writing enlightens such exchange. Atwood gives another important insight in the relationship between art and political activism: «[i]s poetry a means of translating power into social and political forms? No, it's the reverse. Social and political forms get translated into poetry. If you want to change the world, you do not choose poetry as a means for accomplishing it»[17].

Somacarrera suggests a description of the dimensions of power as depicted in Atwood's novel *Bodily Harm* (1981), which can be interpreted as the prose equivalent of the poem collection *Power Politics* as revealing of the author's reflections on the subject of power relationships. Somacarrera identifies three dimensions of power. First, power implies ascription, as power

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[14] Margaret Atwood, "Notes on *Power Politics*", p. 7.

[15] Linda Hutcheon, "From Poetic to Narrative Structures: The Novels of Margaret Atwood", in Sherril E. Grace and Lorraine Wein (eds), *Margaret Atwood. Language Text, and System*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983.

[16] Margaret Atwood with Elisabeth Meese, "The Empress Has No Clothes", in Earl G. Ingersoll (ed), *Conversations*, pp. 177-190, p. 185.

[17] Margaret Atwood with Karla Hammond, "Articulating the Mute", in in Earl G. Ingersoll (ed), *Conversations*, pp. 109-120, p. 119.

is given through elections, but election can be manipulated in more or less clear-cut ways. Second, power is basically founded on economy and people use power as a strategy to take advantage of someone else. Finally, power implies the full control on language[18]:

> [i]n any totalitarian takeover, whether from the left or the right, writers, singers and journalists are the first to be suppressed. […] The aim of all such suppression is to silence the *voice*, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power. Elsewhere, the word itself is thought to have power; that's why so much trouble is taken to silence it.[19]

The dystopian tradition provides fruitful representations of language as a powerful and ambiguous tool. George Orwell famously concludes *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with the "Appendix: The Principles of Newspeak" and Ray Bradbury begins *Farenheit 451* (1953) with the protagonist's sinister pleasure to see «the books [going] up in sparkling whirls and [blowing] away on a wind turned dark with burning»[20]. Language and storytelling are empowering tools that affect people's lives and Atwood continues such dystopic tradition in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred offers a «counter-narrative to the social gospel of Gilead»[21] and uses language as an antidote to the poisonous brainwashing that the totalitarian state injects into its subjects.

Storytelling is for the handmaid the «only possible gesture of resistance to imprisonment in silence, just as it primary means for her psychological survival»[22] and language is a strategy that she employs to resist the power

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[18] Language and storytelling represent a crucial point of the MaddAddam trilogy, as will be further developed in this dissertation.

[19] Margaret Atwood, "An End to Audience?", p. 350.

[20] Ray Bradbury, *Farenheit 451*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1953, p. 1.

[21] Coral Ann Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions", pp. 161-175, p. 165.

[22] Coral Ann Howells, *Private and Fictional Worlds: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970's and 1980's*, London: Methuen, 1987, p. 127.

practiced on her as a victim of abusive power relations. As Dunja Mohr underlines, «Offred's figurative and associative use of language, her frequent use of similes and metaphors, reconnects words and their meanings in new ways»[23], thus disrupting the master narrative that Gilead's patriarchy imposes. However, similarly to *Power Politics*, in *The Handmaid's Tale* women and men are both victims and winners: women exert some power too, mainly on other women, while men are themselves victims of the rigid Gileadean laws depriving them of the freedom of a relationship that falls outside the categories approved and coerced by the theocratic regime.

Gilead is successful in exerting what Foucault defines as biopower – the practice of subjugating and controlling bodies and population. The regime controls individual bodies, by imposing fixed dress codes, behavioral patterns, gender and social roles, as well as the whole population, by regulating with iron hand the sexual lives of its citizens of all ranks. The main point of contention is control over women's bodies and gender, which becomes again a question of utter relevance. Sex as biological reproduction is less of a major theme in *Oryx and Crake*, but as entertainment and as a form of control over human bodies, it certainly is. Internet pornography, child exploitation, and prostitution play a huge part in the novel and Oryx, one of the most enigmatic of Atwood's characters, personifies the tensions related to the over-sexualization of society.

2.1.2. Oryx: the creation of an unusual victim

When Oryx first appears in the narration, Jimmy is frenzied on the seashore and he is trying not to indulge in sex thoughts: «Sex is like drink, it's bad to

[23] Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart. Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias*, p. 127.

start brooding about it too early in the day»[24]. He hears an unidentified female voice in his hallucinatory state and wishes it were Oryx's, but she is elusive even as a product of Jimmy's imagination. The first description that we have of her comes from a dream Jimmy is having and she is immediately characterized as a mythical figure, half animal and half human, «floating on her back in a [pink] swimming pool, wearing an outfit that appears to be made of delicate white tissue-paper petals»[25]. She is then compared to a jellyfish, which can be aptly interpreted as a reference to the myth of Medusa[26], and immediately identified as an uncanny creature that withdraws from touch, whose shape is easily moulded and whose identity is ambiguously transparent, meaning both that she is pure and that she disguises her true colors. Just like Medusa, Oryx performs power through dissimulation.

The reader is progressively informed about Oryx's past, but only through what Jimmy knows about her, which is far from being a verifiable and undeniable truth. As a matter of fact, Oryx herself is extremely vague in the information she gives about her past and present existence. Her entrance in the storyline takes place when adolescent Jimmy and Glenn check into HottTotts, a global sex-trotting site»[27], a porn website that features sex tourism. She is a mysterious victim of multiple abusers – for a start, the sex tourist in the scene, the pimps, and the website users like Jimmy – but the power relations are unclear and she is the one who blurs the boundaries between exploiters and exploited. She is only a little girl, «positioned in front of the

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[24] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 11.

[25] Ivi, p. 43.

[26] See Hélène Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975), *L'Arc*, pp. 39-54, English translation by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, "The Laugh of the Medusa", *Signs* 1.4, pp. 875-893; Frank Davey, "Atwood's Gorgon Touch" *Studies in Canadian Literature* 2.2 (1977), pp. 1-13; Gillian M. Alban, "Medusa as Female Eye or Icon in Atwood, Murdoch, Carter, and Plath", in *Mosaic* 46.4 (2013), pp. 163-82.

[27] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 89.

standard gargantuan Gulliver-in-Lilliput male torso – a life-sized man shipwrecked on an island of delicious midgets, or stolen away and entranced, forced to experience agonizing pleasures by a trio of soulless pixies»[28]. The entire scene is obviously a setup, the little girls' moans and giggles are recorded and their frightened look is very likely part of their acting role.

Oryx, however, is «three-dimensional from the start»[29] and brings that simulated reality on a different level, establishing a contact with the viewer. She is a female subjected to the male gaze, but she surprisingly and ambiguously returns that gaze:

> [s]he smiled a hard little smile that made her appear much older […]. Then she looked over her shoulder and right into the eyes of the viewer – right into Jimmy's eyes, into the secret person inside him. *I see you*, that look said. *I see you watching. I know you. I know what you want*.[30]

Glenn too is so touched by that look that he decides to capture and print the frame – «the moment when Oryx looked»[31] – and gives Jimmy a copy of it. That look does what Atwood believes literature and art in general can do, it enlightens the tensions released by power relations, it makes real what used to be virtual and, as a consequence, it spurs a moral engagement in the viewer or reader: «for the first time he'd felt that what they'd been doing was wrong. Before, it had always been entertainment, or else far beyond his control, but now he felt culpable»[32].

Jimmy usually describes Oryx as a victim, even though an unusual type of victim, but she always refuses to acknowledge this image of her: «she acted

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[28] Ivi, p. 90.

[29] Ibidem.

[30] Ivi, p. 91. Italics in original and it is used to indicate the fabrications of Jimmy's mind throughout the novel.

[31] Ibidem.

[32] Ibidem.

as if she wanted to protect him, from the image of herself – herself in the past. She liked to keep only the bright side of herself turned towards him. She liked to shine»[33]. Even when he shows her the frame taken from the sex tourism website, which is a blatant evidence of a childhood of exploitation and prostitution, she denies her involvement and minimizes the bleakness of such a situation: «"I don't think this is me," was what she'd said at first. […]"A lot of girls have eyes," she said. "A lot of girls did these things. Very many." Then, seeing his disappointment, she said, "It might be me. Maybe it is. Would that make you happy, Jimmy?"». Above all, she resolutely rejects being identified as a victim:

> Another woman in her place would have crumpled up the picture, cried, denounced him as a criminal, told him he understood nothing about her life, made a general scene. Instead she smoothed out the paper, running her fingers gently over the soft, scornful child's face that had – surely – once been hers.[34]

Oryx's position as a non-victim is a product of more than thirty years of reflections about victimhood, a topic that Atwood addressed many times, especially in *Surfacing* and in *Survival* (1972). Although *Survival* was received with mixed feelings that often resulted in harsh criticism, the essay is a landmark in Canadian literary history because it created a social mythology that, following Northrop Frye's critical approach, is crucial in creating a mature and recognizable national literature[35]. Atwood offers a Canadian mythology founded on survival and on the basic victim positions:

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[33] Ivi, p. 135.

[34] Ibidem.

[35] «Literature is conscious mythology: a society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of storytelling, its mythical concepts, sun-gods and the like, become habits of metaphorical thought. In a fully mature literary tradition the writer enters into a structure of traditional stories and images». Northrop Frye, "Conclusion to *Literary History of*

> Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim […].
> Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea […]
> Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable […]
> Position Four: To be a creative non-victim.[36]

Paul Goetsch underlines that such «hypothesis allows Atwood to deal with all kinds of power relationships and move easily from political and social violence to gender relationships»[37].

It is from this early formulation of the victim positions that Atwood develops the most intriguing character of *Oryx and Crake*. Oryx manages to take the fourth position of a creative non-victim, as she is «able to accept [her] own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others' versions of it (particularly those of [her] oppressors)»[38]. Oryx is not a fully developed character, as she embodies the function of a mysterious and ephemeral feminine principle. As a consequence, she can easily be interpreted in a varied number of ways, from the already mentioned Medusa to more recent and challenging readings. Larissa Lai[39] and Michele Lacombe[40] suggests that Oryx functions as a commentary to such

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Canada: Canadian Literature in English», in Branko Gorjup (ed). *Mythologizing Canada: Essays on the Canadian Literary Imagination,* Ottawa: Legas, 1997, pp. 63-96, p. 80.

[36] Margaret Atwood, *Survival*, Toronto: Anansi, 1972, pp. 36–38.

[37] Paul Goetsch, "Margaret Atwood: A Canadian Nationalist," in Reingard M. Nischik (ed), *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000, pp. 166-179, p. 173.

[38] Margaret Atwood, *Survival*, p. 39.

[39] See Larissa Lai, *Slanting I, Imagining We. Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014.

[40] See Michele Lacombe, "Resistance in Dutility: The Cyborg Identities of *Oryx and Crake*", in John E. Moss and Tobi Kozakewich (eds), *Margaret Atwood. The Open Eye*, pp. 421-432.

concepts as Judith Butler's view on *gender*[41], Gayatri Spivak's *subaltern subject*, and Jean Baudrillard's *simulacrum*.

She is a performative character, meaning that her identity is ephemeral, as the jellyfish metaphor suggests, and changes according to the interactions with other people and with the context. In this sense, it is actually helpful to recall Butler's theory of gender, according to which «[g]ender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed»[42]. Just like Jimmy's description of Oryx is made to comply with the image of an Asian little girl growing up as a victim of Western white men's desires, «gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control»[43]. Oryx repeatedly breaks the stereotypes imposed on her by becoming a creative non-victim. In doing so, she embodies the performative aspect of gender and only exists through the roles that she plays in the different scenes of which her life is composed.

2.1.3. Oryx: the subverting power of a non-victim

It is with this awareness that she asks Jimmy what it is that he wants to hear from her, what role he wants her to play: «You want me to pretend? You want me to make something up?»[44]. She eludes victimhood because none of the roles that she is playing truly defines herself, with the only exception of the role that Crake attributes to her in his plan to destroy humankind, a role that she is not

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[41] See Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", in *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988), pp. 519-531.
[42] Ivi, p. 527.
[43] Ivi, p. 528.
[44] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 92.

aware of and which ultimately leads to her death. Even Jimmy acknowledges her theatrical, and ultimately tragic, quality:

> *Enter Oryx*. Fatal moment. But which fatal moment? *Enter Oryx as a young girl on a kiddieporn site, flowers in her hair, whipped cream on her chin*; or, *Enter Oryx as a teenage news item, sprung from a pervert's garage*; or, *Enter Oryx, stark naked and pedagogical in the Crakers' inner sanctum*; or, *Enter Oryx, towel around her hair, emerging from the shower*; or, *Enter Oryx, in a pewter-grey silk pantsuit and demure half-high heels, carrying a briefcase, the image of a professional Compound globewise saleswoman?* Which of these will it be, and how can he ever be sure there's a line connecting the first to the last? Was there only one Oryx, or was she legion?[45]

Larissa Lai gives a thorough and insightful interpretation of Oryx, starting from her gaze to the camera of HottTotts – «a site meant for the voyeur to look on anonymously» – as a destabilizing act that, with the help of technology, calls into question the usual power relations: «[t]he racialized, sexualized other is not supposed to look back. But there is something interdeterminated about power relations on the Internet, such that this relationship is destabilized»[46]. She embodies Spivak's subaltern[47], a notion that Spivak borrows from Antonio Gramsci[48] and Ranajit Guha's *Subaltern Studies* group[49] and that she reinterprets in the imperialistic framework as the subject who cannot speak within the dominant hegemonic code. Lai underlines that

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[45] Ivi, pp. 307-308.

[46] Larissa Lai, *Slanting the I, Imagining We. Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Lauriel Press, 2014, p. 193.

[47] See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998, pp. 271-313.

[48] See Guido Liguori, "Tre accezioni di «subalterno» in Gramsci", in *Critica marxista: rivista bimestrale* 6 (2011), pp. 33-41.

[49] See Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

«while the subaltern cannot speak, [Oryx] can at least *peek*»[50] and this point assumes major relevance, considering how vision and blindness are key concepts in Atwood's writings[51].

Lastly, Oryx is interpreted as an exemplification of the *simulacrum*. A legacy from Greek philosophy and Plato's dialogues, the concept found new application in postmodernity, mainly through Jean Baudrillard's and Frederic Jameson's suggestions. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as «1. a material image, made as a representation of some deity, person, or thing; 2a. something having merely the form or appearance of a certain thing, without possessing its substance or proper qualities; 2b. a mere image, a specious imitation or likeness, of something»[52]. Implicit in this definition and in any discourse on the simulacrum is a reflection on what is true and what is false and, for this reason, the concept is even more meaningful in a postmodern philosophical framework. Oryx is the umpteenth replica of the stereotypical abused female from the disadvantaged world and she embodies such role so thoroughly that she becomes the prototype of it. Such a stereotype does not refer to any actual person, because each and every victim partakes in the tensions of power differently and on different levels. In this sense, she is a simulacrum, «the identical copy for which no original has ever existed»[53]

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[50] Larissa Lai, *Slanting the I, Imagining We. Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s*, p. 194.

[51] See John E. Moss and Tobi Kozakewich (eds), *Margaret Atwood. The Open Eye*, in particular Sharon R. Wilson's chapter "Frankenstein's Gaze and Atwood's Sexual Politics in Oryx and Crake", pp. 397-406. See also Sharon R. Wilson, "Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's Major Novels", in Coral Ann Howels (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, pp. 176-189.

[52] "simulacrum, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Accessed August 31st 2015.

[53] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 18.

because she is the «truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true»[54].

Relying on Frederic Jameson's reflections, Lai argues that HottTotts is a site of the simulacrum, «where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced»[55] [56]. Oryx is sold by her mother[57] to Uncle En, then to the porn movie industry, and finally, after many transfers, to Crake. She is often described «as fluid as cash itself, a figure of pure transaction»[58] whose economic value makes her special, like a «little treasure»[59], or a «precious vase»[60]. She herself is convinced that everything has a price and that, whether or not money is involved, all interactions are deep down transactions of power, emotions, knowledge. Oryx, as a biological entity and at the same time as a virtual representation of male phantasies, has a multiple identity that allows her to escape from the cage of victimhood and destroy most feminine stereotypes – mother, prostitute, victim. It is in this sense that, while acknowledging the different interpretations of her, she can be viewed also as Donna Haraway's cyborg, «a condensed image of both imagination and material reality»[61].

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[54] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacres et Simulation" (1981), English translation by Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman, "Simulacra and Simulations", in Mark Poster and Jacques Mourrain (eds), *Jean Baudrillard. Selected Writings*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, pp.166-184, p. 166.

[55] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 18.

[56] Here 'use value' refers to «the realm of difference and differentiation as such, whereas "exchange value" will, as we shall see, come to be described as the realm of identities». Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 231.

[57] Maternal figures in Atwood's writings are all but stereotypical. I will engage with this subject more thoroughly further in this chapter.

[58] Larissa Lai, *Slanting the I, Imagining We. Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s*, p. 195.

[59] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 132.

[60] Ibidem.

[61] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, p. 150.

A cyborg is «ambiguously natural and crafted»[62] and it determines the breakdown of three crucial boundaries – between human and animal, between organism and machine, and between physical and non-physical – that Oryx crosses as well. She is described as an animal – «big eyes, a small jaw – a Hymenoptera face, a mantid face, the face of a Siamese cat»[63] – and her code name is that of «a gentle water-conserving East African herbivore»[64]. At the same time, she is like an artifact – «[s]kin of the palest yellow, smooth and translucent, like old, expensive porcelain»[65], an extension of the cameras that spies on her, and a posthuman creature who camouflages her human nature through technology, by putting on luminescent green contact lenses and spaying herself to disguise her pheromones when she meets the Crakers. Finally, she is an aery impalpable being, the soulless pixie in the porn movie, but also the mother of all animals in the Crakers' cosmogony, and the spirit that haunts Jimmy after her own death.

Haraway ascribes to the cyborg a number of features that describe adequately Oryx too, as a being «committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity […] oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence»[66]. Some of these, irony and utopia above all, are peculiar to the literary structure of *Oryx and Crake* as well, thus making the most elusive character of the trilogy also a key to decode its narrative strategies. As a matter of fact, Haraway shares with Atwood a conception of writing as a major tool in political struggles. Haraway's words on the cyborg might have been pronounced by Atwood in her explorations of the victim role: «[c]yborg writing must be about

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[62] Ivi, p. 149.
[63] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 115.
[64] Ivi, p. 311.
[65] Ibidem.
[66] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, p.151.

the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked [US women of colour] as other»[67]. Power is dealt with by telling and retelling stories, through the appropriation of myths and, especially in Atwood's writings, through an ironic, satiric, and parodic use of literary tradition[68].

Writing cannot be liberating unless it calls into question the myths of origin on which all stories elaborate. Atwood's parodic and metamorphic use of language and storytelling makes a liberating use of myths, with Oryx as one of the major disruptive elements in the narrative. She counters the myth of original innocence and return to the wholeness of the Garden of Eden, and destabilizes the typical plot in which women «have less selfhood, weaker individuation, more fusion to the oral, to Mother, less at stake in masculine autonomy»[69].

Oryx is one of Haraway's «illegitimate cyborgs, not of Woman born, who refuses the ideological resources of victimization […] actively rewriting the texts of their bodies and societies. Survival is at stake in this play of

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[67] Ivi, p. 175.

[68] A strong convergence exists between Margaret Atwood and British writer Angela Carter with regard to the appropriation and reuse of literary tradition. For example, they both authored contemporary renditions of the folktale of Bluebeard – Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" (1983) and Carter's "The Blood Chamber" (1979) – whose most famous version is Charles Perrault's "La Barbe Bleue" (1697). In Carter's obituary on *The Observer*, Atwood describes her as a Fairy Godmother and, to some extent, she is certainly indebted to Carter's approach to the literary heritage and to the redefinition of female identity. See Margaret Atwood, "Magic Token Through the Dark Forest", *The Observer*, February 23rd 1992, p. 61; Paulina Palmer, "Gender as Performance in the Fiction of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood", in Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (eds), *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, London: Longman, 1997, pp. 24-42; Nancy Roberts, "'Back Talk': The Work of Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter", in *Schools of Sympathy. Gender and Identification Through the Novel*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997, pp. 107-141.

[69] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, p. 177.

readings»[70]. In the MaddAddam trilogy, however, there is more than only personal individual survival at stake, which is the existence and freedom of large groups of people that contrast the abusive power of the multinational corporations. Their fight for survival spurs a much-needed reflection on the meaning of freedom and on the legitimate means to achieve it.

2.2. Terrorism and Self-Terrorism

Oryx and Crake deals with terrorism in many ways. Critics have often commented it as a post 9/11 novel, a label that Atwood finds narrow and inadequate because she started writing the novel months before the Twin Towers attack. She believes that her writing was influenced by the «twentieth and twenty-first century zeitgeist»[71] and underlines that, leaving aside 9/11, the whole world both in fiction and in history has been the stage of «a definite tip-over into a darker view of sudden attempts to change everything around»[72]. When the American Airlines and United Airlines aircrafts crashed into the Twin Towers, Margaret Atwood was at the airport in Toronto, ready to leave for the promotion tour of *The Blind Assassin*:

> I was sitting in the Toronto airport, daydreaming about Part 8 [of Oryx and Crake]. In ten minutes my flight would be called. An old friend of mine came over and said, “We're not flying”. “What do you mean?”, I said. “Come and look at the television”, he replied. It was September 11.[73]

[70] Ibidem.

[71] Margaret Atwood with Martin Halliwell, “Awaiting the Perfect Storm”, in Earl G. Ingersoll (ed), *Conversations*, pp. 253-264, p. 257.

[72] Ibidem.

[73] Margaret Atwood, “Writing *Oryx and Crake*, p. 329.

In this sense, she was a close observer of the momentous events in the United States and she was clearly influenced by the attacks in New York and the Pentagon in the development of *Oryx and Crake*.

2.2.1. A brief history of the term and of the Canadian experience

As a term, "terrorism" comes slightly later than "terrorist" and the etymology of both is related to the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "terrorism" as the «unofficial or unauthorized use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims [and] in order to maintain […] control over a population»[74]. The definition of "terrorist" clarifies that such person is usually «a member of a clandestine or expatriate organization aiming to coerce an established government by acts of violence against it or its subjects»[75]. It is relevant to note that, while the term was originally used in reference to a government or ruling group like the Jacobin Republic, the semantic field of "terrorism" slightly shifted to identify undercover organizations and individuals fighting against a government or ruling group.

In the late nineteenth century, terrorism became almost a synonym of anarchist terrorism, which was inspired by anarchist ideas: for example, the assassination of Russian Tzar Aleksander II enacted by the Russian group Narodnaya Volya in 1881 and the bombing of Greenwich Observatory in London by French anarchist Martial Bourdin in 1894. This last case inspired Joseph Conrad for *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (1907), a novel that Atwood mentions as one of the fictional predecessors of *Oryx and Crake*[76].

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[74] "terrorism, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Accessed October 2nd 2015.
[75] "terrorist, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Last access October 2nd 2015.
[76] Interview with Coates Bateman, *Boldtype* 6.12 (May 2003),

Canada too has been a setting of different forms of terrorism in the twentieth century[77]. In the 1940s, a sort of state terrorism was enacted on Canadian citizens who were suspected of being spies and traitors to their country for the cause of Soviet Communism: they were detained without being arrested under criminal charges and brought before a secret tribunal without legal representation. Of these people, those who incriminated themselves, often under intimidation, were found guilty in court. Those who resisted were mainly acquitted but were denied further employment with the government. The obvious comparison is with McCarthysm in the United States, with secrecy as the main difference between the two Countries' attitudes. While McCarthy's "witch hunt" in Hollywood was a publicly debated affair, the Canadian government denied both purge and the victims received neither notoriety nor public rehabilitation later.

In 1970, *Le Front du Libération du Québec*, a violent separatist group, kidnapped the British Trade Commissioner James Crossed and kidnapped and murdered the Quebec Minister of Labour Pierre Laporte. The Government responded to this terrorist crisis by placing Quebec under a state of martial law that violated liberal democracy but at the same time, together with the rise of the peaceful *Parti Québécuois*, led to the eradication of the terrorist tendency of the separatist movement. In this occasion, Canada could stop terrorism because the terrorist movement was crushed at an early stage, before repression could elicit popular upsurge – as with the IRA among the Catholic population of Northern Ireland; and because the population, that found in the peaceful *Parti Québécois* a preferable channel to express sovereigntist sentiments, condemned the murder of Laport.

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https://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0503/atwood/interview.html. Last access August 11th 2015.

[77] See Reg Whitaker, "Keeping Up with the Neighbours. Canadian Responses to 9/11 in Historical and Comparative Context", *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 41.2/3 (2003): pp.241-265.

In 1985, an Air India Flight took off from Montreal and exploded over the Atlantic before it could reach its destination in London. The bombers were mostly Canadian residents and supporters of a Sikh terrorist group. Atwood, as a Canadian citizen, certainly recalled this tragic event when the World Trade Center was attacked and parts of *Oryx and Crake* testifies it:

> *Remember when you could drive anywhere? Remember when everyone lived in the pleeblands? Remember when you could fly anywhere in the world, without fear? […] Remember before New York was New New York? Remember when voting mattered? […] Oh it was all so great once.*[78]

This excerpt certainly refers to the 9/11 aircraft hijacking, but also to the bombing of the Air India Flight 182 from Montreal on June 23rd 1985.

The relationship with the United States is crucial for Canadian politics and 9/11 obviously had a huge impact on Canada, which reacted carrying out a war on two fronts. On the one hand, Canada publicly supported the war on terror to fulfill its obligation towards its powerful neighbor and reassure its citizens that their security was protected. On the other hand, Canada's contribution was an action of damage limitation that is not related to terrorism *per se*, but to the potential economic harm that USA could cause on Canada. With regard to the War on Terror, it is appropriate to note that during World War II, Canada carried out extreme measures against Japanese Canadian citizens, because they were considered as potential threats in the conflict against Japan and were consequently removed from their homes and deported in internment camps far from the Pacific Coast. A parallel can be drawn between such measures and those taken by the United States in reaction to post-9/11 threats of terrorism, like racial profiling and religious targeting.

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[78] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 63.

Margaret Atwood addressed the issue of Canadian-American relations on a number of occasions and, especially in relation to the United States' national and international policy in reaction to 9/11, she acknowledges her strong personal and cultural connections while criticizing the American strategy against terrorism. In a way, her biography is very representative of her Canadian identity as deeply connected to the United States and she tackles this subject in a crucial "Letter to America"[79], in which she addresses the issue of US policy in reaction to 9/11 from a foreign, but still very close, perspective. It is an important text to analyze in relation to the issue of terrorism in general and to the employment of power as it is described in O*ryx and Crake*.

2.2.2. Atwood on terrorism: "Letter to America"

The letter is written in a subjective, personal, and almost intimate tone. She personifies America and addresses it directly, using first and second persons "I", "we", and "you": «Dear America: This is a difficult letter to write, because I'm no longer sure who you are. Some of you may be having the same trouble»[80]. It was published on March 27th 2003, just a week after the American invasion of Iraq and a week before the fall of Baghdad. Atwood admits being highly disappointed by the recent escalation of events, but she acknowledges her strong bonds, both national and personal, with the United States and her tone remains diplomatic and intimate at the same time.

Atwood then lists the positive things that America is known for, such as movies, literature, social and moral values – a *captatio benevolentiae* that

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[79] Margaret Atwood, "Letter to America", in *The Nation*, March 27th 2003. http://www.thenation.com/article/letter-america-3. Last access August 10th 2015.
[80] Ivi.

creates an ironic contrast with the subsequent parts of the letter. For example, she mentions

> Thoreau, father of environmentalism, witness to individual conscience; and Walt Whitman, singer of the great Republic; and Emily Dickinson, keeper of the private soul [and] Sinclair Lewis and Arthur Miller, who, with their own American idealism, went after the sham in you, because they thought you could do better.[81]

She celebrates the values of freedom, honesty, and justice, but soon identifies in the ideology of capitalistic economy and in the ruthless pursuit of money the slippery slope on which the morality of the United States has been treading:

> You put God on the money, though, even then. You had a way of thinking that the things of Caesar were the same as the things of God: That gave you self-confidence. You have always wanted to be a city upon a hill, a light to all nations, and for a while you were. Give me your tired, your poor, you sang, and for a while you meant it[82].

The discourse on the American values and their contradictions is thoroughly felt and personally experienced by Atwood, who studied at Harvard with Perry Miller, a renowned scholar of American Puritanism to which she had dedicated her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, whose setting was clearly inspired by Cambridge and Massachusetts. The novel is dedicated also to Mary Webster, an ancestor of Atwood's, who was accused of witchcraft in the 1680s in Puritan Connecticut[83]. The praise to the United States is not just a

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[81] Ivi.

[82] Ivi.

[83] Atwood's American and Puritan profile includes the influential minister Cotton Mather's report on the case of Mary Webster, Atwood's ancestor who was hanged on a tree, survived the entire night she was left there, and lived other fourteen years afterwards. Atwood recalled her in many occasions and wrote a poem, *Half-Hanged Mary* (1995), in her honour. See Rosemary Sullivan, *The Red Shoes. Margaret Atwood Starting Out*, p. 14.

way to catch the attention and the sympathy of the American readers then, and even the contradictions that Atwood highlights are represented as part of her own culture and history.

These personal remarks introduce a more specific reflection on the relationship between the United States and Canada:

> We've always been close, you and us. History, that old entangler, has twisted us together since the early seventeenth century. Some of us used to be you; some of us want to be you; some of you used to be us. You are not only our neighbors: In many cases – mine, for instance – you are also our blood relations, our colleagues and our personal friends. But although we've had a ringside seat, we've never understood you completely, up here north of the 49th parallel[84].

The intimate tone is maintained throughout the letter and Atwood foregrounds the inextricable bond with the United States to make her criticism more effective. Hers is a position of liminality: being Canadian, she can see American affairs from outside the American border, but she is at the same time an insider, close enough to be in the position of giving a positively interested advice to her powerful neighbors.

The first person narration is a strategy that she employs to put herself in a one-to-one relationship with the United States and to avert the risk of playing the role of the enemy. She keeps a humble profile and admits her own shortcomings. «What can I tell you about yourself that you don't already know?»[85], she asks, and admits her reluctance to address unpleasant topics, such as the war on terrorism. While criticizing the American way of dealing with international crises, she recognizes her own weaknesses as a Canadian, her «inclination [to] keep your mouth shut, mind your own business»[86], only

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[84] Margaret Atwood, "Letter to America".

[85] Ivi.

[86] Ivi.

to realize that humankind is everyone's business. In order to come to terms with this conundrum, she avoids the direct subject of the war in Iraq, that she defines as «an ill-advised tactical error»[87], but instead chooses to foreground what this policy is doing to the American people: «By the time you read this, Baghdad may or may not be a pancake, and many more sheep entrails will have been examined. Let's talk, then, not about what you're doing to other people but about what you're doing to yourselves»[88].

Other three paragraphs follow in which Atwood addresses the American people in the second person and, with a very simple, short, and straight syntax, she lists all the negative features that have determined the downhill fall of the United States, by grouping them under the issues of politics, economy, global justice or equity. In order to make her message clear, she uses a strong language in this significant paragraph:

> You're gutting the Constitution. Already your home can be entered without your knowledge or permission, you can be snatched away and incarcerated without cause, your mail can be spied on, your private records searched. Why isn't this a recipe for widespread business theft, political intimidation and fraud? I know you've been told that all this is for your own safety and protection, but think about it for a minute. Anyway, when did you get so scared? You didn't used to be easily frightened[89].

Protection and safety at the expense of privacy and freedom are here depicted as the necessary exchange functioning as an antidote to terror. There is an excerpt from the second chapter of Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* which resonates here, along with the ironic tone that runs through the novel: «Protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury. They had to be

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[87] Ivi.

[88] Ivi.

[89] Ivi.

protected; and their horses, carriages, houses, servants had to be protected; and the source of their wealth had to be protected in the heart of the city and the heart of the country»[90]. For the United States to remain the land of wealth, power needs to be performed and severe control has to be practiced on the American citizens and on any possible form of antagonism and of resistance to the official order.

Economy is one of the main threads that constitute the web of power in which society is entangled and Atwood warns the American people about the risks related to their growing debt. She dedicated an entire non-fiction book, which was later adapted as a documentary, to the nature of debt from a financial, cultural, and ecological point of view[91]. If economy is one of the pillars of American society, military intervention is as much fundamental, but Atwood warns that the current situation might unhinge the stability of the whole structure: «You're running up a record level of debt. Keep spending at this rate and pretty soon you won't be able to afford any big military adventures»[92]. At this point, either the United States give up their military enterprises in Iraq and elsewhere, or the comfort to which American pampered citizens are used to is imperiled: «lots of tanks, but no air conditioning. That will make folks very cross. They'll be even crosser when they can't take a shower because your short-sighted bulldozing of environmental protections has dirtied most of the water and dried up the rest. Then things will get hot and dirty indeed»[93].

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[90] Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (1907), edited by Bruce Harkness and S. W. Reid, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 15.

[91] Margaret Atwood, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, Toronto: House of Anansi, 2008. *Payback*, directed by Jennifer Baichwal, National Film Board of Canada, 2012.

[92] Margaret Atwood, "Letter to America".

[93] Ivi.

In *A Letter to America*, the main issues are politics, economy, and global justice, which Atwood reworks and dramatizes in *Oryx and Crake*. She closes the letter with a warning: «If you proceed much further down the slippery slope, people around the world will stop admiring the good things about you. They'll decide that your city upon the hill is a slum and your democracy is a sham, and therefore you have no business trying to impose your sullied vision on them»[94]. At a first glance, terrorism is not the main topic but only the trigger for a war that is fought far away from home in a Middle-Eastern country. However, Atwood's aim is to show that, as victim of a disastrous terrorist act like the Twin Towers attack, the American people have relinquished their freedom and consequently abdicated from the responsibility to preserve it. Ultimately, the American people have become, in Atwood's view, the victim of a continuous state of self-inflicted terrorism.

2.2.3. Terrorism in *Oryx and Crake*: the (absent) mother as terrorist

This is the reason why the Letter is an insightful introduction to the theme of terrorism in *Oryx and Crake* and in the whole MaddAddam trilogy, because the same self-inflicted terrorism that grips the American people deceptively controls the secluded life of the residents of the Compounds. The narrator tells the story of a world ruled by anarchy and chaos that the terroristic groups defies by trying to challenge the tyrannically consumeristic society of the Compounds. However strong and determined the protests might be, they don't reach any political body because the multinational corporations have taken over political power, thus giving a new and disturbing meaning to the claim that consumers vote with their wallets.

[94] Ivi.

As there is no election, the only choice that citizens are allowed to express is related to the products they choose to buy and, as a consequence, any political message is simply ignored or absorbed in the advertising system. Atwood depicts this paradox by showing how even the protesters become complicit with the show of commercials and consumerism, as proved by the so-called Boston Coffee Party, a protest against the coffee multinational corporation:

> in the United States, a Boston Coffee Party sprang up. There was a staged media event, boring because there was no violence – only balding guys with retro tattoos or white patches where they'd been taken off, and severe-looking baggy-boobed women, and quite a few overweight or spindly members of marginal, earnest religious groups, in T-shirts with smiley faced angels flying with birds or Jesus holding hands with a peasant or God Is Green on the front.[95]

Since there is no political authority, every act of rebellion that goes public is integrated in an economical framework and becomes advertisement:

> They were filmed dumping Happicuppa products into the harbour, but none of the boxes sank. So there was the Happicuppa logo, lots of copies of it, bobbing around on the screen. It could have been a commercial.
> "Makes me thirsty," said Jimmy.[96]

The reference to the Boston Tea Party, the political protest that triggered the American Revolution under the motto "no taxation without representation", is emblematic of the new political situation as opposed to that of North American colonies at the end of eighteenth century.

The mob actions against Happicuppa coffee is described as an intriguing TV show, and Jimmy and Glenn enjoy watching the news as if it

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[95] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 180.
[96] Ibidem.

were an action movie instead of a matter of political and social interest with tragic consequences on the life of many people:

> They probably would have gone back to interactives and state-sponsored snuff, and porn, as relaxation after their final exams, but that summer the gen-mod coffee wars got underway, so they watched those instead. The wars were over the new Happicuppa bean, developed by a HelthWyzer subsidiary. […] The resistance movement was global. Riots broke out, crops were burned, Happicuppa cafés were looted, Happicuppa personnel were car-bombed or kidnapped or shot by snipers or beaten to death by mobs; and, on the other side, peasants were massacred by the army.[97]

The description of Jimmy and Glenn's approach to it is comparable to their consumption of porn sites like HottTotts, as if they do not involve real lives and, most often, very real abuses. It is comparable also to another kind of website, like hedsoff.com, alibooboo.com, Shortcircuit.com, brainfrizz.com, and deathrowlive.com. They all involve violent death and executions, but they are set up like a stage and with the occasional accident to entertain the audience:

> The sponsors required them to put on a good show because otherwise people would get bored and turn off. The viewers wanted to see the executions, yes, but after a while these could get monotonous, so one last fighting chance had to be added in, or else an element of surprise. Two to one it was all rehearsed.[98]

The confusion on what is *real* and what is *false* makes Jimmy and Glenn incapable of understanding tragic events as they are, in compliance to the corporations' strategy to minimize the relevance of dissent. The anti-Happicuppa actions escalate in a terroristic bombing of the Lincoln Memorial, in which five Japanese schoolkids are killed, but its consequences in the public

[97] Ivi, p. 179.
[98] Ivi, p. 83.

opinion are non-existent. As the protest switches to actual terrorism, Jimmy is brutally brought back to reality and catches sight of his vanished mother, who had left the family years before because she refused to be complicit with the Corporations. She joins the God's Gardeners but her disappearance had remained a mystery until that moment:

> Love jolted through him, abrupt and painful, followed by anger. It was like being kicked: he must have let out a gasp. Then there was a CorpSeCorps charge and a cloud of tear gas and a smattering of what sounded like gunfire, and when Jimmy looked again his mother had disappeared.[99]

The missing mother is the second crucial feminine character of the novel, as underlined by the epigraph from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927): «Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air?»[100]. This excerpt depicts the moment when Lily Briscoe accepts the loss of the archetypal mother figure, establishes a connection with her inner emotions and liberates them in order to become a true artist. Jimmy too is traumatized by the loss of his mother, but the overlapping of facts and fiction and the incapability to read events correctly, makes it difficult for him to elaborate the trauma. Maternal figures are often atypical in Atwood's writing and the author's biography reveals the presence of very strong female model. The already mentioned Mary Webster, Atwood's maternal aunts, and of her unconventional mother, who camped with her children in the bush during her husband's research missions as an entomologist, are not negative

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[99] Ivi, p. 181.

[100] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. ix.

models, but they provide the models for the problematization of the maternal role in Atwood's fiction[101].

The mother-child relationship is an early interest of Atwood's, who wrote about pregnancies and feelings of inadequacy for motherhood in most of her novels, starting from *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Surfacing*. One of the most enduring images in the development of Atwood's writings is, as J. Brooks Bouson calls it, «the bad unempathic mother»:

> Atwood's narratives set out both to expose and fictively redress the wrongs done to women. One of the targets for fictive punishment in Atwood's art is the bad mother, who acts as a guardian and enforcer of the patriarchal codes that confine and injure women.[102]

Mothers are also scapesgoats for what goes wrong in the child's life, as is the case in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but the MaddAddam trilogy displays yet another evolution of the mother figure, which is the absent mother.

In O*ryx and Crake*, the mothers of the three main characters, Oryx, Crake, and Jimmy, are all far away or absent. Oryx's mother sold her and his brother to the child exploiter that takes them from their remote village to thee big city. Oryx takes this double sale as «evidence that her mother had loved her. She had no images of this love. She could offer no anecdotes. It was a belief rather than a memory»[103]. The impalpable nature of such love accompanies Oryx «through the jungle in the form of a bird so she would not be too

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[101] See Margaret Atwood, "Great Aunts", in Carolyn Anthony (ed), *Family portraits: remembrances by Twenty Distinguished Writers*, New York: Doubleday, 1989, pp. 4-5; Margaret Atwood, "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother", in Joyce Carol Oates and Janet Berliner (eds), *Snapshots: 20th Century Mother Daughter Fiction*, Boston: David R. Godine, 2000, pp. 24-38; Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, pp. 43-44; Rosemary Sullivan, *The Red Shoes. Margaret Atwood Starting Out*, pp. 20, 28, 37, 38, 184.

[102] J. Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, p. 11.

[103] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 121.

frightened or lonely»[104], but remains an expression of the child's imagination that can never be corroborated.

Glenn's mother is «an intense, square-jawed, dark-haired woman with not much of a chest [who is] out a lot, or in a hurry»[105]. She is very detached from her role as a mother and her faded presence in Glenn's life is actualized through her death. She is victim of a suspicious accident, which is more likely a sabotage instead, at her hospital and picks up a transgenic bacterium that «chew[s] through her like a solar mower»[106]. Crake watches her dissolve to death in a mechanized isolation room and, when a digital failure in the mike system prevents him from hearing her last words, he reacts to her tragic passing with apathy and dark humour: «though he could see her lips moving, he couldn't hear what she was saying. "Otherwise put, just like daily life," said Crake»[107].

Jimmy's mother abandons him as an act of resistance to the «immoral […] and sacrilegious [experiments that are] interfering with the building blocks of life»[108], which Jimmy's father carries out in the Corporation. She tries to instill her thinking and morality in her son, but her efforts with Jimmy's education are too weak, with the only exception of the liberation of his female pet Killer. Killer is a rakunk, a hybrid mix between a skunk and a racoon, and can be seen as a reference to the female puma of H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896)[109]. The liberation of Killer, that Jimmy's mother justifies

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[104] Ivi, p. 126.
[105] Ivi, p. 88.
[106] Ivi, p. 176.
[107] Ivi, p. 177.
[108] Ivi, p. 57.
[109] Jimmy fears that Killer would be tore «into furry black and white pieces» (Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 61), like the «gnawed and mutilated body of the puma» (H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau: a Variorum Text* (1896). Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993, p. 69). However, while Moreau fails in conquering the puma and both the scientist and

because «she will be happier living a wild, free life in the forest»[110], contributes to the construction of the image of the missing mother as a liberationist or as a terrorist, for the cause of animal liberation in this case[111]. In Jimmy's mind, she is «a mythical being, something that transcended the human, with dark wings and eyes that burned like Justice, and a sword»[112]. In spite of her blatant shortcomings as a mother and her failure as a freedom fighter[113], Jimmy has an iconic image of her, «looking out the window and smoking. The bathrobe was magenta, a colour that still makes him anxious whenever he sees it»[114]. Such icon becomes all the more powerful as a presence *in absentia*, a ghost that haunts Jimmy and causes the elusive attitude that he develops with all the women in his life:

> On a hook her dressing gown is hanging, magenta, empty, frightening. He wakes with his heart pounding. He remembers now that after she'd left he'd put it on, that dressing gown. It still smelled of her, of the jasmine-based perfume she used to wear. He'd looked at himself in the mirror, his boy's head with its cool practised fish-eye stare topping a neck that led down into that swaddling of female-coloured fabric. How much he'd hated her at that moment. He could hardly breathe, he'd been

the animal die in the struggle, the rakunk is the evidence that Moreau's legacy has succeeded in creating a tame animal hybrid.

[110] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 61.

[111] There is a direct reference to animal liberation activism as a terrorist threat in *Oryx and Crake*, when Crake mistakes the MaddAddam group for «just another crazy Animal Liberation org» (Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 217). It is a matter of fact that environmentalist and animal rights groups are considered as a serious domestic terrorist threat by the United States of America (see the testimony of John E. Lewis, Deputy Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau Investigation, before the Senate Judiciary Committee on May 18th 2004. https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/animal-rights-extremism-and-ecoterrorism. Last access October 5th 2015.

[112] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 191.

[113] The Oxford English Dictionary lists the term "freedom fighter" as a non-derogatory synonym for "terrorist". See "terrorist, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Accessed October 2nd 2015.

[114] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 31.

> suffocating with hatred, tears of hatred had been rolling down his cheeks. But he'd hugged his arms around himself all the same.
> Her arms.[115]

The absence of Jimmy's mother allows the Corporations to perform power by blurring the boundaries between reality and reality shows. The Corpsmen make terroristic attacks an active part of the rehearsal and Jimmy is confronted with the execution of his own mother: «A riot scene Jimmy recognized from a movie remake of Frankenstein. They always put in a few tricks like that to keep him on his toes. […] Then came what looked like a routine execution»[116], just like the many others he had seen online. However, for the second time in his life, a woman looks right at him through the camera and breaks the false narrative that surrounds him. This time it is not Oryx but his mother, refusing to be a victim even on the moment she is executed: «a blue-eyed look, direct, defiant, patient, wounded. But no tears. […] No question, it was his mother»[117]. Yet, he cannot resist the impulse to question what is in front of his eyes: «What if the whole thing was a fake? It could even have been digital, at least the shots, the spurts of blood, the falling down. Maybe his mother was still alive, maybe she was even still at large»[118].

The response of the Corporations against terrorism goes much deeper in the citizens' subconscious than the few bombings and demonstrations carried out by their opponents. The ambiguity that surrounds such events and the blurred boundaries between facts and fictions makes it impossible to articulate a story that can be trusted and, consequently, to take responsibility for the events themselves. The role of the narration is crucial because it is the

[115] Ivi, p. 277.
[116] Ivi, p. 257-258.
[117] Ivi, p. 258.
[118] Ivi, p. 259.

space in which power is performed and gaining control over it is pivotal in subverting the role of winners and victims. The terroristic acts, the protests, and the executions are all presented as parodies because they are described and staged as imitations of actual events, but such farces foster an ironic critical distancing in the reader, that is brought to a deeper level of reflection on the narrated events.

2.3. Resistance through Parody

The all-changing women of *Oryx and Crake* are an expression of Atwood's interest for transformation and metamorphosis, which have been crucial in her writings since her first self-published poetry collection *Double Persephone* (1961) which, as the title suggests, displays a rebirth of the goddess of the underworld in Greek mythology. In the very first poem of the collection, "Formal Garden", «a girl with the gorgon touch»[119] initiates Atwood's long commitment to the myth of Medusa, which she reworks and rewrites many times and of which Oryx is only one of the most recent specimens. She ascribes her interest for metamorphosis to her biologist father and to the readings that she did as a child:

> My interest in metamorphosis may have come from *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. People are always having rebirths there. The culture is permeated with rebirth symbolism. It's Christian, among other things. And it's an idea that is very much around. If I were in India, they would say, Do you believe in metamorphosis? Do you believe in metempsychosis, do you believe in the transmigration of souls? But it seems to have been a

[119] Margaret Atwood, "Formal Garden", in *Double Persephone*, Toronto: Hawkshead Press, 1961.

> concept in one form or another that has been run through the sausage machine by many different human cultures.[120]

More importantly, she acknowledges that metamorphosis is at the very center of the structure of any novel:

> the [central characters] learn something or they become something more, or they become something less, but they always change. They are not the same at the end as they were at the beginning. If you did write a novel in which they were exactly the same, you would probably find it either terribly experimental or terribly boring or possibly both.[121]

The relevance of metamorphosis as an imaginative tool in Atwood's literary corpus is manifest in the many hybrid animals that dwell in the MaddAddam world and a later chapter of this dissertation is devoted to the subject. However, it is appropriate to mention it here as a premise to the analysis of irony, satire, and parody in the trilogy.

2.3.1. The critical debate on irony, satire, and parody

I engage with the critical debate on irony, satire, and parody starting from the premise that they all involve a textual metamorphosis that Atwood employs to interrogate the text and involve the reader in an intratextual, extratextual, and intertextual dialogue. I mainly refer to Linda Hutcheon's studies for her perspective on the «conjunction of irony and politics in the kind of art and literature that pushes at the edges of Canadian social and cultural expectations»[122]. I also question whether the assumption that she derives from Northrop Frye's implicit assertion that «satire is social in intent, parody

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[120] Margaret Atwood with Jo Brans, "Using What You Are Given", in Earl G. Ingersoll (ed), *Conversations*, p. 147.

[121] Ibidem.

[122] Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images. Contemporary Canadian Ironies*, Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. viii.

formal»[123] is valid in relation to the MaddAddam trilogy. In order to provide a very brief introduction on such a vast field, I borrow Clive Thomson's words in his article "Parody/Genre/Ideology": «Irony is situated in a mocking ethos, satire in a scornful ethos and parody in an unmarked ethos which, potentially, can be playful, respectful or contesting. […] Ultimately, irony is an intra-textual phenomenon, satire is extratextual and parody is intertextual»[124].

Hutcheon's analysis of irony relates to Margaret Atwood's approach to literature and power structures in a peculiarly meaningful way. As Hutcheon writes,

> Unlike metaphor or allegory, which demand similar supplementing of meaning, irony has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who "get" it and those who don't, as well as in its targets and in what some people call its "victims." This is where the politics of irony get heated.[125]

While the main investigation is focussed on irony as a discursive practice, the Canadian literary critic acknowledges that irony involves relations of power in the act of communication, which makes her approach the most adequate to analyze the MaddAddam trilogy. Irony is the rhetorical strategy on which both parody and satire rely and it has two functions – semantic inversion and pragmatic evaluation. The pragmatic evaluation signals the frequently pejorative evaluation of the object of irony and the semantic inversion deploys a manifest praise to hide latent mocking blame[126].

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[123] Linda Hutcheon, "Parody Without Ridicule: Observations on Modern Literary Parody", in *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, Spring 1978, pp. 201-211, p. 204.

[124] Clive Thomson, "Parody/Genre/Ideology", in Pierre B. Gobin (eds), *La singe à la porte: Vers une théorie de la parodie*, New York: Peter Lang, 1985, pp. 95-103, p. 97.

[125] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 2.

[126] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art* (1985), Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. 53.

If irony is a structural relation between two statements, parody circumscribes the structural relation between two texts. The complex etymology of the term[127] involves the idea of a song in imitation of or contraposition to another, a concept that is reworked in Samuel Johnson's definition of parody as «a kind of writing, in which the words of an author or his thoughts are taken, and by a slight change adapted to some new purpose»[128]. There is no mention yet to the humorous or scornful effect that parody often evokes, but that Gérard Genette upholds in his *Palimpsests* (1982) identifying parody as a genre fulfilling a satirical function[129]. The Oxford English Dictionary highlights this interpretation of parody by defining it as a «a composition in which the characteristic style and themes of a particular author or genre are satirized by being applied to inappropriate or unlikely subjects, or are otherwise exaggerated for comic effect»[130].

Of all the different theories and definitions that have been advanced about literary parody, there are certain constant elements: a text that refers to and imitates either the form or the content of another text. The intended effect on the reader varies hugely and the comic or degrading effect is only one possibility among many others, mainly due to the relation that some critics have tighten between parody and satire. In spite of the mimic element that characterizes parody, Hutcheon defines it as «a form of repetition with ironic

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[127] See Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 6-19.

[128] Samuel Johnson, quoted in Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 36.

[129] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au second degré* (1982), English translation by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p. 24.

[130] "parody, n.2." OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Accessed on August 31st 2015.

critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity»[131]. That difference is the space in which parody spurs a reflection on power relations and advances ideas of change. Hutcheon identifies a powerful transformational element in the relationship of the parodying text with parodied texts and in its combination with satire and underlines that many writers, especially women[132], have «used parody as the disarming but effective literary vehicle for social satire»[133]. Margaret Atwood is certainly aware of this tradition and uses it to engage with the reader and to stimulate a reflection on society.

Atwood thinks of her writing as «closer to caricature than satire – distortion rather than scathing attack – and […] largely realism»[134]. The close observation of reality leads the author to caricaturize those aspects that she believes to be problematic in order to call for a change, thus putting her writing in line with the wave of authors that, from the 1950s on, inaugurated the literary current of social science fiction[135]. Far from the detached and escapist side of the science fiction of the 1930s and 1940s, such authors as Frederick Pohl, Philip K. Dick, Ray Bradbury ascribe an authentic moral force to science fiction, by arguing against American society through the Swiftian vehicle of satire and irony[136]. More recently, Kurt Vonnegut attributed a strong and authentic moral impulse to his texts, and his writings are particularly akin to Atwood's in themes and satirical style. Vonnegut's novel *Galápagos* (1985), for

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[131] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art*, p. xxii.

[132] Hutcheon elaborates on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's pivotal work of feminist criticism *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and mentions Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Emily and Charlotte Brönte as authors that make this liberating use of parodic satire.

[133] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 44.

[134] Margaret Atwood with Linda Sandler, "A Question of Metamorphosis", in Earl G. Ingersoll (ed), *Conversations*, pp. 40-57, pp. 54-55.

[135] See Carlo Pagetti, "La fantascienza come satira e utopia negativa", in *Il Senso del Futuro. La Fantascienza nella Letteratura Americana*, pp. 213-236.

[136]Ivi, p. 214.

example, addresses with a satirical tone the issue of a global disaster and the subsequent survival of the human species from an evolutionary perspective.

This wave of science fiction authors refers to Jonathan Swift, one of the archetypal authors of the genre, whose satirical and ironic wit is also employed in critical utopias that use caricature and humor to articulate a process of social change. While Atwood seems to distance herself from unsparing satire, the MaddAddam trilogy is definitely Swiftian in its polemic depiction of capitalistic and technomaniac society. Along with Jonathan Swift, the influence of George Orwell's writings on Atwood has already been mentioned as crucial. Atwood acknowledges her debt to Orwell in her essay "George Orwell: Some Personal Connections"[137] (2003) and to Swift in "Of the Madness of Mad Scientists: Jonathan Swift's Grand Academy"[138] (2010) and "Ten Ways of Looking at *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by H.G. Wells"[139] (2005). There clearly is a strong bond that ties the three authors, which is strengthened by George Orwell's imaginary interview to Jonathan Swift, broadcasted on the BBC in 1942[140].

Defined as «[any] work of art which uses humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize prevailing immorality or foolishness, esp. as a form of social or political commentary»[141], satire has one of its best representative texts in Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729). The pamphlet

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[137] Margaret Atwood, "George Orwell: Some Personal Connections", in *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, pp. 141-149.

[138] Margaret Atwood, "Of the Madness of Mad Scientists: Jonathan Swift's Grand Academy", in *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, pp. 194-211.

[139] Margaret Atwood, "Ten Ways of Looking at *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by H.G. Wells", in *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, pp. 150-167.

[140] George Orwell, "Jonathan Swift, an Imaginary Interview", in Carlo Pagetti, *Il Diario e il Microfono: il Pianeta di George Orwell*, Torino: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1994, pp.73-79.

[141] "satire, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Accessed on September 3rd 2015.

is a demonstration of how irony, parody, and satire can fully overlap and of how, as Hutcheon maintains, the goal is not idle and scornful ridicule, but the identification of the paradoxes of society that need to be corrected. Moreover, Atwood ties Swift's satire to literary utopia, thus tying an additional bond between *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and *Oryx and Crake*:

> In Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* the utopias are comic and satirical, but they are similarly located on islands, each of which is provided with a realistic-looking map by the fictional wandering and tale-teling sailor, Lemuel Gulliver – in the tradition of an earlier sea captain and an earlier map, those in More's *Utopia.*[142]

In light of this, the epigraph from Swift's *Gulliver Travels* (1726) at the beginning of *Oryx and Crake* acquires an even more important value: «I could perhaps like others have astonished you with strange improbable tales; but I rather chose to relate plain matter of fact in the simplest manner and style; because my principal design was to inform you, and not to amuse you»[143].

2.3.2. A parody of science

Oryx and Crake begins with an epigraph from a text that parodies popular travel narratives while satirizing the blind optimism of the Enlightenment and of the whole rhetoric of discovery and scientific progress. The MaddAddam trilogy can be interpreted as a parody of science fiction and a satire of the same rhetoric of scientific progress. Drawing on Darko Suvin's theory of science fiction as based on cognitive estrangement and the *novum*, we can trace the lines along which Atwood builds the parody. Estrangement is achieved through the representation of a futuristic society that is uncannily similar to

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[142] Margaret Atwood, "Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia", in *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, pp. 66-96, p. 69.
[143] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. vii.

the reader's own society and that brings about a reflection on what really differentiates the two. The scientific progresses that are at the core of the plot represent the *novum* that characterizes science fiction: the *sus multiorganifer*, popularly known as pigoon, that provides «assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host»[144]; the ChickieNobs, chicken breasts connected to one single head whose function is only to regulate digestion, assimilation, and growth [145]; Happicuppa coffee, the GMO beans that ripen simultaneously and can be picked up by machines; cryogenics applied to post-mortem preservation.

However, Atwood stresses the point that all these scientific projects already potentially exist in the contemporary developments of science, sometimes even at an advanced stage, as the many research files collected in the Atwood Papers at the Thomas Fisher Library show[146]. Atwood makes a parody of science fiction, then, because there is nothing in it that has not been already studied or experimented and Atwood simply implements such scientific discoveries and technological application in everyday life. In doing so, she offers a satire of the posthuman dreams of immortality, genetic enhancement, and total control over nature that are a wide part of the scientific narrative[147]. While the scientific discourse becomes dangerously similar to that of religion, religion is not immune to parody either.

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[144] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 22.

[145] ChickieNobs are particularly interesting to analyze, because they represent not only the search for economic profit. The researchers that engineer these machine-animals also want to make sure that the ChickieNobs are more ethically acceptable than traditional intensive farming: «And the animal-welfare freaks won't be able to say a word, because this thing feels no pain», Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 203.

[146] See Margaret Atwood Papers, MS Coll 335, boxes 108, 111.

[147] See Bill McKibben, *Enough. Staying Human in an Engineered Age*, New York: Times Books, 2003.

The MaddAddam trilogy is best read as a re-elaborated version of past myths that tells us about current social, political, and ecological issues. The creation myth in *Oryx and Crake* is a mocking Bible that Snowman tells the Children of Crake. In his role as a prophet, he fabricates a religion in which Crake is the father[148] and embodies reason, while Oryx is the mother and embodies instincts. Like in the Bible, there is a divide between the creation of the human-like Children of Crake, made out of the flesh of a mango, and the creation of animals:

> *The Children of Oryx, the Children of Crake. He'd had to think of something. Get your story straight, keep it simple, don't falter: this used to be the expert advice given by lawyers to criminals in the dock. Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk*[149].

In Snowman's cosmogony, the Children of Crake seem to come out of thin air, they are creatures that come out directly from Crake's mind and expertise with no biological activity involved in the process. They live the first part of their life in an egg-shaped edifice – the Paradice dome[150] – which is artificial, non-biological: «[t]hey were perfectly adjusted to their habitat, so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons, or, for that matter, clothing»[151]. On

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[148] While the maternal figures are peculiarly far away or absent, the shared characteristic of fathers in Oryx and Crake is that they are scientists, like Atwood's own father, working for the Corporations.

[149] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 96.

[150] The word is a play on words – the composition of the words "paradise" and "dice" – that highlight the signals the randomness that plays a big part even in the most refined scientific project.

[151] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 305.

the other hand, Oryx represents the archetypical mother that gives birth through nature and whose Children – the animals – are deprived of words by the Children of Crake who, in spite of their supposedly intrinsically peaceful nature, are described by Snowman as human-like predators in this instance.

The creation myth that Snowman makes up for the Crakers comes after the actual creation that Crake had in mind when he was working on the Paradice project. It is a paradoxical creation myth, in which the new humanoid population is devoid of all the features that, according to Crake, are responsible for human destructive behaviors against the ecosystems. Crake's unawareness that his creation is nothing but the latest re-elaboration of the myth of human perfectibility allows the reader to identify it as a parody. Even a mock immortality is achieved because the Crakers are «programmed to drop dead at age thirty – suddenly, without getting sick. No old age, none of those anxieties. They'll just keel over. Not that they know it; none of them has died yet»[152]. According to Crake, it is the foreknowledge of death the real point of separation between mortality and immortality, a quibble that allows him to define the Crakers as immortal.

They have been purged of all the «destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesse»[153]. Not only are they unable to destroy the environment, they are also unable to hurt each other:

> racism – or, as they referred to it in Paradice, pseudospeciation – had been eliminated […] merely by switching the bonding mechanism: the Paradice people simply did not register skin colour. Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it.[154]

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[152] Ivi, p. 303.
[153] Ivi, p. 305.
[154] Ivi, p. 305.

They mate seasonally and in groups, thus avoiding any quarrel and fight for reasons related to love or lust or to paternity. Moreover, they are perfectly "environmentally friendly" because they eat leaves and grass and they recycle their own feces: «you'd be surprised how many people would like a very beautiful, smart baby that eats nothing but grass. The vegans are highly interested in that little item. We've done our market research"»[155]. This excerpt is part of a dialogue that Marta Dvorak has analyzed as an example of travesty of the utopian tradition, which follows «a pattern of carnivalesque reversal produced by [Swiftian] double irony: verbal (involving the speaker's ironic intention) and structural (not intended by the persona but by the implied author)»[156]. Dvorak's assumptions on the carnivalesque quality of this dialogue can be extended to the whole trilogy, which often assumes the characteristic of a mock utopia.

The parody of the creation myth is obtained by forcing moral issues on natural laws or, in other words, by addressing a religious discourse with scientific language and tools. Crake's actions imply a reverse naturalistic fallacy, that is the false assumption that it is possible to appeal to nature to derive an ethical indication on what is good or bad[157], which Crake reverse in the assumption that it is possible to force nature, through science, to comply to ethical indications on what is good or bad. Crake's fallacy lies in the

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[155] Ibidem.

[156] Marta Dvorak, "Margaret Atwood's Humor", in Coral Ann Howells (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, pp. 114-129, p. 127.

[157] The concept of naturalistic fallacy was introduced by the British philosopher George Edward Moore in his *Principia Ethica*, published in 1903. An example of naturalistic fallacy is the assumption that infanticide is ethically good because some species practise it and/or draw pleasure from it and/or obtain an evolutionary advantage from it. See Tom Baldwin, "George Edward Moore", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2010 Edition, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/moore/. Last access October 6th 2015.

transition from a prescriptive statement or evaluative conclusion – the human species has morally wrong and factually destructive behaviors – to a descriptive statement or factual premise – a new human species should be devoid of such behaviors –, which is a reverse application of the *is-ought* problem[158]. Crake commits a reverse naturalistic fallacy when he erases from human nature what he deems to be wrong or evolutionarily disadvantageous and he paradoxically infers an *is*-proposition from an *ought*-proposition when he modifies nature to fit his own scientific theories[159]. While Moore and Hume articulate their arguments to warn the readers against mendacious interventions of falsely science-based ethics, Crake mendaciously intervenes on natural laws and tries to exterminate human beings to force what he believes to be the righteous course of evolution. In doing so, his cogitations and actions appears as a parody of both scientific and ethical discourses because he unconsciously engage with both but acts according to neither.

In this unconscious and unresolved dispute between ethics and science, Crake ends up playing the part of god, creating a new species, and «[s]itting in judgment on the world»[160]. The worst sin that he identifies in humankind relates to the ecological unsustainability of human lifestyles and behaviors, a point that he shares with the God's Gardeners. If Crake represent science, or

[158] Also known as Hume's law, the is-ought dichotomy was articulated by the Scottish philosopher David Hume in his A *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739). Inferring that, since the female body *is* compatible with childbirth (descriptive statement), every fertile woman *ought* to give birth and it is therefore ethically wrong if she doesn't (prescriptive statement), is an example of the often imperceptible but ethically momentous change from an *is*-proposition to an *ought*-proposition. See William Edward Morris and Charlotte R. Brown, "David Hume", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2015 Edition, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/hume/. Last access October 6th 2015.

[159] The issues of naturalistic fallacy and *is-ought* dichotomy are at the core of many debates on posthumanism. See Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2002, pp. 114-128.

[160] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 341.

its parody, the God's Gardeners represent religion. They certainly adopt different methods and reach different conclusions, but they clearly have the same preoccupations and they both try to reach ecological sustainability. For example, in Crake's Compound

> [e]verything 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. Rockulators took care of the microclimate, butterflies as big as plates drifted among the vividly coloured shrubs.[161]

When the virus spreads, the scientific and the religious plots seem to proceed in unison: «[c]onspiracy theories proliferated: it was a religious thing, it was God's Gardeners, it was a plot to gain world control».[162] What Atwood underlines through parody is that scientific and religious discourses can become alarmingly alike and she warns the reader that failing to see such analogy often leads to disastrous consequences. Narratives determine actions and being aware of where beliefs come from is necessary before any action is taken.

2.3.3. An entanglement of myths

Related to the creation myth is the Waterless Flood that the God's Gardeners foretells as the right punishment for the mistakes of the humankind against their fellow creatures. Their Christian based religion is founded on a strong suspicion of anything that come from technology and from heavily funded scientific projects: «We cannot know God by reason and measurement; indeed, excess reason and measurement lead to doubt»[163]. They have a holistic

[161] Ivi, p. 291.
[162] Ivi, p. 341.
[163] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 42.

approach and cultivate a traditional knowledge that strengthens a relationship of mutual support with nature. They mention the same ecological catastrophes that characterize the environmental literature of the 1960s and 1970s, like the nuclear holocaust, the exhaustion of resources, pollution, and famines: «Comets and nuclear holocausts are among the possible tomorrows, not to mention the Waterless Flood»[164].

The Waterless Flood is a re-elaboration of the many depurative floods that cross most world cultures and literatures, like the episode of the biblical deluge and the flood in the Epic of Gilgamesh, which cleanse and destroy the corrupted world to establish a new Garden of Eden. However, the ecological conditions have changed so much that the means of divine purification needs to change as well. Natural disasters and actual floods are not extraordinary events anymore in the MaddAddam worls and there is always «more plagues, more famines, more floods, more insect or microbe or small-mammal outbreaks, more droughts»[165]. Climate change and global warming have modified the geography of the Earth and entire states have disappeared, like Texas that «dried up and blew away»[166].

Crake has no faith in humanity and, to preserve the environment, decides to spread a plague to exterminate humanity, which he would replace with the new humanoid species he creates, who are genetically incapable of recreating the conditions that have caused the global environmental crisis. Ultimately, Crake and the God's Gardeners have the same purpose, they both want to get rid of deleterious attitudes toward the environment. Officially, they are on opposite sides of the barricade, but the Gardeners welcome the plague created by Crake. Since one more flood would not be perceived as an

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[164] Ibidem.

[165] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 253.

[166] Ivi, p. 244.

extraordinary event, the divine purification comes through the Waterless Flood, which is a parody of the flood narratives.

The parody of the Divine Deluge operates through «imitation characterized by ironic inversion» – as the Flood is Waterless – that according to Hutcheon «is not always at the expense of the parodied text [and], in another formulation, repetition with critical difference»[167]. The Flood does not come as water, but under the form of an overwhelming and relentless pandemic that, instead of criticizing the original Biblical source, it criticize present-day society and is represented as a right punishment: «it travelled through the air as if on wings, it burned through cities like fire, spreading germ-ridden mobs, terror, and butchery»[168]. Ironically, the long awaited Waterless Flood is caused not by God but by Crake, a representative member of the same multinational corporations that the Gardeners opposed.

There is an intratextual parody in the relation between Crake's view and the Gardeners' view, because the two opposing sides are like two mirrors facing each other, who imitate each other but with a significant critical difference. They both act to facilitate the solution to the problems that humankind caused, but they give a different value to the power of narration. Crake, as a representative member of the scientific community, despises art and is unable to include his project in a coherent narrative. On the other hand, the Gardeners acknowledge the power of narration and insert their ideas in a religion-based narrative that allows them to survive the catastrophe. Whether their religious beliefs are heartfelt is not the point, because it is the narrative, not God, that saves them.

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[167] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 6.

[168] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 20.

After the Waterless Flood, a sort of Garden of Eden is restored but, again, in the form of a parody, because anarchy and chaos have taken the place of the wrongdoings of the Corporations. Atwood mentions the Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch (1453-1516) as a source of inspiration on her ideas of metamorphosis and on the surreal literary and visual landscapes that she creates in MaddAddam before and after the catastrophe[169]. There is a painting in particular that appears frequently in Atwood's literary and visual works, which is Bosch's masterpiece "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (1504). The relevance of this reference lies in the interpretation of the painting as a satirical parody, because the Creation takes place in a monstrous setting, where the delights are so extreme and exaggerated that cannot be taken seriously. The painting creates a contrast with the idyllic image of the paradise, because it communicates chaos and anarchy instead of peacefulness. Likewise, the idea of Eden fostered by Crake is so extreme and unnatural that leads to a catastrophic outcome.

Instead of reshaping futuristic scenarios from science fiction, Atwood takes inspiration from Bosch's painting to imagine the world of the MaddAddam trilogy. She sees parody as «habitually work[ing] in a double-edged way: by trivializing a specific work or style whose original has pretensions to profundity, it allows the audience an escape from the marginal and mysterious in "art"»[170]. Likewise, the reader of the MaddAddam trilogy

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[169] See Margaret Atwood with George Hancock, "Tightrope-Walking Over Niagara Falls", in Earl G. Ingersoll (ed), *Conversations*, pp. 191-220; Margaret Atwood, "One Species of Love, After a Painting by Hyeronimous Bosch", in *Interlunar*, p. 55; Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993, p. 40; Michiko Kakutani, "A Familiar Cast of Fighters in a Final Battle for the Soul of the Earth", *The New York Review of Books*, September 14th 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/15/books/15kaku.html?_r=0. Last access September 7th 2015.

[170] Margaret Atwood, "What's So Funny? Notes on Canadian Humor", in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, Toronto: Anansi, pp. 175-189, p. 181.

escapes from the pretentious scientific dreams fostered by a conception of human perfection that is out of control. If terrorism and other traditional forms of resistance ultimately fail to contrast the totalitarian master narrative of consumerism and technological enhancement at all costs, the process of revision involved in uncovering past myths emphasizes the power of narration. While the Corporations blurs the boundaries between reality and a reality show, Atwood suggests that such *impasse* can be overcome by approaching narration as a speculative and performative activity and not as the source of truth. Parody necessarily engages the reader in decoding and reconstructing the text, in order to obtain a provisional truth calling into question the issues of authority and its relations of power.

Chapter 3.

The Year of the Flood: The Evolution of Culture and of Religious Narratives

> What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe? […] Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing?
>
> Stephen Hawking (1988)

Margaret Atwood published *The Year of the Flood* in 2009. In December that same year, Copenhagen hosted the UN Climate Change Conference, which gathered delegates from the United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Cahnge (UNFCC) to start negotiations and take actions on climate change mitigation. A few months earlier, *The Guardian* asked artists, authors, and poets their contribution in reaction to the environmental crisis, and Atwood responded to the call. She published the piece "Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet"[1], which is a sort of message in the bottle left by one of the last inhabitants of a dying planet as a warning.

The omniscient narrator explains that his or her society went through four phases: the age of gods, the age of money, the age when money became a god, and the age of deserts. He or she delivers a message to the reader that, he believes, risks to follow the same path: «Pray for us, who once, too, thought we could fly»[2]. The piece is tightly connected to *The Year of the Flood*, which

[1] Margaret Atwood, "Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet", in *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, pp. 229-230.
[2] Ivi, p. 230.

needs to be read in light of the environmental disasters caused by climate change. In this sense, the MaddAddam trilogy belongs to the new current of climate fiction (cli-fi), which is the literary exploration of global climate change and extreme wether events[3].

3.1. Cosmogonies: The Origin of Culture and the Foundation of the God's Gardeners' Religion

"Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet" resumes the same phases of the MaddAddam society and *The Year of the Flood*, published in the same year, explores the revival of an age of gods in the last stage of the age of deserts. In the Acknowledgements of the second novel of the trilogy, she writes that «[t]he clearest influence on Gardener hymn lyrics is William Blake, with an assist from John Bunyan and also from *The Hymn Book of the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada*». Atwood's use of literary sources becomes more explicit and less parodic. Although the comparison with Blake's hymns certainly demeans the God's Gardeners' artistic capabilities, I argue that this is not a strategy to make a parody of literary tradition but, on the contrary, to expand on the question of the value of literature to humans as a species. The allusions to milestones of the English literary canon[4] is not meant

[3] See Kathryn Schultz, "Writers in the Storm. How Weather Went from Symbol to Science and Back Again", *The New Yorker*, November 23rd 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/23/writers-in-the-storm. Last access December 1st 2015.

[4] I use the phrase "literary canon" here to refer to an established body of literary works, or classics, that are considered as having the highest and most enduring value in the literary environment from which Atwood herself has been influenced in her writings. However, what constitutes the literary canon of any culture cannot be interpreted as an absolute, neutral, and fixed body of works without coming up against the bias of white male hegemony (The debate on literary canons is alive since the early 1990s. See Henry Louis Gate jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Thus, I use it here only in the broadest sense of an archive of titles that a cultural community wishes to remember. Incidentally, the reference to the canon is also useful here because its meaning as «the

to reinforce the separation between the so-called high culture and popular experience, but to clarify the pervasiveness of literary and cultural references that overcome barriers of class and education.

Blake's literary influence is not limited to *The Year of the Flood* and can be identified in a few passages of *Oryx and Crake* as well, for example when Jimmy describes a moment of sexual rapture with Oryx, exclaiming «Oh stolen secret picnics. Oh sweet delight. Oh clear memory, oh pure pain. Oh endless night»[5], that quotes the lines of William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" (1863): «Some are born to sweet delight / Some are born to endless night»[6]. However, Jimmy's use of erudite quotations is self-referential and only aims at finding some solace from the harshness of his own existence before and after the catastrophe, while the God's Gardeners group exploits literary imagination to reach out to other people.

Likewise, Atwood points back to the literary tradition in order to reach and engage her readership, a goal that she accomplishes with her unconventional promotional tour of *The Year of the Flood*. Between 2009 and 2010, a theatrical version of the novel was performed in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, with amateur actors and singers in the role of the Gardener. The aim of these unconventional and eccentric promotional activities is to entertain as much people as possible. The hymns, with their plain style and rhythm, are employed to convey the God's Gardeners' morals and guidelines in a spontaneous and accessible way.

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collection or list of books of the Bible accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and inspired» ("canon, n.4." OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2015. Web. 26 November 2015) well introduces the subject of this chapter, which is Atwood's employment of religious narrative.

[5] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 122.

[6] William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, London: Longman, 1971, p. 615.

The centrality of the hymns in the structural development of the MaddAddam trilogy is reinforced by the strict and ritualistic regularity in which they appear, by Atwood's own statement in the Acknowledgements at the end of *The Year of the Flood*, and by their employment in the promotional tour. In her review to Atwood's novel, Gillian Beer writes that

> The hymns sustain and structure the novel and are moving, humorous, compelling and perfectly rhymed. The rhyming means much. It knits up disorder; it discovers kinships; it solaces; it reveals. It persists to the end. These are songs to be sung, together.[7]

The ritualistic and sometimes pedestrian mode of expression of the hymns in association with the self-congratulating and reassuring sermons spoken by Adam One represent a haven from the chaos and ruthlessness that govern the dystopic world.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy could rely on the knowledge he acquired writing his dissertation "Self-Help Books of the Twentieth Century: Exploiting Hope and Fear" at the Martha Graham Academy. It is on similar basis that the God's Gardeners manage to keep their confidence by exploiting the knowledge, hope, and also fear, that their religion implants into them: «[l]ike all hymn collections, – Atwood writes – those of the Gardeners have moments that may not be fully comprehensible to non-believers»[8]. Yet, contrarily to Jimmy's narcissistic fruition of knowledge, the religious environmental group shares its mythology through proselytism and transforms it into a cultural act.

3.1.1. Reflections upon the definition of culture

The topic of culture is essential in the construction of most literary utopias and dystopias. The analysis of the etymology of "culture" gives substantial

[7] Gillian Beer, "Gardening God's flooded Earth", *The Globe and Mail*, September 11th 2009.
[8] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 433.

information on the various functions that the word fulfils and helps discuss its function in *The Year of the Flood*. The contemporary debate on culture is heavily indebted to the work of Raymond Williams and his historical analysis of the development of the word[9]. Williams was born in a working-class family in Wales in 1921 and was highly committed to issues of democracy and socialism in his influential studies on cultural materialism. In Williams's conceptualization, culture includes both the symbolic system and its material productions. His theory of culture implies the study of the everyday representations and practices of ordinary people in a specific time and place and it involves «the analysis of all forms of signification […] within the actual means and conditions of their production»[10]. He identifies three categories in which "culture" is used today:

> (i) the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development […]; (ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general […]; (iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.[11]

The root of the word "culture" is the latin *colere*, whose meanings range from "cultivate" and "inhabit" a land, which originated the word "colony", to "honour with worship", that developed into the term "cult". The word passed into English through Latin and French with the main meaning of tending natural growth, which was later extended by metaphor to the growth of

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[9] See Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary" (1958), in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, London: Verso, 1989, pp. 3-14; "The Analysis of Culture", in *The Long Revolution*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1961, pp. 57-70; *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

[10] Raymond Williams, *Culture*, London: Fontana, 1981, p. 64-65.

[11] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, p. 90.

human intellect. Thus, "culture" refers to the abstract process of developing the human mind and to the products of such development. Culture has often been conceptualized in opposition to nature, but the two keywords are intimately connected: they both begins as descriptions of a quality or process – to cultivate and to be born – that originates in the material world and progressively reaches an abstract meaning. The concept of nature will be discussed thoroughly in the next chapter, but it is useful to underline here its relevance in the definition of culture and its relation to religion.

It has already been mentioned that one of the original meanings of the latin *colere* is "to honour with worship", which was imported into English by diplomat and printer William Caxton in 1483. His translation of Jacobus de Voragine's collection of hagiographies *Legenda Aurea* (ca. 1260), records the only attestation of this obsolete usage of the word culture: «Whan they departe fro the culture and honour of theyr god»[12]. Religious service is interpreted as cultivation of the soul and worshipping god is metaphorically combined to tending his Garden, meaning not only human souls but also all nature as God's Creation. In *The Year of the Flood*, this connection between religion and the cultivation of land is part of the God's Gardeners doctrine.

Moving on from the etymology to the present usage of the word "culture", the boundaries of its definition remain flexible and stratified in the multiple layers of meaning that the word acquired. In the twentieth century, the scope and variety of the word received the attention of a number of authors and scholars, thus opening the field to the new discipline of cultural studies. T. S. Eliot writes the critical treatise *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), in order to reassess the meaning of culture with a conservative

[12] "culture, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2015. Last access November 11th 2015.

approach that aims at re-establishing its proper functions against heresies. He positively follows the etymological stream that connects culture and religion and maintains that «no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion: according to the point of view of the observer, the culture will appear to be the product of the religion, or the religion the product of the culture»[13]. Eliot's defense of culture as composed of the highest elements of society is indebted to Matthew Arnold's theory of culture.

In Arnold's model, culture is the only possible reaction to anarchy and it represents a bulwark against the «Englishman's right to do what he likes; his right to march where he likes, meet where he likes, enter where he likes, hoot as he likes, threaten as he likes, smash as he likes»[14]. Culture exerts a principle of authority to contrast the anarchic tendencies whose roots the author identifies in the 1866 London's Hyde Park riots to promote manhood suffrage. In Arnold's formulation, culture is not tantamount to a curiosity of Greek and Latin, a mark of «sheer vanity and ignorance, […] an engine of social and class distinction», but the «pursuit of our total perfection [that] leads us to think that we should really, in this way, be working to make reason and the will of God prevail»[15].

This idealistic aspiration of culture draws upon its obsolete usage as "honour with worship" and expands its perimeter:

> Religion says: The kingdom of God is within you; and culture, in like manner, places human perfection in an internal condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality, in the ever-increasing efficaciousness and in the general harmonious expansion of those gifts of thought and feeling

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[13] T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), London: Faber & Faber, 2010, p. XV.
[14] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy. An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1869, p. 58.
[15] Ivi, p. 33.

> which make the peculiar dignity, wealth, and happiness of human nature.[16]

Arnold's and Eliot's perspectives on culture support their conceptualization in opposition to nature: culture is considered as an activity that emancipates humans from their fallen condition in nature, in order to reach a higher sphere of dignity.

The excerpt quoted above is highly revealing of the times of its publication, only few years before the appearance of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). Arnold proves to be embedded in the Victorian debate on the theory of evolution as he argues the existence of a principle that separates human beings from other animals and from the rest of nature. His view represents one stream of development of the concept of culture that was later criticised as elitist by Williams. Williams acknowledges Arnold's influential role in establishing the notion of culture as the highest point of a civilization, as opposed to the anthropologist approach systematized by Ursula K. Le Guin's father Alfred L. Kroeber and his colleague Clyde Kluckhohn[17]. The two anthropologists foster a wider concept of culture, following Edward Burnett Tylor's 1871 definition as a «complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society»[18].

Arnold's definition of culture as the expression of spiritual and aesthetic development and as the intellectual works and artistic practices produced in the process became a touchstone in literary criticism. Moreover,

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[16] Ivi, p. 13.

[17] Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: a Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Cambridge: Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1952.

[18] Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, quoted in Kroeber and Kluckhohn, *Culture: a Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, p. 9.

the moral significance that culture holds in Arnold's formulation is evoked in Atwood's understanding of literature and literary criticism as «guardians of the moral and ethical sense of the community»[19]. Her view, however, is divested of Arnold's authoritarian modulation and is more shaped on Northrop Frye's re-elaboration of the concept. Frye takes sides with Arnold's emphasis on culture as the elevating work of the human mind, «the totality of imaginative power, of which the matrix is art»[20]. In his study of William Blake, Frye endorses the concept of culture as «what maintains all order and security in society»[21] and refers to a religious principle, because «our imaginations, being one in God, achieve, when unrestricted, a spontaneous cooperation»[22].

However, like Williams, he reveals a suspicious attitude towards Arnold's view of culture as potentially authoritarian and, ultimately, elitist, especially in comparison with Blake's conception of it:

> This conception of culture as the source of order in society and as more complete and as more complete in its appeal than religion, may remind us to some extent of *Culture and Anarchy*; enough, at any rate, to make us wonder why so strongly "Hebraic"[23] a thinker and despiser of the

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[19] Margaret Atwood, "An End to Audience?", p. 346.

[20] Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947, p. 89.

[21] Ivi, p. 90.

[22] Ibidem.

[23] Frye refers to the dichotomic cultural forces – Hebraism and Helleism – that are employed to reach «man's perfection or salvation». He writes that the energy that drives humanity to salvation can be expressed in a twofold manner. On the one hand, it is articulated as a «paramount sense of the obligation of duty, self-control, and work, this earnestness in going manfully with the best light we have». On the other hand, it can manifest as «the intelligence driving at those ideas which are, after all, the basis of right practice, the ardent sense for all the new and changing combinations of them which man's development brings with it, the indomitable impulse to know and adjust them perfectly». Arnold sees these two forces as sharing the same goal but following opposite paths to reach it. He uses Hebraism and Hellenism as keywords to underlines that they both belong to human nature, but have developed differently for historical and spatial reasons: «to give these forces names from the

> Classics as Blake should hold such views. Blake believed, like Arnold, that culture preserves society: he did not believe, as Arnold apparently did, that society preserves culture. Society to Blake is an eternally unwilling recipient of culture: every genius must fight society no matter what his age. Arnold's view of both culture and society is conservative, traditional and evolutionary; Blake's is radical, apocalyptic and revolutionary. Arnold thinks of the prophet not so much as a visionary as a preacher of moral scruples, and in his thought the boundary line between Hebrews and Philistines becomes even more vague and fluctuating than it was in history.[24]

Frye endorses a view of culture as an intellectual and spiritual emancipating force that originates in the imagination and expands the artistic horizons beyond stiff deference to tradition.

Frye's emphasis on culture as a field that deserves to be explored in its entirety constitutes the first and foremost joining link with Atwood and reveals a geographical quality that has become peculiarly Canadian over the years. Atwood writes that Frye's taxonomy of literary genres reveals a

> Canadian reflection to a Canadian situation. Stranded in the midst of a vast space which nobody has made sense out of you, you settle down to map-making, charting the territory, the discovery of where things are in relation to each other, the extraction of meaning.[25]

The geographical reference can easily be interpreted as a metaphor in which the meaningless «vast space» represents the loss of transcendental values that used to be the roots of the moral sense of a community. Thus, the role of culture

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two races of men who have supplied the most signal and splendid manifestations of them, we may call them respectively the forces of Hebraism and Hellenism. Hebraism and Hellenism,—between these two points of influence moves our world». Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 142-143.

[24] Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, pp. 90-91.

[25] Margaret Atwood, "Northrop Frye Observed", *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, pp. 398-408, p. 405.

and of literary criticism is to make sense of this vast territory, to highlight power relations, and to provide a roadmap for ethical behavior.

Arnold defines culture as «the best which has been thought and said in the world»[26], while Eliot intensifies the conservative focus on culture as sophistication and on art as meant «to give some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it»[27]. Conversely, Frye acknowledges Arnold's and Eliot's contributions to the field, but he embraces a more liberal approach that has a wider scope than the hierarchical affirmation of culture. He maintains that «high art and an expanding audience are not necessarily contradictory, and no unpassable gulf separates Stravinsky from Disney»[28]. For Frye, Shakespeare[29] and Walt Disney[30], the Bible[31] and Charlie Chaplin[32] are equally worthy of the cultural critic's attention, as they all contribute to shape society.

Culture, though it is defined by what it excludes, is enriched by being as inclusive as possible, promoting variety instead of conformity. Frye

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[26] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. VIII.

[27] T.S. Eliot, *Poetry and Drama*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951, pp. 33-34.

[28] Jan Gorak, "Introduction", in Northrop Frye and Jan Gorak (ed), *Northrop Frye on Modern Culture*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003, p. XXXI.

[29] Frye's criticism on Shakespeare is spread throughout the whole corpus of his writing and his study of Shakespearean comedies and tragedies constitutes an integral part of the *Anatomy of Criticism*. There is also a considerable number of essays dedicated to the British playwright only. See for example Robert Sandler (ed), *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1986; Tony Grande and Garry Sherbert (eds), *Northrop Frye's Writings on Shakespeare and the Renaissance*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010.

[30] Frye maintains that «[t]here is no better index to the general level of civilization in a country today than the quality of its cinemas. Hollywood has given a free hand to two authentic geniuses, Charlie Chaplin and Walt Disney, and it is obvious in their pictures how close we are to ballet and pantomime techniques […]. Yes, I've seen *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Yes, I told you all that stuff about Wagner and Greek philosophy just to lead up to it», Northrop Frye, "Music and the Savage Beast", *Canadian Forum* 18 (April 1938), pp. 451-453.

[31] See Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982; *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991; *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*.

[32] See Northrop Frye, "The Great Charlie", *Canadian Forum* 21 (August 1941), pp. 148-150.

recognizes three levels of culture: «a level of lifestyle, a level of ideology and historical process, and a level of creativity and of education in the arts and sciences»[33]. Different levels, however, are not tantamount to a corresponding qualitative gradation: «The distinction between popular culture and highbrow culture assumes that there are different kinds of people, and I think that's extremely dubious. I don't see the virginal purity of highbrow culture trying to keep itself unsullied from the pollutions of popular culture»[34].

While promoting a forward-thinking approach to literature, the Canadian critic keeps an accurate adherence to the etymology of culture with regards to the religious and the agricultural semantic fields. When asked about the role of cultural institutions in Canada and the economic investment from the State, he writes that «culture always has to have a feeling of *cult* about it»[35], thus highlighting that defining one's own culture is a sacred act, which pertains more to religion rather than politics and economics. Frye retrieves the root of *colere* as tending the land and writes that culture «has something vegetable about it, something that increasingly needs to grow from roots, something that demands a small region and a restricted locale»[36].

Northrop Frye's major contributions to literary criticism are the milestone work on archetypal criticism *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (1957) and the study on the Bible as literature that produced the publication of *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature* (1982) and *Words with Power. Being a Second*

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[33] Northrop Frye, "Speech at the New Canadian Embassy, Washington" (1989), in Jean O' Grady and David Staines (eds), *Northrop Frye and Canada*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2003, pp. 639-654, p. 644.

[34] Northrop Frye, "On the Media – Interview with Northrop Frye", *Acta Victoriana*, 110.2 (Spring 1986): pp. 23-25, p. 23.

[35] Northrop Frye, "From Nationalism to Regionalism: The Maturing of Canadian Culture" (1980), in Jean O'Grady, *Interviews with Northrop Frye*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008,

[36] Northrop Frye, "Canadian Culture Today" (1977), in *Northrop Frye and Canada*, pp. 508-520, p. 513.

Study of the Bible and Literature (1991). The polemical premise on which *Anatomy of Criticism* is developed is that criticism exists in its own right as an essential part of culture and not as «a parasitic form of literary expression, […] a second hand imitation of creative power»[37]. He polemicizes against the superiority of the natural artistic genius as opposed to acquired skill, which he attributes to Tolstoy and the Romantics, and likewise criticizes the idea of art as a mysterious and esoterical ritual of sophisticated refinement.

Both assumptions, he argues, are based on a strong but imprecise correlation between the work of art and public response in determining its artistic value. If public response is not an adequate criterion to evaluate art, neither is the opinion of the artist. He maintains that the poet is not the best interpreter of himself or herself, as some literary trends maintain: the poet presents a vision of society and it is the critic's duty to interpret such vision and render it into a conception or theory of society. While defending the autonomy and necessity of literary criticism, Frye acknowledges that the discipline «seems to be badly in need of a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole»[38]. On the whole, Frye finds such coordinating principle in his theory of myth, on the conviction that the practical role of criticism is to illuminate the mythological substance of a cultural tradition.

3.1.2. From culture to religion: the Genesis in *The Year of the Flood*

It is from these premises and from his experience as an instructor and later as a professor of literature at Victoria College at the University of Toronto that

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[37] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, p.3.

[38] Ivi, p.16.

Northrop Frye develops his study on the Bible. Religious knowledge was a required academic subject in mid-twentieth century Toronto, but it needed to be disguised in such a way that the administrative and political bodies of Ontario «would not be frightened into thinking that a college with an interest in God was drawing money from the province»[39]. Frye rejects the dominant criticism that interpreted the Bible according to external criteria such as its authenticity or historical reliability and shows instead how the Bible, as revealed by its narrative structure and imagery, is closely related to the conventions and genres of Western literature[40].

The Great Code, his major study on the sybject, is the product of decades of immersion in the study of the Bible, which started with *A Fearful Symmetry. A Study of William Blake* (1947) and culminated in *Words with Power. Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (1990), and it inaugurates two interpretative patterns on the bible and literature. Firstly, Frye wants to illuminate the literary devices that make the Bible successful as a story and secondly, he uses the Bible as a code to decipher the larger body of literature that the Old and New Testament have shaped and influenced over the centuries.

The Canadian critic keeps track of the etymological roots of culture in analysing the primary mythological[41] constructions of Western identity, which

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[39] Northrop Frye, "An Approach to the Bible and Translations of the Bible", in Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson, *Biblical and Classical Myths. The Mythological Framework of Western Culture*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004, pp. 7-20, p. 7.

[40] Northrop Frye, *Words with Power. Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*, p. 7.

[41] For Northrop Frye «mythology is not primarily an attempt to picture reality: it is not a primitive form of science or philosophy, however crude. It is rather an attempt to articulate what is of greatest human concern to the society that produces it», Northrop Frye, "The Times of the Signs" [1973], in Jean O'Grady and Eva Kusher (eds), *"The Critical Path" and Other Writings on Critical Theory 1963-1975*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, pp. 331-357, p. 347.

he identifies in two major traditions: «the vast synthesis that institutional Christianity made of its Biblical and Aristotelian sources [and] the modern mythology that began when the modern world did, in the late eighteenth century»[42]. On the one hand, there is the premodern myth that sees in God the ultimate origin of civilization whose forms, «the city and the garden, were imitations of divine models, for God had planted the garden of Eden and had established his city before man was created»[43]. On the other hand, the myth that shaped Western culture from the eighteenth century on originates in «the conviction that man had created his own civilization. This meant not merely that he is responsible for it […] but that its forms of city and garden and design, of law and social discipline and education, even, ultimately, of morals and religion, were of human origin and human creation»[44].

This duality has shaped different approaches to the human rights of intervention on God's creation, which Atwood moulds in the opposite cosmogonies elicited by the religious inspiration of the God's Gardeners and by the scientific vision fostered by Crake. While the former attitude insists on taking care of the garden that God created and that humans are destroying, Crake wants to build what he believes to be perfection, modelling his own creation on the basis of the human failures that need to be eliminated, instead of what needs to be preserved. The God's Gardeners embrace a conception of culture that Atwood borrows from Frye, in compliance with three main features: spirituality as a founding principle, tending the land as a metaphor for the cultivation of culture, and suspicion towards the authoritarian tendencies of tradition.

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[42] Northrop Frye, "Clair de lune intellectual", in Jan Gorak (ed), *Northrop Frye on Modern Culture*, pp. 48-72, p. 60.

[43] Ivi, p. 61.

[44] Ibidem.

In the MaddAddam trilogy, biblical influences are evident and provide the fabric on which the plot is woven. The Bible is primarily a revelation of the Kingdom of God as «an idealized world, metaphorically identical […] with the "spiritual" garden of Eden and the Promised Land»[45]. I argue that this imagery corresponds to the dual source from which Arcadia and New Jerusalem derive and which holds great relevance for the interpretation of the MaddAddam trilogy and more specifically for *The Year of the Flood*. Eden, or Arcadia, has its inspiring principle in the spring of the natural cycle, where youth, vigour, and energy defeat senility and death, and it is the source of inspiration for the God's Gardeners, who look back at Eden to find and preserve its remnants on Earth. Crake's invention of the genetically enhanced population of the Crakers, on which more will be said in the next chapter, is likewise inspired by the dream of perfection and immortality, but represents a sinister interpretation of it because it aims at making it new from blank slate. Crake performs his dream by removing God from the picture and taking his role, through an aspiration that does not look back to Eden but acts forward to the Promised Land, with the necessary middle step of the blank slate of human extinction.

At the opposite end of this imagery, the Promised Land is the harbinger of New Jerusalem, which is inspired by both the creative and the productive human work. With regards to this, the God's Gardeners keep a conservative attitude aimed at cultivating one's own spirit and developing their ingenuity only within the boundaries of their community. By contrast, Crake forces the advent of a Promised Land in which his creations, the Crakers, takes the place of old humanity and he himself becomes God. Frye writes that «[a] good deal of human activity is wasted or perverted energy, making war, feeding a

[45] Northrop Frye, *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature*, p. 90.

parasitic class, building monuments to paranoid conquerors, and the like»[46] and this is a statement that Crake shares to some extent. As a matter of fact, he projects the Crakers in such a way that it will be genetically impossible for them to pursue the same deleterious path on which humanity has trodden, because all human violent and destructive impulses have been thoroughly erased. The secularized ideals of the Promised Land are not based on the cult of nature as it is, but on its transformation «into a world with a human shape, meaning, and function»[47], thus implying that the world needs to be mended and that only a human mind can accomplish this goal.

There are two basically opposite premises to the patterns of Eden and of the Promised Land. The former is the cult of a prelapsarian blissful existence that perceives nature as a whole in which single entities exist in perfect harmony with one another and society is perfectly integrated. The latter assumes a condition of distress that is resolved once the promise is honoured, thus implying a phase of misery that must be experienced before an ideal and happy resolution can finally be reached. At the basis of these opposite approaches also lie opposite ideas on what existed before the new beginning, before the Creation or the Big Bang. Adam One and Crake ground their systems of beliefs on different cosmogonies or, in other words, different answer to the reason why we expect existence rather than nothingness[48]. Atwood engages in a debate that involves theology, physics, and philosophy and that develops around the reason why is there something instead of

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[46] Ibidem.

[47] Ibidem.

[48] A preliminary answer to this question is that any observation, even the observation of nothingness, requires an observer and, thus, the observer's own existence. For a comprehensive survey on the philosophical conceptualizations of nothingness, see Roy Sorensen, "Nothingness", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/nothingness/. Last access November 29th 2015.

nothing, a question usually attributed to Gottfried Leibniz[49] in his essay *De Rerum Originatione Radicali* (1697) and raised again by Martin Heidegger[50] as the most fundamental issue of metaphysics.

This theological diatribe is introduced by Voltaire in the entry that he devotes to the Genesis in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764). He refers to the description of the earth before creation as a formless void, a representation of unshapely chaos that, however, contrasts the idea that matter could be created from nothing, and quotes from Persius's Third Satire «de nihilo nihilum, in nihilum nil posse reverti»[51]. The first and foremost theoretical problem to support the idea of *creation ex nihilo* is that it is impossible for the human mind to conceive absolute nothingness, and on this matter develops the above mentioned dispute between Adam One and Crake[52]. The human mind is unable to conceive nothingness and, likewise, God is unconceivable too: in

[49] Leibniz writes that there is a sort of competition in which things struggle to exist, in a sort of Darwinian metaphysics: «since something rather than nothing exists, there is a certain urge for existence or (so to speak) a straining toward existence in possible things or in possibility or essence itself; in a word, essence in and of itself strives for existence», Gottfried W. Leibniz, "De Rerum Originatione Radicali" (1697), English translation by Mary Morris in G.H.R. Parkinson (ed), *Leibniz: Philosophical Writings*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1973, pp. 136-144.

[50] In *What Is Metaphysics?*, Heidegger addresses the question of nothingness in terms that seem to come up to nonsense and meaninglessness, thus aptly posing the question as a logical quibble that reveals more on how human mind works through language than on the existential matter behind it. Heidegger reformulates the question as "Why are the essents rather than nothing?" and argues that the second part "rather than nothing" is inessential: his focus is on the phenomenology of the *Da-sein* and the concept of nothingness can be eliminated without any argumentative loss because the concept of "nothing" is not to be interpreted as a negative entity, but as an integral part of the *Da-sein* itself. See Martin Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik?* (1929), English translation by Joan Stambaugh, in David Farrel Krell (ed.) in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 93–110; Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (1953), English translation by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

[51] Persius, Satires III, v. 84, in *The Satires of Horace and Persius*, London: Penguin, 2005.

[52] See also Bianca Del Villano, "An Ecocritical Retelling of the Bible: Genesis and Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*", *Textus* 27.3 (2014), pp. 151-169.

Adam One's words, «God cannot be held to the narrowness of literal and materialistic interpretations, nor measured by Human measurements»[53].

The immeasurability of God leads towards the debate between religion and science and to the different interpretations that Adam One and Crake give to it. For Adam One God is No-thing, meaning that He is the immeasurable abstract entity that allows all things to be conceived, to be measured and, thus, to exist:

> How can anyone reason that the failure to measure the Immeasurable proves its non-existence? God is indeed the No Thing, the No-thingness, that through which and by which all material things exist; for if there were no such No-thingness, existence would be so crammed full of materiality that no one thing could be distinguished from another. The mere existence of separate material things is a proof of the No-thingness of God.[54]

By contrast, Crake endorses an approach that does not interpret God as an ontological matter, but only as a consequence of how the human mind and language work. For him, nothing is God, meaning that the human brain is led to give substance – a divine substance – to what is created by its linguistic constructions, even though such things are impossible to conceive and measure:

> Glenn used to say that the reason you can't really imagine yourself being dead was that as soon as you say, "I'll be dead", you've said the word *I*, and so you're still alive inside the sentence. And that's how people got the idea of immortality of the souls – it was a consequence of grammar. And so was God, because as soon as there's a past tense, there has to be a past before the past, and you keep going back in time until you got to *I don't know*, and that's what God is. It's what you don't know – the dark, the hidden, the underside of the visible, and all because we have

[53] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p 11.
[54] Ivi, p. 62.

> grammar, and grammar would be impossible without the FoxP2 gene; so God is a brain mutation.[55]

Religion is explained in fully materialistic terms that opens up to a complex question about the role of language.

From these opposite views on the concept of God derive opposite views on Eden. God-like Crake engineers his Garden in the Paradice lab with the aim of programming the new Adams and Eves in a genetically forced harmony with the environment, leaving no space for transcendence. Conversely, Adam One fosters an ethics of care toward the earth and believes that

> When the Waterless Flood comes, the Gardeners are better equipped than most to survive it—not just because of the skills they have cultivated, but because of the religious context in which they have done so. In a real sense, the sacred has facilitated their secular survival.[56]

Reviving the myth of the Garden of Eden and the spiritual dimension of nature is the God's Gardeners' key to cure the Earth from the ecological crisis, survive the ecological meltdown, and re-establish the lost harmony among all creatures.

3.2. Tending the Garden to Cultivate the Spirit: Theological Doctrine and Its Implementation

The God's Gardeners group is an environmental religious cult that is based on reformist activism, rather than faith. If Jimmy takes advantage of his knowledge of nineteenth century self-help books to gain self-control, Adam One tailors his sermons on a neopagan spirituality that is not far from the New Age movements of the 1960s and 1970s, especially with regard to its

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[55] Ivi, p. 377.

[56] Andrew Hoogheem, "Secular Apocalypses: Darwinian Criticism and Atwoodian Floods", *Mosaic 45.2* (2012), pp. 55-71, p. 64.

underlying ecological component. The God's Gardeners are described as «twisted fanatics who combine food extremism with bad fashion sense and a puritanical attitude towards shopping»[57], but behind their eccentricity, there is Atwood's strong knowledge of the American religious tradition and of the development of mythology in the construction of culture.

3.2.1. Spiritual skepticism and secular worries

It is interesting to note that the choice of the title of the novel raised a debate among the American, British, and Canadian publishers that was largely based on the religious background of the imagined sect and on the effect that it would have on the readership of different national communities. Atwood reveals that the original title of *The Year of the Flood* was *God's Gardeners*, thus following the general rule of the trilogy of stating clearly in the title what the crucial center of interest of the novel was and whose mythology was being represented: the myth related to Oryx and Crake in the first book, to the God's Gardeners in the second, and to the surviving bioterrorist group of MaddAddam in the third.

However, the American and Canadian publishers did not welcome this choice «on the grounds that people would think the book was a far-right extremist tract, which goes to show how thoroughly the word *God* has been hijacked»[58]. At the other extreme of the political span of religion, the other suggested title *Serpent Wisdom* was felt by the US publisher as too risky because the American readership might have perceived it as referring to a hippy New Age cult, thus potentially excluding a whole segment of readers leaning toward an opposite religious interpretation. The British publisher did

[57] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 48.
[58] Margaret Atwood, "Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia", p. 92.

not welcome the third proposed title, *Edencliff*, because «it sounded like "a retirement home in Bournemouth"»[59] and the final decision fell on *The Year of the Flood*. The title gives centrality to a mythical event that appeals to an archetype that Northrop Frye finds increasingly popular from classics like Wagner's *Ring Cycle* (1876) to science fiction works like John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*[60] (1951): «[t]his usually takes the form of some cosmic disaster destroying the whole fictional society except a small group, which begins life anew in some sheltered spot»[61].

It is appropriate to note here that Frye's literary inquiries focus on, but are not limited to, biblical records. The Canadian critic notably mentions Gilgamesh as an earliest example of an epic in which «the hero's search for immortality leads him only to hear about the end of the natural cycle, symbolized here, as in the Bible, by a flood»[62]. The apocalyptic pattern of natural collapse and regeneration through a purifying flood connects human

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[59] Ibidem.

[60] Floods abound indeed in science fiction stories and Frye's reference to John Wyndham's post-apocalyptic novel is of particular relevance here, because it develops around the theme like genetic mutations and the ethics of science that are pivotal in Atwood's trilogy as well. The myth of the flood is employed as a knowledge that can help the small group of survivors to overcome the tragic catastrophe, thus setting another correspondence with *The Year of the Flood*: «Stupendous as this disaster is, there is, however, still a margin of survival. It may be worth remembering just now that we are not unique in looking upon vast calamity. Whatever the myths that have grown up about it, there can be no doubt that somewhere far back in our history there was a Great Flood. Those who survived that must have looked upon a disaster comparable in scale with this and, in some ways, more formidable. But they cannot have despaired; they must have begun again – as we can begin again», John Wyndham, *The Day of Triffids*, London: Penguin. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy* (1993, 1994, 1996) is another remarkable example of utopian/dystopian narrative focusing on ecological disaster and in which the subsequent floods symbolize the conflict between opposing views of society. See Carol Franko, "Kim Stanley Robinson: *Mars Trilogy*", in David Seed (ed), *A Companion to Science Fiction*, pp. 545-555.

[61] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 203.

[62] Ivi, p. 317.

mythologies established in Akkadian culture as in the Biblical narrative[63]. Atwood's reference to a well-known literary tradition allows her to expand on the power of literature and art to contrast the gloomy feelings that the end of the world might suggest.

The God's Gardeners are the elected small group that in all flood narratives hopes to begin life anew in some sheltered spot, like the Edencliff garden. The religious references are self-evident in MaddAddam as in many other works of science fiction, but contemporary literature tends to perceive the religious influence as intricate and difficult to deal with even after Northrop Frye's major study. Atwood directly addresses the question in an essay[64] on the mythological basis that connects the Bible to science fiction, in which she follows Frye by suggesting that science fiction has taken over and substituted religion-based mythology: «the literary offspring of theology, such as angels and devils, moved to outer space because we no longer believed in their doctrinal underpinnings sufficiently to make these creatures plausible in realistic narratives set on Earth»[65].

In light of this, Atwood follows an alternative path and brings the religious discourse back in the narrative, but she keeps it within a realistic framework. The cult of the God's Gardeners is not based on otherworldly revelations, divine messengers, or miracles but, rather, on a self-conscious mythology that provides the foundation for the God's Gardener's culture. In

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[63] For a comprehensive overview on the flood myth around the world, see James George Frazer's Huxley Memorial Lecture for 1916, "Ancient Stories of a Great Flood", in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 46 (1916), pp. 231-283.

[64] Atwood recalls Frye's Bible course at Victoria College at the University of Toronto and his interpretation of the Scripture as a myth. See Margaret Atwood, "Burning Bushes: Why Heaven and Hell Went to Planet X", in *In Other Words. SF and the Human Imagination*, pp. 38-65.

[65] Margaret Atwood, "Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia", p. 70.

this sense, Atwood proves to be Frye's disciple by recognizing that the Bible, like any other religious narrative, originally belongs to the sphere of myths,

> stories that are central to their cultures and that are taken seriously enough that people organize their ritual and emotional lives around them […]. Such stories go underground, as it were, when the core statements about truth and reality repeated in the stories cease to be entirely, factually believed. But they then emerge in other guises, such as Art, or political ideologies[66].

On the other hand, the realist and materialistic trend is not abandoned in Atwood's descriptions of the God's Gardeners. Their beliefs and practices are well-grounded on scientific principles and urgent ecological concerns that seriously threaten their lives, instead of their souls. However, there is a common ground that joins together materiality and spirituality, historical present and mythical past, on which the environmental religious cult grows its creed, which is well represented in the ongoing dissonance between the material and the spiritual sphere that Adam One's sermons try to correct. The dystopian context amplifies the dissonance and the efforts of the God's Gardeners to balance material needs and spiritual inspiration seem to be even stronger. The word "pollution" is a telling example of how ecological degradation and spiritual implications provide fertile soil for mythology in dystopian literature. Its primary meanings pertain to the context of moral or spiritual contamination, «the desecration of that which is sacred» and «spiritual or moral impurity or corruption»[67].

The idea of environmental pollution retains the spiritual connotation and it is now considered the deadliest of ecological sins. We might say that the term pollution follows the above mentioned path through which stories

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[66] Margaret Atwood, "Burning Bushes: Why Heaven and Hell Went to Planet X", p. 55.

[67] "pollution, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2015. Last access November 26th, 2015.

evolve into mythologies. Pollution is not considered factual moral corruption and profanation of the sacred anymore, but it has re-emerged as a catchword for environmental movements and Atwood restores its etymological origins in the doctrine of the God's Gardeners. Moreover, Brian Stableford aptly notes that «the idea of dystopia was infected with this consciousness at birth, and the history of the idea [of pollution] has, inevitably, seen a gradual and inexorable increase in its elaboration within the context of ecological mysticism and science»[68]. The dystopian setting helps to enact that confrontation between materiality and spirituality on the ground of ecological degradation, in a struggle that is replicated at a broader level in Atwood's trilogy in the clash between religious and scientific discourses.

Among the God's Gardeners, the material/spiritual duality is a characteristic tract that largely determines the whole set of beliefs constituting their cult. They are defined more by what they eat and buy, rather than by their spirituality, even though there are a few episodes in which they display mystic tendencies. Conditions of psychic precariousness are euphemistically called "Fallow state", because depression is a too harsh and negative word: «a real Gardener would never say depressed. The Gardeners believed that people who acted like Veena were in a Fallow state — resting, retreating into themselves to gain Spiritual insight, gathering their energy for the moment when they would burst out again like buds in spring»[69]. Spirituality is also cultivated through Retreats and Vigils that are conducted with the help of hallucinogenic drugs in order to supposedly reach an inner level of the self. Toby is the character that shows in more detail the tormented spirituality of

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[68] Brian Stableford, "Ecology and Dystopia", in Gregory Claeys (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 259-280, p. 263.
[69] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 80.

the God's Gardeners, which is always given as a fact but never disclosed. Toby's Vigil is described in an ambiguous tone verging on plain scepticism:

> She waited till dusk, then took the drops with a mix of Elderflower and Raspberry to disguise the taste: Pilar's Vigil potions always tasted like mulch. Then she sat down in meditation position, near a large tomato plant, which in the moonlight looked like a contorted leafy dancer or a grotesque insect.
> Soon the plant began to glow and twirl its vines, and the tomatoes on it started to beat like hearts. There were crickets nearby, speaking in tongues: quarkit quarkit, ibbit ibbit, arkit arkit …
> Neural gymnastics, thought Toby. She closed her eyes.
> Why can't I believe? she asked the darkness.[70]

There is no institution where an answer to her compelling question is available, nor any religious authority that can provide spiritual assistance, but only the darkness of her own mind blown down by hallucinating herbs. The religion of the God's Gardeners is individualistic, based on a private spirituality and on an orientalistic[71] bias derived from the New Age subcultures that constitutes the framework on which the sect is grounded. Yet, the narrator uses a benevolent irony that does not condemn the God's Gardeners' limits, but underlines the clarity of mind that lies beneath their eccentricity. As a matter of fact, the herbs seem to actually work and during the Vigil Toby believes that she is having a vision, but she remains rational to the very instant she passes out:

> Behind her eyelids she saw an animal. It was a golden colour, with gentle green eyes and canine teeth, and curly wool instead of fur. It opened its mouth, but it did not speak. Instead, it yawned. It gazed at

[70] Ivi, p. 171.

[71] I use this term as proposed by Edward Said in his seminal critical study on the representations that dominant Western cultures have fostered on non-Western dominated countries, especially the Middle East. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

> her. She gazed at it. "You are the effect of a carefully calibrated blend of plant toxins," she told it. Then she fell asleep.[72]

Toby often expresses her doubts on her affinity to the God's Gardeners because she is often uncomfortable with some of their extravagant behaviors. She is not sure she believes in the Waterless Flood, nor that death should be celebrated as the restitution of the body to the Matrix of Life, and feels awkward at talking to bees, a task that she inherits from her mentor Pilar when she takes up her role as Eve Six. She is respectful enough to the God's Gardeners to feel the hypocrisy of living as one of them without fully supporting their views. With regards to this, Adam One gives her a pretty clear explanation of how the God's Gardeners understand faith and what counts as necessary to be one of them. In their theology, religious belief is considered as subaltern to deeds:

> "In some religions, faith precedes action," said Adam One. "In ours, action precedes faith. You've been acting as if you believe, dear Toby. As if — those two words are very important to us. Continue to live according to them, and belief will follow in time. […] We should not expect too much from faith," he said. "Human understanding is fallible, and we see through a glass, darkly. Any religion is a shadow of God. But the shadows of God are not God."[73]

The religious attitude of the God's Gardeners has a practical aim, which is the foundation of an environmentally sustainable human society. The slim doctrine that they follow is shaped on a practice that is ritualized through common acceptance, rather than on theoretical principles that must be interpreted in order to be applied in everyday life. The interpretation of a principle implies the designation of authority and approved instruments that provide an official version, but this position would also imply a hierarchical

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[72] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 171.
[73] Ivi, p. 168.

organization that goes against their egalitarian principles. As I have already mentioned, on a superficial level the sect can be aligned to the New Age movement that emerged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, but its individualistic approach to faith and refusal of institutionalized authority is the expression of a much older attitude in American spirituality.

3.2.2. A confrontation of theologies and the culture of gardening: *The Year of the Flood* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

The theological background of the God's Gardeners is rooted in the American tradition of religious revival waves and movements, which dates back to the Antinomian Controversy that heated the spiritual life of Massachusetts between 1636 and 1638 and to the First Great Awakening, spurred by Jonathan Edwards in the 1730s and 1740s[74]. The influence of American Puritanism on Margaret Atwood's writings has been extensively proved with reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which Biblical models are applied according to an authoritarian interpretation imposed onto the citizens by the theocracy of Gilead. In a way, *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a warning on the dangers of interpreting the Bible with the wrong instruments and putting it literally into practice. The religious attitude of the God's Gardeners seems to be a direct response to Gilead's theocracy and serves as a demonstration that religion is not the source of evil *per se*, but its malicious use in justifying one's wrongdoing.

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[74] See Perry Miller, *The New England Mind. The Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1939; Perry Miller, "Jonathan Edwards and the Sense of the Heart", *The Harvard Theological Review* 41.2 (1948), pp. 123-145; Alan Simpson, *Puritanism in Old and New England*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955; Luigi Sampietro, "Misticismo antinomiano in Massachusetts", in *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa*, Vol. XIII, Verona: Olschki, 1977, pp. 263-286; Luigi Sampietro, "Nature and Knowledge in Jonathan Edwards's Personal Narrative", in *Science and Imagination in XVIIIth Century British Culture*, edited by Sergio Rossi, Milano: Unicopli, 1987.

It is possible to detect an affinity between Toby and Offred, *The Handmaid's Tale*'s protagonist, regarding their religious feeling. Offred is forced by the theocracy that rules the country to submit to their rules because the alternative would be a long and painful death cleaning toxic dumps and nuclear waste in the Colonies; Toby joins the God's Gardeners to save her life from her murderous and rapist boss at the Secret Burgers shop. At first, they both have little choice on whether to believe or not and they simply find themselves in the position of being compelled to believe. Offred's version of The Lord's Prayer at the end of Chapter Thirty resonates with the same doubts and hopes that Toby has, and the same loneliness that results in a private and individualistic spirituality: «I feel very unreal talking to You like this. I feel as if I'm talking to a wall. I wish You'd answer. I feel so alone»[75].

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the theological discourse originates from Atwood's reflections on American Puritanism, which she studied under the pioneering historian of colonial America Perry Miller[76]. The foundation of the Puritan thought is piety, as derived from the Calvinist idea that the measure of salvation is the intensity of faith, which clears the mind from the obscurity of sin and makes understanding accessible. In Gilead, piety is mechanized and faith becomes bigotry, thus leading to abominations such as the Salvagings

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[75] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 204.

[76] In her essays on literary utopias and dystopias, she mentions her studies in American Puritanism at Radcliffe College as a necessary step in her choice of her Ph.D thesis on "The English Metaphysical Romance": «In addition to the Victorians, I took courses in American Literature and Civilization because I was told it was my "gap" […]. We hadn't heard much about Cotton Mather or John Winthrop or "The Day of Doom" by Michael Wigglesworth up in Canada, worse luck. But the gap was soon filled: ask me anything about the Salem Witch Trials and the rules of spectral evidence, and you will receive an even longer and more pedantic answer», Margaret Atwood, "Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia", p. 77.

and Particicutions, brutal public executions that have an historical precedent in the witch trials:

> Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging, by the necks, their hands tied in front of them, their heads in white bags tipped sideways onto their shoulders. There must have been a Men's Salvaging early this morning. I didn't hear the bells. Perhaps I've become used to them.[77]

The God's Gardeners religion embraces a heretic attitude instead, that considers faith as a private matter that everyone is free to live as they wish, while focusing on the practices that unite all the members of the group through fixed rituals, meetings, and prayers. Under these conditions of individual freedom and rejection of authoritarianism, which are opposite to Gilead doctrine, Toby develops a conscious involvement in the cult and wholeheartedly embraces the real core of the doctrine of the God's Gardeners, which is the forthcoming divine punishment for the reckless ecological devastation and the necessity of better practices towards the environment:

> *We're using up the Earth. It's almost gone*. You can't live with such fears and keep on whistling. The waiting builds up in you like a tide. You start wanting it to be done with. You find yourself saying to the sky, *Just do it. Do your worst. Get it over with*. She could feel the coming tremor of it running through her spine, asleep or awake. It never went away, even among the Gardeners. Especially – as time wore on – among the Gardeners.[78]

The God's Gardeners have a millenaristic approach that sees in the Waterless Flood the necessary regeneration after the ruinous human wickedness that imperil life on Earth. However, their theology is not based on a reward in the afterlife for their righteous moral conduct, but on training

[77] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 41-42.
[78] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 239.

resilience and building a sustainable human niche in the ecosystem. Adam One preaches the doctrine through his sermons that open each chapter of the novel and create a fixed structure. The title of each chapter corresponds to the festivity that the God's Gardeners celebrate in the day the sermon is spoken. It is followed by temporal indication of the year following the Gardeners' annals: «Year One, Garden just begun; Year Two, still new; Year Three, Pilar started bees; Year Four, Burt came in the door; Year Five, Toby snatched alive; Year Six, Katuro in the mix; Year Seven, Zeb came to our heaven»[79]. After indication of day and year, a subtitle provides a description of the topic of the sermon, which is structured in an introductory part that functions as a welcoming address and specifies the context of the assembly:

> CREATION DAY
> YEAR FIVE.
> OF THE CREATION, AND OF THE NAMING OF THE ANIMALS.
> SPOKEN BY ADAM ONE.
> Dear Friends, dear Fellow Creatures, dear Fellow Mammals:
> On the Creation dDay five years ago, this Edencliff Rooftop Garden of ours was a sizzling wasteland, hemmed in by festering city slums and dens of wickedness; but now it has blossomed as the rose.[80]

Then, Adam One delivers his catechesis to convey the religious message and its practical applications in the present-day context.

In spite of the rigid pattern of their religious life, the openness of the God's Gardeners to all people and all levels of adherence to their beliefs is an assurance against authoritarian deviation. The sect is structured in a non-hierarchical and yet multilayered framework, in which a leading group of

[79] Ivi, p. 60.
[80] Ivi, p. 11.

Adams and Eves guides the community and organize the everyday life of its members:

> Adam One insisted that all Gardeners were equal on the spiritual level, but the same did not hold true for the material one: the Adams and the Eves ranked higher, though their numbers indicated their areas of expertise rather than their order of importance.[81]

Adam One adapts the Old Testament to an ecological message that is aimed at preparing oneself to welcome the new world after the environmental global crisis.

The necessity to adapt the Old Testament to the present-day context raises internal debates on topics that the Adams and the Eves discuss to offer a coherent vision in which religion and science do not contradict themselves. The topics that needs to be discuss are raised, usually by the children, only when the practices upon which the group has already agreed are called into questions. For example, Zeb teaches the children the differences between carnivore and herbivore bites and they want «to know why — if Adam was created as a vegetarian, as he surely was — human teeth should show such mixed characteristics». Similarly, they are worried about the excerpt of Genesis in which God provides Adam and Eve with animal-skin clothing: «[h]ad God killed and peeled some of his beloved Creatures to make these skin coats? If so, He'd set a very bad example to Man. If not, where had these skin coats come from?»[82].

In all such quibbles, the playful dimension of Atwood's writing comes to the forefront of the narration and renovates religious language through parody. The Adams and the Eves are not really interested in finding answers within the Scripture, but they try to provide plausible explanations with the

[81] Ivi, p. 45.

[82] Ivi, p. 240

only aim of making the Word of God compatible to the way of life that they have chosen. When the authority of science collides with the authority of God, the prescription is to read the Bible with alert awareness of its metaphorical dimension: «must we […] take as scientific fact the story that the world was created in six days, thus making a nonsense of observable data? God cannot be held to the narrowness of literal and materialistic interpretation»[83].

Religion is an instrument to cultivate the human soul: in an age in which art is dismissed as worthless, the God's Gardeners preserve religious culture and fight with it against the foolishness of human hubris. Through them, Atwood follows Frye's exploration of culture as based on religious beliefs and on the metaphor of tending the land. The semantic field of cultivation to which the word culture is originally tied is also employed in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which the sensuality and vibrancy of gardens contrasts the chromatic rigidity[84] and strict obscurantism that rule society. Tending the garden is the only occupation of Serena Joy, Fred's Wife, for which Offred acts as a sexual surrogate for reproductive aims. The luxuriance of her plants and flowers are antonymic to her sterility: «Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to order and maintain and care for»[85]. The reclusion of women in kitchens, bedrooms, and gardens, according to their rank in society, was established by Gileadean theocracy.

Gilead is an obscurantist society in which reading and writing is a forbidden activity for women, but cultural repression does not come from religion only. In their attack against the commercialization of the female body, the radical feminists of the pre-Gilead period are as reactionary as the religious

[83] Ivi, p. 11.
[84] Gileadean society divides women according to their functions and controls them through clothing: The Wives wear blue, the Marthas green, the Aunts brown, and the Handmaids red.
[85] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 22.

fundamentalists are. The feminists, Offred's mother among them[86], are responsible for a fire that takes inspiration from Ray Bradbury's novel *Farenheit 451*. However, what the angry feminists burn is not Shakespeare's and Plato's books, but glossy magazines:

> It had a pretty woman on it, with no clothes on, hanging from the ceiling by a chain wound around her hands. […] I threw the magazine into the flames. It riffled open in the wind of its burning; big flakes of paper came loose, sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women's bodies, turning to black ash, in the air, before my eyes.[87]

Culture is not represented by high literature here but, nonetheless, the suppression of the so-called popular culture is a one of the very first signals of the upcoming obscurantism.

The repression is based on Gileadean awareness of the potentially destabilizing power of culture, but culture is not limited to reading and writing. From idle pastime for the Wives, the garden becomes a symbol of cultural resistance to Offred's eyes and a metaphor of sabotage

> There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently. A Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid, the return of the word swoon.[88]

What is subversive about Serena's garden is its metaphorical extension to the regenerating power of culture, that is here resumed with the reference to Tennyson's poem "Come Into the Garden, Maud" (1895).

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[86] Like Jimmy's mother in *Oryx and Crake*, Offred's mother too is a radical revolutionary whose political aims become insurmountable shortcoming in her parental relationship.
[87] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 48.
[88] Ivi, p. 161.

Atwood uses again the metaphor of the garden in *The Year of the Flood*. The community of the God's Gardeners is built around a new commandment: tending the Earth and saving it from human destruction through an ethics of care that involves the three natural kingdoms of animal, vegetable, and mineral, as the first hymn of the novel shows:

> Who is it tends the Garden,
> The Garden oh so green?
>
> 'Twas once the finest Garden
> That ever has been seen.
>
> And in it God's dear Creatures
> Did swim and fly and play;
>
> But then came greedy Spoilers,
> And killed them all away.
>
> And all the Trees that flourished
> And gave us wholesome fruits,
>
> By waves of sands are buried
> Both leaf and branch and root.
>
> And all the shining Water
> Is turned to slime and mire,
>
> And all the feathered Birds so bright
> Have ceased their joyful choir.
>
> Oh Garden, oh my Garden,
> I'll mourn forevermore
>
> Until the Gardeners arise,
> And You to Life restore.[89]

In this hymn, the mysticism inspired by the idyllic representation of the Garden is balanced by precise references to the present-day condition of

[89] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 1

ecological hazard, in which global warming has dried up the oceans and Rachel Carson's silent spring is not a warning anymore but a tragic reality[90]. The garden is the metaphor on which the cultural foundations of the sect are built and reveals their dream of the return to the Garden of Eden.

3.3. Eden Vs New Jerusalem: A Confrontation of Dreams

The garden is a metaphorical representation of a place where sin and suffering do not exist and can be interpreted as a utopian model. On the one hand, many utopian societies are based on the dream of complete harmony and conformity of nature and culture and on the aspiration to build a replica of the idyllic pastoral myth of the Golden Age. On the other hand, culture is often employed in utopian societies as a mean through which humans control nature and reason dominates over passions and instincts, as exemplified by the island of the Houyhnhnms in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*[91]. In the MaddAddam trilogy, both solutions are explored by Atwood and represented by the many juxtaposed communities: the God's Gardeners and the society of the Corporations; the MaddAddam group and Crake, the surviving humans and the genetically-engineered Crakers.

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[90] Rachel Carson's text *Silent Spring* is an ecocritical milestone of the twentieth century for its scientifically informed description of the biosphere poisoning caused by pesticides. The spring is silent because all birds have died and their silence announces an ecological catastrophe of unprecedented proportions. Margaret Atwood has acknowledged the importance of the book and of its legacy in different occasions and she has made her the foremost saint in the pantheon of the God's Gardeners in *The Year of the Flood*. See Margaret Atwood, "Rachel Carson's Silent Spring, Fifty Years On", *The Guardian*, December 7th 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/07/why-rachel-carson-is-a-saint. Last access October 5th 2015.

[91] For the Houyhnhms, reason and nature coincide with no effort or struggle, but Gulliver does not understand that his nature, and that of humanity in general, is that of a Yahoo and that the essence of humanity is that struggle between reason and instincts.

3.3.1. Eden, New Jerusalem, and their offshoots

Actually, such a dichotomical structure of nature and culture is the heart of many literary utopias and dystopias and the relationship between nature and culture might be the most crucial single element in the construction of such generic paths[92]. An insightful explanation of the dichotomy comes from W.H. Auden, who compares and contrasts the visions of the Arcadian dreamer, who looks back at Eden, and of the Utopian dreamer, who looks forward at a New Jerusalem. The British poet outlines the two positions in the poem "Vespers" in the series *Horae Canonicae*[93] (1955) and details the difference between them in the essay "Dingley Dell and the Fleet" (1962):

> In their relation to the actual fallen world, the difference between Eden and New Jerusalem is a temporal one. Eden is a past world in which the contradictions of the present world have not yet arisen; New Jerusalem is a future world in which they have at last been resolved.[94]

Eden is a realm where no one can enter, as its Arcadian inhabitants are all native of the place, and there is no notion of law because happiness and pleasure substitute morality. New Jerusalem is a place where contradictions are more starkly revealed, but both places suggest how ambiguous utopian thought essentially is. Unlike the Arcadian dreamer, the Utopian subject

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[92] See Edith Aubin "Culture", in Vita Fortunati and Raymond Trousson (eds), *Dictionary of Literary Utopias*, Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2000, pp.146-149.

[93] It is now that our two paths cross.
Both simultaneously recognize his Anti-type:
that I am an Arcadian, that he is a Utopian.
He notes, with contempt, my Aquarian belly:
I note, with alarm, his Scorpion's mouth.
He would like to see me cleaning latrines: I would
like to see him removed to some other planet.
W. H. Auden, "Vespers", in *Collected Poems*, New York: Random House, p. 482.

[94] W. H. Auden, "Dingley Dell and the Fleet", p. 409

dreams about a new place that is in the making and that will substitute the present one, in which he or she is born. New Jerusalem is a goal that the Utopian dreamer wants to achieve, which implies an intervention on his or her part that is denied in Eden, where everything is given and nothing can be changed. Such intervention may easily imply actions that would not be acceptable in the good and happy place that both Eden and New Jerusalem are thought to be. Auden then provides the reader with an image of the divide between Eden and New Jerusalem that is particularly relevant in outlining the utopian visions that come out of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

> while neither Eden nor New Jerusalem are places where aggression can exist, the Utopian dream permits indulgence in aggressive fantasies in a way that the Arcadian dream does not. Even Hitler, I imagine, would have defined his New Jerusalem as a world where there are no Jews, not as a world where they are being gassed by the million day after day in ovens, but he was a Utopian, so the ovens had to come in.[95]

Samuel R. Delany elaborates on Auden's commentary on Arcadian and Utopian thinking in an interview on his novel *Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976), in which the author addresses the issues related to defining science fiction and utopian thinking. Delany engages in a dialogue around the title of his novel *Triton*, which explicitly refers to Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974), and clarifies the contradictory ideas of utopian societies that both Le Guin and Delany himself explore. Such ambiguities are also revealing of the contradictions that Atwood herself expounds in the MaddAddam trilogy. According to Delany, utopian writing is based on fundamental ambiguities that are highlighted by the coexistence, in LeGuin's novel for example, of «two very different societies, one harsh and spiritual,

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[95] Ivi, p. 410.

one rich and decadent, but each of which considers itself the best of all possible worlds»[96].

These two societies are manifestations of what Auden calls Eden and New Jerusalem as expressions of opposite ways of thinking, the Arcadian and the Utopian, which will always see each other in the dystopic version. Delany argues that there has been an evolution on this framework from the time of Auden's writing and that new images should be included that are closely intertwined with the ecological crisis caused by our hyper-technological society. These images replicate the dichotomical structure that opposes the city and the garden, culture and nature:

> one of these is the urban image of Junk City—a very different image from Brave New World […]: think of the car with half its motor and three wheels gone which has been sitting out in the yard beside that doorless refrigerator for the last four years.[97]

Junk City is where the marvels of New Jerusalem actually end up when the technological progress reaches its peak and waste invades streets, homes, workplaces: «here we have an image of techno chaos entirely different from the regimentation of Brave New World—and one that neither Huxley in the early '30s nor Orwell in the late '40s could have envisioned»[98]. The totalitarian presence of hi-tech waste represented in science fiction is often contrasted by communities living at the border of society and rejecting technology, like the Lo Teks in William Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981). The urban landscape of technochaos is juxtaposed to the rural image of the «country landscape polluted with technological detritus»[99]. In spite of its haunting and decadent

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[96] Samuel R. Delany, "On *Triton* and Other Matters", http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/delany52interview.htm. Last access October 7th 2015.

[97] Ibidem.

[98] Ibidem.

[99] Ibidem.

quality, this «polluted, poisonous landscape becomes a place of extraordinarily delicate and decadent beauty, among the "cultures of the afternoon"»[100].

Gerry Canavan adopts Auden's view filtered by Delany and structures his collection of essays *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* according to it. In his introduction "If This Goes On", he explains how the relationship between science fiction and ecology develops around three categories derived from Auden's primary dichotomy: Arcadia and New Jerusalem; Brave New Worlds and Lands of the Flies; Quiet Earths, Junk Cities and Cultures of the Afternoon. The first category re-examines the dichotomy between the

> technological super city where everything is bright and shining and clean, and all problems have been solved by the beneficent application of science [versus] that wonderful place where everyone eats natural foods and no machines larger than one person can fix in an hour is allowed in.[101]

The second category represents the flip side of the first, in which the technological super city has become an Huxleian totalitarian regime[102] and the natural idyll has turned into a descent into savagery, as in William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954).

The third category is closer to the present-day disenchantment with absolute and distinct utopian and dystopian models, opting for a blurred and contradictory coexistence of both. The Junk City is «the dysfunctional New Jerusalem in slow-motion breakdown […] where nothing works quite the way it did when it was new» and the Culture of the Afternoon represents the sublime and decadent beauty of the polluted countryside. The Quiet Earth is

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[100] Ibidem.
[101] Ibidem.
[102] See Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1932.

the only category that Canavan adds to Delany's list and it is «the planet devoid of human life entirely […], the elegiac fantasy of an entirely dead planet»[103]. The idea of the decay of society and nature reminisces the concept of entropy in J.G. Ballard's works. In the *Drowned World* (1962), for example, a reflection on human nature, on the origins of violence, and the ecological collapse of civilization all converge in the entropic force that will lead the Universe to exhaustion.

Margaret Atwood follows this tradition of science fiction and utopian literature and explores all the above mentioned possibilities in the MaddAddam trilogy. In Atwood's dystopian world, he Corporations have established a Brave New World in their hyper-technological Compounds, which are the equivalent of the mythical Medieval citadel:

> in the days of knights and dragons, the kings and dukes had lived in castles, with high walls and drawbridges and slots on the ramparts so you could pour hot pitch on your enemies […] and the Compounds were the same idea. Castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside.[104]

The outside is the pleebland, the urban sprawl of trash piles and technological debris, a Junk City where everything seem «so boundless, so porous, so penetrable, so wide-open. So subject to chance»[105] to be too dangerous for the rigid and strictly controlled minds of the utopian scientists of the Corporations. The pleebland is the buffer space that separates the Compounds from the countryside that global warming has turned into uninhabitable land:

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[103] Gerry Canavan, "Introduction: If This Goes On", in Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson (eds), *Green Planets. Ecology and Science Fiction*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 1-24, p. 11.

[104] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 28.

[105] Ivi, p. 196.

> vacant warehouses, burnt-out tenements, empty parking lots. Here and there were sheds and huts put together from scavenged materials – sheets of tin, slabs of plywood – and inhabited no doubt by squatters. How did such people exist? Jimmy had no idea. Yet there they were, on the other side of the razor wire. A couple of them raised their middle fingers at the train, shouted something that the bulletproof glass shut out.[106]

The God's Gardeners envisage a post-catastrophic world in which the Waterless Flood destroys the Exfernal World[107], meaning both the Compounds and the Pleeblands, leaving nothing behind «but decaying wood and rusting metal implements»[108]. We can recognize in this image the almost deserted Earth in which Snowman finds himself at the beginning of *Oryx and Crake*, alone with the debris of consumerism. Yet, the planet is still alive and nature recovers its strength as the God's Gardeners had predicted: «over [decaying wood and rusting metal implements] the Kudzu and other vines will climb; and Birds and Animals will nest in them […]. For all works of Man will be as words written on water»[109]. This description of blight and deterioration uncovers the rebirth of Earth through the regenerating power of nature.

The birds recoups the «joyful choir» and announce the restored life of God's Garden:

> how privileged we are to witness these first precious moments of Rebirth! How much clearer the air is, now that man-made pollution has ceased! This freshly cleansed air is to our lungs as the air up there in the clouds is to the lungs of Birds. How light, how ethereal they must feel as they soar above the trees! For many ages, Birds have been linked to the freedom of the Spirit, as opposed to the heavy burden of Matter.

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[106] Ivi, p. 185.

[107] This is one of the many play on words in the trilogy, as "Exfernal" is composed of the words "external" and "infernal".

[108] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 312.

[109] Ibidem.

> Does not the Dove symbolize Grace, the all-forgiving, the all-accepting?[110]

Ultimately, Atwood's post-catastrophic Earth is neither apocalyptic nor quiet at all. If compared to other contemporary apocalyptic texts, such as Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), the world of the MaddAddam trilogy is still riddled with objects, animals, people, and life. The tone is not elegiac and, even though it is not optimistic either, it leaves hope for a regenerated future.

The God's Gardeners live by an Arcadian dream of harmony and bliss and try to reintegrate culture and nature. Eden is not the prelapsarian valley where Adam and Eve were created by God, but a condition to be gained after the Waterless Flood has cleansed and destroyed the fallen world. In *The Year of the Flood*, the God's Gardeners do not simply look back with melancholy to the past world of pristine Creation, but they prepare themselves to the blessed state they will reach after the sins of humanity have been atoned for through punishment. From their perspective, the Waterless Flood is not a disaster to be feared, but a blessing to be welcomed as the beginning of a new era of harmony between humanity and nature: «True, there is a certain — let us not say disappointment. The debris left by the Waterless Flood, like that left by any receding flood, is not attractive. It will take time for our longed-for Eden to appear, my Friends»[111].

In preparation of the event, the God's Gardeners live a frugal existence and try to convert people from the pleebland. They build hidden storeplaces for food, which they call Ararats like the mount on which, according to the Bible, Noah's Ark landed after the Deluge. They are strictly vegetarian and

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[110] Ivi, p. 371.
[111] Ibidem.

refuse everything that come from the Corporations, from mobile phones to drugs and nutritional supplements: those Corporation pills are the food of the dead, my dear. Not our kind of dead, the bad kind. The dead who are still alive. We must teach the children to avoid these pills — they're evil. It's not only a rule of faith among us, it's a matter of certainty»[112]. They blatantly oppose the capitalistic system but they are not dangerous enough to be extirpated by the Corporations, because even though their weirdness and fanaticism is publicly directed against the economic interests of the Corporations, they «own nothing they want, so [they] don't qualify as terrorists»[113].

The Gardeners' activities mainly consist in supporting themselves in their settlement in the Edencliff Rooftop Garden, from growing vegetables to sharing the necessary skills to survive in the hostile environment that would follow the Waterless Flood. Even though they oppose the sinful separation from nature, the Gardeners are not naïve about the harshness of living outside of society and promote a state of readiness that spans from growing vegetables to martial art, that they euphemistically call Bloodshed Limitation:

> Our teachers were Nuala for the little kids and the Buds and Blooms Choir and Fabric Recycling, and Rebecca for Culinary Arts, which meant cooking, and Surya for Sewing, and Mugi for Mental Arithmetic, and Pilar for Bees and Mycology, and Toby for Holistic Healing with Plant Remedies, and Burt for Wild and Garden Botanicals, and Philo for Meditation, and Zeb for Predator-Prey Relationships and Animal Camouflage.[114]

However, their clear-cut principles often clash with their practices and this is what allows them to adapt and change. They avoid the totalitarian

[112] Ivi, p. 105.
[113] Ivi, p. 48.
[114] Ivi, p. 61.

dangers of utopian dreams by breaking the rules from time to time. For example, in spite of the ban on technology, the Adams and the Eves have a laptop that they use with extreme precaution to store crucial data on the Exfernal World: «"It's like the Vatican's porn collection," Zeb told [Toby]. "Safe in our hands"»[115]. Zeb's quips trivialize the precepts of the God's Gardeners and discloses his future schism with the MaddAddam group, but he is right in acknowledging that absolute coherence is not the God's Gardeners' forte. After all, Adam One candidly admits that he «must sometimes say things that are not transparently honest. But it is for the greater good»[116].

Their way of life seems simple and straightforward, but the actual identity and previous life of the Gardeners is often obscure and sometimes in ostensible collision with their new religious beliefs. For example, Eve Six Pilar, who is Toby's mentor when she joins the Gardeners, is a refugee from the Compounds, a former friend of Crake's father, and a specialist of mushrooms, funguses and mould at HelthWyzer Corporation. Like her, many other Gardeners are scientists and doctors rejecting the foundations of the Corporations: «Katuro the Wrench used to be an internist. He does our plumbing now. Surya was an eye surgeon. Stuart was an oncologist. Marushka was a gynecologist»[117]. The ambiguity and duality that characterize utopian narratives is personified by Adam One's counterpart and brother Zeb.

As Adam One contrasts the Corporations through the God's Gardeners community, Zeb is the founder of another anti-Corporations organization that plays a crucial role in the development of the trilogy and gets closer to the New Jerusalem end of the complex scheme sketched by Auden. Being a

[115] Ivi, p. 189.
[116] Ivi, p. 184.
[117] Ivi, p. 105.

foreign body among the God's Gardeners, Zeb disagrees with most of Adam One's strategies that he considers naïve and ineffective. He and other former Gardeners leave the community of Arcadian dreamers, recruit new members, and establish a group aimed at opposing the Corporations through actions of bioterrorism that are organized on a secret online platform, a videogame that the reader already knows as one of Crake's favourite amusements in *Oryx and Crake*:

> Extinctathon, an interactive biofreak masterlore game he'd found on the Web. EXTINCTATHON, Monitored by MaddAddam. Adam named the living animals, MaddAddam names the dead ones. Do you want to play? That was what came up when you logged on. You then had to click Yes, enter your codename, and pick one of the two chat rooms – Kingdom Animal, Kingdom Vegetable. Then some challenger would come on-line […] and propose a contest. Begins with, number of legs, what is it? […] Then you'd narrow it down, Phylum Class Order Family Genus Species, then the habitat and when last seen, and what had snuffed it. (Pollution, habitat destruction, credulous morons who thought that eating its horn would give them a boner.) The longer the challenger held out, the more points he got, but you could win big bonuses for speed.[118]

On a first superficial level, the videogame is only what it claims to be, a rather boring and pedant pastime for brainiacs, but it also contains limited access playrooms that Zeb and his acolytes use to communicate and coordinate their actions. The focus on endangered and extinct species highlights that the God's Gardeners and MaddAddamites share an ecological concern, but the discriminating element between the two groups is a disagreement on tactics, which is also determined by a different moving principle – political for the MaddAddamites and spiritual for the God's Gardeners.

[118] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 80.

Even though it is steeped in the Exfernal World, the group maintains some Arcadian reminiscences that are reflected in the videogame, because it implies nostalgia for a past world in which all the extinct animals were still alive. Zeb and the other Maddaddamites are lured by the peaceful and harmonious aesthetics of Eden and they reproduce the Arcadian dream in the path of webpages to access their hidden playrooms:

> He entered a site advertising Mo'Hair transplants, skipped through a pixel gateway on the eye of a magenta-haired sheep, entered the blue percolating stomach of an ad for a HelthWyzer antacid, which led to the avid open mouth of a SecretBurger customer caught in mid-chomp. Then a wide green landscape unfolded — trees in the distance, a lake in the foreground, a rhino and three lions drinking. A scene from the past.[119]

This description suggests a movement of liberation that passes through the aberrations of the Corporations, takes inspiration from a scene that is an iconic and kitsch[120] representation of Arcadia, and goes back to society to fight the system with its own weapons through terrorism.

In this sense, the way of access to the online videogame tells the story of its founders, who all have a first-hand knowledge of the Corporate power represented by companies such as HelthWyzer and Secret Burger, because they are «[t]op scientists — gene-splicers who'd bailed out of the Corps and gone underground because they hated what the Corps were doing»[121]. They oppose society as it is and dream of a newly found harmony with nature that closely resembles the God Gardener's Arcadian dream, which some of them join for a period. But instead of quietly and piously manifesting their beliefs

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[119] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 269.

[120] Kitsch is an important aesthetic category in Atwood's writings. See Lorna Irvine, "Recycling Culture: Kitsch, Camp, and Trash in Margaret Atwood's Fiction", in Reingard M. Nischik, *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*, Rochester: Camden House, 2000, pp. 202-214.

[121] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 333.

through their way of life, the MaddAddam group actively undermines the interests of the Corporations:

> "We were doing bioform resistance […]. The splicers put the bioforms together and Shackie and me and Rebecca and Katuro had top identities — insurance and real estate, stuff like that you could travel with. So we'd take the bioforms to the locations and let them loose."
> "We'd plant them," said Oates. "Like, you know, time bombs."
> "Some of those suckers were really cool," said Shackie. "The microbes that ate the asphalt, the mice that attacked cars …"
> "Zeb figured if you could destroy the infrastructure," said Croze, "then the planet could repair itself. Before it was too late and everything went extinct".[122]

The MaddAddam group follows a science-based utopianism that relies on subversive action instead of religious spirituality, but they embrace the pacifism of the God's Gardeners because their "bombs" only attack the Corporations and never kill people. Even though Adam One considers the MaddAddam group schismatic and heretic, the God's Gardeners are always in contact with them and keep an agreement of mutual support to protect themselves from the Corporations and from other groups. The multinational companies have generated a state of chaos that triggered the formation of a number of insurrectionary radical groups that, while combining the God's Gardeners religious inspiration and the MaddAddam group's militancy, are driven by much more dangerous motivations that sometimes result in terroristic fanaticism.

Paradoxically, the most aggressive groups among this number of cults are the Lion Isaiahist and the Wolf Isaiahist, who both base their cult on the

[122] Ibidem.

Biblical Book of Isaiah that announces God's promise of a Peaceable Kingdom in which all creatures live together in harmony:

> The wolf will live with the lamb,
> the leopard will lie down with the goat,
> the calf and the lion and the yearling[a] together;
> and a little child will lead them.
> The cow will feed with the bear,
> their young will lie down together,
> and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
> The infant will play near the cobra's den,
> and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.[123]

In spite of their Arcadian ideal, the two factions of Isaiahists fight each other because they are «at odds over whether it was the lion or the wolf that would lie down with the lamb once the Peaceable Kingdom had arrived»[124]. The Lion Isaiahists profit from scientific and technological advancement to foster their ideal and commission the genetically engineered liobam to fulfill the lion/lamb prophecy without the first eating the second. They force God's will and take his place in creating the hybrid animal, which is sacred to the faction of the Wolf Isaiahist too. Their fanaticism paves the way for violent actions because they Machiavelistically feel that their end justifies whatever means they consider as necessary to reach it. Their terroristic charge culminates in the lethal bombings at the Rarity restaurant chain as a punishment for the liobam meat specialities on their menu.

3.3.2. The evolutionary advantage of apocalypse

The relevance of religion in the narrative is always counterbalanced by the scientific discourse, which influences the conception of myth-making as a

[123] Isaiah 11:6-8.

[124] Margaret Atwood, T*he Year of the Flood*, p. 39.

fundamental evolutionary tract of the human species. This argument has been advanced by a number of scholars from the arts and literature in the last few decades, in an attempt to bridge the science/culture divide theorized by C.P. Snow in *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*[125] in 1959. Snow's premise that the best creative expressions and breakthroughs come from the encounter of humanistic and scientific efforts was followed by scientists like the American biologist Edward O. Wilson and has opened the controversial field of evolutionary literary criticism, or literary Darwinism[126].

In Adam One's evolutionary representation, catastrophic events are not senseless disasters but expressions of a meaningful design and his narrative provide a context in which religion and science are collaborative forces in the adaptation of the God's Gardeners. The peculiarity of the evolutionary doctrine of the God's Gardeners is that it does not contrast scientific findings, nor does it try to substitute biology with the Word of God. In fact, their pantheon of saints includes environmental activists and thinkers, artists and scientists, naturalists and explorers who all share ecological concerns and

[125] See Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution. The Rede Lecture*.

[126] At the core of this branch of literary studies lies the integration of evolutionary biology in literary criticism, on the basis that artistic faculties are in fact adaptations in the evolutionary process of the human species. This approach is criticized as reductive and conservative as it narrows the complexities of art works to the necessary conformity of a scientific paradigm like evolutionary theory. See Joseph Carrol, *Evolution and Literary Theory*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995; Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby (eds), *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995; Joseph Carrol, Literary Darwinism. Evolution, Human Nature, andLiterature, New York: Routledge, 20041; Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson (eds), *The Literary Animal. Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005; Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories. Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010. See also Carlo Pagetti (ed), *Darwin nel Tempo. Modernità Letteraria e Immaginario Scientifico*, Milano: Cisalpino, 2009; Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

foster environmental change through science and art. Taken as a whole, the long list of the saints, which is always presented in a playful language, encapsulates the God's Gardeners system of beliefs and provide behavioral and spiritual guidelines. To name just a few, Saint Robert Burns of Mice, the Scottish poet author of the poem "To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough" (1785); Saint Rachel Carson of All birds, marine biologist and author of the environmental classic *Silent Spring*; Saint Chico Mendes, martyr, Brazilian trade union leader and advocate for human rights and the preservation of the Amazon rainforest; Saints Shackleton, Crozier, and Oates, explorers in the Arctic and Antarctic; Saint Julian of Norwich, a Christian mystic and final saint of the novel.

Atwood explains the centrality of religion in her trilogy following a line of thought that bonds it to science through language and narration. She maintains that the human mind is conditioned by language because «if you have a language which includes a past tense, you're going to sooner or later say, "Where did I come from?" And sooner or later you're going to end up with an origin story of some kind»[127]. Thus, religion is «a human subset of narrative and language»[128] that answer the question of our origins by identifying God as the primary cause. Science, on the other hand, have framed a number of hypothetic answers, the Big Bang for example, that put a non-divine unknown singularity at the beginning of the origin story. In this view, religion and science are both conditioned by a narrative necessity triggered by human language that has a singularity or God as its product. Atwood explores

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[127] Margaret Atwood, "15 Questions with Margaret Atwood", *The Harvard Crimson*, September 26th, 2013.
http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/9/26/15-questions-with-margaret-atwood. Last access November 15th 2015.

[128] Ibidem.

this possibility in the MaddAddam trilogy and in *The Year of the Flood* she pushes the hypothesis forward by suggesting that religion might even provide an adaptive advantage to the human species.

Following the idea that language determines the tension toward narrative, Atwood argues that, while the past tense stimulates the investigation on human origins, the future tense similarly inspires enquiries on what the end of the story might be. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode had argued that human beings live in the middle of things, with no clear vision of past and future, and that «to make sense of their span they need fictive concords between origins and ends»[129]. In other words, fiction is a strategy that is employed to explain human time and dispel the fears of a meaningless existence. Contrary to the chaos and horrors that narrations of the End usually bring to the mind, apocalyptic thinking provides a pattern of order because it depends on «a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain "in the middest"»[130]. Even though the MaddAddam trilogy does not feature an exact apocalypse because people survive and history is not interrupted, this makes it even more consistent with Kermode's paradigm. He writes that «[a]pocalypse can be revised without being discredited [and] this is part of its extraordinary resilience»[131].

It is no coincidence that Atwood chooses apocalypse, one of the most resilient narrative paradigms, to represent and elaborate the ecological degradation caused by the foolhardy and greedy behavior of humankind. The awareness that the extermination of the human species is likely to happen fosters the idea that substantial adjustments are required to reduce the impact

[129] Fran Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, p. 7.
[130] Ivi, p.8.
[131] Ibidem.

that human societies have on the environment. The plot of human evolution developed in the trilogy shows that religion and science often provide different responses on how to make sense of existence on the edge of extinction and to strengthen human resilience. Toby asks: «Why are we designed to see the world as supremely beautiful just as we're about to be snuffed? Do rabbits feel the same as the fox teeth bite down on their necks? Is it mercy?»[132], which raises the importance of the aesthetic instinct in strengthening human resilience. The beauty of nature seems to inspire the same feeling of hope that the God's Gardeners cultivates with their hymns.

In Adam One's narrative of environmental apocalypse, the premise is that if human beings believe in gods, there must be an evolutionary advantage in it and that, in times of crisis, such advantage provides our species with a motivation to care about the environment:

> most people don't care about other Species, not when times get hard. All they care about is their next meal, naturally enough: we have to eat or die. But what if it's God doing the caring? We've evolved to believe in gods, so this belief bias of ours must confer an evolutionary advantage.[133]

This passage is revealing of Atwood's view, derived from Northrop Frye, that religion is a product of our myth-making needs. It is also revealing of the hypothesis that God can actually strengthen the resilience of the human species because it gives a motivation for action and rebirth.

Atwood makes it clear in the trilogy that such motivation does not necessarily lead to ethical actions, nor to the redemption of Earth: the blind utopianism of the Isaiahists and the disingenuous greed of the Church of

[132] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 75.
[133] Ivi, p. 241.

PetrOleum[134] are telling examples of it. However, Adam One preaches an ecological message supported by scientific facts and reinforced by the presence of a superior being that might reward or punish humanity for its conduct.

The strictly materialist view of evolution «that we're an experiment animal protein has been doing on itself»[135] leads to the hubris and nihilism embodied by Crake. Adam One is able «to push popular sentiment in a biosphere-friendly direction by pointing out the hazards of annoying God by a violation of His trust in our stewardship»[136]. Conversely, Crake is emblem of the godless scientist that takes the role of creator and judge, but ultimately leaves no hope for the future of humankind and, instead of doing nothing, he triggers the catastrophe that was meant to destroy the human species. In the following chapter, I will engage in the complex scientific discourse on which the trilogy is based. More specifically, I will discuss the idea of nature fostered by Atwood and her belief in storytelling as a strategy of human survival and adaptation.

[134] The Church of PetrOleum is the God's Gardeners' religious counterpart, founded on the cult of oil and money.
[135] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 241.
[136] Ibidem.

Chapter 4.

MADDADDAM: OLD AND NEW NARRATIVES OF NATURE

> The book happens to be the most efficient technological instrument that the human mind has ever devised, and consequently it will always be here, at the centre of our technology, no matter what else we do.
>
> Northrop Frye (1982)

MaddAddam is the last novel of the trilogy and its title reveals the playful element in the use of language that characterizes the whole trilogy. It is a palindrome and the double "d" in the middle, Atwood explains, has two explanations: «the intellectual excuse» is the reference to the duplicated DNA used in genesplices, but she «made that up after the fact»[1]. The simple reason, she writes, «is that someone already had the domain name for 'Madadam,' and I didn't like the idea of my book title being used, possibly, for a porn site, as has been known to happen»[2]. Atwood has never concealed her concerns regarding covers, titles, and other considerations regarding the marketability of her works, especially in prose. For the same reason, she includes a synopsis of the previous two novels to allow the reader to catch up with the story.

This section is titled "The MaddAddam Trilogy: The Story So Far", which provides the reader with basic information about *Oryx and Crake* and

[1] Margaret Atwood, "Why I wrote *MaddAddam*", *Wattpad*, https://www.wattpad.com/24196534-why-i-wrote-maddaddam-part-1. Last access December 15th 2015.

[2] Ibidem.

The Year of the Flood. Indeed, the last novel of the trilogy hinges on stories and storytelling and complies with the need for an at least partial closure:

> Why did you write *MaddAddam*, I'm sometimes asked? I'm tempted to quote alpine climber George Mallory, who, when asked in 1924 why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, said, "Because it is there." *MaddAddam* had to be there, because the two books that came before it – *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009) – both end on unfinished business. So *MaddAddam* had to come along and close those open endings, didn't it? Or close them at least in part.[3]

It is a story that explores the boundaries of human nature by questioning the meaning of both humanity and nature.

4.1. What Kind of Nature?

As it has already been mentioned, "nature" is a term that is often conceptualized in opposition to "culture" and that originally describes a process, since it is referred to anything that is subjected to generation and death, growth and decay. Its etymology refers to the Latin *nātūra*, past participle of *nāscī*, to be born, and more generally represents whatever undergoes a process of physical transformation or metamorphosis, but it also has an abstract connotation projecting the term in a metaphysical dimension that suggests both the idea of the original past and of the future destination or destiny. From Aristotle's theory of four causes to Baruch Spinoza's *Deus sive natura*, philosophical discourses about nature have often been intertwined with metaphysics and ethics, a combination that Raffaello Sanzio represents in the allegory of philosophy in the *Stanza della Signatura* in the Palace of the Vatican. The Urbinate artist depicts philosophy as a female figure holding two books titled *Naturalis* and *Moralis*, which restate the branches, natural

[3] Ibidem.

philosophy and ethics respectively, on which the scope of philosophy, *causarum cognitio*, is grounded[4].

4.1.1. Discourses on nature and on the environment

The potentially metaphysical charge of "nature" is what discriminates it from "environment", a synonym under many aspects but whose etymology delineates a different concept. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "environment" as «[t]he physical surroundings or conditions in which a person or other organism lives, develops, etc., or in which a thing exists»[5]. As a matter of fact, "environment" is detached from the broader moral connotation that "nature" detains in classical and modern philosophy: it has a purely physical meaning, spatially and dynamically denoted by the elements that it includes and by the dynamics among such elements. For this reason, while "nature" represents a much longer and established scholarly tradition in both the humanities and science, contemporary discourses related to the ecological crisis have more frequently favoured "environment" over "nature" for its focus on observable and circumscribed phenomena. However, this does not limit the use of "environment" to scientific discourses only because, as David Mazel maintains, the environment too is «a myth, a grand *fable*, a

[4] See Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich, K. M. "Naturphilosophische Begründung einer holistischen Ethik", Italian translation by Carlo Sandrelli, "Fondazione di un'etica olistica con l'ausilio degli strumenti della filosofia della natura", in Sergio Dellavalle (ed), *L'Urgenza Ecologica. Percorso di Lettura Attraverso le Proposte dell'Etica Ambientalista*, Milano: Baldini Castoldi, 65-93; Matteo Andreozzi, *Le Sfide dell'Etica Ambientale. Possibilità e Validità delle Teorie Morali Non-Antropocentriche*, Milano: LED, 2015, p. 19.

[5] "environment, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2015. Web. 7 December 2015.

complex fiction, a widely shared, occasionally contested, and literally ubiquitous narrative»[6].

Postmodern thought makes an important contribution to the debate on nature and culture by deconstructing and overcoming the grand-narrative of the nature-culture dichotomy[7]. A distinguished voice of postmodernity in Canada and beyond, Linda Hutcheon sees the postcolonial and the ecological as perspectives that share the challenge to «modernity's faith in system and reason, in universal truth, beauty, and goodness»[8] and thus embrace postmodernity's «contingency, provisionality, and the "situatedness" of both knowledge and morality»[9]. Far from advocating disengagement, the «ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised»[10].

In other words, the impasse is given by the difficulty of responding to moral calls without relying on any overarching principle or, to use a typically postmodern term, without a meta-narrative, meaning «a narrative about narratives of historical meaning, experience or knowledge, which offers a

[6] David Mazel, *American Literary Environmentalism*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000, p. XII.

[7] See Linda Hutcheon, "Eruptions of Postmodernity: The Postcolonial and the Ecological", *Essays on Canadian Writing* 51 (1993), pp. 146-163; Jim Cheney, "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative", in Max Oelschlaeger (ed),*Postmodern Environmental Ethics*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1995, pp. 23-42; Daniel R. White, *Postmodern Ecology. Communication, Evolution, and Play*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1998; Glen A. Love, *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003; Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman (eds), *Material Ecocriticism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014.

[8] Linda Hutcheon, "Eruptions of Postmodernity: The Postcolonial and the Ecological", p. 147.

[9] Ibidem.

[10] Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, London: Routledge, 1992,p. XXII.

society legitimation through the anticipated completion of a (as yet unrealised) master idea»[11]. The paradigm of postmodernity, Hutcheon writes, «transforms these overarching modern metanarratives of control and order into simply a few of the many possible narratives that we have constructed for ourselves throughout history»[12].

The strenuous task of taking responsibility outside the trusted borders of a meta-narrative is at the basis of the ethical paradox that Atwood extensively develops in the MaddAddam trilogy and whose best representative is Crake. He is a scientist who does not believe in any of the modern meta-narratives and he refuses the existence of master ideas such as God and Nature: «"Nature is to zoos as God is to churches." – "I thought you didn't believe in God," said Jimmy. – "I don't believe in Nature either," said Crake. "Or not with a capital N"»[13]. Yet, he feels responsible for the impending ecological disaster caused by humanity and responds to the moral call by paradoxically endorsing another meta-narrative. The master theory of evolution leads him to the idea that science can help building a better future by replacing humankind with a supposedly perfect humanoid species that will not need any other meta-narrative to inhabit the planet successfully and harmoniously. His attempt is flawed at its roots and, as a result, the Crakers constantly and avidly crave for stories:

> "They want me to tell them a story," says Toby. "About being made by Crake. But who do they think Crake was, and how do they think he made them? What were they told about that, back in the Paradice dome?"

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[11] Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi (eds), *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 186

[12] Linda Hutcheon, "Eruptions of Postmodernity: The Postcolonial and the Ecological", p. 157.

[13] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 206.

> "They think Crake is some sort of a god," says Crozier. "But they don't know what he looks like."[14]

Not only do they have a concept of God that they identify in Crake, they also want to hear the story of their own creation time and again, as if the rituals connected to telling the story corroborate their existence and legitimize their social nucleus.

> They already know the story but the important thing seems to be that Toby must tell it. She must make a show of eating the fish they've brought, charred on the outside and wrapped in leaves. […] She must begin at the beginning, she must preside over the creation, she must make it rain. She must clear away the chaos, she must lead them out of the Egg and shepherd them down to the seashore. […] Once Toby has made her way through the story, they urge her to tell it again, then again. They prompt, they interrupt, they fill in the parts she's missed. What they want from her is a seamless performance, as well as more information than she either knows or can invent.[15]

As the Crakers' narrative demonstrates, Crake does not accomplish the postmodern dream of overcoming the paradox of acting morally without a guiding principle. They need stories to make sense of their existence in the world and enjoy listening to Jimmy and Toby, even though they clearly do not share that pleasure with them.

4.1.2. The postmodernist debate

Crake's failure in emancipating the Crakers from grand narratives seems to validate Dana Phillips's argument[16] that postmodernism is incompatible with environmental thought on the ground that it comes into being when «nature

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[14] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 42.

[15] Ivi, p. 45.

[16] See Dana Phillips, "Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology", *New Literary History*, 30.3 (1999), pp. 577-602 and *The Truth of Ecology. Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

is gone for good»[17] and it is consequently «incapable of telling a coherent story, much less generating a *theory*, about the disappearance of nature. It simply has to take nature's disappearance for granted»[18]. Phillips's argument is likely based on a misleading interpretation[19] of postmodernism as a synonym of radical relativism and it does not provide a satisfying explanation for the prolific contribution to ecocriticism from postmodern thinkers. The misunderstanding is largely based on the idea that the natural world, like everything else, is a cultural construction, an assertion that he bases on Linda Hutcheon's claim that «even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees»[20].

However, Phillips quotes Hutcheon out of context, because the Canadian scholar is purposefully oversimplifying the nature/culture dichotomy to expose the naïve interpretation of nature as a virginal otherness opposed to humankind. Instead of denying the existence of nature, postmodern ecology seeks a renewed engagement of humankind with the natural world and, in Serpil Oppermann's words, it «emphatically dismantles disjunctive opposites [and] opens space for mutually constitutive relationships between culture and nature»[21]. Phillips grounds his major study on ecocritical theory, *The Truth of Ecology*, in Umberto Eco's 1975 essay "Travels in Hyperreality"[22], whose last section is titled "Ecology 1984 and

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[17] Frederik Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. IX.

[18] Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology. Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*, p. 27.

[19] See Serpil Oppermann, "Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice", *ISLE* 13.2 (Summer 2006), pp. 103-128.

[20] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 2.

[21] Serpil Oppermann, "Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice", p. 116.

[22] Umberto Eco, "Il cuore dell'Impero: Viaggio nell'iperrealtà", English translation by William Weaver, "Travels in Hyperreality", in *Travels in Hyperreality. Essays*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986, pp. 1-58.

Coca-Cola Made Flesh". Eco explores the theme of hyperreality – a simulation that appears as undistinguishable from reality – in Nature and takes inspiration from the zoo in San Diego.

The show of uncontaminated nature is accurately designed to the benefit of the visitors who live an amusing and educating experience, but «the final essence of this apologue on the goodness of nature is Universal Taming»[23]. The public has the feeling of being put into close contact with wild freedom, but they have only submitted to the falsification industry of hyperreality:

> The first, most immediate level of communication that these Wild Worlds achieve is positive; what disturbs us is the allegorical level superimposed on the literal one, the implied promise of a *1984* already achieved at the animal level. What disturbs us is not an evil plan; there is none. It is a symbolic threat. We know that the Good Savage, is he still exists in the equatorial forests, kill crocodiles and hippopotamuses, and if they want to survive the hippopotamuses and crocodiles must submit to the falsification industry: This leaves us upset. And without alternatives.[24]

Phillips takes Eco's description of the apparently natural yet artificial ecosystem of the San Diego Zoo as an exemplification of the reason why «the hyperreal is not just a bad idea or the product of a lapse in taste, but a full-blown cultural condition»[25] that he identifies with the postmodern cultural condition.

Even though the zoo is in the vanguard of animal well-being, the Italian writer observes the suspicious docility of the animals and ambiguously asks: «Where does the truth of ecology lie?»[26], which conceals the question whether

[23] Ivi, p. 52.
[24] Ivi, p. 52-53.
[25] Dana Phillips, "Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology", p. 577.
[26] Ivi, p. 49.

the ecology of the zoo is not true after all, but a lie. The animals of endangered species live in the artificial reproduction of their original environment and their freedom and authenticity is the main act of the play. Eco explains that the paying visitors of the zoo are lead through the exhibition of natural peace, an idyllic reproduction of wilderness devoid of all the inconveniences that the original wilderness have for human fruition. Similarly, the Corporations in the MaddAddam trilogy create a fake habitat for their employees and their families. Authenticity is not lost in zoos only, but also in the lives of privileged citizens, where even the difference between the *authentic* and the *reproduced* is ungraspable:

> When Jimmy was really little they'd lived in a Cape Cod–style frame house in one of the Modules […] but now they lived in a large Georgian centre-plan with an indoor swimming pool and a small gym. The furniture in it was called *reproduction*. Jimmy was quite old before he realized what this word meant – that for each reproduction item, there was supposed to be an original somewhere. Or there had been once. Or something.[27]

The genetically engineered nature of the Watson-Crick Institute and Crake's Paradice Project is also strikingly similar to Eco's description of the San Diego zoo:

> Since the temperature around him is artificially kept beyond zero, the polar bear gives the same impression of freedom; and since the rocks are dark and the water in which he is immersed is rather dirty, the fearsome grizzly also seems to feel at his ease. But ease can be demonstrated only through sociability and so the grizzly, whose name is Chester, waits for the microbus to come by at three-minute intervals and for the girl attendant to shout to Chester to say hello to the people. Then Chester stands up, waves his hand (which is a terrifying huge paw) to say hi.

[27] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 26.

> The girl throws him a cookie and we're off again, while Chester waits for the next bus.[28]

In MaddAddam, biomimicry is employed for human needs and artificially pushed to its extremes in the name of sustainability. Not only is nature tamed and employed for human entertainment and education, world environments are created from scratch in such a way that they are not imitation anymore, but become original:

> Huge fake rocks, made from a combo-matrix of recycled plastic bottles and plant material from giant tree cacti and various lithops – the living-stone members of the Mesembryanthemaceae – were dotted here and there. […] The fake rocks looked like real rocks but weighed less; not only that, they absorbed water during periods of humidity and released it in times of drought, so they acted like natural lawn regulators. Rockulators, was the brand name. You had to avoid them during heavy rainfalls, though, as they'd been known to explode.[29]

Through genetic engineering, nature is allowed to exist only in its artificial version, so that taming is not even necessary and natural evolution is replaced by synthetic evolution. Hyperreality is brought to a higher level in the bioengineered world because the boundary between natural and synthetic is extremely blurred if not completely meaningless. It is not a show or a play enacted by tamed animals behind the bars of a zoo anymore, because scientists mastermind the very existence of these living beings:

> "So, are the butterflies – are they recent?" Jimmy asked after a while. The ones he was looking at had wings the size of pancakes and were shocking pink, and were clustering all over one of the purple shrubs.

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[28] Umberto Eco, "Travels in Hyperreality", p. 49.

[29] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 199-200

> “You mean, did they occur in nature or were they created by the hand of man? In other words, are they real or fake? […] These butterflies fly, they mate, they lay eggs, caterpillars come out”[30]

The process through which hyperreality substitutes reality is finally accomplished with the Crakers, whose creation is realized by picking their features from different natural organisms: «As Crake used to say, *Think of an adaptation, any adaptation, and some animal somewhere will have thought of it first*»[31]. So, the citrus smell functions as built-in insect repellent, the purring as a self-healing mechanism borrowed from cats, and the chromatic features of the reproductive system – «a trick of variable pigmentation filched from the baboons, with a contribution from the expandable chromophores of the octopus»[32] – when they are ready to mate. Crake creates a hypernatural species, borrowing its features from natural species but assembling them artificially. The result is all but natural:

> They’re preternaturally beautiful, thinks Toby. Unlike us. We must seem subhuman to them, with our flapping extra skins, our aging faces, our warped bodies, too thin, too fat, too hairy, too knobbly. Perfection exacts a price, but it’s the imperfect who pay it.[33]

The postmodernist influence on Atwood’s writings about nature does not condone, as Phillips’s reasoning would suggest, the disappearance of natural environment in the convoluted sphere of language. It does not even imply the negation of the ecological crisis based on the assumption that nothing exists outside the text, which derives from an oversimplified interpretation of postmodernism. Kate Soper’s trenchant words encapsulate the skeptical attitude that some ecocritical theorists take towards

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[30] Ivi, p. 200.

[31] Ivi, p. 164

[32] Ibidem.

[33] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 36.

postmodernism: «it is not language that has a hole in its hozone layer; and the real 'thing' continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier»[34]. Yet, postmodernism contributes to expose the false assumptions on nature that language often conveys and, as Atwood's writings have often demonstrated, it overturns the relations of power. In Linda Hutcheon's words, «postmodernism challenges our mimetic assumptions about representation (in any of the 'scrambled menu' meaning): assumptions about its transparency and common-sense naturalness»[35]. In doing so, language is transformed from a tool of subjugation – nature cannot talk and humanity takes advantage of it – into a tool of empowerment because, as Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer points out, the ecocritical position «entails a critical reassessment of the functional relationship between cultural 'texts' and their material referents»[36].

In the MaddAddam trilogy, Margaret Atwood explores the possibility that language and storytelling are the keys to overcome the environmental crisis by dismantling oppositions and building relationships. Oppermann maintains that «ecologically oriented postmodernism draws attention to the linguistic manipulations behind the discursive constitution of nature at the bottom of which lies human oppression of the nonhuman world resulting in the environmental degradation»[37]. Atwood's writings can be successfully interpreted in a postmodern framework for her use of the emancipating power of parody, which has already been discussed in the second chapter of this

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[34] Kate Soper, *What Is Nature?*, London: Blackwell, 1995, p. 151.

[35] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 32.

[36] Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer, "Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Defining the Subject of Ecocriticism – An Introduction", in *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies. Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006, pp. 9-21, p. 11.

[37] Serpil Oppermann, "Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice", p. 117.

dissertation. Atwood addresses her parodic wits not only to literary forms and to religion, but to mystifying discourses on nature too. The entire representation of manufactured nature in Atwood's trilogy exemplifies the mystification of environmental discourses on nature, evolution, and ecological crisis, but there is also a direct parodization of self-professed environmental organizations.

4.1.3. Postmodern ecology in "Bearlift"

"Bearlift", the fourth chapter of *MaddAddam*, aptly exemplifies Atwood's parodization of superficial and self-absolving environmentalism. Atwood introduces the intertwining multiple layers of the episode: «There's the story, then there's the real story, then there's the story of how the story came to be told. Then there's what you leave out of the story. Which is part of the story too»[38]. Finding out the "real" story is not as important as performing the act of telling the story, thus including as much visions on the facts as possible. Atwood's exploration of the unreliability of stories as ultimate truths has a relevant correlative in the poem "True Stories" (1981):

> The true story is vicious
> and multiple and untrue
> after all.
>
> Why do you need it?
> Don't ever ask for the true story.[39]

The chapter begins with the simplified version of Zeb's adventure that Toby tells the Crakers, who want to hear about «when Zeb was lost in the Mountains, and ate the Bear»[40]: «Zeb was lost. He sat under a tree. The tree

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[38] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 56.
[39] Margaret Atwood, "True Stories", in *True Stories*, p. 11.
[40] Ivi, p. 53.

was in a big open space, wide and flat, like the beach except there was no sand and no sea, only some chilly pools and a lot of moss. All around but quite far away, there were mountains»[41]. Toby immediately runs into many difficulties in the narration, because she is not used to the Crakers' lack of knowledge on the world, which is directly proportional to their curiosity for what they do not know. She even has to explain what a mountain is, but they cannot handle the amount and complexity of new information that is implied:

> Mountains? Mountains are very large and high rocks. No, those are not mountains, those are buildings. Buildings fall down, and then they make a crash. Mountains fall down too, but they do it very slowly. No, the mountains did not fall down on Zeb. [42]

Then, the reader is lead through Zeb's own narration about the time he was working for Bearlift, an environmental organization that wanted to save bears from extinction:

> Bearlift was a scam, or partly a scam. It didn't take anyone with half a brain too long to figure that one out. Unlike many scams it was well meaning, but it was a scam nonetheless. It lived off good intensions of city types with disposable emotions who liked to think they were saving something – some rag from their primordial authentic ancestral past, a tiny shred of their collective soul dressed up in a cute bear suit.[43]

Atwood exposes here the environmental problems generated by false assumptions on nature. While it is true that «it is not language that has a hole in its hozone layer»[44], Zeb's account shows very clearly the flawed discourse on the environment that inspires a good deal of society. It is interesting to note that the events imagined in the novel take place when the Corporations have

[41] Ibidem.

[42] Ivi, p. 54.

[43] Ivi, p. 59.

[44] Kate Soper, *What Is Nature?*, p. 151.

not entirely taken charge of society and, since the whole trilogy is set in a quite close future, this temporal note makes the criticism particularly relevant to the reader's own contemporary world:

> The concept was simple: polar bears were striving because the ice was almost gone and they can't catch seals anymore, so let's feed them our leftovers until they learn to adapt, "*adapt* being the buzzword of those days, if you'll recall […]"
> "I remember *adapt*," says Toby. "It was another way of saying *tough luck*. To people you weren't going to help out."[45]

The damage does not occur on the discursive level only, though, because many false solutions and detrimental practices follow from a flawed discourse on nature and its laws.

As Zeb underlines, «feeding trash to the bears didn't help them adapt, it just taught them that food falls out of the sky. They'd start slavering every time they heard the sound of a 'thopter, they had their very own cargo cult»[46]. The bears' faith in food-providing entities in the sky is also a reference to the flawed religious discourses that have been analyzed in the previous chapter. Atwood's postmodern use of language is not meant to deny the existence of reality, but to denounce its mystification that derives from the blind faith in human representations of it. The bears, perceiving their "reality" as food falling from the sky, are victims of the same mimetic assumptions that humans often makes and which, being caused by verbal artifice, can only be unmasked through language.

There is a sharp contrast between the idea of nature conveyed by the Bearlift organization and the nature that Zeb experience in the Mountains[47].

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[45] Ibidem.

[46] Ibidem.

[47] As it has already been mentioned, the Mackenzie Mountains in which the events are set are the only certain place location of the whole trilogy, thus giving a special significance to

To Zeb's colleagues at Bearlift, whom he calls «preposterous green-hued furfuckers»[48] that sermonize on the necessity to restore the ecological balance, nature is what they see from the sky when they fly with their helicopters to feed the bears:

> The flight was standard, threading the valleys through and around the Pelly Mountains, pausing to bombard the landscape a few times with bear yummies; then over to the high-altitude Barrens with the Mackenzies all around, postcard snow on tops, with a couple more drops; then crossing the remains of the Old Canol Trail, still marked by the occasional World War Two telephone pole.
> […] two bears – one mostly, one mostly brown – were already cantering toward their personal garbage dump as the 'thopter approached; Zeb could see their fur rippling like a shag rug being shaken. Being that close was always a bit of a thrill.[49]

Close enough to feel the thrill of the wilderness, but only in its postcard version, nature is represented as the object of man's observing eyes, at safe distance from the perils that it conceals. When Zeb experience that landscape from the inside, he finds « himself sitting under a tree, staring at the tree trunk. Astonishing, how clear the frilly edges were, of the lichen; light grey, with a tinge of green, and an edge that was darker, so intricate…»[50].

When he moves in that environment that he had only overflew until then, his perception of the surrounding changes significantly. Like in the

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Canadian wilderness and underlining that Atwood, while addressing a world readership, never forgets the Canadian dimension. Moreover, Zeb, who eats parts of the defunct Chuck to survive, becomes the epitome of the *windigo*, an Algonquian cannibal monster that Atwood describes as «a giant spirit-creature». This episode is a prophecy of Zeb's killing of his father: «If you go Wendigo – as Zeb does – you may end up losing your human mind and personality and destroy your family members, or those you love most», Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, pp. 66-67.

[48] Ivi, p. 58

[49] Ivi, p. 66.

[50] Ivi, p. 67.

previous survey from the helicopter, Zeb gives an overview on the landscape featuring both natural and artificial objects and he describes the encounter with a living being, but the effect is neither reassuring nor enticing:

> The tundra was hard walking. Spongy, waterlogged, with hidden pools and slippery moss and treacherous mounds of tussock grass. There were parts of old airplanes sticking out of the peat – a strut here, a blade there, detritus from rash twentieth-century bush pilots caught by fog or sudden winds, long ago. He saw a mushroom, left it alone: he knew little about mushrooms, but some where hallucinogenic. That's all he'd needed, an encounter with the 'shroom god while green and purple teddybears skimmed towards him on tiny wings, grinning pinkly.[51]

The perils that give Zeb the exciting thrill on the helicopter, now become dangerously real and ascribe to nature a complexity that exceeds by far what can be contained inside a postcard.

Zeb leaves the security of the helicopter because his partner, Chuck, attacks him for reasons that are revealed much later in the novel, giving another perspective on the dangers surrounding environmentalist discourses. Chuck is an adept of the Church of PetrOleum, a sect that was founded by Zeb and Adam One's vicious father and that is based on the cult of oil and money:

> The Rev had nailed together a theology to help him rake in the cash. Naturally he had a scriptural foundation for it. Matthew, Chapter 16, Verse 18: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." "It didn't take a rocket-science genius, the Rev would say, to figure out that Peter is the Latin word for rock, and therefore the real, true meaning of 'Peter' refers to petroleum, or oil that comes from rock. 'So this verse, dear friends, is not only about Saint Peter: it is a prophecy, a vision of the Age of Oil, and the proof, dear friends, is right before your eyes, because look! What is more valued by us today than oil?'[52]

[51] Ivi, p. 72.
[52] Ivi, p. 112.

Upon this scriptural foundation, the Church grows in the worship of The Holy Oleum and its extraction from the bowels of the earth: «The Holy Oleum must not be hidden under a bushel – in other words, left underneath the rocks – for to do so is to flout the Word! Lift up your voices in song, and let the Oleum gush forth in ever stronger and all-blessed streams!'»[53].

The extraction of oil is the reason why Chuck crosses Zeb's path, because Bearlift works in a geographical area where huge amount of oil could be extracted and the PetrOleum Church is interested in infiltrating the organization. Its adepts obviously have no interest in preserving the environment, since their faith is based exactly on its consumption:

> they were all death on ecofreaks. Their ads featured stuff like a cute little blond girl next to some particularly repellent threatened species, such as the Surinam toad or the great white shark, with a slogan saying: *This*? or *This*? Implying that all cute little blond girls were in danger of having their throats slit so the Surinam toads might prosper.[54]

The idea of nature on which Bearlift and similar organizations base their actions of environmental protection is clearly deceptive, but so is also the idea of nature fostered by the Church of PetrOleum and other ultra-conservative groups. In this way, Atwood exposes the deceptive use of language and the consequent fallacious reasoning shared by both environmentalist groups and non-renewable resources fanatics. The playful and parodic element holds, again, a crucial role and it is directed to the reader's own society too.

Postmodern and ecocritical theories share a few basic peculiarities that contribute to give a thorough description of the representation of nature conveyed by the MaddAddam trilogy. First, they both favor the metaphorical use of language over purely logical discourse to better communicate the

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[53] Ibidem.

[54] Ivi, p. 182.

complexities of ecological relations; second, they reject dichotomical thinking that oppose nature and culture; third, both discard metanarratives that impose an inaccurate view on the evolution of species, which Atwood exemplifies in Crake's dream of artificially-made perfect organisms. As Daniel R. White puts it, «[m]etaphorically, the ideas of postmodernity and those of ecology are complementary halves of a new multidimensional environmental ethics and practice»[55]. The MaddAddam trilogy draws the reader's attention on the fact that nature and the environment are conceptual constructs that exist within the medium of language and that often deviate significantly from what they represent. Yet, a postmodern reading of Atwood's trilogy does not deny the environmental crisis but, on the contrary, it underlines the necessity to elaborate narratives capable of developing literature and culture into strategies of survival[56].

4.2. Beyond Extinction: Old and New Species

The MaddAddam trilogy develops around one fundamental question: can human beings fix the damages that they have inflicted upon the environment and re-establish the equilibrium of ecological dynamics? More to the point, can human nature either return to its Arcadian idyllic past or reach the Utopian ideal of harmony with the whole of nature? In fact, the concept of nature also refers to a spontaneous inclination that either proceeds from the Christian notion of human corruption caused by the original sin and the loss of Eden or is inspired by an ideal fulfillment of human deepest essence. In both cases, the perfection of humanity is intimately connected to nature and the

[55] Daniel R. White, *Postmodern Ecology. Communication, Evolution, and Play*, pp. 32-33.

[56] For a comprehensive theoretical and practical exploration of the potential of literature as a strategy of survival to overcome the ecological crisis, see Serenella Iovino, *Ecologia Letteraria. Una Strategia di Sopravvivenza*, Milano: Edizioni Ambiente, 2006.

condition of the latter is seen as a mirror of the former. Margaret Atwood approaches this issue from the perspective of the current mass extinction of species and develops her narrative around the idea that the creative powers of humanity can be employed as a critique of ruthless technological and industrial progress to ultimately save nature from human hubris.

4.2.1. The tragic and the comic in extinction narratives

The loss of biodiversity is a biological fact that has often been narrated in environmentalist stories in an elegiac and tragic template that follows a relentlessly declining trend. Ursula K. Heise analyzes what she calls the "cultures of extinction"[57] and the manifestations of the ecological crisis across a range of disciplinary practices and literary genres. The cultures of extinction are mutually tied to the contemporary geological era, that has been labelled as Anthropocene[58] by Nobel-laureate chemist Paul Crutzen, who observed that the impact of human activities on the ecology of the planet has reached such a level that it has become the major geological force of the epoch and will have long-lasting consequences[59]. The major contemporary effects of the Anthropocene are climate change and biodiversity loss[60], which both appear

[57] Ursula K. Heise, "Los Dogs, Last Birds, and Listed Species: Cultures of Extinctions", *Configurations* 18 (2011), pp. 49-72.

[58] See Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene E. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene", *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000), pp. 17-18.

[59] Crutzen acknowledges that his idea, though it was popularized only in the 1990s, dates back to 1873, when Italian geologist, paleontologist, and educator Antonio Stoppani spoke of the anthropozoic era in his *Corso di geologia*. The Italian scholar writes that the destructive force of humankind is responsible for the extinction of countless species. See Antonio Stoppani, *Corso di geologia. Volume II. Geologia Stratigrafica*, Milano: G. Bernardoni e G. Brigola editori, p. 773.

[60] Both climate change and extinction are normal geological and evolutionary processes that have resulted in glacial and interglacial periods and mass extinctions, but in the current Anthropocene Epoch, such processes occur at unprecedented high and vast rate that might cause irreversible ecological collapse.

extensively in MaddAddam and constitute the ecological fabric on which the plot is woven.

Heise maintains that the environmentalist debate from the 1960s has developed narratives, both fiction and non-fiction, that most often use the genre conventions of elegy and tragedy, as a synecdoche for the decline of nature and as a reflection on modernization. Species loss is crucial in the environmentalist debate, but mere agreement on what is to be defined as a species, and consequently to its loss, is yet to be found. Each branch of biology has advanced tentative definitions that account for the reproductive behavior, the phylogenetic or morphological features, the metabolic processes or genetic material of an organism, but a shared consensus on the concept of species is yet to be found[61].

The evolutionary process causes all organisms to change in order to adapt to the environment and the only possible anchorage in the definitional debate is that species are time-limited versions of biological units. They are bound to transform through slight changes over time and space into altogether a new species (speciation) or into a new version of the original species (anagenesis) or to become extinct. Most contemporary environmental discourses fail to acknowledge that, as gloomy as it is, extinction is part of an acknowledged process of evolution and, even though the current rate of biodiversity loss is alarming and human beings bear a major responsibility for it, the species count alone does not provide an adequate narrative of the complexity of the decline of nature.

Actually, extinction is often employed in contemporary narratives not just as a metaphor for the decline of nature, but also as a critique of modernity.

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[61] See John S. Wilkins, *Species: A History of the Idea*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

As Heise highlights, public environmental campaigns often rely on certain endangered species, such as polar bears, pandas, and dodos, with anthropomorphic and aesthetic qualities that make them appealing to raise environmental awareness, but such stories «often function synecdochically by pointing to broader crises in humans interactions with nature»[62]. The crisis of humankind in the relationship with the environment is then integrated in the cultural context and becomes a symptom of unease over the consequences of modernization.

However, this connection between modernization and extinction should be seen from a double perspective. On the one hand, modernization is often responsible for the environment alteration causing endangerment and extinction of species[63]; on the other hand, modernization often acts in defense of endangered species and against indigenous populations. Whaling is a typical example of the struggle between conservationist modernization and indigenous cultures that rely on whale hunting for their livelihood[64]. Heise writes that «[e]xtinction, in this case, becomes the political fulcrum at which different critiques of modernity – the indigenous one and the environmentalist one – collide»[65] and the loss of a species represents a turning point in the history of human civilization. Narratives of extinction reveal «worries about the future of nature on one hand, and on the other, hopes that a part of one's own identity and culture might be preserved or revived if an endangered species could be allowed to survive or an extinct one to be rediscovered»[66]. The

[62] Ursula Heise, "Los Dogs, Last Birds, and Listed Species: Cultures of Extinctions", p. 61.
[63] See, for example, David Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions*, New York: Scribner, 1996.
[64] Canada is directly involved in this debate, as a number of Inuit groups carry out subsistence whaling and seal hunting in the Canadian seas and coasts.
[65] Ursula Heise, "Los Dogs, Last Birds, and Listed Species: Cultures of Extinctions", p. 68.
[66] Ivi, p. 69.

Extinctathon game featured in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy well represents the role of extinction as a blend of biological and cultural concern.

Human beings, Heise points out, alter nature through scientific and technological development not only by hastening the extinction rate, but also by creating new species. Humanity has adapted in relation to other species by selecting and domesticating animals and plants or generating new variants according to specific needs, so that these selected species could thrive more easily. Selective breeding is a process that requires a long span of time, but the advent of biotechnology has brought about a radical change in the reach of human power in generating new species, because the intervention consists of a direct manipulation of the genome of an organism. In spite of the ethical issues that are involved in the creation of new living beings, Atwood does not use genetic engineering only to denounce unethical technological progress, but also as a literary strategy to reverse the narrative of the decline of nature.

One of the scholars engaging his critical tools in the intersections between literature and ecology, Joseph Meeker, writes that «comedy and ecology are systems designed to accommodate necessity and to encourage acceptance of it, while tragedy is concerned with avoiding or transcending the necessity in order to accomplish the impossible»[67]. *MaddAddam* is the key to understand the whole trilogy as a praise to comedy as a successful literary strategy to narrate evolution. Crake wants to accomplish the impossible task of manipulating the rules of evolution by creating his own static version of the perfect human being and he is for this reason doomed to fail. He is the tragic grotesque hero who, in absence of God, takes his place and defeats himself. On the contrary, the human survivors of the Waterless Flood learn to live with

[67] Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, p. 44.

the hybrid species that inhabit the environment with them and take up a new process of adaptation and evolution.

Following Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival*, Heise suggests that current narratives of extinction employs the tragic and elegiac modes only, exclusively focusing on biodiversity loss. Comic and satiric approaches to extinction like Atwood's, on the other hand, might trigger the regenerative power of imagination to envision the future of life, instead of the end of nature:

> Comedy is a celebration, a ritual renewal of biological welfare as it persists in spite of any reasons there may be for feeling metaphysical despair […]. Literary comedy depends on the loss of equilibrium and its recovery. Wherever the normal processes of life are obstructed unnecessarily, the comic way seeks to return to normal.[68]

Heise relies on Meeker's argument and writes that comedy understands «extinction not only as narrative endpoint, but as the possibility of new beginnings – not the end of nature so much as its continually changing features»[69].

4.2.2. Genetically engineered animals: facts and fiction

Atwood's emphasis on hybridization and genetic engineering provides a perspective on the future of humankind in nature that is closer to Meeker's comic mode rather than the elegiac or tragic template. There is a consistent number of new hybrid lab-created species with the most diverse origins and functions. There are the pigoons, giant pigs with human brain functions, whose «organs could be customized, using cells from individual human donors, and the organs were frozen until needed»[70]. Their meat is eventually

[68] Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival. Studies in Literary Ecology*, p. 39-40.
[69] Ursula Heise, "Los Dogs, Last Birds, and Listed Species: Cultures of Extinctions", p.72.
[70] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 23.

turned into food, even though the Corporation that produces them claims the contrary because «no one would want to eat an animal whose cells might be identical with at least some of their own»[71]. Mo'hairs, a sheep-human splice that provide hair extensions (the capital M underlines that the species is a patented commercial item): «[o]nscreen, in advertisements, their hair had been shiny — you'd see the sheep tossing its hair, then a beautiful girl tossing a mane of the same hair. *More hair with Mo'Hair!* But they're not faring so well without their salon treatments»[72]. The liobams, part lion and part lamb, are at the center of the already mentioned religious dispute on the attainability of the Peaceable Kingdom[73]. The rakunk is a mix of skunk and racoon born as «an after-hours hobby on the part of one of the OrganInc biolab hotshots […] : create-an-animal was so much fun, said the guys doing it; it made you feel like God»[74]. In spite of its purely recreational origin, the rakunk turns out to be marketable as a pet and has the chance to enter the world of natural evolution[75].

The Corporations do not create and commercialize charming and beneficial hybrids only, but accommodate less desirable requests from the market as well. The CorpSeCorps need ferocious and deceiving watchdogs and commission the wolvogs: «they still look like dogs, still behave like dogs, pricking up their ears, making playful puppy leaps and bounces, wagging their tails. They'll sucker you in, then go for you. It hasn't taken much to reverse fifty thousand years of man-canid interaction»[76]. The bobkittens are

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[71] Ibidem.
[72] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 238.
[73] See section 3.3.1 of this dissertation.
[74] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 51.
[75] These hybrid species have an obvious literary precedent in H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, which Atwood analyzes in her essay "Ten Ways of Looking at *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by H.G. Wells", in *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, pp. 150-167.
[76] Ivi, p. 108.

fearsome bobcat-kitten hybrids, that «were supposed to eliminate feral cats, thus improving the almost non-existent songbird population»[77], but soon went out of control. The snats, «[r]ats with long green scaly tails and rattlesnake fangs»[78] and represent one of the unfortunate blend that had to be destroyed because they turned out too obnoxious to be marketable. One of the most interesting splices is the spoat/gider, the mascot of the Watson-Crick Institute and «one of the first successful splices, done in Montreal at the turn of the century, goat crossed with spider to produce high-tensile spider silk filaments in the milk. The main application today was bulletproof vests»[79].

As Atwood already claimed in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale* and the speculative nature of her novel, «[t]here's nothing in it that we as a species haven't done, aren't doing now or don't have the technological capacity to do»[80]. In the Acknowledgements of *MaddAddam*, she upholds this statement again: «Although *MaddAddam* is a work of fiction, it does not include any technologies or biobeings that do not already exist, are not under construction, or ar not possible in theory»[81]. This proves to be especially true for the spoat/gider, that Atwood transferred into her fiction from a project that was actually released to the public from Montreal based company Nexia Biotechnologies and McGill University:

> Using patented processes, Nexia Biotechnologies Inc. is creating a herd of transgenic goats - animals with an additional gene. The goats, which contain a spider's silk-making gene, produce milk loaded with spider silk protein. The milk is collected, and the silk protein extracted. The

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[77] Ivi, p. 164.

[78] Ivi, p. 224.

[79] Ivi, p. 199.

[80] Margaret Atwood Papers, MS Coll 200, box 96.

[81] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 393.

> protein is then processed into steely strong but supple filaments with medicinal, military and commercial applications.[82]

Jeffrey Turner, the founder of Nexia Biotechnologies, talks about the project in terms that could have been easily used by Crake, perfectly reasonable and seemingly compliant with the laws of nature:

> Nexia's project is less about altering nature than harnessing it. The company's goal isn't to create weird goats; they're merely a means of producing useful quantities of spider silk, a simple substance created eons ago by natural evolution […].What Nexia is really up to isn't mere genetic engineering, it's 'biomimicry'.[83]

®BioSteel, the tradename for the silk obtained from the spider-goat's milk, is also promoted as eco-friendly in both its composition and its production process, thus drawing another striking comparison with Crake's environmental goals.

The overlapping of science and fiction is one of the core elements of the MaddAddam trilogy and aims to help the reader perceive biotechnological advancement and its possible outcomes in concrete, even though fictional, everyday life. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) is another literary example of the astonishingly ordinary everyday life in a dystopic society based on cloning human beings that are then used as organ providers. In her review to *Never Let Me Go*, Atwood writes that «Ishiguro isn't much interested in the practicalities of cloning and organ donation […]. Nor is this a novel about future horrors»[84]. She identifies the core motifs in the marginalization of

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[82] Quoted from the Fact Sheet of McGill University's Office of Technology Transfer, October 30th 2002, http://www.mcgill.ca/files/ott/nexia.pdf. Last access November 15th 2015.

[83] Lawrence Osborne, "Got Silk", *New York Times Magazine*, 16 June 2002, quoted in Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 365.

[84] Margaret Atwood, "*Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro", in *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, pp. 168-173, p. 169.

subdued groups, the world of children, the role of art, and the complexity of human relationships, but the bioethical issues in the background raise pressing questions on the meaning of being human and on the control that people have on their own and others' bodies. Power relations and the essence of humanity are the crux of both Atwood's and Ishiguro's novels, and genetic engineering provides new frameworks to find possible answers to old questions.

Anna Franciska Pusch argues that the MaddAddam trilogy «depicts a future where biotechnological innovations, especially in the field of human and animal "enhancement", significantly affect shared human–animal life by redistributing power and authority, as well as by blurring the human–animal boundary»[85]. The human-animal splice that poses such questions throughout the whole trilogy is that of the pigoons:

> with their human portion of DNA, are the most visible representatives of the hybridization of the human-animal realm. The goal of the pigoon project was to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host – organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection […]. A rapid-maturity gene was spliced in so the pigoon kidneys and livers and hearts would be ready sooner, and now they were perfecting a pigoon that could grow five or six kidneys at a time. Such a host animal could be reaped of its extra kidneys; then, rather than being destroyed, it could keep on living and grow more organs […]. That would be less wasteful, as it took a lot of food and care to grow a pigoon.[86]

They are considered as mere machines that only exist to accomplish their task of providing human organs for transplantation. Each pigoon holds a high economic value that the company exploits as much as possible by following

[85] Anna Franciska Pusch, "Splices: When Science Catches Up with Science Fiction", *Nanoethics* 9 (2015), pp. 55–73, p. 57.

[86] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 22.

the criterion of efficiency to reach the maximum result at the minimum cost. To such high value corresponds a very high risk of corporate espionage and the company develops all the necessary strategies to protect the intellectual property of the *sus multiorganifer*.

As with the spoat/gider, the pigoon project is very realistic, as demonstrated by a very similar experiment that was conducted by a research group at the faculty of the Stanford Institute for Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine in 2013[87]. In xenotransplantation, that is the transplantation of organs, tissues, and other biological components from a different donor species to that of the receiver, pigs are preferred to other animals because they have excellent breeding characteristics and organ size compatible to humans. Other than that, the alternative to pigs is to use nonhuman primates, which would raise considerable ethical concerns for the genetic proximity of human and nonhuman primates.

However, Atwood's pigoons have been implemented with human DNA and the ethical issues that the use of nonhuman primates would raise are only disguised by the outer appearance of the pigoons, which better conceals their proximity to humans. Atwood's choice to give a central role to the pigoons also refers to the caste of the pigs in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). They are also a very early product of Atwood's imagination: a letter to her grandfather, written when she was thirteen years old, includes «an account

[87] See Hitomi Matsunaria, Hiroshi Nagashimaa, Masahito Watanabe, Kazuhiro Umeyamab, Kazuaki Nakanoc, Masaki Nagaya, Toshihiro Kobayashi, Tomoyuki Yamaguchi, Ryo Sumazaki, Leonard A. Herzenberge, and Hiromitsu Nakauchi, "Blastocyst complementation generates exogenic pancreas in vivo in apancreatic cloned pigs", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 110.12 (2013), pp. 4557-4562.

of a novel I was at work on – I'd forgotten this – called Happy the Hog. (Morphed into Pigoons, in later life…)»[88].

4.2.3. The evolution of the species: Pigoons and Crakers

The way in which the pigoons are described varies considerably throughout the trilogy and, in spite of their genetically engineered nature, they soon reveal features that the scientists had not envisaged. The reader catches a first glimpse of the pigoons through young Jimmy's eyes during a visit to OrganInc Farms, the company where his father works as a scientist and as «one of the foremost architects of the pigoon project, along with a team of transplant experts and the microbiologists»[89]. Jimmy's gaze on the animals is sympathetic but objectifying nonetheless:

> When Jimmy went in to visit the pigoons he had to put on a biosuit that was too big for him, and wear a face mask, and wash his hands first with disinfectant soap. He especially liked the small pigoons, twelve to a sow and lined up in a row, guzzling milk. Pigoonlets. They were cute. But the adults were slightly frightening, with their runny noses and tiny, white-lashed pink eyes. They glanced up at him as if they saw him, really saw him, and might have plans for him later.[90]

The bars and protections between them create the same environment that John Berger[91] observed and analyzed in zoos, whose public purpose is «to offer visitors the opportunity of looking at animals»[92] while avoiding any authentic encounter.

[88] Margaret Atwood Papers, MS Coll 335, box 119, folder 2.
[89] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 22.
[90] Ivi, p. 26.
[91] John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" (1977), in *About Looking*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, pp. 1-26.
[92] Ivi, p. 26.

Their status progressively change throughout the novel and after the collapse of the Corporations. The pigoons go feral and display talents and behaviors that can only be described as human. Jimmy does not look at them from behind bars anymore and the power relations between them change too[93]:

> Seven pigoons have materialize from nowhere. They're staring at him, ears forward. […] As he watches, they begin to amble in his direction. They have something in mind, all right. […] He looks over his shoulder: they're trotting now. He speeds up, breaks into a jog. Then he spots another group through the gateway up ahead, eight or nine of them, coming towards him across No Man's Land. They're almost at the main gate, cutting him off in that direction. It's as if they've had it planned, between the two groups; as if they've known for some time that he was in the gatehouse and have been waiting for him to come out, far enough out so they can surround him.[94]

This circumstance of this later encounter can be easily read as the fulfillment of the plans that the slightly frightening pigoons in the OrganInc Farms pens seemed to have for little Jimmy years before, as quoted above. They appear again in *The Year of the Flood*, when Toby tries to safeguard her shelter from their attacks and eventually kills one of them. They return the gaze to which they had been subjected in their previous secluded life. Toby realizes that they have been watching for her and that they are vindictive animals, just like human beings.

Finally, they show to have knowledge of death and mourning feelings when Toby kills a boar in their group:

> There are fronds scattered about, on top of the boar’s carcass and beside it. Fern fronds. Such ferns don’t grow in the meadow. Some are old and

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[93] On the significance of the gaze in power relations, see chapter 1.2.

[94] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p, 267.

> dry and brown, some quite fresh. Also flowers. Are those rose petals, from the roses by the driveway? […]
> Usually they'd just eat a dead pig, the same way they'd eat anything else. But they haven't been eating this one.
> Could the pigs have been having a funeral? Could they be bringing memorial bouquets?[95]

In the last novel of the trilogy, the pigoons keep on attacking the group of survivors, Toby and the ex God's Gardeners, the MaddAddam group, the Crakers. They are still occasionally used as food: «Frankenbacon, considering they're splices. I still feel kind of weird about eating them. They've got human neocortex tissue»[96]. However, they progressively acquire more power and demonstrate a striking ability to interpret the circumstances. Eventually, the pigoons suggest that Toby and the others join forces to kill the Painballers, with the mediation of the Crakers who have the ability to communicate with other animals. Toby is the first to acknowledge the need to include them in the story under different terms: «The Pigoons were not objects. She had to get that right. It was only respectful»[97].

In the final battle, the description of the pigoons is radically different from the first one in *Oryx and Crake*. They are not objects of observation anymore nor feral beasts only, but also comrades, who have the faculty to decide and act outside of the restrictive tracks that genetic coding imposed on them:

> The Pigoons alongside tilt their heads to look up at their human allies from time to time, but their thoughts can only be guessed. Compared with them, humans on foot must seem like slowpokes. Are they irritated? Solicitous? Impatient? Glad of the artillery support? All of

[95] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 328
[96] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 19.
[97] Ivi, p. 351.

> those, no doubt, since they have human brain tissue and can therefore juggle several contradictions at once.[98]

Their transformation mirrors the change of perspective on bioengineering, which is criticized for its dystopic potential at first, but it is then used as a literary device to explore hybridity as an in-between area where to examine the human-animal boundary and human identity. The agreement between the pigoons and the human survivors shows that moral communities and rules are never fixed and need to be constantly discussed as the external circumstances change.

The pigoons used to be customized items, a propriety of the Corporation that created them and, as such, they were denied any moral stance. Yet, Jimmy's gaze and the general repulsion to the idea of eating the pigoons open a breach and allows the reader to imagine the possibility of an encounter with these strange and yet familiar animals. When the encounter actually happens immediately after the Waterless Flood, it is a traumatic experience and the pigoons become monsters bringing to the surface the beastly nature of certain typically human behaviors. Jimmy and Toby have to protect themselves from the vicious ingenuity of the pigoon species that, borrowing Friedrich Nietzsche's phrase, is human, all too human. Finally, the agreement allows the moral community to expand and include the pigoons too. The result is that the human survivors comply with the old rules of the God's Gardeners: they do not eat fellow animals anymore and establish a new relationship of interspecies cooperation.

The evolution of the pigoons allows the reader to include biotechnology in a cultural process that implies fundamental bioethical issues. Such issues are not new in literature and have been introduced by authors like Mary

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[98] Ivi, p. 348.

Shelley[99] and H.G. Wells, whose influence is strong in the MaddAddam trilogy. As a matter of fact, science fiction has always been particularly receptive of the uncanny consequences related to posthuman horizons on evolution, including the manipulation of the human body. In *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, Shelley foresees the ethical issues related to creating an artificially made human being, while Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* describes the horrifying consequences of remorseless amoral scientific progress. As Doctor Moreau himself declares, «[t]he study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature»[100]. In Atwood's trilogy, references to the experiments carried out in these two milestones of science fiction abound, but they are combined with the accurate depiction of already existing genetically engineered hybrid species and ongoing experiments.

In the MaddAddam trilogy, there are substantial evidences that «literary texts often reveal […] the complex cultural, social, and representational issues tied up with conceptual shifts and technological innovations»[101]. Atwood expounds the dangers of science and technology, but she significantly identifies reasons of hope in some of such projects, especially the pigoons and the Crakers. The Crakers are described as the exact opposite of the pigoons for their anthropomorphic and perfectly beautiful appearance and ostensible stupidity, but they adapt to the new ever-changing circumstances just like the pigoons. *MaddAddam* is centered on their learning process that help the Crakers live in a world that happens to be radically different to the world that Crake had in mind when he created them.

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[99] Shelley works that resonate more in Atwood's work are *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Last Man* (1826).

[100] H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, p. 49.

[101] Kathrine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, p. 24.

The urge to adapt and evolve is epitomised in the hybrid pregnancies that occur in the group of human survivors. At the end of *The Year of the Flood*, Ren and Amanda are raped by the vicious Painballers and by well-meaning male Crakers immediately after, raising doubts on the paternity that can only be cleared after birth:

> An ultracriminal or some kind of gene-spliced weirdo monster. […] I've got one of those Frankenbabies inside me too. I'm just scared of peeing on the stick." Toby tries to think of something to say – something upbeat and soothing. Genes aren't a total destiny? Nature versus nurture, good can come of evil? There are the epigenetic switches to be considered, and maybe the Painballers just had very, very bad nurturing? Or how about: the Crakers may be more human than we think?[102]

Swift Fox, one of the MaddAddam scientists whom Crake had kidnapped to accomplish his Paradice project, deliberately chooses to have sex with the male Crakers and carries out the pregnancy as a crossbreeding experiment[103]: «I've been doing an experiment in genetic evolution. Reproduction of the fittest. Think of me as a *petri dish*»[104]. The four babies, Swift Fox's two twins, Amanda's, and Ren's, are all human-craker hybrids and they are welcomed as the future of the human species.

4.3. Conclusions. The Story Goes On

The ending of *MaddAddam* is not a closure but an opening on the possibilities that the author hands over to the reader to ponder and explore further. The writer accomplishes her narrative goal on the last page of the third novel of

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[102] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, pp. 216-217.
[103] This element aligns *MaddAddam* with the science fiction tradition of genetic hybridization and of the representation of pregnancy as a liberating experiment, which explore the links between gender and genetics. See, for example, Naomi Mitchinson's *Solution Three* (1975) and Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987, 1988, 1989).
[104] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 273.

the trilogy, but the reader can fill the gaps and widen the margins of the narration. The story is to the reader what a fossil footprint is to the paleontologist, a comparison that Atwood draws as she reflects on the role of the writer in relation to the text:

> The writer has about the same relation to the thing written, once that thing is finished, as fossilized dinosaur footprints have to the beast who made them. The footprints are a record of the fact that once upon a time he walked, fast or slowly, through this particular stretch of mud.[105]

Atwood considers herself as a witness who uses fiction to examine society and as a priest who officiates an upside down incarnation in which the flesh of human life is translated into the words of a story[106]. The writer does not hold any absolute authority over the story and he or she delivers it to the reader to make it meaningful. In Atwood's view, the story never ends inside the pages of a book and she underlines this by closing most of her novels and short stories with open endings that hold a metanarrative significance and an ethical relevance as well.

In *Bodily Harm*[107] (1981) and *The Handmaid's Tale*[108] (1985), for example, the reader is left with an ambiguous description of the final events and has to

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[105] Margaret Atwood, "An End to Audience?", p. 344.

[106] Ivi, pp. 346, 348.

[107] The protagonist of *Bodily Harm*, Rennie, is a journalist and breast cancer survivor who runs away from degrading and hopeless relationships with the men in her life by accepting a mission on a Caribbean island to write a travel piece. Eventually, a *coup d'état* subverts the unstable political equilibrium of the island and Rennie is imprisoned as a hostage. The ending of the novel can be interpreted either as a happy ending, with Rennie on a flight back to Canada, or as a unresolved and possibly unhappy ending, with Rennie locked up in jail for an indefinite period of time.

[108] *The Handmaid's Tale* ends with "Historical Notes", an epilogue that is reminiscent of George Orwell's "Appendix: The Principles of Newspeak" in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This is a clue for the reader that the Republic of Gilead collapsed and has become only a subject of academic

complete the story with his or her own imagination. The reason why Atwood employs this strategy in these two novels is directly connected to the discourse on power relationships that I have discussed in Chapter two. In both novels, the protagonists are women who have been subjected to abuse and sufferings and who have struggled to survive and to be free. The open-ending underlines their tentative acts of liberation, because the author refuses to pronounce her verdict on their fate. Along with the ethical dimension, Atwood endorses open-ended situation from a playful metanarrative perspective, which is best exemplified in the short story "Happy Ending", published in 1983 in the collection *Murder in the Dark*. The whole short story is a metafictional piece composed of six sketches that provide a skeletal outline for six stories, all of which have a "happy ending". Its structure follows the model of gamebooks, thus involving the reader in the creative process and concluding that beginnings and the endings are not so much interesting as «the stretch in between, since it's the hardest thing to do»[109].

In *Oryx and Crake*, Crake decides to put an end to humanity because, as a scientist, he believes he has the authority to do so: «Sitting in judgment on the world […]; but why had that been his right?»[110]. Conversely, the open ending of the novel is Atwood's statement of withdrawal from a final judgment on humankind. Jimmy rediscovers the power of narration and, in spite of Crake's attempt to erase imagination and the art instinct from the

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debate, but whether Offred managed to survive after her escape remains uncertain. The protagonist ends her account with the following words: «[w]hether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped», Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 295. For Atwood, these strangers are the readers themselves, who will establish Offred's ultimate fate, or even whether she is a "real" individual, with their own interpretation and imagination.

[109] Margaret Atwood, "Happy Endings", *Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems*, Toronto: Coach House, 1983, p. 45.

[110] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 341.

Crakers, his storytelling becomes «a means not only for his personal *survival* but a *revival* of a human narrative in the Craker community»[111]. Both the author and the protagonist leaves it to the reader to decide whether this narrative has a happy ending. «"What do you want me to do?" [Snowman] whispers to the empty air»[112], a question that the character addresses to Oryx, and the author to the reader, to find out whether storytelling is a strategy of survival or the swansong of a dying species's tragic epigone.

As J. Brooks Bouson aptly notes, Atwood offers «a sober ending to our present human folly, but proposes a possible new beginning for her readers»[113]. The Crakers raise questions on their origins and unconsciously encourage Jimmy to revive the mythic language on which humanity has built its community, which is explored further in *The Year of the Flood*. The second novel of the trilogy is devoted to trace the origins of storytelling in religious discourse, which Atwood interprets not much as a need for transcendence as a peculiarly human strategy of survival. Most human cultures have founded their communities on a religious cult and Atwood goes back to the religious origins of storytelling to explore its possibilities for the future of humankind. The adaptive advantage of the God's Gardeners over the other humans in the dystopic society does not depend on any actual divine intervention, but on their capability to create a meaningful narrative that allows them to quickly adapt to a radically changed environment. The MaddAddam group employs a similar strategy that relies on the narrative provided by the Extinctathon videogame, but they adopts an elegiac and tragic mode of storytelling based

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[111] J. Brooks Bouson, *Margaret Atwood. The Robber Bride. The Blind Assassin. Oryx and Crake*, London: Continuum, 2010, p. 170.

[112] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 374.

[113] J. Brooks Bouson, *Margaret Atwood. The Robber Bride. The Blind Assassin. Oryx and Crake*, p. 171.

on the theme of extinction, which Crake ultimately seizes for his own destructive purposes. On the other hand, the God's Gardeners include their narrative into a comic framework and, through their hymns, they rediscover the creative power of the poetic language. In the last novel of the trilogy, *MaddAddam*, Toby hands down this legacy to the Crakers and cultivates the ground for the new beginning of a hybrid posthuman species.

In *MaddAddam*, the Crakers highlight the potential of a playful use of creativity, which they express through their tireless curiosity and their need for stories. They urge Jimmy at first and Toby afterwards to rediscover the inner meanings behind words and, if need be, to liberate it from its original context and adjust it to the new one. One brilliant example of the mutability and playfulness of the language encouraged by the Crakers is in the chapter titled "Snowman's Progress", a clear reference to *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) by John Bunyan, whom Atwood acknowledges as a source for the hymns in *The Year of the Flood*. In this chapter, Snowman wakes up from his delirium and the Crakers hear him swearing. Abraham Lincoln, their leader, asks: «"Who is this *Fuck*? Why is he talking to this Fuck? That is not the name of anyone here"»[114]. Toby realizes that when Jimmy says "Oh Fuck", the Crakers interprets "Oh" as a vocative particle and logically infers that Fuck is the name of someone whom Snowman is invoking.

Toby quickly realizes that she cannot explain what "fuck" actually means and decides to create a new meaning for the word. She explains that Fuck is an airborne invisible entity, a helper in time of need:

> Fuck lived in the air and flew around like a bird, which was how he could be with Zeb one minute, and then with Crake, and then also with Snowman-the-Jimmy. He could be in many places at once. If you were in trouble and you called to him – *Oh Fuck!* – he would always be there,

[114] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 146.

> just when you needed him. And as soon as you said his name, you would feel better.[115]

Through the Crakers, Atwood foregrounds the playful element of language and storytelling, which she employs throughout the whole trilogy to create new words and to give new meanings to old words. The playfulness of language also marks a change of perspective from *The Handmaid's Tale*, which remains a classical dystopia.

The story of Fuck that Toby tells the Crakers is a successful example of the regenerative power of a playful use of language, which Atwood reinforces with a pun by moulding the character of Fuck on Shakesperean Puck, «merry wanderer of the night»[116] and Oberon's bungling helper in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600):

> Hermes, the wing-enabled flying messanger, is not only the god of communication, he is also the god of thieves, lies, and jokes. That's another interesting thing about many airborne nonhumans – their odd sense of humour, the delight they seem to take in misleading human beings and playing tricks on them. In the plays of Shakespeare, there are […] two notable non-human flying beings: Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Ariel in *The Tempest*. Both are messangers and servants […] and both are disguise artists and trick players.[117]

The Crakers' natural attraction for storytelling overturns the premises on which Crake engineered them. He wanted them to be perfectly rational robot-like beings, unable to make jokes: «For jokes you need a certain edge, a little malice. It took a lot of trial and error and we're still testing, but I think we've managed to do away with jokes»[118]. Considering their supposedly genetic

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[115] Ivi, p. 164.
[116] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act. 2, Sc. 1, line 43.
[117] Margaret Atwood, "Flying Rabbits", *In Other Worlds. SF and the Human Imagination*, p. 33-34.
[118] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 306.

inability for abstract thinking, their efforts to understand and employ the power of imagination seem to be aimless.

Toby imagines the difficulties of explaining to the Crakers an abstract process like writing when she first meets Bleackbeard: «*[w]riting is when you make marks on a piece of paper – on a stone – on a flat surface, like the sand on the beach, and each of the marks means a sound, and the sounds joined together mean a word*»[119]. However, Toby finally explains writing and reading as a magical process that, like an enchanted potion, involves tools and ingredients to reach unexpected results:

> *You can use the juice of elderberries for the ink, you can use the feather of a bird for the pen, you can use a stick and some wet sand to write on. All of these things can be used to make writing* […]. "Each letter means a sound. And when you put letters together they make words. And the words stay where you've put them on the paper, and then other people can see them on the paper and hear the words"[120]

Bleackbeard is incredulous at first, but tries out the powers of *writing* and *reading* and he eventually becomes the first literate among the Children of Crake:

> He's carrying the sheet of paper, holding it in front of him like a hot shield. His face is radiant. "It did it, Oh Toby," he says. "It said my name! It told my name to Ren!"
> "There," she says. "That's *writing*."
> Blackbeard nods: now he's grasping the possibilities.[121]

Actually, their innate disposition for singing proves that Crake was wrong with regard to the Crakers' inability to use language in a creative way. They show a deeply-rooted art instinct, as the team of bioengineers «couldn't

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[119] Ivi, p. 91

[120] Ivi, p. 202.

[121] Ivi, p. 203.

erase [the singing] without turning them into zucchinis»[122]. More than their biological and morphological features, the singing represents the unequivocal proof of their bond with humankind. Blackbeard is the joining link between the old humanity and the new hybrid species, a continuity that he underlines right at the end of *MaddAddam*. The last words in *Year of the Flood* are taken from Adam One's sermon "Of the fragility of the Universe" that, like all his sermons, ends with the ritual «Let us sing»[123]. Blackbeard endorses that tradition but, instead of singing for the present, he encourages the audience to look forward:

> This is the end of the Story of Toby. I have written this Book. And I have put my name here – Blackbeard – the way Toby first showed me when I was a child. It says that I was the one who set down these words.
> Thank you.
> Now we will sing.[124]

The future tense is an indicator that, once again, the story does not end on the last page of the novel but continues in the reader's imagination.

In spite of the gloomy representation of society and its dystopic forebodings, there is still hope for the future of the surviving characters in the MaddAddam trilogy and for humanity as a whole. Humour, which epitomizes the creative use of language, is depicted as a trait on its way to extinction at first, but it is then revived throughout a trilogy that subverts its tragic premises and becomes a comedy. Margaret Atwood has not exhausted her explorations of the dangers posed by a mechanistic conception of human nature, nor has she abandoned dystopia as a literary framework to validate the paradoxes of society. In her last novel, *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), she extensively addresses

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[122] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 43.
[123] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, p. 425.
[124] Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam*, p. 390.

both issues in her usual dark and grotesque mood. However, she elaborates it by exploring the possibilities that technology and new media offer to the writer[125] and maintains the open ending as a way to engage the reader in the dialogue between literature and society. Atwood also reveals the strength of a Canadian sensibility, based on a keen awareness on the composite human element, shaping a precarious nation as Canada is.

Atwood writes that «Utopia is only safe when it remains true to its name and stays nowhere» because «should we try too hard to enforce Utopia, Dystopia rapidly follows»[126]. In other words, fiction is the only place where humans can safely explore the possibilities of utopian thinking, an intellectual response that does not preclude hope for the future of humankind. While Utopia remains a fictional device, the dialogue with society is fundamental and represents the occasion for social improvement. In light of this, Margaret Atwood's enthusiastic participation in the Future Library project displays the manifest effects of the author's imagination and hope for the future of humanity. The project is described as a collection of one hundred books that has not been published yet and that will be kept in a locked room in Norway for a hundred years.

> Katie Paterson's artwork is a meditation on the nature of time. It is also a tribute to the written word, the material basis for the transmission of words through time – in this case, paper – and a proposal of writing itself as a time capsule, since the author who marks the words down and

[125] *The Heart Goes Last* is a reworking of the Positron series of novellas that Atwood published online between 2012 and 2013. The Positron series, composed of "I'm Starved for You" (Positron, #1), "Choke Collar" (Positron, #2), "Erase Me" (Positron, #3), "The Heart Goes Last" (Positron, #4), first appeared on Byliner, a literary start-up company that published literary fiction and journalism that could be read in no more than a couple of hours.

[126] Margaret Atwood, "Writing Utopia", in *Writing With Intent. Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose: 1983-2005*, p. 95.

> the receiver of those words – the reader – are always separated by time.[127]

In *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman grieved over the uselessness of writing a diary because «[a]ny reader he can possibly imagine is in the past»[128]. Conversely, Atwood, like Blackbeard, testifies her fascination with writing as a powerful mode of communication that connects the text with the so-far non-existent reader. The meaning of such encounter is also the author's final statement of existence and, ultimately, a declaration of his or her faith in the existence of a reader in the future and in the survival of humankind.

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[127] Margaret Atwood, "Future Library", https://www.wattpad.com/130738240-future-library-by-margaret-atwood-future-library. Last access December 15th 2015.

[128] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 41.

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The bibliography is divided into ten thematic sections, as follows:

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B. OTHER LITERARY TEXTS

C. CRITICAL STUDIES ON MARGARET ATWOOD

D. ON CANADIAN LITERATURE

E. UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA, SCIENCE FICTION, AND APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

F. ECOCRITICISM. THEORY AND PRACTICE

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