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Comme beaucoup de romans dystopiques, *Oryx and Crake*, le tout dernier roman de Margaret Atwood, décrit les traces d'une race en voie de disparition et offre une lueur d'espoir au lecteur sous la forme d'une race nouvelle. Comme typiquement dans ce genre littéraire, les erreurs de l'ancienne race sont déjà présentes à l'état latent dans la nouvelle race et société qui est sensée remplacer l'ancienne société décadente par quelque chose de neuf et d'immaculé. L'avenir et le passé finissent nécessairement par se mélanger dans ce type de fiction et le critique, ainsi que le lecteur, ne peuvent qu'imaginer et espérer, en vain, que l'avenir ne répétera pas le passé. Le roman d'Atwood, bien qu'étant futuriste, nous fait grâce d'une fin où la société future imiterait celle de ses prédécesseurs. Mais le lecteur averti peut déjà très clairement déduire et discerner les nombreux défauts de cette utopie planifiée et se sentira poussé à établir des comparaisons entre cette société future, ainsi que son propre futur, et ce passé voué à l'échec qui est décrit dans le roman. Le roman de Margaret Atwood propose ainsi un nouveau mythe de la création, aux connotations religieuses, une Histoire réécrite qui fait écho au modèle allégorique dont le but est à la fois de « divertir » et d'« instruire » le lecteur.

allégorie, histoire, réécrire l'Histoire, mythe de la Création, divertir/instruire, société futuriste, dystopie

As I was listening to the radio on my way to work a few weeks ago, as the whole world was commemorating the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, I was struck by one frequently made remark concerning the horror of concentration camps: « it's not possible ».

An eighty-year-old man who had been tortured in the camps mentioned the fact that many people had written him insulting letters saying he had exaggerated the truth, saying « it was not possible ». Which above all made me think of the mental defenses we tend to create in order to avoid seeing this infinite emptiness, this absence of meaning, the dreadful vacuum with which we are necessarily left when attempting to comprehend such events. I was also reminded of the historical notes at the end of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in which some eminent 21st century literary critics waste all their energy trying to prove how the events narrated in the book could not really have happened, thereby unwittingly disregarding any actual lessons to be learned from such a story.[1] Of course, the second world war was no fiction, and it is delicate business comparing the telling of history provided by a real living witness to that furnished by a character in a novel.

Still, *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood's latest novel, just like *The Handmaid's Tale*, the author's 1985 best-seller, faces the challenge of attempting to combine History and Fiction.[2] The use of the speculative mode in both novels serves the same purpose as real History should do in an ideal world : warning the reader of potential dangers. In order to do that, the future world of the speculative novel has to sound as though the events narrated could be History, could become our collective past in a distant future. The hypothetical future of the novel has to be recounted as a credible past in order to fulfill its didactic purpose. For the didactic purpose of History is undeniable, past events being taken as warnings for future generations not to repeat the mistakes of the past. However, the writing conditions are different in fiction, for the reader will enter the world of willing suspension of disbelief only if this world is sufficiently credible but also entertaining enough. If the didactic streak is too strong in the novel, the story might simply fail to be convincing. One of the epigrams of *Oryx and Crake* actually refers directly to this old preoccupation of combining didacticism and entertainment in fiction. It's a quote from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in which the author attempts to posit the novel as non-fiction by saying that his « principal design was to inform (the reader), and not to amuse (him) ». This quote acquires an even more ironic dimension in Margaret Atwood's book, as the purpose of the novel is ostensibly to entertain the reader, but in accordance with Horace's own definition of the poetical mode, simultaneously « instructing » and « delighting ». In those terms, « l'Histoire » (History) - « histoire » (the story) and Allegory work hand in hand. Allegory, by definition, is a story which through fictional figures and actions expresses truths or generalizations about human conduct or experience : put simply, the delight is in the fiction, and the instruction is in its treatment of the human conduct contained therein. Let's see more closely how this axiom functions in Margaret Atwood's latest novel.

Oryx and Crake tells the life story of our hero Jimmy, *alias* Snowman, through a series of flashbacks over a four-day period in Snowman's thirty-something present, four days that may well be Snowman's final days. We discover, in no particular order, that Snowman, the son of an emotionally uninvolved father and abandoned by his ardently political mother, is now the dubious and avuncular guardian of a small tribe of genetically modified "humans" called Crakers. This duty has befallen Snowman, putatively the last original human, after the human race was wiped out by a virus spread by a mad-scientist bio-terrorist named Crake, Snowman's erstwhile friend and benefactor. Much of the novel is dedicated to elucidating what is essentially a love-triangle involving Snowman, Crake and the mysterious Oryx, an Asian nymphet apparently devoid of emotional scarring after being sold as a child into sex slavery to a ring of child pornographers. Snowman's ambiguous obsession with Oryx begins during adolescence when he and Crake first glimpse her captivating though troubling likeness on one of the many sex web-sites they frequently visit. Snowman is immediately enthralled by

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[1] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986, pp. 299-311.

[2] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, Toronto : McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2003.

Oryx and believes his obsession to be singular but it is ultimately Crake who tracks her down and begins to use her and her global network of acquaintances to disperse the virus hidden in a self-help product ostensibly designed to enhance sexual performance. The reader suspects that Crake's enlistment of Oryx may also be a deliberate ploy to recruit an unwitting Snowman into the scheme, for it is a madly jealous Snowman who murders Crake to avenge his love, in what Snowman later assesses to have been a form of assisted suicide, when Crake slits Oryx's throat. The double murder accomplished, the way has been conveniently paved for Snowman to assume his duties as guardian, prophet and teacher for the Crakers. As far-fetched as the story may seem in its outline, it is rendered credible through the filtering consciousness of Snowman whose lack of ambition, self-doubt and desire are authentically banal. The mad-scientist Crake, whose megalomania might otherwise make the story absurd, is introduced to us as a believable boy genius, but is then in large part taken off-camera, as it were, as he and our focalizer pursue differing career paths. When they are re-introduced, Crake appears as something of a stereotype of himself, but neither Snowman nor the reader guess that Crake is planning human extinction until it is too late.

The allegorical dimension of *Oryx and Crake* leaves little room for doubt. The website presenting the novel asks the thought-provoking question: « what would happen if the reins of progress slipped from our hands? »[3] The novel claims to be a warning against mankind's present-day dangers such as genetic manipulation, environmental carelessness leading to global warming and endangering life itself, globalization and consequent social disparities and widespread privatisation of all services, virtual reality, video games, fast food, big pharmaceutical companies, fertility and cloning programs, drugs, the breakdown of the family, literacy being undermined by the technological revolution, obsession with money-making, comfort, beauty and longevity, to name the most obvious ones.

But, behind these obvious dangers lie human vanity and megalomania, of which Crake is most certainly a good example, making the novel sound at times like a biblical allegory. Crake is a « grandmaster, » not only in the simulation game *Extinctathon* in which the players decide which animals should live and which ones become extinct (a decision-making power generally equated with God), but also in real life as his ability to manipulate nature, at least at the genetic level, seems to be supreme. The final disaster seems to have been fully planned by him and him alone. He has played the role of God, an entity Crake reduces in scientifically derisive terms to « a cluster of neurons » in the human brain.[4] Crake's cynical approach to life and critical view of human nature resemble the final judgement. Snowman compares Crake to God "sitting in judgment on the world".[5] Snowman and the children of Crake are easily compared to Noah and his family, the last worthy survivors of a world of hedonism. The novel does not answer the question whether Crake actually planned everything to occur as it did, nor does it explain why he seemingly commits suicide, through his sacrificial murder of the lamb, Oryx, on the altar of his creation, the Dome. Jimmy wonders thereafter if Crake was actually a grandmaster who had planned every single detail or a crazy MaddAdam, to refer to another dominant God-figure from the omni-present internet landscape which serves as catalyst and backdrop to Snowman and Crake's formative years.

Crake's own name is ambiguous, for that matter, as this nickname is borrowed from an extinct animal in the Extinctathon repertoire. Crake is both an expert player of the game and at the origin of his own extinction. The scientist destroys human nature and himself at the same time, but is it out of genius or out of madness? Only the allegorical dimension of the novel can fully reconcile both aspects. Our present-day scientists, who can sometimes be considered sorcerers' apprentices, through a combination of ego and profit motive, have made their

[3] oryxandcrake.com
[4] *Oryx and Crake*, p. 157.
[5] *ibid*, p. 359.

creations dangerous, to the point of endangering their own species and world. The character of Crake in the novel is either a cunning scientist or a madman, in Jimmy's terms, but the character of the scientist, on an allegorical level, is a mad scientist. There again, the novel warns not so much about scientific progress as the distorted use of progress by ethically derailed minds. Snowman actually summarizes this idea when he says at some point: « Or perhaps the danger was in him. Perhaps he was the danger, a fanged animal gazing out from the shadowy cave of the space inside his own skull ».[6] Or as Margaret Atwood pointed out in an interview on the writing of her novel: « Science is a way of knowing, and a tool. Like all ways of knowing and tools, it can be turned to bad uses [...]; it is not in itself bad [...]. The driving force in the world today is the human heart – that is, human emotions [...]. Hate, not bombs, destroys cities ». No wonder that the Paradise which Crake has created as a perfect home for his Crakers to grow and live, is spelled in the novel « Paradice », as if Crake the scientist were shooting craps with destiny. Crake's technologically post-lapsarian world is Milton's *Paradise Lost*,[7] Paradise being the world before the « Apocalypse »,[8] before the final disaster when the human race is wiped out of existence, the world as it was before the dystopian society described in the novel leads to the decay Crake feels requires a radical solution. If we extend this biblical allegory, these fallen Adam and Eve could be Crake, the megalomaniac scientist, and Oryx, the projection of all human desires and fantasies. This would explain why Oryx and Crake as characters seem to be devoid of personality, as if their symbolic value superceded their importance as characters. Snowman's role in this biblical allegory is less clear, as the reader must decide if he is a more apt Michael or Lucifer, or whether he is meant to embody both of these figures. This new history of creation is meant to suggest that the world in which we live today is being manipulated by human vanity and desires. And this society, says the novel, can only be doomed.

The breakdown of the family unit and traditional values is a strong theme in the novel and, as is often the case in real life, broken families here constitute a cycle of repetition, giving the society described in the book a sad resemblance to contemporary society. The three main characters, Oryx, Crake and Snowman come from families where parental conflict and/or absence are obvious. Each of them has at least one parent who is a terrible role model: Oryx's father doesn't seem to exist, and her mother sells her into slavery. Crake's father is assassinated for industrial subversion, a fact Crake actually seems to find amusing. And Snowman's mother, another political activist, abandons her son, while Snowman's father's father-son relationship skills are apparently limited to stupid and impersonal e-mailed birthday cards. The irony in the fact that these three characters emerge as a tripartite parental group for mankind's final brood can not be overstated. If Crake's ultimate act is truly a murder-suicide, then he in his turn can only be found guilty of abandoning his « children » while simultaneously depriving them of their mother. It is hard to make a case against Oryx in this context, for she seems a patient and nurturing mother. As for Snowman, he is the typical new parent, in a state of perpetual consternation as to how to deal with his new children. Like most parents, Snowman makes up reality as he goes along, saying whatever comes into his head to get the Crakers to cooperate and obey. As a prophet, there is every indication that he will freely interpret religious law to his own ends, given the opportunity, as he considers asking the vegetarian Crakers to catch him more fish for his own dinner. Ultimately Snowman too will abandon the Crakers, in the open ending of the novel, either to die trying to kill the last real humans, or to join this group of humans. The reader can only wonder what will become of the Crakers, like so many real children, actually or symbolically abandoned by a series of parents. Will they be immune to a lack of parental love, or will they learn from this

[6] *ibid*, p. 261.
[7] *ibid*, p. 308.
[8] *ibid*, p. 340.

faulty model as their « parents » did before them? Snowman's apparent concern for the fledgling Crakers is born of his feelings of responsibility for them and his guilt and misgivings about leaving them on their own. But he will nonetheless abandon them at the end of the novel.

However the final message of the novel is not as pessimistic as we might expect. There is a redeeming feature which is embodied by Snowman and the Crakers. The new myth of creation which Snowman delivers the Crakers in bits and pieces throughout the novel is an attempt to make up for a desensitized world. Snowman re-tells History in his own way because the Crakers would not understand the real truth. The society of the Crakers could not possibly benefit from History because they are so utterly different from the people who lived History. They are a primitive self-sufficient society of genetically modified human beings and as such would not make the link between Snowman's past and their present, let alone their future. The novel makes it very clear that they won't ever be able to evolve into another technologically advanced civilization. History won't be able to reproduce itself for them because advanced technology and electricity have been obliterated. Crake is actually the one who expands on this idea when he says:

> [...] all the available surface metals have already been mined, [...] without which, no iron age, no bronze age, no age of steel, and all the rest of it. There's metals farther down, but the advanced technology we need for extracting those would have been obliterated,

along with the knowledge required to make this technology function.[9] The novel is precisely an examplification of this hypothesis. *Homo sapiens sapiens*, of which Snowman seems to be one of the few remaining specimens at the end of the novel, is disappearing forever: « Maybe that's the real him, the last *Homo Sapiens*, a white illusion of a man, here today, gone tomorrow (..), getting thinner and thinner until he liquefies and trickles away altogether ».[10]

The Crakers won't ever be faced with another civilization of the type described in the novel. Allegorically, the message to the reader is that if we go too far in the direction we have taken, there won't be any turning back. The Crakers live outside Time and History. This could explain why they seem so blissfully happy, which may be another interpretation of Hegel's words: « happy people have no History ». Historical events lose their real value and meaning, just like historical figures. The Crakers are all named after great historical figures, like Napoleon, Empress Josephine, or Abraham Lincoln, but in their society these names don't mean anything anymore, they are just empty names waiting to go through totally different meanings. Nonetheless, it is curious to see names of powerful historical figures applied to the naive and childlike Crakers, and one thinks automatically of other classic dystopian literature such as *Animal Farm* and *Lord of the Flies* in which a small group of characters, newly liberated from the constraints of society, immediately sets about establishing a hierarchy that is condemned to abuses of power – an unconscious emulation of the pre-existing order, that for the absence of authority, have dire consequences. Snowman himself begins to notice the first traces of hierarchy among the Crakers, in his last days before leaving them, and the reader wonders if the Crakers, despite their genetic « improvements », are not going to reproduce human behaviour, if not human history.

Snowman's manner of re-telling History is totally appropriate to Craker society because it is purely spiritual and addresses their preoccupations with the invisible. Snowman sees himself at some point as an embodiment of History for the Crakers: « he's what they may have been once. *I'm your past*, he might intone, *I'm you ancestor, come from the land of the dead* ».[11] But he soon realizes that he is a « message without sender » for these people,[12] because his

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[9] *ibid*, p. 223.
[10] *ibid*, p. 224.
[11] *ibid*, p. 106.
[12] *ibid*, p. 109.

past does not correspond to anything for them, so that the message even becomes futile to them, but not to us readers because it's not too late for us. Instead of being seen as History, the Crakers see him as an Oracle, a prophet of some kind who serves as the link between them and their God. They worship him like a God. Snowman is melting, literally dwindling away from starvation throughout the novel and ultimately likely to succumb to some super-virus which has infected his foot. But the myth he is leaving behind is perfectly adapted to the Crakers'society. Snowman provides a naive religious framework based on simple, natural elements, appropriate to a primitive society which has no existential pretentions or notion of the immortal soul. Their capacity to conceptualize any complex theological framework is limited; accordingly, the religious instruction given them by Snowman is a pragmatic book of diet, law and history, not a guide-book for the spirit. It is an old testament rather than a new testament, essentially history and chronicles, however faulty and truncated, that ultimately portrays Oryx and Crake in mythical terms more reminiscent of Zeus and Hera than of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Snowman's shortened, personalized and very selective version of history is therefore a source of amusement for the reader who identifies with Snowman's predicament while he essentially botches the job of transmitting any accurate notion of history to the Crakers.

Another reason why Snowman re-writes History for the Crakers is that they are like children, and their language and conceptual skills are so limited that Snowman has to simplify History and deliver it up to them in some comprehensible fashion. Snowman's fight with words is constant through the novel, not only through his exasperated attempts at communicating with the Crakers, but also through his nostalgic approach to the language of the past. He often refers to the « dissolution of meaning »,[13] not only because he has nobody to speak to anymore, except for the Crakers, but because the world he has inherited is the leftovers of a society which had grown less and less literate in the face of technology. Just like in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the question of recording History in a context where History cannot be recorded is crucial. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the contention is that Offred recorded her story on tapes after the events she tells took place. Here Snowman does not write the story of the past events because he does not have any readers: the Crakers do not read (part of Crake's genetically modified programs) and he believes that he might be the only human being left on the planet, so what would be the point? Writing History becomes useless if you have no readers. Snowman's only attempt to write history is when, before leaving the Dome, he scribbles down a speculative account of Crake's plan, how the virus that destroyed the world was created and spread.[14] But this singular attempt at writing History fails because the only reader is Snowman himself, when he returns to the Paradice Dome. Upon discovering his own message untouched and unread, weeks or months after it had been written, he destroys it. No need of History in a world in which the passage of time has become meaningless.

Another reason why Snowman does not write history, or does not need to, is that the Crakers will perpetuate his version of History through oral tradition. They are the book he has not written. Again, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is a reversion to oral tradition in this dystopian society, reminiscent too of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. The oral tradition in a world without books or readers, though a primitive throwback to our tribal origins, is the only pre- or post-technological solution to creating and recording History, and the human urge to do this is compulsive and inescapable from the moment that even a germinal comprehension of one's own existence in time emerges. The need to explain the past, and imply a future, is inherent to the egotistical human condition, as self-awareness requires a context, which History, however fabulous or fallible, reassuringly provides. The Crakers do not have any understanding of their own mortality −indeed, they are intended by Crake to be « immortal »,

[13] *ibid*, p. 39.
[14] *ibid*, p. 346.

creatures that will live in perfect health until their own sudden death, as in the golden age of mythology. As such, they will not require religion because mortality is not a preoccupation with which they are faced. Nonetheless, their initial history is a religious history because it is a creation myth: they have met Oryx, and know they are the children of Crake. The absence of these two key figures in their emerging society explains their curiosity, their « need to know », underlining a further flaw in Crake's execution of his master plan. By definition immortal, the Crakers would have no need of History had they never been exposed to Oryx, told of Crake, or given a guide in the form of Snowman. Obviously, however, the novel could not exist in its present form either, but for these conditions. Snowman, quite clearly, is present to guide and instruct the reader, not the Crakers.

Snowman's wish to write History needs to be analyzed further though, as Snowman still has hope that there might be survivors like him, in which case telling History would become a necessity. « *How did this happen?* Their descendants will ask, stumbling upon the evidence, the ruins. The ruinous evidence. *Who made these things?* [...] you'd be freaked, you'd run away, and after that you'd need an explanation [...] ».[15] Similarly, there is a lot of guilt behind his words to the Crakers, the guilt of the fallen man. We may wonder if his re-telling of History is not to alleviate his bad conscience at having participated in the downfall of the human species, just like Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* who was also fully aware of her own active and guilty participation in the system. This guilty feeling could correspond to the guilty parent in Snowman who realises what a ruined world he is leaving for his children to live in. Allegorically speaking, the novel would then incite the readers to become, not guilty parents for their children, but responsible parents instead, who still have some power to change the future, and who might decide to question their participation in that world. For example, though Snowman may be infuriated by Oryx's miserable past of slavery and sexual submission, he still feeds it in some ways by visiting porn web-sites and through his insatiable curiosity regarding her past, as he wants her to reveal each juicy detail. Furthermore, he is responsible for the final apocalypse, as he was in charge of marketing the Blyssplus product which spread the virus. Should not the reader also question his own professional involvement in his world? Snowman's redeeming feature, in a sense, is that he is fully human, aware of some (but certainly not all) of his own inner contradictions, and this may be one of the novel's greatest messages. There is room for hope from the moment that we start questioning our participation in this world.

However, the novel points to no recipe. Here we are, back to the very beginning of the novel, in the second epigram which is a passage of *To Tthe Lighthouse*, by Virginia Woolf, and which reads as follows: « Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air? ». History does not provide recipes and is also subjected to the human heart's inner contradictions as History is told by fallible human beings, like Snowman, who is this novel's Historian. But even though the novel questions the role of the Historian, it especially focuses on the role of the listener of History, for, as the Crakers' lack of comprehension underlines, History is pointless if there is nobody to hear it. If it does not appeal to the human heart and raise our consciousness of ourselves to the point where we can learn from it and use it as a guide, History simply becomes an obituary column, a *magna carta* of achievements and deaths, like in the computer game *Blood & Roses*. The thing that animates that list of achievements is the human soul running through it, with its triumphs and implicit warnings. Regognition of one's own tragic flaws but also potential for either redemption or atrocity is didactic −awareness is the first step towards salvation. History provides the opportunity for this recognition. The message of hope at the end of the novel, unlike the example of

[15] *ibid*, p. 222.

Auschwitz, is that this story has not happened yet and there are still choices to be made in order to prevent it from becoming History. And while we can learn from both stories, this one can still be prevented. The novel invites the reader to question the reality of the events that are told, just like Snowman imagines hypothetical visitors to this apocalypse saying: « *These things are not real. They are phantasmagoria* ».[16] The warning is clear: if we believe that the events described in the novel are far-fetched, if we cast doubt upon their possibility or even their reality, then we are indirectly participating in the downfall of our world. More generally, if we cast doubt upon the truths that lie behind the historical text, we are in danger of reproducing atrocities or of merely letting atrocities happen, and this is not a useless piece of advice in a time that raises so much the question of collective memory and its failings. How much of our past history will remain when computers have finished replacing human memory? This is why the final tone of the novel is one of urgency. We, the readers, still live in Time, unlike the Crakers, and we still have choices to make regarding our actions.

[16] *ibid*, p. 222.