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## HOW FUCK BECAME A WINGED DEITY: ON THE BIRTH OF A NEW RELIGION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S DYSTOPIAN TRILOGY *ORYX AND CRAKE*, *THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD* AND *MADDADDAM*

In her dystopian trilogy *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood* and *Maddaddam*, Margaret Atwood introduces the reader into the world before and in the wake of a biological catastrophe which wipes out almost all of the human race and manifold plant and animals species. A handful of those who survive find themselves forced to take care of a new genetically modified race of Crakers, perfect, child-like creatures who strive to make sense of the post-apocalyptic world. The majority of the questions that these “new people” pose revolve around the issue of their creation, namely, how and why they were created. Henceforth, the reader witnesses the birth of a new mythology and a new religion. The following article aims to depict and analyze the mechanisms behind the formation of this new religion, as well as to demonstrate that symbolic thinking, of which religion is one of the grand examples, may be beyond any genetic modification; thus, it is quite likely that it might be an innate trait of posthumans, too.

In the collection of critical essays entitled *Prophets of the Posthuman*, Cristina Bieber Lake<sup>1</sup> argues that as an academic discipline, the humanities have

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<sup>1</sup> C. Bieber Lake, *Prophets of the Posthuman*, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2013, p. xiv.

abandoned the question of bioethics, that is, all ethical questions concerning biotechnology and the future of mankind in the face of new scientific advancements, and left these queries to scientists and politicians. However, because the most important question behind any dilemma connected with technological progress and setting its limits comes down to the eternal queries “What are we?” and “How should we live?”, these are the very humanities that should be dealing with biotechnology. These are the questions that ought to be discussed and consulted with philosophers, ethicists, or, as Bieber Lake points out, writers.

Why do writers need to get involved in the discussion on bioethics? Mainly because they may contribute greatly to the deeper understanding of the consequences that will follow our bioethical choices through a narrative that is a complex web of interhuman relations and that needs to be based on verisimilitude, that is the likeliness of the characters’ actions and choices, if a particular work is to be credible<sup>2</sup>. In other words, a good writer exploring the realm of biotechnology will surely ground their vision in a deep understanding of the mechanisms of human behavior, and will opt for the most likely scenario or scenarios. In this way then, as readers, we may make better informed or better imagined choices as to what our standpoint is; namely, whether we support genetic engineering or whether we will persist in ignoring environmental trauma. Therefore, Bieber Lake insists that writers “can no longer take a backseat when it comes to bioethics”<sup>3</sup>. Those writers that do raise the issue of biotechnology Bieber Lake calls “prophets”, for they, in some way, engage in telling the future or possible futures. Quoting Brueggemann, Bieber Lake asserts that the primary function of the prophets “is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us”<sup>4</sup>. This perfectly encapsulates the long-standing literary career of Margaret Atwood, since all her writing is a form of activism and awareness raising, and also demonstrates dissatisfaction with and disapproval of people’s complacency and ignorance.

However, Ronald Green, a bioethicist and the author of *Babies by Design*, holds the view that as humanity “we should be free to make deliberate interventions into our genetic makeup for both therapeutic and enhancement purposes”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 111.

Therefore, he believes that writers like Atwood are “part of an unthinking ‘coalition of opposition’” that hinders our progress as humanity. Constituting an apocalypse brought upon the world by bioengineering as the backbone of the trilogy, Atwood does issue a clear warning that nature should not be tampered with. However, as Bieber Lake notes, “the novel insists that it is not bioengineering that could cause our self-destruction but the continuation of a culture that encourages people to think about the purpose of human life in a narrow and nefarious way”<sup>6</sup>. That is to say, Atwood is far from objecting to scientific progress that can benefit humanity. However, she strongly opposes technocracy and the reductionist treatment of the natural environment and its resources. In her view, modern technology ought to aid and serve humans, not vice versa.

Margaret Atwood’s writing seems to be more and more grounded in SF, understood as speculative fiction rather than science fiction. As the author herself stresses, the main difference between these two sub-genres lies in the fact that speculative fiction is closer to the possible and near future than science fiction, with its proverbial “Martian invasions”. Moreover, she asserts that as a writer she refuses to divert readers’ attention from the here and now, and instead intends to emphasize our current responsibility for the planet<sup>7</sup>. What we are doing now influences our immediate and distant future to the same extent as our negligence and ignorance shape it. In *In Other Worlds*, Atwood’s collection of critical essays devoted to science fiction, the author traces the roots of speculative fiction back to “Jules Verne’s books about submarines and balloon travel and such–things that could really happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books”<sup>8</sup>. As Katherine Snyder observes:

Dystopian speculative fiction takes what already exists and makes an imaginative leap into the future, following current sociocultural, political, or scientific developments to their potentially devastating conclusions. ... Yet the imaginative effects of dystopian literary speculations depend precisely on their readers’ recognition of a potential social realism in the fictional worlds portrayed therein.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 111.

<sup>7</sup> A. Lindhe, *Restoring the Divine within: The Inner Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood’s The Year of the Flood*, in: *Margaret Atwood’s Apocalypses*, ed. Karma Waltonen, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> M. Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, London: Virago Press, 2011, p. 6.

These cautionary tales of the future work by evoking an uncanny sense of the simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of these brave new worlds<sup>9</sup>.

As an SF writer, Atwood is mostly known for *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which spins the story of a future world where fertile women are reduced to multiple childbirth and later forced to give their children away to the infertile couples of the ruling class. The novel, read primarily as a social critique of right-wing philosophy and righteousness, received high critical acclaim, and 30 years since its publishing is still considered to be one of the most important and up-to-date feminist works. Atwood also resorted to science fiction in the subplots of the Booker-prize-winning *The Blind Assassin* (2000), where they served as a mirror text to the main narrative in order to make the main heroine see her own dismal plight from a detached perspective. However, the *Maddaddam* trilogy (2003, 2009, 2013) seems to be the crowning achievement of Margaret Atwood's involvement in this genre. Coral Ann Howells observes that to some extent the trilogy continues the themes that permeated the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*:

[I]n many ways *Oryx and Crake* might be seen as a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*. The pollution and environmental destruction which threatened one region of North America in the earlier novel have escalated into the worldwide climate change through global warming in the latter, and the late twentieth-century Western trend towards mass consumerism which Gilead tried to reverse by its fundamentalist doctrines and its liturgy of "moral values" has resulted in an American lifestyle of consumerist decadence in a high-tech world which is ultimately death-doomed by one man's megalomaniac project of bioterrorism<sup>10</sup>.

The three novels that constitute the trilogy may be read as self-contained novels. However, it needs to be stressed that each installment greatly contributes to the better understanding of the former part. The first in the trilogy to come out, *Oryx and Crake*, has the form of the "last man narrative" and tells the story of Jimmy Snowman, who believes he is the sole human survivor of the apocalypse. His version of events prior to the apocalypse is described from the

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<sup>9</sup> K. Snyder, 'Time to go': *The Post-Apocalyptic and the Post-Traumatic in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake*, "Studies in the Novel", 43:4, Winter 2011, p. 470.

<sup>10</sup> C. A. Howells, *Margaret Atwood's dystopian visions: The Handmaid's Tale and Oryx and Crake*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 161.

point of view of someone who was lucky enough to have grown up in the Compounds, better districts of the cities that are in the possession of the upper echelons of power. *The Year of the Flood*, on the other hand, as Atwood described it, is “not a sequel, nor a prequel, but a ‘simultan-eul’”<sup>11</sup> since it presents events and time-line parallel to those from *Oryx and Crake* but depicted from the perspective of two female survivors, Ren and Toby, who in the case of the latter was unfortunate to have lived in pleeblands, the area which literally means inner city slums. *Maddaddam*, in turn, focuses on the story of two brothers, Adam and Zeb, and sheds some new light on the events and characters described in the two previous novels, plus it pushes the narrative further as it takes off where the two earlier books ended.

One of the central characters and at the same time the perpetrator that wiped out almost the entire human race through unleashing a vicious virus is Glenn, also known as Crake. He is an ingenious scientist whose primary preoccupation is genetic modification in order to create a new, presumably better, hominid species. When he eventually succeeds, these new creatures come to be known as Crakers. Crake is the epitome of an arrogant and cynical genius who despises the human race, believes in no boundaries to scientific progress but, above all, renounces and abhors the notion of God, all of which are crucial factors that account for the creation of his hominids.

Prior to a detailed description of Crakers, it is absolutely indispensable to sketch the novel’s social and economic backgrounds, for they, at least partially, contribute to the way Glenn designs the new carefree race. As the *Maddaddam* trilogy spins a tale of an apocalypse, also referred to as the “waterless flood”, we are presented with two very different realities: before and after. The world before the flood is set in the fairly immediate future of North America. As Bieber Lake promptly observes, the trilogy offers

two futures: the one we already inhabit and are moving closer into, and the one that could be our reality if nothing changes. It is the near future that is of the greatest interest to her [Atwood] and that provides a chilling warning: the near future of this novel is not so far from the North America of the present<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> A. Akbar, *Margaret Atwood: ‘People should live joyfully’*, “The Independent”, 4 September 2009. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/margaret-atwood-people-should-live-joyfully-1781166.html>

<sup>12</sup> C. Bieber Lake, *Prophets of the Posthuman...*, p. 112.

At this point it is worth emphasizing the fact that Margaret Atwood is an environmental activist, a fervent advocate of widely interpreted human rights, and a persistent critic of any inequity, whether it is due to, e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or material status. Therefore, a plethora of her critical thoughts can be detected in the way the pre-flood society is constructed. As Bieber Lake points out, “Its mode is primarily satirical”, and “the apocalypse is devised more to reveal society’s current choices than to predict its inevitable future”<sup>13</sup>. Thus, in a nutshell, the pre-flood society is youth-obsessed, money-driven, highly divided and oblivious to the natural environment.

The vision of the society of the mid- or late twenty-first century that Atwood sketched in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* is bleak and terrifying to the reader, who can easily recognize the elements of the present world that led to such an unbearable future. However, the true horror is revealed the moment we realize that this gloomy crime-ridden world is the pre-apocalyptic vision, and thus, the rosy past of Jimmy Snowman, Ren and Toby. The world we already recognize as unbearable turns out to be a paradise lost to the protagonists for it was still the human world; in the post-apocalyptic world there is no place for humans, they are bound to extinction. As Snyder observes,

From the retrospective point of view of the novel’s last man, as well as from the prospective point of view of the novel’s reader, the difference between past and present, between our nearer and later future, is all the difference in the world. It is the difference between a human future and no future at all<sup>14</sup>.

The creatures that are the most likely inhabitants of and heirs to the future world of the novel are the bio-engineered race of Crakers. As Ciobanu notes, “the end of the Anthropocene is hardly the end of the world—it is simply the end of *our* world, the end of the world as we know it”<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the dystopian world of the Maddaddam trilogy is populated by a handful of human survivors and a group of Crakers who are “non-predatory, non-territorial” hominids, “adapted to, and not in competition with, the natural environment”<sup>16</sup>. As

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> K. Snyder, *Time to Go...*, p. 471.

<sup>15</sup> C. Ciobanu, *Rewriting the Human at the End of the Anthropocene in Margaret Atwood’s Maddaddam Trilogy*, “Minnesota Review”, Issue 83, 2014 (New Series), p. 153-4.

<sup>16</sup> J. Brooks Bouson, “*It’s Game Over Forever*”: *Atwood’s Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in Oryx and Crake*, “The Journal of Commonwealth Literature”, September 2004, 39, p. 149.

Atwood characterizes them in one of the interviews, they “have built-in sunblock and insect repellent, [are] equipped with self-healing purring capabilities, and are designed to be seasonal maters so they will never suffer from sexual jealousy”<sup>17</sup>. Because they can eat leaves as well as their dung, and do not need clothes or anything to keep them warm, they are perfectly sustainable.

What is more, and what is crucial for that article, is that Crake removed from their genetic make-up “the G-spot” (G standing for God), “believing that symbolic thinking would lead to the downfall of his hominids”<sup>18</sup>. He says, “Next they’d be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war”<sup>19</sup>. But despite his efforts to deprive Crakers of higher thinking, they spontaneously start asking questions about their origins and engage in semi-religious practices.

Thus, no sooner do the pandemics break out than Jimmy Snowman inadvertently becomes a prophet of a new religion. After the death of Oryx and Crake, obliged by his promise to Oryx to look after the new hominids in case of emergency, Jimmy Snowman reluctantly resolves to take Crakers to a safe place, though “He knew what an improbable shepherd he was”<sup>20</sup>. What commences with dealing with the queries of alarmed Crakers about first missing and then dead Oryx briefly turns into a fully-fledged cult involving rituals, artifacts, offerings and oral tradition. His red baseball cap and a wrist watch, the epitomes of times gone by, become significant artifacts that enable the wearer to communicate with Crake, which becomes evident when Toby, forced to substitute for the febrile Jimmy Snowman, is presented with both the cap and the watch at the beginning of the ceremony. As a part of the ritual, Jimmy Snowman is also offered a grilled fish, and in exchange is expected to tell Crakers the story of their creation, and thus to weave a creation myth. As the “new people” are told their own version of Genesis, generated by Snowman and later taken over by Toby, Oryx, who was Crake’s female assistant responsible for genetic modifications of animal and plant species, and Crake himself, become two major deities.

The most perturbing part of the beginnings of Crakers is the fact that their creation rested upon the eradication of humanity. What human characters such

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<sup>17</sup> A. Bedford, *Survival in the Post-Apocalypse: Ecofeminism in Maddaddam*, in: *Margaret Atwood's Apocalypses*, ed. Karma Waltonen, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> J. Brooks Bouson, *It's Game Over Forever...*, p. 150.

<sup>19</sup> M. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, New York: Anchor Books, 2003, p. 430.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 420.

as Jimmy Snowman and members of God's Gardeners see as the waterless Flood and their apocalypse, in Crakers' Genesis becomes the Great Rearrangement and the Great Emptiness. According to their prophet, Jimmy Snowman, Oryx and Crake grew tired of people and the chaos they caused, so Crake resolved to annihilate the human race to make room for his children, Crakers. The end of humanity is their beginning, the human Apocalypse is their Genesis. But what was it about us, humans, that drove Crake to eradicate our race and force us to give way to supposedly better versions of ourselves? The following excerpt, even though narrated by Snowman, reiterates some of Atwood's frequent observations about modern society being greedy, (self-)destructive and oblivious to the natural environment and our dependence on it for survival:

The people in the chaos were full of themselves, and the chaos made them do bad things. They were killing other people all the time. And they were eating up all the Children of Oryx, against the wishes of Oryx and Crake. Every day they were eating them up. They were killing them and killing them, and eating them and eating them. They ate them even when they weren't hungry<sup>21</sup>.

Oryx's preoccupations seem to echo the ecocritical concerns of Aldo Leopold, the author of *The Land Ethic*, who was one of the first to acknowledge the need for expanding "the boundaries of ethics" in order "to include non-human elements" such as broadly understood "the land". He argued that a "land ethics changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such"<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, in the *Oryx and Crake's* simultaneous "through the Gardener's hymns and Adam One's sermons, which talk about 'tolerance, and loving-kindness'" Atwood "urges us to live an environmentally responsible life in harmony with nature and our fellow humans"<sup>23</sup>.

Since child-like, gullible Crakers never cease to wonder about the surrounding world, and flood Jimmy Snowman as well as Toby with a barrage of questions, soon a new deity joins the Oryx and Crake divine duet. Intrigued as to why some human survivors, such as Zeb or Jimmy Snowman, repeatedly invoke "*Fuck!*", Crakers ask Toby about his provenance. In response, they are told:

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<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 125.

<sup>22</sup> V. Adami, *Bioethics through Literature: Margaret Atwood's Cautionary Tales*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2011, p. 114.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 115.



Fuck was his [Zeb's] friend and helper too, but he could not be seen. ...

But Fuck kept him company and gave him advice. 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, just when you needed him. And as soon as you said his name, you would feel better<sup>24</sup>.

Thus, a swearword converts into an invocation to a winged deity, which cannot be helped but juxtaposed with the Holy Spirit. Since these brand-new hominids have no point of reference to such culture or tradition, nor can they turn to their parents or grandparents for explanation, Jimmy Snowman and Toby are forced to concoct stories that would help them make sense of the world, the human language and themselves. Naturally, the point of reference for the human characters of the novel is modern North American culture, which is deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and its values and beliefs. Therefore, many myths that emerge strongly draw on this tradition, as is evident in the following excerpt upon Jimmy Snowman's arrival from Paradise Dome: "He'll need to invent some lies about that. *What did Crake look like? I couldn't see him, he was in a bush.* A burning bush, why not? Best to be nonspecific about the facial features"<sup>25</sup>. As Coral Ann Howells notes, even though the characters live in "a post-Christian world" and "it is not the laws of God but the laws of science which constitute the postmodern version of a transcendent metanarrative", "Yet the imagery of the Christian tradition persists, now reshaped in parodic form" "in the bricolage of Jimmy's mythologising to the Crakers"<sup>26</sup>. A declared strict agnostic, Atwood is nonetheless knowledgeable in the religious imagery on which she draws heavily in the Maddaddam trilogy. However, her references to Judeo-Christian as well as Eastern traditions are of a subversive nature, and subsequently expose the corruptive power of religious systems that demand blind faith.

One of the most imaginative myths Jimmy Snowman invents is the one that elucidates why animals cannot talk, which betrays Atwood's obsession with words and the crucial role they play in the development of humankind. According to his story, Oryx laid two eggs:

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<sup>24</sup> M. Atwood, *Maddaddam*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 164.

<sup>25</sup> M. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake...*, p. 427.

<sup>26</sup> C. A. Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, New York: Palgrave, 2005, p. 182.

one full of all animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the (people) had already been created by then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out<sup>27</sup>.

As in the case of all previous mythologies that evolve and frequently merge with other beliefs, thus borrowing or lending their symbols, gods, heroes, artifacts or stories to one another, Crakers' mythology also develops and incorporates new tales, or even reformulates the already existing stories. Such is the case of the aforementioned myth about animals' inability to talk. In the third part of the trilogy that abounds in new stories, especially of the demi-god or mythic-like figure Zeb, the role of the Crake's prophet is passed on from unconscious due to disease Jimmy Snowman over to Toby. When Crakers are astounded by the fact that one of them, namely Blackbeard, can communicate with pigeons, genetically modified pigs that contain human tissue, Toby needs to alter the myth slightly, and she starts the following way:

Crake thought that you had eaten all the words, so there were none left over for the animals, and that was why they could not speak. But he was wrong about that. Crake was not always right about everything.

Because when he was not looking some of the words fell out of the egg onto the ground, some fell into the water, and some blew away in the air. And none of the people saw them. But the animals and the birds and the fish did see them, and ate them up. They were a different kind of word, so it was sometimes hard for people to understand the animals. They had chewed the words up too small.

And the Pigeons—the Pig Ones—ate up more of the words than any of the other animals did. You know how they love to eat. So the Pig Ones can think very well<sup>28</sup>.

It is essential to note how in the quoted excerpt Atwood equates language with thinking; the language you speak determines the way you think. Yet, what also deserves special attention in this revision of a formerly recounted myth is Toby's questioning of Crake's omniscience; through curbing Crakers' unre-served trust in their creator, Toby seems to be protecting them from blind faith that leaves no space for doubt, and thus critical thought.

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<sup>27</sup> M. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake...*, p. 116.

<sup>28</sup> M. Atwood, *Maddaddam...*, p. 290.

The creation of the new myths that inevitably accompanies the birth of a new religion breeds other observations, too; namely, the evoking power of language itself. The pre-flood world devalues arts and language, superseding them with technology and bioengineering. As Bieber Lake notes, “Jimmy and Crake grow up in a world that clearly marginalizes language and the arts so that they are merely tools of production and consumption, advertising or entertainment”<sup>29</sup>. This shift from humanities towards technology is particularly prominent, and successfully ridiculed, in the change of the motto of the Martha Graham Academy, the epitome of the art school, from “*Ars Longa Vita Brevis*” into “Our Students Graduate with Employable Skills”<sup>30</sup>. The redundancy of arts juxtaposed with the strong position of scientism, *nota bene* not science itself, in the times of global capitalism stems from the crude calculation that anything which does not possess purchasing power is ignored, marginalized or ostracized. It is also, as Banerjee notes, the very cause of the apocalypse in the trilogy:

human capacities and faculties not amenable to rationality are ignored, and non-utilitarian discursive fields, like those of the liberal arts, are neglected and undervalued. Pervasive scientism working in tandem with advanced global capitalism, leads to the apocalypse in *Oryx and Crake*<sup>31</sup>.

One of the few graduates of the Martha Graham Academy in the novel, Jimmy Snowman, is forced to employ his artistic and linguistic skills in his profession as a copywriter. Using language for commercial purposes in order to sell beauty products and treatments, limiting words to emotive slogans rather than message carriers, or inventing new meaningless yet exciting words, Jimmy Snowman betrays language per se, and thus contributes to its degradation. The impoverished language leads to impoverished thinking, but very few seem to be preoccupied with this phenomenon, for in the pre-flood world the majority do not think, they consume. Since there are no complex ideas to convey or stories to pass on to the next generation, language and its status of a unique human trait among all animal species are questionable. Only such weirdos as God’s Gardeners, with their preoccupation with the Hymns and the hagiographies of their saints, seem to engage the language for higher purposes.

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<sup>29</sup> C. Bieber Lake, *Prophets of the Posthuman...*, p. 115.

<sup>30</sup> M. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake...*, p. 229.

<sup>31</sup> S. Banerjee, *Science, Gender and History: The Fantastic in Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, p. 5.

Similarly, in her artistic installations composing of single words made of animal carcasses to be further devoured by vultures, Amanda also emphasizes the short-lived nature of words or perhaps their imminent death. She points to the way the consumption-driven society savagely, in a vulture-like manner, consumes the language that has already become scarce and is frequently limited to mono-syllables. The language is dead, hence an animal carcass, for no meaningful non-material exchange between people takes place, and even love has been reduced to the bodily exchange of a sexual act. Perhaps that is exactly the reason why no-one stopped Crake from wiping out the human race and annihilating the world as we know it. Ethical boundaries of bioengineering were left to scientists who are not “language people” but who are driven by the idea of progress. In one of her lectures, Atwood conspicuously juxtaposes the two attitudes:

Science is about knowledge. Fiction, on the other hand, is about feeling. ... “The arts” – as we’ve come to term them – are not a frill. They are the heart of the matter, because they are about our hearts, and our technological inventiveness is generated by our emotions, not by our minds. A society without the arts would have broken its mirror and cut out its heart. It would no longer be what we now recognize as human<sup>32</sup>.

Therefore, Jimmy’s and Tony’s storytelling to Crakers in the post-flood world may be seen as regenerative linguistic practices and the proof for the prevalence of arts and humanities over efficient technology in the face of bioengineered catastrophe. Those who survive are compelled to “talk and to tell, to remember and to imagine (all the things associated with the narrative impulse)”<sup>33</sup> and Jimmy Snowman is no exception. Though at some point he feels the need to write down his story, he abandons his aspirations altogether for the absence of a prospective reader. To write would imply hope for the survival of other literate species, which until the final pages of *Oryx and Crake*, when Jimmy spots three other human survivors, seems highly improbable. Consequently, instead of writing down his “last-man narrative”, he engages himself in conversing with the ghosts of the past and Crakers. As Coral Ann Howells aptly remarks about Jimmy Snowman’s practices:

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<sup>32</sup> M. Atwood, *The art of the matter*, “Saturday’s Globe and Mail”, Jan. 24, 2004. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/the-art-of-the-matter/article741366/?page=all> [20.11.2015]

<sup>33</sup> C. A. Howells, *Margaret Atwood’s dystopian visions...*, p. 171.

He talks to the Crakers, though in his public capacity as Crake's prophet, improvising a version of the Genesis myth with Crake as God creator and Oryx as Earth Mother, while secretly wishing to endow Crake with "horns and wings of fire" (p. 121). Through storytelling, he teaches the Crakers the rudiments of symbolic thinking. And the Crakers love his stories, which makes us wonder if the primitive human brain is hard-wired not just for dreaming and singing as Crake had discovered, but for narrative as well<sup>34</sup>.

Crakers' need for an understanding of their beginnings resonates with Atwood's observation that as humans we tend to invent stories that would make our life on Earth meaningful and that stretch beyond death. As she notes in *In Other Worlds*, "we human beings prefer stories that have a central role in them for us, that preserve some of our mystery and thus some of our dignity, and that imply there might be help at hand if we really need some"<sup>35</sup>. Hence, the winged Fuck that hurries to the rescue. Because we are mortal, we strive for meaningful shelter from metaphysical loneliness; we will the presence of God to make our existence if not meaningful then at least bearable. If we were immortal, Atwood speculates:

It would certainly mean an end to narrative. If life is endless; why tell stories? No more beginnings or middles, because there will be no more endings. No Shakespeare for us, or Dante, or, well, any art, really. It's all infested with mortality and reeks of earthiness<sup>36</sup>.

In *In Other Worlds*, Atwood cites the findings of Dennis Dutton, published in *The Art Instinct*, who believes that "the arts—and also the impulse toward a religion—are encoded in our genes"<sup>37</sup>. Besides postulating that the need for arts and religion is most likely an inherent trait of humanity, Dutton also emphasizes the role story-telling might have played in the survival of the human species. Through sharing with their offspring the stories of their late antecedents, people could build on their experiences and mistakes without having to try everything out themselves and risking their lives. As Atwood puts it, "if you could tell your children about the time your grandfather was eaten by a crocodile, right there at

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<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 171.

<sup>35</sup> M. Atwood, *In Other Worlds...*, p. 55.

<sup>36</sup> M. Atwood, *Writing with Intent*, New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005, p. 301.

<sup>37</sup> M. Atwood, *In Other Worlds...*, p. 43.

the bend in the river, they would be more likely to avoid the same fate. If, that is, they were listening”<sup>38</sup>.

Concluding, the human need for gnosis has come under the scrutiny of many prominent researchers<sup>39</sup> but not that many have explored it from the perspective of biotechnology. It is noteworthy that, as Banerjee observes, “By showing the laboratory-made humanoids develop elements of human complexity despite their genetic programming [...] Atwood implicitly contends that human nature cannot be mastered by technology”<sup>40</sup>. Crakers’ questions about their origins and the symbolic practices they spontaneously engage in testify to the fact that human nature may be prevalent despite genetic modifications. Whether official religious doctrines will grant them a soul or not, posthumans will most likely be concerned with ontological dilemmas and, thus, they will inadvertently resort to symbolic thinking. A declared agnostic herself, Atwood is skeptical of all ideologies, religion included, that may oppress an individual and discourage them from critical reflection, which is clearly demonstrated through the use of parody in her description of Crakers’ newly-formed religious cults. Nevertheless, she does believe in the redeeming power of art and language and their importance for the preservation of the human species. If humans are to survive, however, they also need to dramatically alter their approach to the natural world by acknowledging the fact that they are a part of a complex eco-system outside which they cannot survive. To conclude with the words from J. Brooks Bouson, one of Atwood’s most renowned critics, “in an unexpected manoeuvre for readers long familiar with her work, [Atwood] looks to religion – specifically – eco-religion – as she seeks evidence of our ethical capacity to find a remedy to humanity’s ills”<sup>41</sup>.

### Streszczenie

W swojej dystopijnej trylogii, na którą składają się *Oryx i Derkacz*, *Rok Powodzi* oraz niedostępna jeszcze w wersji polskiej powieść *Maddaddam*, Atwood przedstawia świat przed i po biologicznej katastrofie, na skutek której unicestwieniu ulega prawie

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<sup>38</sup> M. Atwood, *In Other Worlds...*, p. 43.

<sup>39</sup> Confer the writings of Carl Gustav Jung or Sigmund Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*.

<sup>40</sup> S. Banerjee, *Science, Gender and...*, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> J. Brooks Bouson, “We’re Using up the Earth. It’s Almost Gone”: A Return to the Post-Apocalyptic Future in Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*, “The Journal of Commonwealth Literature”, 46 (1), 2011, p. 17.

cała ludzkość oraz wiele gatunków roślin i zwierząt. Ci z ludzi, którzy zdołali ocaleć, mimowolnie stają się opiekunami Derkaczan, nowej genetycznie modyfikowanej rasy hominidów. Mimo iż Derkaczanie są fizycznie idealnie przystosowani by przetrwać w postapokaliptycznym świecie, nie pojmują zasad jakimi kierują się ludzie. Próbując zrozumieć otaczający ich świat, zarówno świat natury jak i pozostałości ludzkiego świata, Derkaczanie bombardują ocalałych pytaniami o znaczenie słów, objaśnienie niezrozumiałych dla nich zachowań, ale przede wszystkim pragną wiedzieć skąd się wzięli i dlaczego zostali stworzeni. Dociekania Derkaczan szybko przeradzają się w nową religię z własną mitologią. Celem artykułu jest opisanie procesu rodzenia się nowej religii, jak również zwrócenie uwagi na fakt, iż myślenie symboliczne, którego religia jest doskonałym przykładem, może być cechą wrodzoną gatunku ludzkiego, która nie podlega modyfikacji genetycznej. Podążając za rozwojem Derkaczan, można spekulować, iż myślenie symboliczne może również dotyczyć postludzi.