



## *Crossing Human Boundaries: Apocalypse and Posthumanism in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood*

by Valeria Mosca

Defining Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the first book in the as-yet-unfinished MaddAddam trilogy, has proven difficult for many critics. The main reason for this is the multiple genre affiliation that appears as one of the most prominent features of this work. Shuli Barzilai, among others, has devoted much attention to this issue; in addition to detecting signs of dialogue between *Oryx and Crake* and famous literary works of the English tradition (among others, *Hamlet*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Frankenstein*), she has also pointed out how Atwood's novel draws on elements from science fiction, the *Bildungsroman*, quest romances, survivor stories and revenge tragedies<sup>1</sup>. In spite of her thorough analysis, though, Barzilai has not been able to provide an effective definition for *Oryx and Crake*; in order to find one we need to turn to Atwood herself, who describes her book as a work of speculative fiction.

In a much-quoted passage from her essay "*The Handmaid's Tale and Oryx and Crake in Context*" Margaret Atwood distinguishes between what she calls *speculative*

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<sup>1</sup> See Barzilai, S., 2008, "Tell My Story: Remembrance and Revenge in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*", *Critique*, 50:1, pp. 87-110.



*fiction* and “science fiction proper” (2004: 513): while the latter is a label for “books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can’t go”, speculative fiction “employs the means already more or less at hand, and takes place on Planet Earth” (*ibidem*). Similar considerations are made in “Writing *Oryx and Crake*”, where the author elaborates further on the concept of speculative fiction and the way in which it applies to her novel:

[Speculative fiction] contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians. [...] It invents nothing we haven’t already invented or started to invent. [...]  
Every novel begins with a *what if* and then sets forth its axioms. The *what if* of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, *What if we continue on the road we’re already on? How slippery is the slope?* (Atwood 2005: 285-86)

The “road we’re on” includes genetic manipulation, pollution, exploitation of natural resources, and abuse of non-human animals. Atwood, always very vocal about her environmental concerns – as an author and as an activist<sup>2</sup> –, depicts a scenario in *Oryx and Crake* that plausibly results from current environmental policies. All of this is, of course, embedded in fiction; more precisely, in a narrative that alternates between two different moments in the future: a post-apocalyptic narrative line is intertwined with one that relates events from a nearer future, all of them leading up to an environmental catastrophe of huge proportions.

A young man named Jimmy, who thinks of himself as the sole survivor of the as-yet-undefined apocalyptic disaster, is the main character and focalizer in both narrative lines. The reader only discovers the reasons for the catastrophe through his memories and his attempts to make sense of what happened. The (narrative) past ‘catches up’ with the post-apocalyptic present at the end of the book, finally allowing the reader some insight into what caused the massive destruction. One may be surprised to discover that there is more to it than hazardous environmental policies; an individual and over-ambitious scheme of Crake’s, Jimmy’s best friend and leading genetic engineer, was actually the main reason for the near-extinction of the human race.

The second book in the trilogy, *The Year of the Flood* (2009), sheds more light on the hectic succession of events that follow one another in *Oryx and Crake*. Although the second novel is not, as one may expect, a sequel to the first one – the same events are simply retold from different points of view –, the new characters who express their

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<sup>2</sup> This is to be seen very clearly in much of the critical work about Margaret Atwood. Four out of the five critical anthologies and almost every one of the articles that are listed in the bibliography to this essay devote much space to Atwood and the so-called ‘environmental question’. The writer’s official website (<<http://www.margaretatwood.ca>> – last visit in January, 2013) also shows evidence of her work as an activist.



different outlooks on events allow the reader much more insight into the environmental catastrophe and what caused it.

This essay is structured in a similar fashion. While the first section focuses on the more 'classical' interpretation of Atwood's dystopian fiction as a form of cautionary tale, the second section offers a different perspective on the apocalyptic narration and its meaning. Elements from the new philosophical discourse of posthumanism will be employed as a theoretical frame to Atwood's apocalyptic scenarios; new meanings may, hopefully, be uncovered or new perspectives revealed – perspectives that by no means attempt to contradict more traditional readings, but that may nonetheless provide more insight into the meaning of Margaret Atwood's dystopian fictions.

#### SLIPPERY SLOPES AND CAUTIONARY TALES

Sigmund Freud defined the uncanny as something that evokes a feeling of familiarity and yet, at the same time, comes across as strange, frightening and ultimately incomprehensible. Such a definition easily applies to Atwood's speculative and dystopian fiction: there is no doubt about the fictive, imaginative quality of the setting in a novel like *Oryx and Crake* – and yet, readers can recognize in it disquieting similarities with their own everyday reality. Katherine Snyder describes this feeling of cognitive dissonance as the product of a "potential social realism":

Dystopian speculative fiction takes what already exists and makes an imaginative leap into the future, following current socio-cultural, political or scientific developments to their potentially devastating conclusions. [...] These cautionary tales of the future work by evoking an uncanny sense of the simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of these brave new worlds. (Snyder 2011: 470)

It is indeed true that much of what we find in *Oryx and Crake* is a large-scale, extreme version of recent (Western) scientific and economic trends. Corporate power, for instance, is a major force in Atwood's hypothetical future: corporations control the environment and those who inhabit it; they have seemingly replaced – or, at best, disempowered – any form of democratic government, and they defend their supremacy with the help of private police forces, gruesomely named CorpSeCorps (Corporation Security Corps). Corporate power also goes hand in hand with scientific experimentation: genetic engineering corporations are the richest ones, and they are exempted from having to deal with any unexpected outcome their experiments may have. Atwood's dystopian future is in fact defined, among other factors, by a rigid separation between the inside and the outside – the inside being the Compounds, safe and enclosed areas that the various corporations have bought for their members to live in, and the outside being the increasingly unsafe rest of the world. Outer spaces are disparagingly called 'pleeblands' by the compounders, who also feel free to pillage



and trash them and, when necessary, use them as the setting for their hazardous scientific experiments.

Bioengineering and clonation also play a major role. The novel is populated by ambiguous hybrid creatures, all of them developed by prestigious scientists in order to fulfill various kinds of human needs. Rakunks, for example, are a cross of raccoons and skunks, “an after-hours hobby on the part of one of the OrganInc biolabs hotshots” (Atwood 2003: 51).<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the raccoons’ clean smell combined with the skunks’ placid temperament, rakunks serve well as pets. As one may certainly guess, though, hybrids are not only being designed to mitigate human loneliness. Aside from rakunks there are wolvogs (tame-looking, but nonetheless ferocious, wolves working as police dogs for the CorpSeCorps), liobams (combinations of lions and lambs commissioned by a religious group as a symbol of the two creatures lying down together), and, most notably, pigeons.

Pigeons are probably the most famous – and ontologically ambiguous – hybrids the readers find in both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. They are “transgenic knockout pig host[s]” used to “grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs” (*ibid.*: 22). Since they share DNA with humans, they generate discussion and uneasiness more than other bioengineered hybrids. As Jimmy recalls from his childhood, “to set the queasy at ease, it was claimed that none of the defunct pigeons ended up as bacon and sausages: no one would want to eat an animal whose cells might be identical with at least some of their own” (*ibid.*: 24); Jimmy’s father, though, is a leading scientist at OrganInc Farms, where pigeons are developed – and where doubts soon start to arise as to the nature and origin of the food that is served to employees. Although many compounders display a seemingly nonchalant attitude about what they eat (“pigeon pie, pigeon pancakes, pigeon popcorn”, jokes Jimmy’s father – *ibid.*), others are no doubt affected by it – among them, Jimmy, still a child at the time pigeons first appear in the world:

He was confused about who should be allowed to eat what. He didn’t want to eat a pigeon, because he thought of the pigeons as creatures much like himself. Neither he nor they had a lot of say in what was going on. (*ibid.*)

Jimmy’s concerns are similar to those of his mother. A former scientist like her husband, the woman soon starts having moral concerns about the Pigeon Project. “You’re interfering with the building blocks of life. It’s immoral. It’s... sacrilegious” (*ibid.*: 57), she says to her husband, and soon afterwards escapes the OrganInc Farms compound to live as an eco-terrorist in the pleeblands.

Jimmy’s mother may well give voice to the feeling that readers experience while getting acquainted with Atwood’s dystopian future: the feeling of lines being crossed. What kind of lines, though, is difficult to tell; are they religious dogmas on the sacred

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<sup>3</sup> All the quotations from *Oryx and Crake* are from the 2003 Bloomsbury edition.



nature of life? Moral paradigms? Humanitarian concerns about the exploitation of other species? Or are they aesthetic objections to bioengineering projects that some may well perceive as disgusting? A disquieting feeling also contributes to intellectual uncertainty: the rationale behind the work of Atwood's scientists is very similar to arguments in the current, real-life bioethical debate ("It's just proteins", "There's nothing sacred about cells and tissue", "we can give people hope", are Jimmy's father replies to his wife's accusations – *ibid.*: 56-57). This, of course, leads us back to the uncanny features of Atwood's fiction. The author herself has not failed to comment on this aspect of her work, as Coral Howells shows us:

Atwood insists that she is writing speculative fiction, and not science fiction, based on an accumulation of well-documented research, "so there's nothing I can't back up". For years she had been clipping news items from papers and popular science magazines and "noting with alarm that trends derided ten years ago as paranoid had become possibilities, than actualities". (Howells 2005: 173-174)<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Jimmy's first memory adds to the disturbing feeling one experiences upon realizing that Atwood's novels blend together real-life events with fictive speculation. The fourth chapter in *Oryx and Crake* is, in fact, entirely devoted to Jimmy's recollection of an enormous bonfire of animal carcasses – one of the real-life bonfires, the reader soon understands, that were lit in 2001 to manage the hysteria caused by the widespread Foot-and-Mouth epidemic.<sup>5</sup>

In light of this, it is easy to understand why Atwood speaks of 'slippery slopes', although critics have sometimes disagreed on *which* slippery slope she may be referring to. Some argue that the main target of her social critique is the "spreading 'virus' of Americanism" (Bouson 2011: 17) and the consumerism it brings about: everything is reduced to a commodity, including nature, animals, and even human identity – or, more precisely, identities, since those, too, have become goods that can be bought in order to enter the most prestigious Compounds. In this view every form of human abuse of the environment and of other species is only one among many aspects of corporate control (Bouson 2011). Other interpretations put more emphasis on, respectively, the 'environmental question' as such (Howells 2006), female discrimination (gender-related issues are not part of the analysis carried on in this essay, but they are extensively dealt with in *The Year of the Flood* and also, to some extent, in *Oryx and Crake* – see Tolan 2007 and Osborne 2010), or (bio)ethical concerns (Farca 2010).

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<sup>4</sup> The quotations are, respectively, from "Profile Margaret Atwood", an article by Robert Potts published on the *Guardian Review* in 2003 (April, 26<sup>th</sup>, pp. 20-24), and Atwood's "Writing *Oryx and Crake*".

<sup>5</sup> See Tiffin, H., 2007, "Foot in Mouth: Animals, Disease, and the Cannibal Complex", *Mosaic*, 40:1, pp. 11-26.



On the other hand, what critics do agree on is that dystopian fictions – Atwood’s as well as those of others – function as a warning. “Perhaps the primary function of a dystopia is to send out danger signals to its readers”, states Howells (2006: 161); J. Bouson corroborates her theory and describes *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* as “a form of environmental consciousness-raising” driven by Atwood’s belief in “the transformative and ethical potential of imaginative literature” (Bouson 2011: 23). According to this theory, apocalyptic discourse expresses cultural anxieties about human conduct and its possible outcomes. On the one hand, it helps us “imaginatively to rehearse the end” we fear (Synder 2011: 486), and thus to exorcise it; on the other, it allows us “to experience [...] the horror of seeing our own interior worlds nightmarishly returning from without” (*ibid.*), and to adjust our conduct before its consequences become inescapable.

Although all of this is certainly true, I feel that looking at Atwood’s works from different perspectives may disclose new meanings of her apocalyptic narratives. In her analysis of *The Year of the Flood* Hope Jeggins, unlike many others, remarks on Margaret Atwood’s ambivalence towards apocalyptic fictions:

Atwood has become one of contemporary literature’s most rigorous demythologizers of Apocalypse, while at the same contributing to its tradition of prophetic warning. [...] *The Year of the Flood* goes beyond merely warning against impending environmental catastrophe but sustains a complex critique of apocalyptic rhetoric; [...] consequently, we might read *The Year of the Flood* as a meta-narrative, a cautionary tale *about* our cautionary tales (Jeggins 2010: 11; italics in original).

Jeggins draws on what Jacques Derrida sees as the paradoxical nature of apocalyptic discourse: the fact that it is, indeed, a *discourse*<sup>6</sup>. Humanity has not ended yet, and the only possible referents for end-of-the-world narratives are other narratives; apocalypse is an entirely discursive phenomenon. Echoes of this theory are much more easily found in *The Year of the Flood* than in *Oryx and Crake*. Although, as we said before, the two books relate the same events, they do so from very different points of view – and those found in *The Year of the Flood* are effective examples of how apocalyptic rhetoric works. In the second book of Atwood’s trilogy, the focalizers are Toby and Ren, two pleeblander women who belong to the eco-religious group of the God’s Gardeners. God’s Gardeners live according to very strict, environmental-friendly rules, upon which they have built their theology; their leader, Adam One, periodically makes up sermons to validate the Gardeners’ dogmas, and he depicts end-of-the-world scenarios as the inevitable consequences humanity will incur into if these dogmas are not respected. It does not take long for Toby to dismiss the

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<sup>6</sup> See Derrida, J., 1984, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)”, *Diacritics*, 14:2, pp. 20-31.



Gardeners' theology as "scrambled" (Atwood 2009: 46),<sup>7</sup> and her uncertainty as to the value of its theoretical foundations is solved when she reaches a high rank in the Gardeners' hierarchy. Getting better acquainted with Adam One allows Toby to find out for sure that the majority of the leader's sermons are textual constructs only made up to provide the Gardeners' doctrine with a logical basis. Dogmas such as that of human vegetarianism, for instance, need much reflection to be backed up:

The children wanted to know why – if Adam was created as a vegetarian, as he surely was – human teeth should show such mixed characteristics.

"Shouldn't have brought it up," Stuart had muttered.

"We changed at the Fall," Nuala had said brightly. "We evolved. Once man started to eat meat, well, naturally..."

That would be putting the cart before the horse, said Adam One; they could not achieve their goal of reconciling the findings of Science with their sacramental view of Life simply by overriding the rules of the former. He asked them to ponder this conundrum, and propose solutions at a later date.

Then they turned to the problem of the animal-skin clothing provided by God for Adam and Eve at the End of Genesis 3. (*ibid.*: 240-241).

The same goes for the idea of apocalyptic destruction as a punishment for human sins: "if there's a penalty, [people] want a penalizer. They dislike senseless catastrophe", Adam One says (*ibid.*: 241).

In passages such as the one quoted above the dissonance between reality and the way we picture it in order for it to make sense is obvious. This may not appear so blatantly in *Oryx and Crake*; yet, the theme of textual constructs and the realities they are superimposed on plays a significant role in that novel, too. The second part of this essay will discuss whether and how apocalypse can be considered as one of those constructs.

#### APPLIED RHETORIC AND THE LIVING WORD

As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, the environmental catastrophe described in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* is not primarily caused by dangerous environmental policies, as one is led to think until the very end of the first book. As I have already mentioned, the pandemic is actually caused by a very attractive, and yet deadly, invention of Crake's, top Compound scientist and Jimmy's best friend. Crake's creation is a pill named BlyssPluss, a seemingly wonderful scientific product that works simultaneously as a protection from any sort of venereal disease, a contraceptive device and a libido enhancer. Although certainly alluring and apparently beneficial to

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<sup>7</sup> All the quotations from *The Year of the Flood* are from the 2009 Bloomsbury edition.



the whole humanity, BlyssPluss is actually part of a broader and secret project of Crake's. A few months after its commercial distribution, BlyssPluss causes a deadly pandemic that brings humanity to near-extinction; Crake's intention is to have human beings replaced by the para-human population he has secretly bioengineered. Jimmy, albeit unknowingly, has been a part of Crake's plan; after spending his childhood in the OrganInc Compound with Crake, he has in fact moved on to study Applied Rhetoric, and then to pursue a career in the advertising industry. At Crake's request the two friends reunite, and Jimmy is offered a job in the advertising campaign for BlyssPluss.

Crake discloses the truth to his friend shortly before the pandemic outbreaks: the Crakers have not been bioengineered as a playful experiment; on the contrary, they are actually intended to replace humans once BlyssPluss wipes them off the world. Crake does not dignify Jimmy's objections with even the slightest consideration. In his opinion, the Crakers are fitter than humans both to live in the world and with one another: they have not been programmed to experience conflict-provoking feelings of any sort; their immune system is indestructible; they lack the ability to think symbolically, and their language only comprehends words whose referents can be found in material reality; they are only interested in sexual intercourse when it results in reproduction, and, since their own excrement is their only nutritional source, they do not need to use up natural resources in order to survive.

According to their creator's intentions, the Crakers are a post-human population – literally and chronologically, since they are supposed to become the 'new' humans after the 'old' ones have disappeared. We see that Margaret Atwood presents us once again with an uncanny product of speculative fiction; her novels dramatize current philosophical thinking about the emergence of a post-human condition.

Here it may be helpful to introduce a short digression about posthumanist philosophical discourse and its implications. Posthumanism, broadly speaking, aims at re-locating humans from their self-assigned position of centrality in the world. Such a thing may be done in relation to various coordinates: evolutionary, ecological, technological ones. Posthumanism does, indeed, split in many branches – most notably, two. One of them focuses on human co-evolution with machines. This branch of posthumanism is frequently called *transhumanism* and tries to make sense of what it means to be human in times when human capabilities are constantly enhanced by scientific and technological means: plastic surgery allows us to change our appearance; powerful prostheses make our bodies stronger; increasingly sophisticated technological archives work for us as a potentially all-comprehensive memory. The other branch of posthumanism focuses on opposite issues – that is, biological and corporeal ones. The idea of co-evolution does not only apply to humans and machines, but also to humans and other species, or, more broadly, nature. This does not mean, of course, denying obvious biological differences; it aims at questioning the





cultural constructs that contribute to the definition of 'human', and exploring the fine line that separates humans from animals.<sup>8</sup>

It is plain to see that both branches of posthumanism describe the Crakers. Pigeons, too, display ambiguous post-human features. Margaret Atwood's interest in the post-human condition is obvious, and statements she has made on various occasions show that one of her main concerns as a novelist shares the same theoretical basis as posthumanist thought. One example is the Kesterton Lecture, delivered by Atwood in 2004. Atwood asks questions such as "What is a human being?" or, more specifically "How far can we go in the alteration department and still have a human being?" (quoted in Howells 2006: 72).

Various philosophers have tried to answer these same questions that Margaret Atwood deals with as a novelist. Humanism is quick to dismiss them by turning to the traditional, Cartesian list of 'human proprieties' – all those features and abilities that are believed to be exclusively human. Although historically many factors have contributed to composing this list, particular emphasis is always placed on two of them: language and rationality. Traditionally animals are thought of as 'biological machines', capable only of instinctive reactions to external stimuli, whereas humans can articulate linguistic responses and behave according to rational thinking (see Wolfe 2010: xvii-xix and xxi-xxii). Posthumanism questions these assumptions on various levels. First of all, it is argued that traditional binary thinking fails to acknowledge what happens in the liminal area that necessarily separates polar oppositions: the fine line between reaction and linguistic response is actually blurred by many factors, such as unconscious influences, repetition compulsion and bodily limits that may or may not allow acts of vocal expression (see Derrida 2002: 378, 400-401, 406). Secondly, language and rationality are seen as self-referential – and thus weak – tools that humans employ to mark their separation from animals. According to Wolfe, "rationality is not, as it were, rational enough, because it stops short of applying its own protocols and commitments to itself" (Wolfe 2010: xx). Even if it is, indeed, exclusively human, rationality fails its own premises when employed as a distinctive criterion:

Observations are based on a constitutive distinction (between figure and ground, say, or legal and illegal) that is paradoxical because it posits the identity of difference (the distinction between legal and illegal is itself made within the legal, i.e., within one side of the distinction) (Wolfe 1998: xviii).

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<sup>8</sup> This is, of course, an over-simplification of the complex discourse of posthumanism. It should be noted, for example, that the cybernetic and the 'corporeal' branch are often in theoretical opposition with one another. Unfortunately, it is not possible to give a full account of that here. For a synthetic and yet exhaustive compendium of posthumanist theories, see Wolfe, C., 2010, *What is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press.



The same stands for language, which defines itself as exclusively human *through human linguistic means*. Both Wolfe (2010: xxi) and Derrida agree that this self-referential use of language is paradoxical:

The idea according to which man is the only speaking being [...] seems to me at once undisplaceable and highly problematic. Of course, if one defines language in such a way that it is reserved for what we call man, what is there to say? But if one re-inscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes. [...] These possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language, *are themselves not only human*. (Nancy 1991: 116; italics in original)

Derrida also argues that the word 'animal' is one blatant example of linguistic self-referentiality. Humans in fact use one single signifier to refer to a highly heterogeneous plurality of beings – "all the living things that man does not recognize as his fellows" (Derrida 2002: 402).

'Animal' as a signifier is depicted by Derrida as a verbal cage used by humans to imprison other, non-human beings and deny any form or individuality to them. His provocative response to this is based on a pun that French allows him: *animot*. This neologism is a homophone for *animaux* (French for 'animals'), and it also contains the word *mot* (French for 'word'). Thus, with one word, Derrida achieves two goals: on the one hand, he recognizes the plurality within the animal realm; on the other, he shows how much power the signifier has over the signified – how unfit human language is to represent reality. Cary Wolfe, too, acknowledges this representational problem. If human language is self-referential and fails to represent non-human realities, how is it possible to dispel "the specter of philosophical idealism" (Wolfe 1998: xix) and avoid representational dead-ends? Wolfe's answer is that we cannot, indeed, help thinking and speaking in anthropological terms. What we can do, though, is make room for a "different logic" (Wolfe 2010: xviii), always 'infecting' our thought and our language with something that acknowledges and states their partiality. Derrida's *animot*, a linguistic creation that shows linguistic limits, is a very effective example of Wolfe's proposed solution.

It may look like we have moved away from Margaret Atwood's fiction, and even further away from post-apocalyptic discourse. It is not so. Both in *Oryx and Crake* and in *The Year of the Flood* the power of rhetoric is a major motif – just as its limits are. Both corporations and religious sects like the God's Gardeners rely strongly on verbal means to achieve their own ends; animal hybrids are given names that, according to human convenience, either emphasize or hide their origins (pigeons' hybridization with humans, for instance, is not displayed in their name – their disquieting function is hidden behind a playful reference to balloons; liobams' nature of both lions and lambs, on the contrary, is explicitly and suggestively stated in their names). Jimmy himself has studied Applied Rhetoric and knows very well how signifier and signified



may be much more incompatible with one another than people often believe. After the pandemic this thought actually begins to haunt him: although he tries to “hang on to words” (Atwood 2003: 68), they begin to feel more and more “slippery”: “there was no longer any comfort in the words. There was nothing in them” (*ibid.*: 261). Language is clearly no longer linked to reality:

[Jimmy] feels like weeping. Then he hears a voice – his own! – saying *boohoo*; he sees it, as if it’s a printed word in a comic-strip balloon. Water leaks down his face. (*ibid.*).

Jimmy’s situation exposes the limits of linguistic representation in fictional form, just as posthumanism does theoretically. Atwood’s novels, though, do not just focus on linguistic limits; they also celebrate the possibilities opened up by a ‘viral’ kind of language – they present us with Atwood’s own *animot*. The fictional scenario is that of an artist, Amanda Payne, who specializes in “Bioart installations” (Atwood 2009: 56); Amanda appears briefly in *Oryx and Crake*, and then moves on to play a more significant role in *The Year of the Flood*. In both books, she is depicted while working on various installations that make up a series called The Living Word:

The idea was to take a truckload of large dead-animal parts to vacant fields [...] and arrange them in the shape of words, wait until the vultures had descended and were tearing them apart, then photograph the whole scene from a helicopter. (Atwood 2003: 244)

There is no need to remark again on the conflict Atwood depicts between word-signifiers and bodily, real-life referents. Like Derrida’s *animot*, The Living Word brings together the verbal and corporeal constituents of reality, and shows the reader their conflicting natures, their lopsided co-evolution and the way in which they ultimately consume one another.

A conflict between theoretical constructs and reality has also informed this section of the essay, since the focus, here, has not been the (apparent) end of humanity Atwood stages in her novels, but the end of ‘the human’ as it is traditionally conceived. The next, concluding section will be devoted to discussing possible relationship between those two kinds of endings.

#### CHOREOGRAPHIC ONTOLOGIES AND THE END(S) OF HUMANITY

Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) is a very famous piece of criticism of apocalyptic paradigms in literary fiction. David Seed argues that the reason for its popularity is the way Kermode depicts “apocalypse [as] a narrative, one of the fictions which we employ to make sense of our present” (Seed 2000: 11). Kermode does



indeed state that “apocalyptic thought belongs to linear [...] views of the world” (Kermode 1967: 5) and that it is a “concordant structure” (*ibid.*: 7) people need to give meaning to their lives and stories. Men, he explains, are born and die “in the midst” of time and history, and “to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends” (*ibid.*).

Once again we are presented with a case of discursive practices giving shape and meaning to an otherwise unconceivable reality. Posthumanist theoreticians would argue that this is part of a broader representational attitude; humans represent both the world and themselves through anthropocentric discourse – which, up to now, has proven inevitable, but also increasingly unfit to portray an evolving reality.

Today’s world is described by Donna Haraway in her “Cyborg Manifesto” (1985)<sup>9</sup> – according to Cary Wolfe (2010: xiii), a *locus classicus* of posthumanism – as a space populated by new forms of life: “by the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids” (Haraway 1991: 150). Barriers between humans, animals, nature and machines are crumbling; different forms of life co-evolve and shape one another. Identities are far from being fixed – on the contrary, they develop partial, ever-changing connections defined by Haraway as “choreographic ontologies” (Haraway 2003: 8).

Choreographic ontologies are what we find once we abandon the cultural constructs through which rigid boundaries between species are usually conceptualized – and they are also what Margaret Atwood presents in fictional form in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. In a passage quoted earlier in this essay, Hope Jeggins states that “we might read *The Year of the Flood* as a meta-narrative, a cautionary tale about our cautionary tales”. We may also argue that both the first and the second novel in the trilogy are apocalyptic tales about the apocalypse of anthropocentric cultural constructs and language. They are not so much tales about the end of humanity as tales about what is beyond traditional human boundaries – the ends of humanity<sup>10</sup>.

But what does this mean in representational terms? If human language is gradually being destroyed by previously subjugated realities – if signifiers are being consumed and eaten up by their non-corresponding referents like Amanda Payne’s Living Words – is Margaret Atwood trying to posit a bleak future for any possibility of linguistic representation?

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<sup>9</sup> To be found in Haraway, D., 1991, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women – The Reinvention of Nature*, London, Free Association Books, pp. 149-181.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida is the first one to use this expression. *The Animal That Therefore I Am* was in fact originally conceived as the third in a series of three speeches he gave during his famous ‘Cérisy conferences’. In Derrida’s words: “It is only after the event, reading the titles of these three meetings (‘Les Fins de l’homme,’ ‘Le Passage des frontières,’ ‘L’Animal autobiographique’) with a feeling of uncanniness, that I perceived a sort of prescriptive arrangement, a preestablished if not harmonious order, a providential machine [...], an obscure foresight, the process of a blind but sure prefiguration in the configuration”. (Derrida 2002: 371)



Perhaps it is too soon to try to answer such a question, since the trilogy still has to be completed. Yet we can find in Atwood's novels some fictional clues as to her willingness to explore new representational territories. One of those is the uneasiness Jimmy experiences because of the "absence of official time" (Atwood 2003: 3) – it will not be surprising, at this point, to know that in the trilogy human instruments to measure time no longer work after the catastrophe, and that survivors can only live according to the natural day-night cycle. The incipit to *Oryx and Crake* shows Jimmy staring at his watch: "Out of habit he looks at his watch – stainless-steel case, burnished aluminum band, still shiny although it no longer works. [...] A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him" (*ibid.*). The lack of human paradigms to manage the world does indeed terrify him; yet it does not corner him in a dead-end. In the closing lines of the novel Jimmy performs the exact same action he is seen doing in the first page: he is looking at his watch. Strange creatures are approaching, and Jimmy has to decide very quickly whether he wants to remain in his hiding place or face the unknown. "Zero hour" is his last thought as the novel comes to an end; "time to go" (*ibid.*: 374).

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