An Ecocritical Retelling of the Bible: Genesis and Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*

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Abstract
In *The Year of the Flood* (2009), Margaret Atwood sketches out a dystopic, post-apocalyptic scenario after the spreading of a disease that ends by nearly destroying the human race. Two characters, Toby and Ren, are entrusted with the task of making sense of what has happened, connecting the desolation of what remains with an analogous devastated past, in which the Earth appeared as deprived of its natural resources and inhabited by violent, dehumanised people. An attempt to find a solution to this environmental and human degradation before the catastrophe had come from an eco-religious group called God's Gardeners, who had tried to resume Biblical dictates to explain their peculiar bio-ethics. Along with Toby and Ren's memories (they were both Gardeners), the novel also presents a transcription of some oral hymns told by Adam One, the original and brainy leader of the sect, who also re-elaborated the myth of the Flood to prepare his people for the worst. In this paper, I investigate the way in which the Gardeners use and rhetorically exploit the Bible to offer a vision of life that proves to be alternative and yet complementary to the materialistic one expressed by the numerous scientists appearing in the novel. At the same time, I will discuss how Atwood employs and changes some traits of the dystopian fiction in a direction that seems to be aware of the most recent critical debates on ecocriticism.

Key-words: *The Year of the Flood*, Bible, Ecocriticism, Atwood.

1. The conceptual frame: the location of the human

In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben wrote: "If animal life and human life could be superimposed perfectly, then neither man nor animal – and, perhaps, not even the divine – would any longer be thinkable. For this reason, the arrival at posthistory necessarily entails the reactualization of the prehistoric threshold at which that border had been defined. Paradise calls Eden back into question" (Agamben

2002: 21). Agamben here conjectures on the artificiality of the *Homo Sapiens* notion, grounded in the expulsion of the category of the animal from the category of the human; the effacement of a distinction between the two – the quotation suggests – would happen in, and possibly would cause the arrival of, a post-historical era marked by the disintegration of the assumptions on which the West has founded its identity. At this point, post-history would necessarily evoke myths belonging to a non-datable (prehistorical in this acceptation) original past, represented by the Biblical Eden.

The implications and the reflections activated by Agamben's statement may acquire even more relevance than they have already done in philosophical terms if considered with respect to the longstanding debate on ecocriticism and its impact on literary studies.

Changes in the morphology of Western culture, deconstructed from the 1970s on by movements (feminism, cultural studies, queer studies and so on) exposing what Iain Chambers has called "the heart of darkness of modernity" – i.e. the systematic marginalisation and even objectification of minorities in order to affirm the centrality of the white male subject (2001: 7-26) – have led to a reconceptualisation of the terms in which anthropocentrism was conceived. What followed paved the way for new critical attitudes leading to the awareness that the dominance over an Otherness classified in terms of its belonging to a constructed category of the human (race, class, gender), could also be extended, as Agamben has pointed out, to the animal and to nature. If re-thinking the borders between human, animal and technology is said to be the main focus of posthumanism, the problematisation of the human/environment relationship appears as part of the project of ecocriticism working to overcome "the separation of subject and object, body and environment, nature and culture" (Heise 2006: 506-7).[1]

[1] The difference between posthumanism and ecocriticism is, in fact, rather ephemeral. At a recent conference, Sullivan talked about ecocriticism in terms of "ecological posthumanism", in that the two strands actually run parallel in the deconstruction of traditional Western humanism. For information visit: http://environmental-humanities-network.org/participants/all-participants/heather-sullivan.

In my view, this project also informs Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Year of the Flood*, published in 2009 as the second in a trilogy started in 2003 with *Oryx and Crake* and completed in 2013 with *MaddAddam*, which discusses issues related to pollution and an excessive and dangerous advancement of biotechnology. Science is questioned in the novel by recourse to religion and to a re-telling of Biblical myths, such as the Flood. Far from sustaining a naïve counter-scientific argument to solve the problems of the planet, the text poignantly explores the limits of both mysticism and materialism, creating a post-apocalyptic setting that seems very close to the one described by Agamben in terms of pre- and post-historic condition, that is to say, a time and a space in which the categories defining the human have collapsed.

The next sections will explore the kind of scenario built by Atwood, addressing questions related to 1) the function of myth-retelling in the novel; 2) the ecocritical perspective that can be applied to *The Year of the Flood*.

2. The sense of an ending: science and religion in *The Year of the Flood*

It is quite unequivocal that *The Year of the Flood* presents a dystopic pattern of the catastrophic type, characterised by fantasies of human extinction projected onto a future where society shows signs of all kinds of brutality and the utmost lack of ethical concern (Muzzioli 2007: 29).[2] In Atwood's novel, these ingredients are seen as the consequences of the commodification of science and technology, as the only interest is in making profit through the exploitation and abuse of natural resources, animals

[2] Some peculiarities of Atwood's dystopia have been discussed by the author herself; she has indeed made it clear on more than one occasion that dystopia is not about science fiction, but about "speculative fiction", in that it does not deal with "things […] we can't yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can't go", but with "the means already more or less at hand […] on Planet Earth" (Atwood 2004: 513). Snyder offers another useful explanation: "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" (2011: 470). See also Mosca 2013: 38-9.

and the weakest social subjects. The destruction of the individual "I" as a result of the control wielded by totalitarian regimes and an expression of social inequality – which was a distinctive trait of the British dystopias of the first half of the last century until the 1970s (Guardamagna 1980) – returns here under different guises. The dehumanisation of people turning into (mindless) machines – that for instance was at the centre of Zamjatin's *We* (1921) or Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) – becomes, in Atwood's society-to-be, the reduction to organic material to be used up in any possible way: subjugation and dominance are established as the extremes of a rigid social hierarchy. At the top, there are only corporations of bio-engineers and scientists who, like post-modern Frankensteins, prove able to give life to hybrid creatures, and to take life away from a population that appears as an indistinct mass of consumers, unwitting subjects for experiments, providers of 'pieces' for illegal transplants and bodies on sale for sex. Consumerism rules society and establishes the value of people, so that technological progress is paradoxically accompanied by barbarism and by deep divisions within the social body. Divisions are spatially embodied: engineers and their families are secured within districts (the Compounds), separate from the so-called Pleebmob, the 'rest' of the citizens, placed in disorderly urban agglomerates named the Pleebland.

The separation characterising space also characterizes time, as the novel deals with events before and after a dividing line, the spreading of a mysterious plague that has swept the human race away. When the novel opens, the aftermath of the catastrophe is recounted by two survivors, Toby and Ren, who also tell in retrospect how desolate and violent life was even before it. As the narrative unfolds, we discover that the pandemic was actually created and spread by the ineffable top-Compound genetic engineer Glenn aka Crake (the protagonist of the first novel of the trilogy, *Oryx and Crake*), who had planned the destruction of humankind and its replacement with post-humans created in the lab. More to the point, Glenn had carried out the apocalyptic fantasies of an eco-cult called God's Gardeners – of which both Toby and Ren were followers – based on the belief in the imminent arrival of a divine punishment for the reckless ecological behaviour of men. A third-person narrator expresses Toby's feeling towards

the environmental devastation characterising the world and fuelling the dissemination of the Gardeners' doctrines:

> *We're using up the Earth. It's almost gone.* You can't live with such fears and keep on whistling. The waiting builds up in you like a tide. You start wanting it to be done with. You find yourself saying to the sky, *Just do it. Do your worst. Get it over with*. She could feel the coming tremor of it running through her spine, asleep or awake. It never went away, even among the Gardeners. Especially – as time wore on – among the Gardeners. (Atwood 2009: 285)

This sense of an imminent end is material for the sermons and hymns spoken by the leader of the Gardeners, Adam One, whose voice interrupts the two narratives about Toby and Ren, thus constituting a third nucleus of story-telling. Adam's stories, however, seem to be founded on a different isotopy to the other ones. The extra-diegetic narrator who speaks about Toby, and Ren herself in the role of a first-person speaker, reconstruct past and present from different perspectives, offering the reader pieces of a puzzle to be put together in order to create a prismatic but linear description of events. Conversely, Adam's words prove oracular, solemn and persuasive in directly addressing an audience and so in trying to expose the heart of the Gardeners' philosophy based on the worship of a mystical nature, the expression of God's goodness. It is not by chance that the introductory hymn which we find at the very beginning of the text not so innocently celebrates a garden that is clearly a metaphor for nature:

> Who is it tends the Garden,
> The Garden oh so green?
> Twas once the finest Garden
> That ever has been seen.
> And in it God's dear Creatures
> Did swim and fly and play;
> But then came greedy Spoilers,
> And killed them all away.
> […]
> Oh Garden, oh my Garden,
> I'll mourn forevermore
> Until the Gardeners arise,
> And you to Life restore. (p. 1)

The quotation subtly suggests an analogy between nature and the garden *par excellence* – the Biblical Eden – thus tracing a temporal bridge between a *mythical* past and a *historical* present or, to put it differently, between a fictional divine perfection and its unworthy human degradation.[3] Though this incipit provides a synthesis of the Gardeners' main arguments against the blind exploitation of natural resources and against the dehumanisation of people, the last lines refer to a possible restoration of life as they think it ought to be.

Both points – the critique of society and the construction of a better future – are central to Adam's efforts at contrasting the nihilism of a materialistic culture through the dislodging of human beings from the top rungs of the traditional *scala naturae* and their relocation within the ecosystem as creatures among equally valued creatures: "We thank Thee, oh God, for having made us in such a way as to remind us, not only of our less than Angelic being, but also of the knots of DNA and RNA that tie us to our many fellow Creatures" (p. 64). The insertion of scientific notions in a sermon inspired by the Bible is the main characteristic of Adam One's rhetoric. Emblematic, in this respect, is his re-elaboration of the myth of the Creation, in which he includes evolutionary and other scientific theories:

The Human Words of God speak of the Creation in terms that could be understood by the men of the old. There is no talk of galaxies or genes,

[3] The concern for ecology is interestingly considered by Stableford as one of the problems intrinsically connected to dystopia as a genre: "The original meaning of the word 'pollution' had a moral and spiritual context, referring to defilement or desecration rather than common-or-garden uncleanliness, and the increasing use of the term 'environmental pollution' with reference to problems of industrial waste disposal retained a plangent echo of that implication. In effect, pollution became the first and foremost of the deadly ecological sins. The idea of dystopia was infected with this consciousness at birth, and the history of the idea has, inevitably, seen a gradual and inexorable increase in its elaboration within the context of ecological mysticism and science" (2010: 263). This vision may be particularly useful for understanding the narrative operation carried out by Atwood and the way she resumes and transforms dystopic themes and motifs. In *The Year of the Flood*, in fact, ecology is treated from a variety of perspectives, warning the reader against the dangers of pollution, but also underlining the pros and cons of a mystification of nature.

for such terms would have confused them greatly! But must we therefore take as scientific fact the story that the world was created in six days, thus making a nonsense of observable data? God cannot be held to the narrowness of literal and materialistic interpretations… (pp. 13-4)

The exegesis offered in this and other passages prescribes the refusal of a literal reading of the Scriptures by suggesting the radical necessity of historicising it and considering it metaphorically:

Remember the first sentences of those Human Words of God: the Earth is without form, and void, and then God speaks light into being. This is the moment that Science terms "The Big Bang", as if it were a sex orgy. Yet both accounts concur in their essence: Darkness; then, in an instant, Light. (p. 14)

The retelling of the Bible in such a way as to insert science into traditional Scriptures aims at persuading an audience accustomed to scientific knowledge (many Gardeners are former scientists) and in need of a religious belief; at the same time, it performs the function of making two opposing axiologies part of a unitary and homogeneous system of thought, aspiring to recreate the link between the subject and his/her context, be it society or nature; but while there may be no point in denying science, it may be useful to relativise it in order to debunk materialism:

On the Feast of Adam and All Primates, we affirm our Primate ancestry – an affirmation that has brought down wrath upon us from those who arrogantly persist in evolutionary denial. But we affirm, also, the Divine agency that has caused us to be created in the way that we were, and this has enraged those scientific fools who say in their hearts: "There is no God". […] [S]o how can anyone reason that the failure to measure the Immeasurable proves its non-existence? God is indeed the No Thing, the No-thingness, that through which and by which all material things exist; for if there were not such a No-thingness, existence would be so crammed full of materiality that no one thing could be distinguished from another. *The mere existence of separate material things is a proof of the No-thingness of God*. (p. 62, my emphasis)

The reference to God as Nothingness moves Adam's rhetoric from the traditional Aristotelian logic, defining Being (or 'what is') as the fixed point by which it is possible to define nothing (or 'what is

not'). Adam One creates, in fact, a theology in which God appears as a differential gap among things, a gap that founds their very existence and allows their distinction from one another: Nothing is the source and the ruling principle of living beings and things, in that He delimits and so creates them out of pure and amorphous materiality.

It is worth comparing Adam One's doctrine with the alternative vision of the other charismatic character of the trilogy, Glenn:

> Glenn used to say the reason you can't really imagine yourself being dead was that as soon as you say, "I'll be dead," you've said the word *I*, and so you're still alive inside the sentence. And that's how people got the idea of the immortality of the soul – it was a consequence of grammar. And so was God, because as soon as there's a past tense, there has to be a past before the past, and you keep going back in time until you got to *I don't know*, and that's what God is. It's what you don't know – the dark, the hidden, the underside of the visible, and all because we have grammar, and grammar would be impossible without the FoxP2 gene; so God is a brain mutation […]. (p. 377)

God stands here within the peripheral regions of endless past tenses, which point not to a foundational origin but simply to what cannot be known. Analogously, faith in the immortality of the soul (and consequently in the possibility of transcendence) depends on the use of the pronoun 'I' and hence it is just a question of grammar, testifying to the impossibility of formulating a thought outside the categories of language – and so of discourse. 'Nothingness' and spirituality are interpreted as genetic reactions of the brain and so reported to a fully physical and therefore material dimension (which is exactly the opposite of what Adam One predicates in his sermons). Nonetheless, Adam's and Glenn's visions have a point in common in that they both somehow rewrite the Bible and in particular those parts, such as the Gospel of John, which associate God to Word:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
>
> The same was in the beginning with God.
>
> All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

> In him was life; and the life was the light of men. (John 1:5)

The God/Word equation, which is cynically retold by Glenn in terms of God as a grammatical appendix, surfaces in Adam's preaching too in such a way as to inspire a more sophisticated linguistic interpretation. God as the Nothingness that allows the demarcation of single material things may also be seen as the Saussurian difference between signs that authorises *meaning*, or as the Derridian 'différance' (intended as deferment plus difference) that activates new *evolutions of meaning*. In fact, Saussure (1916) has notably conceptualised meaning as emerging from the differential relation between signs: "concepts […] are defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively by contrast with other items in the same system. What characterises each most exactly is being whatever the others are not" (1983: 112). In Adam's theology, Nothingness emerges as the differential gap by virtue of which not only things but also meanings are created. The Gardeners' leader, however, goes further, in a direction that might be explained by recourse to Derrida's différance, an idea worked out by the philosopher to criticise and overcome Saussure's theory. Derrida, in fact, accepts Saussure's definition of meaning as relational but demonstrates that signs are exposed to a series of additional differences given not only by the sign-vs-sign contrast, but also by the alteration and deterioration produced by time and space: the same word means different things in different epochs and in different places. Différance, in this perspective, has to be understood as difference plus deferment, i.e. the continuous deferral of a meaning that cannot be definitely fixed once and for all (1976: 80-88).[4] Back to the novel, in affirming the necessity to historicise the Bible and to read it as a metaphor, Adam seems to be conscious of the deterioration meaning is subjected to, a problem that he solves by *adapting* the Bible to his own present. Whereas for Glenn God and spiritual beliefs of any kind are just linguistic matters to discard or to correct via genetic splicing, Adam's theology recognises a powerful potentiality in the Bible – and in

[4] Derrida's criticism of Saussure as well as the idea of 'différance' are not limited to the aspects mentioned here but involve a more general revision of the Saussurian theory of language, including the relation between speech and writing. For further inquiries on the topics, see Derrida (1976): 74-97; 133-50.

general in the cult of God – which, thanks to his manipulations (the insertion of science), proves useful to 'convert' people to the respect of nature.

In the following passage, Adam reveals his true feelings towards his pseudo-Biblical preaching:

> "The truth is," he'd said, "most people don't care about other Species, not when times get hard. All they care about is their next meal, naturally enough: we have to eat or die. But what if it's God doing the caring? We've evolved to believe in gods, so this belief bias of ours must confer an evolutionary advantage. The strictly materialist view – that we're an experiment animal protein has been doing on itself – is far too harsh and lonely for most, and leads to nihilism. That being the case, we need to push popular sentiment in a biosphere-friendly direction by pointing out the hazards of annoying God by a violation of His trust in our stewardship."
>
> "What you mean is, with God in the story there's a penalty," said Toby.
>
> "Yes," said Adam One. "There's a penalty without God in the story too, needless to say. But people are less likely to credit that. If there's a penalty, they want a penalizer. They dislike senseless catastrophe". (Atwood 2009: 287-8)

Glenn and Adam, then, represent two sides of the same coin: both are driven by ideological concerns for planet Earth, but they choose very different strategies to recreate 'the Garden'. Glenn realises his personal utopia playing at being God – meaningfully his lab is called Parad*ice* – and creating a number of post-humans that are programmed to live in peace with one another and in harmony with the eco-system. The exploitation of nature is avoided through the recycling of their excrement, which comes to be their main supplier of nutrition, and happiness is guaranteed by the obliteration of symbolic thought and language: for the Crakers only words with material referents make sense, a significant feature which would be foundational of a totally different new humanism, deprived of speculative thinking but also of the great unresolved – and useless according to Glenn – philosophical questions tormenting the 'old' humankind.

Though partly inspirer of Glenn's utopic dream, Adam works on a totally different plane; he tries to re-interpret and spread myths belonging to a common imagery in order to create an axiology that proves antagonistic to the one defended by unscrupulous

scientists and by Corporations; an axiology that is predicated on the 'nothingness' of spirituality in opposition to consumerism and materiality. In contrast with Glenn, he intensifies symbolic thinking by enlarging the gap between words and referents, i.e. by creatively adapting Biblical myths and metaphors to the current situation of the world.

Adam senses the importance of linguistic categories as filters that allow the perception of the outside world and the expression of one's subjectivity. The re-telling of myths is aimed at balancing the relationship between the subject and the world – by telling something new that is fashioned as something old – and uses the concept of Nothingness as the starting point for irradiating a new ecological ethics. As Cassirer notably suggested, "[m]ythical thinking is opposed to that of science and philosophy: the latter is oriented to the perception of things, while the former is rooted in the perception of expression itself" (1961: 94).[5] Adam works out a theology that adds myth to science and philosophy. *Mythos* and *Logos* in *The Year of the Flood* are not opposed as in the classical theories of myth-making: on the contrary, in a perspective proposed by Blumenberg (1985), "myth itself [appears as] one of the modes of accomplishment of logos" (p. 27), in that it performs the function of defusing the pressures and anxieties stemming from social and natural decay, in order to promote and favour the emergence of new significances and the arising of new issues in the field of *Logos*, of human historicity.

The intersection of these two forms of thinking fashions the conception of re-telling (such as we find it in Adam's manipulation of the Bible), as a cultural practice that aims at amending and explaining an epistemically fractured time, by dramatising it as an apocalypse. On the one hand, Adam One's use of myth serves the purpose of reconstructing a form of humanism against the decay depicted in the novel; on the other, the narrative composition engineered by Atwood – based on the juxtaposition of the hymns

[5] Another helpful definition of myth comes from Cohen: "[A] myth is a narrative of events; the narrative has a sacred quality; the sacred communication is made in symbolic form; at least some of the events and objects which occur in the myth neither occur nor exist in the world other than that of myth itself; and the narrative refers in dramatic form to origins or transformations" (1969: 337).

and sermons of the Gardeners' leader with Toby and Ren's views on past and present – deconstructs the myth re-telling discursiveness by following the most recent orientations of ecocriticism.

3. Ecocriticism and post-poststructuralism

Many critics have examined, in relation to *The Year of the Flood*, the pressing question of "the dissonance between reality and the way we picture it in order for it to make sense […]" or, to put it differently, of "textual constructs and the realities they are superimposed on" (Mosca 2013: 44). In my view, these questions are to be addressed on two levels. On the one hand, *The Year of the Flood* represents a world where words have lost their meanings and in which the signifier/signified connection appears eroded by a deceitful use of verbal communication: words often come to be distorted for commercial goals or to obtain confessions and false proof on the part of the police *versus* dissidents and 'terrorists' fighting against the abuses of the corporations. On the other, the discrepancy between signified and signifier is accepted as 'physiologically' resulting from the arbitrariness of the link between them and even as what allows new meanings to be created.

The former vision is shared by both Glenn and Adam and concurs in driving them to found a new humanism emerging, respectively, from a rupture in the historical continuum and from a reformulation of its coordinates. The latter post-structuralist awareness, instead, seems to be implicit only in Adam's strategy: the choice of repeating the path of human common knowledge by intervening in crucial points may be read as springing from the conviction that it is impossible to totally get out of its underlying sign-system and textual nature. *The Year of the Flood*, in other words, emphasises the impossibility of perceiving and filtering the world out of cognitive and representational structures. What emerges is that the constructiveness of the Real is a datum beyond which it is difficult to go, despite the urgency of problems – such as those regarding pollution and political oppression – that need to be addressed by recourse to 'objective facts'.

This issue, tellingly, evokes and aestheticises certain theoretical positions animating the debate within the ecocritical movement, divided between a poststructuralist idea of nature as something

discursively constructed (Dobrin and Weisser 2002: 573), and other, anti-constructivist, trends driven by a concern for the destiny of the ecosystem. If the awareness that everything is textually produced has been useful to recognise and dismantle past hegemonic strategies of dominance, one of its negative consequences has been, according to many representatives of ecocriticism, an excessive nihilism and self-referentialism which is not helpful to the environmental cause and ignores the achievements of scientific studies.[6]

A third way – which could be the one adopted by Atwood – is indicated by Dobrin and Weisser, who embrace the discursive nature of the environment beyond which human perception cannot go, but also try to account for the material existence of a 'reality', though unknowable in itself, which cannot be ignored either: "In a sense, humans occupy two spaces: a biosphere, consisting of the earth and its atmosphere, which supports our physical existence, and a semiosphere, consisting of discourse, which shapes our existence and allows us to make sense of it" (p. 574). The interdependence between the biosphere and the semiosphere creates a dialectics that other theorists have considered as a possible "post-poststructuralist" solution which, in keeping with Buell, can be described as "a critical practice that operates from a premise of bidirectionality, imagining texts as gesturing outward toward the material world, notwithstanding their constitution as linguistic, ideological, cultural artifacts that inevitably filter and even in some respects grotesquify their rendition of the extra-textual" (1999: 705).

It would be too simplistic to affirm that *The Year of the Flood* "gesture[s] outward toward the material world" only through the ecological 'contents' of the narration. In actual fact, the novel proposes an intersection between 'the text' and 'the real' by using post-structuralist relativism as a rigorous methodological tool that comes to question everything and even its own status and validity. This deconstruction is thought to be dialectical and temporised on a double stage that perennially repeats itself, exposing and discarding discursive constructions in order to produce new and alternative

[6] For a reconstruction of the debate among different ecocritical positions see: Buell 1999: 700-3; Heise 2006: 505-8; Love 1999: 561-70; Phillips 1999: 583-92.

ones. The gap between the two, sounding close to Adam's theory of Nothingness, may be identified with reality that is beyond representation but that continuously irrupts into discourse to find self-expression.

On a more practical level, the novel investigates what hides beneath the surface built by the centres of power governing society but also proposes the juxtaposition of different narratives that never give the same interpretation of things. For example, though Adam is one of the few characters that appear flat in their 'good' characterisation, the Gardeners' as a group are criticised on more than one occasion. Remembering her past before the catastrophe, Toby notices that the hierarchical structure ruling the sect dangerously resembled that presiding the organisation of the corporations:

> [The Gardeners] sat around a table like any other conclave and hammered out their positions – theological as well as practical – as ruthlessly as medieval monks. And, as with the monks, there was increasingly much at stake. That was worrying to Toby, for the Corporations tolerated no opposition, and the Gardener stance against commercial activities in the larger sense might well come to be construed as that. (Atwood 2009: 226)

The game of mirrors and oblique gazes at facts and people produces a relativisation extended to all aspects of the narration and dramatises a question that hangs over the entire novel: is it possible to enact the ultimate deconstruction and what may happen afterwards? The core of this problem lies in *the way* Adam refashions the myth of the Flood through a scheme rhetorically inspired by the Apocalypse and reminiscent of other apocalyptic tales. Apocalypse, in other words, becomes the device that clusters the multifarious issues and the contradictions raised by and through the novel with respect to the debates on ecology and textuality.

4. The Apocalypse of the Flood

A long time before Glenn plans human extinction, as already said, Adam elaborates a sort of prophecy regarding a mysterious illness he names the Waterless Flood, which later comes to be identified by the Gardeners with the disease spread by the genetic engineer:

A massive die-off of the human race was impending, due to overpopulation and wickedness, but the Gardeners exempted themselves: they intended to float above the Waterless Flood, with the aid of the food they were stashing away in the hidden storeplaces they called Ararats. As for the flotation devices in which they would ride out this flood, they themselves would be their own Arks, stored with their own collections of inner animals, or at least the names of those animals. Thus they would survive to replenish the Earth. Or something like that. (Atwood 2009: 56)

It would be quite needless to remark that the Gardeners' project of survival responds to the sensation that the world cannot continue in such a degraded way. Adam's discursive strategy innervates and sustains an organisation that operates *concretely*. The Gardeners run a little green oasis of health food on the roof of a building in the Pleebland, a secret place they call Edencliff in which they live detached from the others but not in total isolation. Their political commitment is evident in the way they help harmless fugitives from the Exfernal World (the appellation they give to the outside), among whom scientists who want to do away with the Corporations. While doing all this, they store food and fill their memories with the names of extinct animals, waiting for the Waterless Flood to arrive:

We God's Gardeners are a plural Noah: we too have been called, we too forewarned. We can feel the symptoms of coming disaster as a doctor feels a sick man's pulse. We must be ready for the time when those who have broken trust with the Animals – yes, wiped them from the face of the Earth where God placed them – will be swept away by the Waterless Flood, which will be carried on the wings of God's dark Angels that fly by night, and in airplanes and helicopters and bullet trains, and on transport trucks and other such conveyances. But we Gardeners will cherish within us the knowledge of the Species, and of their preciousness to God. We must ferry this priceless knowledge over the face of the Waterless Waters, as if within an Ark. (p. 110)

Adam's reference to Noah and to the Ark are obviously taken from *Genesis*, the first Book of the Bible recounting the sacred origins of mankind and the mistakes made by the first generations of humans overwhelmed by God's anger for their evil behaviour. The preacher identifies all the Gardeners with "a plural Noah", the elect to whom the Lord commends the animals while the world is submerged by an incessant rain. The hint at activism is obvious.

In the overlapping between myth and reality another function of Adam's rhetoric is also detectable: the story of a corrupted civilisation deserving punishment provides a foreseeable trajectory on which to overwrite the present so that the future does not appear too unresolved and unpredictable. Even the fear of a catastrophe becomes preferable to a world in which there is no room for individual autonomy if it is not accompanied by the hope of survival. This fear/hope knot is the central reason for a reformulation of *Genesis* in a fashion that adapts some of the features marking the *Apocalypse* of John, the Book that closes the *New Testament*: the dark angels flying by night and carrying the mortal sickness are reminiscent both of the four Horsemen spreading despair on earth and of angels spreading plagues. But Apocalypse is mainly appropriated as a rhetorical strategy, to make sense of the pointless evil taking place in society and to narrate events that are perceived as senseless and out of control. As O'Leary argues, "apocalyptic believers suffer from psychological conditions of anomie and absence of meaning" (1994: 10), which is exactly the condition we find in the novel. The discursive solution singled out by Adam (and parallel to activism) through his choice of re-telling the episode of the Flood as something apocalyptic to come, is to make people believe that whatever happens in the future has actually already occurred. In fact, the peculiarity of Adam's Biblical reformulation, resides above all in the fact that cosmogony is presented as eschatology and vice versa: the Genesis standing for a mythical origin is presented in terms of an apocalyptic event, a mythical future, inaugurating a type of transcendence that is grounded in a very complex temporality that mixes beginning and end. As O'Leary aptly argues, "[e]schatologies and cosmogonies, myths and speculations about ultimate endings and origins, are [...] strategies of transcendence, in which the seemingly contradictory realities of phenomenal, practical experience are unified through the temporizing of the present in relation to the future or the past" (1994: 26).

The transcendence delineated in the novel does not design an *elsewhere* on which to transfer or differ what is unacceptable or unexplainable (such as paradise, the afterlife and so on); on the contrary, it serves the purposes of, on the one hand, encouraging action in *this* life through activism and political commitment and, on the other, accepting injustice and oppression as consequences of

the movements of an on-going Fall running parallel to an on-going Creation. In two different sermons Adam says: "In our efforts to rise above ourselves we have indeed fallen far, and are falling farther still; for, like the Creation, the Fall, too, is ongoing (Atwood 2009: 63)" and "But surely the Creation is ongoing, for are not new stars being formed at every moment? (p. 14)". The trajectories of Creation and Fall – symbols for Life and Death, Origin and End – by virtue of their infinite extension, eventually transcend their difference and come to coincide on a *conceptual space*, where the end *is* the beginning and where they can be symbolized and narrativised only through and as re-writing. Significantly, the new apocalypse is called 'waterless flood', an oxymoron that syntactically keeps together two opposite words (just as it refers both to the beginning and the end of the Bible). The noun receives new meaning by being deprived of its commonly accepted semantic connotation: the flood has to be waterless to be able to symbolise a new reality: "Apocalypse is a semantic alchemical process; it burns and distils signs and referents into new precipitates" (Berger 1999: 30). Illustrative of this theoretical pattern are Adam's references to the life/death cycle we find in his sermons, in which he often talks about "The Great Transformation […] that state sometimes called Death" in terms of "Renewed Life. For in this our world, and in the eye of God, not a single atom that has ever existed is truly lost" (Atwood 2009: 507). What counts, in nature as in culture, is the first law of thermodynamics: "nothing is created, nothing is destroyed, everything is transformed".

In conclusion, *The Year of the Flood* interprets the imminent sense of ending characterising current ecocritical debates on "biosphere" and "semiosphere", and dramatises the necessity to overcome Western humanism as was intended until the development of the movements of the 'post'. The issues raised by a degraded nature fuse with questions more directly connected to literature and to critical theory, as emerges from the analysis of the strategies which Glenn and Adam use to address these problems. This paper has focused in particular on Adam's theology, founded on the re-elaboration of the myth of Genesis in apocalyptic terms, a textual operation that sutures the contradictions of his troubled time by paradoxically leaving untouched the very contradiction of any apocalypse that, as Berger synthesises, "the end is never the end" (Berger 1999: 27).

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