

WHAT'S LEFT OF WRITING: REFLECTIONS ON ATWOOD'S *ORYX AND CRAKE*¹

Melissa Cristina SILVA DE SÁ

Pós-Graduação em Estudos Literários – Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

RESUMO: *Oryx and Crake*, de Margaret Atwood, apresenta um mundo em que a tecnologia domina a vida e o estilo de vida das pessoas. De animais geneticamente modificados a entretenimento com jogos online de alta tecnologia, esse mundo retrata uma sociedade definida pelo protagonista como um “vasto experimento incontrolável”. Jimmy, o primeiro protagonista masculino de Atwood, sente-se deslocado neste mundo por ser uma “pessoa de palavras”, uma definição que ele dá para aqueles que lidam com literatura e línguas em oposição a pessoas que se destacam em matemática e física. Num mundo construído para “pessoas de números”, Atwood explora através de Jimmy, as ansiedades da figura do artista num mundo tecnológico, considera seu papel e, principalmente, sua importância. Usando os estudos de Coral Ann Howells e Sharon Rose Wilson acerca da ficção especulativa de Atwood, essa comunicação objetiva refletir a questão da tecnologia e da arte, especificamente a escrita e o papel do escritor, na chamada “era da tecnologia” à luz do romance *Oryx and Crake*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ficção especulativa, o papel do escritor, Margaret Atwood.

ABSTRACT: *Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake presents a world in which technology has taken over people's lives and lifestyles. From genetically modified animals to entertainment featuring high technological online games this world depicts a society defined by the protagonist as a “vast uncontrolled experiment”. Jimmy, Atwood's first male focalizer, feels displaced in this world for being a “words person”, a definition he provides for people who can deal with literature and language in opposition to people who exceed in mathematics and physics. In a world built for “numbers people”, Atwood explores, through Jimmy, the anxieties of the artist figure in a technological world and considers its role and, mainly, its importance. By using the studies of Coral Ann Howells and Sharon Rose Wilson on Atwood's speculative fiction, this presentation aims to reflect upon the matter of technology and art, specifically writing and the role of the writer, in the so-called “age of technology” taking into account the novel *Oryx and Crake* as well as Atwood's critical works.*

KEYWORDS: *speculative fiction, role of the writer, Margaret Atwood.*

Margaret Atwood has used fictional storytellers, among them writers, painters, and oral storytellers, as protagonists throughout her novels. As argued by Karen F. Stein (2003, p. 154-171), these female protagonists usually use storytelling as a means to understand and revisit their lives and memories, to create alternate realities and fantasies, and also to defy the attempt to shut down their voices. From writer Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* to painter Elaine Risley in *Cat's Eye*, going through journalist Rennie Wilford of *Bodily Harm* to Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, writing and storytelling has a major role in Atwood's novels: writing remodels life, recreates it, and finally works as a rebellious act against established order.

In *Oryx and Crake*, novel published in 2003, Atwood presents another storyteller protagonist. Nonetheless, being a shape shifter writer² she introduces a different kind of

¹ This paper is part of my mater's research project “Writing as Survival in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*” done under the supervision of professor Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida (UFMG).

storyteller – a Last Man character – and her first male focalizer. The protagonist Snowman is a wannabe writer, a lost subject in search for words, the last man on Earth with a narrative compulsion; a writer with no readers. The figure of Snowman is a radicalization of Atwood’s previous storytellers and his doubled portrayal as a “words person” is in itself a reflection upon the matter of writing and being a writer in a world which idealizes scientific knowledge.

Telling a story is more than acknowledging a personal history and/or attempting to understand one self, it is rather a way to gain power and a survival strategy. Survival, obviously, is a major theme in Atwood’s works. In her 1972 critical book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, she states the four instances of survival: bare survival, crisis survival, culture survival, and finally the survival of a previous order that vanished. Throughout her published works, Atwood has explored through her protagonists and personas these instances of survival. In *Oryx and Crake* the last notion is portrayed with this male storyteller who attempts to recreate his past in a post-apocalyptic scenario. Through this act of narrating his life to himself, he is able to reconstruct not only the history of a global genocide, but the history of his own personal dwellings. He had always been an outcast for being an artist figure in a society that only values science, discarding any kind of art as useless.

With Snowman, the relation between man and scientific discourse is reversed. The protagonist does not understand science nor its discourse of improvement of human race. Although rich and son of an influential scientist, the protagonist does not fit in; he is rather an outcast, considered a funny type – he is labeled “neurotypical” by the students of science, a nickname meaning a person with regular intelligence –, that lives in his private world of words and language puns. This feature provides a metafictional quality to *Oryx and Crake*, which relies on self-reflexivity while Snowman tells his fragmented narrative.

The narrator of the novel is a third person omniscient one focalizing on Snowman. A strategy that, according to Coral Ann Howells, has the effect “to displace Jimmy/Snowman from the centre of his own narrative, just as he is displaced from the post-catastrophe world around him” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 173). Snowman’s attempts to recollect his own past as Jimmy, his self before catastrophe, are confronted with his negation of responsibility. At the same time memory is all there is left for him, he cannot stand having them. For this reason, Snowman is always displaced not only in relation to the alien landscape he finds himself in, but also to his own personal history and self. This characterization of the protagonist as a displaced subject is connected to the unsettling double nature of the novel which presents not only these split selves of the protagonist, but also the presence of the double in the title, in the epigraphs and most importantly, in the narrative structure³ which presents a double vision of dystopia.

As speculative fiction⁴, *Oryx and Crake* shares with *The Handmaid’s Tale* a dystopian vision of future. However, instead of the totalitarian religious regime in the

² The term is frequently used by critic Coral Ann Howells making reference to Atwood’s exploration and blurring of different genres along her career.

³ Coral Ann Howells in the chapter devoted to *Oryx and Crake* in the critical book *Margaret Atwood* discusses ideas of doubleness presented in the novel.

⁴ For the discussion on using the term speculative fiction rather than science fiction see Margaret Atwood’s “*The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in Context”, LeGuin’s “*The Year of the Flood* by Margaret Atwood”, Atwood’s *In Other Worlds* and Howells’s “Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Visions”.

United States of the latter, *Oryx and Crake* presents a future in which science and capitalism have together taken over people's lifestyles forming a world the protagonist defines as a "vast uncontrolled experiment" (ATWOOD, 2004, p.267)⁵. Science is the only field of study considered worthy of devoting one self and people outside it are marginalized. Rich people live in the Compounds, walled cities controlled by private corporations, while the masses inhabit the rest of the world, the Pleenblands, violent areas without monitoring whose citizens – if it is possible to discuss such a thing as citizenship in the highly capitalized world of *Oryx and Crake* – buy bio-engineered products from the dominant corporations. Entertainment is found in the form of online games which present violence and pornography as common place and highly advanced technology controls people's houses, movements, and lifestyles. It is our capitalist society to going down to its extreme consequences as Atwood herself argues in the essay "Writing *Oryx and Crake*" (2005, p. 286). As the protagonist remarks: "for each reproduction item, there was supposed to be an original somewhere. Or there had been once. Or something" (p. 30). A comparison to Baudrillard's notion of simulacra and simulation is unavoidable: in the society of *Oryx and Crake*, everything is a copy from vanished originals.

Another vision of dystopia presented in the novel is the world after the catastrophe. A man-made plague causes the extinction of human race and Snowman is apparently the last survivor. Alongside him there are wolvogs and pigeons (genetically modified animals) and also the Crakers: humanoid creatures with different skin colors which smell like citric fruit and eat grass. The Crakers are also genetically modified creatures; however, their "source" is human being. They were designed by Crake – the protagonist's former best friend – in order to replace humanity getting rid of characteristics such as war, greed, proud, and selfishness, but also love, friendship, and art. The wasteland environment is not a problem for the survival of the Crakers, but lethal to humans such as Snowman who is not able to find food or proper shelter. Moreover, the lack of human contact and the detachment of history – the protagonist is now the repository of all human culture – added to the forced contact with the Crakers is a living nightmare for Snowman, who cannot stand their lack of humanity. All things he most values in the so-called human nature – love, sex, and art – are now gone with the Crakers.

The second variety of doubleness in the novel is the protagonist himself. After the catastrophe, he renames himself Snowman: "The Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape" (p.8). This renaming feature allows him to distance himself from his own past and establishes the necessary distance to start revisiting his own past. As Snowman, he is a mythical figure able to face the task of taking care of the Crakers. He is the one to teach them how to do things (such as recognizing what objects are safe or not) and he also creates a mythology for them in which Oryx and Crake created the world and he, Snowman, is kind of a prophet. The narrative on his past starts fairy-tale like: "Once upon a time, Snowman wasn't Snowman. Instead he was Jimmy. He'd been a good boy then". (p. 18) This split into Snowman and Jimmy complicates the matter of displacement in the novel, but at the same time provides an interesting analysis on the anxieties of the artistic figure, specially the writer, in a high technological world that devalues art.

Snowman is a Last Man with a narrative compulsion. Although he does not write, he tells his story to himself. He works as a shadow, following the third person omniscient

⁵ All references to the novel *Oryx and Crake* are taken from the 2004 Virago edition. Further quotations will include the page number only.

narrator in the story of his former self, Jimmy. The difference between these two selves being clearly marked: “Maybe she had love Jimmy, thinks Snowman” (p. 69). This double vision of a man creates a broken narrative in which Snowman tries to reclaim his own identity through storytelling. Narration is the only strategy he employs to keep his sanity. He acts as a mythmaker to the Crakers, inventing genesis at the same time he tries to understand what led him to the present situation: “Snowman is sad because the others like him flew away over the sea, and now he is all alone” (p.9). In the lore he created about himself to the Crakers, he reflects and conjectures on his own present reality. Thus, even though Snowman tries to block his most personal memories, he cannot avoid them “He hates these replays. He can’t turn them off, he can’t change the subject, he can’t leave the room.” (p. 77) He is embedded in his own reminiscences since they are all that is left of human culture. “Hang on to the words, he tells himself. The odd words, the old words, the rare ones”. (p. 78) Storytelling and language work as his saving graces.

Jimmy (the self before catastrophe) defines himself as a “words person” in opposition to “numbers people” such as his father, his mother, and his best friend Crake. Jimmy is not fit for the study of biology or physics; instead, he is interested in words. As a teenager, he likes to watch Anna K., a reality show in which an actress sometimes quotes Shakespeare: “she’d been a doorway of sorts. Think what he might not have known if it hadn’t been for her Think of the words. *Sere*, for instance. *Incarnadine*” (p.97). Moreover, he reads old books and has some fun on language games. “... , he could go on the library and watch old instructional CD-ROMs. Alex the parrot was his favourite, . . . He liked the part where Alex invented a new word – cork-nut,” (p. 61). His pastimes are different from the other kids; he is an outsider in his own world. Even his best friend, the bright scientist Crake, does not understand him: “‘What is this shit?’ said Crake [about Anna K.]” (p. 97). Although he has access to good education living in a Compound and being the son of a famous scientist, he does not fit in, he is not a “numbers person”.

The only option for him is to study in Martha Graham, a college for humanities and arts regarded as a decadent place. The logo ARS LONGA VITA BREVIS was replaced for WE EMPLOY PEOPLE WITH SKILLS and Jimmy studies subjects such as Applied Rhetorics 101 in which he has to learn how to use language to sell products. Advertising is the only place left for writing skills; however, this place is underrated and neglected by society:

He knew what sort of thing would be open to him when he came out the other end of Problematics with his risible degree. Window-dressing was what he’d be doing, at best – decorating the cold, hard numerical real world in flossy 2-D verbiage. (p. 220)

The “real” world, the world of true importance, is the world of science and all his artistic skills will be used as mere adornment. His “risible degree” gives him second-rate status and all his ambitions and desires have no kind of recognition.

The conflict between scientific and artistic discourse is announced in the epigraphs. The first one is Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* advocating for trustworthy scientific based account on events and the second one is Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* with a claim for subjective artistic expression⁶. These epigraphs echo in the novel in the two

⁶ For further discussions on the epigraphs of *Oryx and Crake* see Howell’s *Margaret Atwood* and Wilson’s “Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood’s Major Novels”.

educational institutions presented: Martha Graham Academy, the humanities and arts college, and Watson-Crick Institute, the science one. Jimmy transits in these two spheres since his best friend Crake is a prominent student in Watson-Crick and he feels the prejudice in regard of those in the artistic field.

It is worth remarking the implications of the names of the two fictional institutions. Martha Graham is often considered the mother of modern dance, with major contributions to the field. However, her figure is also associated to decadence since she turned into a depressive alcoholic by the end of her career and was frequently associated to decay because she never fully recovered from the fact she could not dance anymore⁷. The same way, Martha Graham Academy in the novel also had a golden age when millionaires from the Compounds invested money in arts: “The Academy had been set up by a clutch of now-dead rich liberal bleeding hearts from Old New York” (p. 219) but later on was associated to decadency and oblivion: “So a lot of what went on at Martha Graham was like studying Latin, or book-binding: pleasant to contemplate in its way, but no longer central to anything” (p. 219). Martha Graham students are portrayed as outcasts for studying worthless subject in a society that hypervalues practical knowledge. This is made clear in the novel not only with the potential writer Jimmy but with other characters such as Amanda, a visual artist who works with rests of dead animals. The image can work as a kind of summary of the way art is noticed in the novel: unnecessary trash.

Watson-Crick Institute is named after the two scientists who discovered the structure of the DNA. They were awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1962 and their discovery changed the way biology understood the DNA. In a novel that debates so much the ethics of gene splicing such as *Oryx and Crake*, the reference is not so simple and direct. Especially if the reader bears in mind the polemics surrounding Watson and Crick’s discovery. There are allegations that they actually stole the research of Rosalind Franklin, using her evidence in order to publish the article that made them famous. Watson and Crick acknowledged the influence of Franklin’s research but never included her in their publications. Her sudden death in 1958 avoided the embarrassing situation of the Nobel Prize nomination of Watson and Crick. As the Prize does not award posthumously, Franklin was not even considered. However, there has been a lot of debate on whether she would be nominated if alive⁸. In the fictional institution, the allusion is clear: science is a place to achieve prestige, but there may be an antithetical price to pay. Crake seems to have run a medical experiment with his own mother and Jimmy’s mother finally runs away since she is not able to cope with the ethical consequences of gene splicing. Furthermore, the passages describing Watson-Crick Institute are highly satirical and Margaret Atwood has compared them to the ones describing the island Laputa in *Gulliver’s Travels*⁹.

Jimmy fluctuates in these two realms, unable to fit in. On the one hand, he is the son of a successful scientist in an important Compound; thus he has comfort and wealth. On the other hand, he is unskilled in science and is considered for this reason, underrated. He is the “neurotypical”: “Still, it seemed to be like calling him a Cro-Magnon or something. Next step they’d be putting him in a cage, feeding him bananas, and poking him with electroprods” (p.239). Science is the predominant discourse and any person out of its standards is considered an outcast, a deviation, a sub-person. However, Jimmy is the one to

⁷ See *The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Website*.

⁸ See the *San Diego Supercomputer Center Website* section on Science Women.

⁹ See Atwood’s “*The Handmaid’s Tale and Oryx and Crake in Context*”.

survive to final catastrophe and his writing skills allow him telling the story while scientific knowledge is actually the responsible for the disaster.

He finds in words and storytelling his consolation in life since an early age. As a young boy, he would deal with his parents failed marriage by mocking and presenting a kind of puppet show in school starring “Righteous Mom” and “Evil Dad”. Karen Stein asserts about Atwood’s female narrators: “To scape from their unpleasant situations, the protagonists take refuge in fantasies that may include wordplay” (2003, p. 157). The same can be said of Jimmy, a male focalizer that is very much portrayed as a female force, an “alternative ‘feminine’ allegiance to the life of emotion and imagination” (HOWELLS, 2005, p. 177) if one considers the male discourse of science and of the scientist in the novel. Retelling and remodeling stories works as a means of gaining power and confidence. Language is after all, all Jimmy can manipulate.

Later in his life, after graduation, Jimmy embraces his position as a “words person”:

The system had filled him among the rejects, and what he was studying was considered – at the decision-making, the levels of real power – an archaic waste of time. Well then, he would pursue the asuperfluous as an end in itself. He would be its champion, its defender and preserver. Who was it who’d said that all art was completely useless?” (p. 229)

In his advertisement work, he uses words freely them and puts into practice his neglected creativity. His “pursues of the superfluous” lead him to collect words and later on to invent them. Eventually this manipulation of language is the resource that saves him when final catastrophe strikes. Art, storytelling and writing had a crucial role to Jimmy who survives as Snowman. By creating a new self and recreating his personal story he is able to revisit and revise his past, taking responsibility for acts for the first time in his life.

Stein claims that “when depicting such dramas of violence and struggle, these novels [Atwood’s] focus on the telling rather than the action” (2003, p. 155) and this is very true of *Oryx and Crake*. The role of the storyteller is of central attention and the self-conscious Snowman, who is unable to stop writing in his mind – “One more scrap from the burning scrapbook in his head” (p. 12) –, is a radicalization of Atwood’s storyteller figure in the sense that his split self reflects on two major aspects of art: its importance in society and its actual function in it.

The first aspect is discussed in the figure of Jimmy in the first dystopian world. The satire of a highly capitalistic society questions the importance and the value of art and shades light on the discussion of what the place of writing and of the writer are in a high technological world. The question is posed and the answer is given in the form of Jimmy’s constant struggles to find his self. However, Jimmy shows his “humanity” because of his artistic and creative forces which lead him to some kind of moral responsibility. He is the one to feel uneasy with violent and/or pornographic games in opposition to Crake, who is paves the other way around: the belief in logic and science. One may bear in mind Atwood’s own remarks on the role of the storyteller and its redeeming quality¹⁰ and the reader’s impression of the first layer of dystopia in the novel is the one that without art and creative thinking, the world falls into the fallacy of dehumanization. A society which does not value a reflection in relation to itself – meaning art – then is tailing its own end.

¹⁰ See Atwood’s *Negotiating with the Dead*.

The matter of the function of writing – and for extent art – is explored in the second dystopian layer of the novel. In the wasteland Snowman finds himself in, writing and storytelling is what keeps his humanity in opposition to the Crakers, creatures that are not genetically able to have emotions, dreams, or abstract thought. Moreover, it is through storytelling that Snowman teaches the Crakers how to survive; a defiance to the idea that only science is able to teach useful things. As Sharon Rose Wilson remarks: “Snowman acts as trickster creator: his attempt to keep words from becoming extinct succeeds in that he manages to tell the story we read” (2006, p. 187). It is precisely imaginative force in the form of writing and storytelling what survives final catastrophe. Thus, writing is all that is left by the end of the novel.

Although the novel presents a conflict between art and technology in the beginning, the implications of a society that does not produce or values art and consequently not reflects upon its own actions are portrayed as potentially dangerous. Science is what leads humans to its final end and writing and storytelling are ironically what keeps humanity’s traces by the end of the novel. Snowman and his narrative compulsion present the idea that storytelling is, after all, the essence of human thought and there is a hint that even the Crakers, creatures that were project not to have creativity, cannot avoid myths and stories. Even though he writes to no readers, Snowman is not able to stop writing since this very feature is his salvation and his definition as human. Thus Snowman configures Atwood’s radicalization in relation to writing and storytelling as a major theme in her work once writing is all that is left in a post-apocalyptic world being, therefore, the very nature of human beings.

References

ATWOOD, Margaret. **In other worlds: SF and the Human Imagination**. Toronto: Doubleday, 2011.

_____. **Negotiating with the dead: a writer on writing**. New York: Anchor Books, 2003.

_____. **Oryx and Crake**. London: Virago, 2004.

_____. **Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature**. Toronto: M&S, 2004.

_____. **Writing with intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose (1983-2005)**. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005.

BAUDRILLARD, Jean. The precession of simulacra. In: NATOLI, J.; HUTCHEON, L. **A postmodern reader**. New York: State University of New York Press, 1993, p. 342-375.

HOWELLS, Coral Ann. Margaret Atwood’s dystopian visions: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. In: HOWELLS, C.A. **The Cambridge companion to Margaret Atwood**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 161-175.

_____. *Oryx and Crake*. In: HOWELLS, C. A. (Org.). **Margaret Atwood**. 2. ed. London: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2005, p. 155-169.

THE JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS WEBSITE. Artists. **Martha Graham**. Washington DC, 2012. Available at: <http://www.kennedy-center.org/explorer/artists/?entity_id=3735> Accessed in: 19 April 2012.

LEGUIN, Ursula K. *The Year of the Flood* by Margaret Atwood. **Guardian**. 2009. Available at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood>> Accessed in: 19 April 2012.

SAN DIEGO SUPERCOMPUTER CENTER. Science Women. **Rosalind Franklin**. San Diego, 1997. Available at: <<http://www.sdsc.edu/ScienceWomen/franklin.html>> Accessed in: 19 April 2012.

STEIN, Karen F. Talking back to Bluebeard: Atwood's fictional storytellers. In: WILSON, S.R. **Margaret Atwood's textual assassinations**. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2003, p. 154-172.

WILSON, Sharon R. Blindness and survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels. In: HOWELLS, C.A. **The Cambridge companion to Margaret Atwood**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 176-190.