

The Parable of Nutrition in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*

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Abstract

*One of the most important effects of the “gene revolution” is the possibility of manipulating foodstuffs, in particular agricultural crops like soybeans, wheat and corn. While the development of agricultural technology accelerates the process of growth and provides solutions to age-old problems such as poverty and hunger, there are serious concerns about the risks of ecosystem changes. This article explores the environmental issues connected with Atwood's claim for sustainable nutrition in *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and (more marginally) in *Oryx and Crake* (2003).*

Keywords: gene revolution, foodstuffs, nutrition, Atwood, Oryx and Crake, The Year of the Flood, Ecosophy

In April 2013 the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) published a programme of activities (*Resilient Livelihoods – Disaster Risk Reduction For Food and Nutrition Security Framework Programme*) to avoid food scarcity in risk areas such as Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The plan highlights the major causes of the precariousness of food and nutrition security:

natural hazards (drought, floods, tsunamis, hurricanes/typhoons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides); food chain emergencies of transboundary threats (e.g. transboundary plant, forest, animal, aquatic and zoonotic pests and diseases, food safety events, industrial pollution); socio-economic crises (e.g. volatility in agricultural commodity markets and soaring food prices); wild fires; environmental conditions such as land degradation, desertification and water scarcity; climate change, particularly the expected increase in the frequency and intensity of weather-related

hazards; protracted emergencies (prolonged emergencies that combine two or more of the above-mentioned crises). (FAO 19)

Among the recommendations to reduce the risk of food shortages, UNFAO emphasizes “the application of technologies and approaches, such as crop diversification, genetically enhanced crop varieties able to withstand hazards, and conservation agriculture” (FAO 15).

One of the most important effects of the “gene revolution” is the possibility of manipulating foodstuffs, such as agricultural crops like soybeans, wheat, corn and so on. If, on the one hand, the development of agricultural technology makes it possible to accelerate the process of growth and to provide solutions to problems such as poverty and hunger, on the other hand there are serious concerns about the risks of ecosystem changes, the dependence on corporate control of the seed supply, and the spread of industrial agriculture.

In *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent, 1982–2004* (2004) Margaret Atwood states that “[t]he *what if* of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, *What if we continue down the road we’re already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who’s got the will to stop us?*” (330). This lends a new impulse to an issue which has been one of the *leitmotifs* in some of Atwood’s novels, such as *Surfacing* (1972) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985): the environmental perspective. As Shannon Hengen notices, in her works environmentalism “becomes a concern with the urgent preservation of a human place in a natural world in which the term ‘human’ does not imply ‘superior,’ or ‘alone,’ and in which what is fabricated or artificial is less satisfying than what has originally occurred” (74).

Both *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and (marginally) *Oryx and Crake* (2003)¹ present this question with reference to the quality of new-generation food and to the particular food education instilled by God’s Gardeners, a religious sect. In this paper I will explore the environmental issues connected with Atwood’s claim for *sustainable* nutrition, and their development in the frame of Ecosophy.

Eating is an essential activity for all living creatures. In *The CanLit Food Book: From Pen to Palate, a Collection of Tasty Literary Fare* (1988), Atwood writes: “Eating is our earliest metaphor, preceding our consciousness of gender, race, nationality and language. We eat before we talk” (53). Such a statement locates food and eating on a metaphorical level: “[f]ood cooked, eaten, and thought about provides a metaphoric matrix, a language that allows us a way to get at the uncertainty, the ineffable qualities of life” (Schofield 1).

It would be difficult to analyze exhaustively the multiple representations of this “parable of nutrition” among Atwood’s novels, and so I will give just a few significant examples. The epigraph to *The Edible Woman* (1969) presents one of the main themes of the novel – the preparation of a product to be consumed: “The surface on which you work (preferably marble), the tools, the ingredients and your fingers should be chilled throughout the operation...” (Atwood, *The Edible Woman* vii). As Gina Wisker notes, this novel “critiques the contradictions or dualities where life is reduced to consumer artifice” (41). Marian McAlpin, the protagonist, moves through two different dimensions throughout the narrative: “to consume” or “to be consumed”. This battle is fought out over the body, which becomes both the symbol for the protagonist’s “rejection of her female identity and maternity” (Rigney 23) and for her “struggle [...] against that part of the self which is striving for self-determination” (Rao, *Strategies* 135).

Marian works for a market research firm, Canadian Facts Marketing, and her job consists of writing surveys and, occasionally, of sampling products. She shares a flat with a roommate Ainsley Tewce, a very independent woman, who shifts from one love affair to another, and whose final pursuit is to become pregnant and to rear her child as a single mum. Ainsley's counterpart is Clara Bates, Marian's friend, who has sacrificed her education in order to have children, and who depends on her husband for every aspect of her life. Motherhood is analyzed in the range of the social conventions in which Marian herself is entrapped during her engagement with Peter Wollander. He would like Marian to conform to the stereotype of the perfect wife (and mother), and this generates her sense of displacement; she is "torn between refusing and desiring to conform to society's representation of true womanhood" (Staels 23). One night, during a party, in order to cater to her fiancé, she wears a red dress and heavy make-up, thus presenting a fake and unusual version of herself, which becomes unbearable for her after her friend Duncan's remark: "You didn't tell me it was a masquerade. Who the hell are you supposed to be?" (Atwood, *Edible* 239). The next day, after spending the night with Duncan in a hotel, Marian shows the first symptoms of lack of appetite; she starts refusing anything with "bone or tendon or fiber" (Atwood, *Edible* 245). As the novel progresses, this refusal of food is extended also to vegetables and crops.

Some Atwoodian critics have ascribed Marian's self-starvation to pathological conditions, such as "nervous anorexia" (Staels 33), which "signals Marian's split or multiple condition and it silently communicates a repressed dimension of herself" (Staels 33), or to psychological discomfort, a "self-division", as Coral Ann Howells notes (*Margaret Atwood* 46–47). Recently in *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (2009) Ellen McWilliams focuses mainly on the meaning of food in the novel, and states that it "functions as a vivid and complex metaphor [...], marking a new departure in the feminist impetus of Atwood's work, but also sowing the seeds of Atwood's preoccupation with the relationship between feminist and nationalist discourses of power" (81).

In my opinion, Marian's refusal of food is a protest against all social constraints, which annihilate her as an individual and orient her towards a homologated eternal nourishing figure. Her lack of appetite represents, ultimately, a revolt against the objectification of herself as a woman and as a human being. She reacts by performing a sort of totemic banquet², whose main course is a scaled-down representation of herself. She bakes a woman-shaped cake which is "at once a therapy, a solution, self discovery, a potential symbol of freedom and a leading progressive step ahead" (Mouda 7). The cake represents also "the ultimate image of bodily dismemberment" (Royanian and Yazdani 237); Marian, indeed, bakes it for Peter with the intention of giving him a surrogate for herself: "'You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you?', she said. 'You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork.'" (Atwood, *Edible* 352). Peter feels disoriented and leaves without joining the banquet. Paradoxically, Marian will eat her edible product with Duncan's help. Many forces interact and control the dynamics of power in this act of eating: anger, bewilderment, compensation, but also the refusal to submit to "male domination" (Mouda 7). The cake consumption symbolically inverts the power roles and releases Marian from the oppressive consuming and objectifying dimension, becoming herself a consumer and a ruler.

Food issues are present in two other novels by Atwood: *Lady Oracle* (1976) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The protagonist of *Lady Oracle* is Joan Foster, a gothic novel writer who wanders through the world in order to escape from the cumbersome presence of her mother, whose ghost still haunts her from beyond the grave. During her existence, Joan fights against diverse “discarded selves” (Rosowsky 202), but the most powerful is “her former self as the Fat Lady” (Rosowsky 202), which fosters her sense of exclusion and separateness both from the love of her mother, who continually remarks on her fat condition, and from the world in general. According to Staels, in the novel the corporeal dimension “becomes the territory on which the war (of values) between mother and daughter is fought” (71). In this novel, as previously in *The Edible Woman*, the protagonist is affected by an eating disorder: in this case bulimia represents “the beginning of an unresolved battle, an ambivalent relationship characterized by proximity and domination on the one hand and evasion and absolute separation on the other” (Staels 71).

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the theme of food is very marginal, if compared with the two texts I previously analyzed. The novel's scenario is the Republic of Gilead, set from the territorial point of view within the borders of the former United States of America. It is a totalitarian regime, led by a military dictatorship with a theocratic basis. In this context women are located at the very bottom of the social ladder and deprived of any social, economic and individual rights. The story is told by Offred, who “finds herself in the familiar dystopian predicament of being trapped inside a space and a narrative where she is denied any possibility of agency” (Howells, “Dystopian” 165). She is a concubine, or handmaid, of a troop commander called Fred, whence her name Of-Fred. The role of the handmaids is to copulate with the commanders in order to procreate. Indeed, because of pollution, sterility is one of the main problems in the community of Gilead. Despite their significant function, the handmaids live a very spartan life, almost cloistral: they are obliged to wear long nun-like garments, they are forbidden to read, to wear make-up, to circulate freely outside the Commander's house and to communicate with the outer world. From the nutritional aspect, they are given very essential and boring food, and the impossibility to satisfy the palate generates some improbable mental associations, as in the case of the Scrabble tiles which remind Offred of peppermint candies. This association of “bizarre senses to ordinary objects” (Macpherson 57) is due to the fact that in Gilead, as Roberta Rubinstein notices, “like sex [...] food serves only functional, not emotional, appetites” (109).

In Atwood's latest novels, foodstuffs not only give the coordinates of a lost future but they also define both the excessive manipulation of organic material and the urge for a more sustainable nutrition which would take into account respect for the environment. In *Oryx and Crake* (2003) we are in the presence of a world “where no alternative frame of reference is available, until the shock ending” (Howells, “Dystopian” 162). A sense of alienation emerges from the interrupted relationship between human beings and the Earth due to an environmental catastrophe; in this landscape of desolation, hunger represents a fundamental impulse: “There's something to be said for hunger: at least it lets you know you're still alive” (Atwood, *OC* 109). The story is set in a post-apocalyptic scenario in which Jimmy, the protagonist, is the last man left alive. Humankind has been decimated by a terrible plague-like disease after the consumption of a drug, the BlyssPluss Pill, which was supposed to “[...] protect the user against sexually transmitted diseases, [...] [to]

provide an unlimited supply of libido and sexual prowess, [...] [and to] prolong youth" (Atwood, *OC* 346).

Alone and desperate, Jimmy struggles with the harsh life conditions due to the progressive lack of food and the frequent attacks of genetically manipulated animals; at the same time he carries the heavy responsibility of the Crakers' lives. The latter are a transgenic species which, together with the BlyssPluss Pill, represent the result of the ambitious project of Crake, the protagonist's long-standing friend, who is killed by Jimmy at the outbreak of the epidemic. In order to survive, Jimmy, "stranded and displaced in an alien environment" (Rao, "Home and Nation" 109), feeds himself with "simulated foodstuffs" (Cooke 67), represented by "Svetlana No-Meat Cocktail Sausages" (Atwood, *OC* 4), dehydrated "chocolate-flavoured energy bars" (*OC* 4), "noodle soup with vegetables, chicken flavour" (*OC* 322), and "Chinese food in a tube" (*OC*, 322), which he alternates with the grilled "weekly fish" (*OC* 115) brought by the female Crakers. The focus of the novel, however, is mainly centred on the consequences of an indiscriminate use of biotechnologies, which has produced a new species at the cost of the decimation of mankind, rather than on the necessity of a more sustainable nutrition. This theme emerges forcefully in *The Year of the Flood* (2009), embodied in the God's Gardeners and their eco-thought, "dedicated to saving the planet and righting a natural balance" (Maxwell 5).

To discuss sustainable nutrition means to embrace a series of ethical questions concerning the responsibilities of agricultural producers, the assessment of technological changes affecting farm populations, the utilization of farmland and other resources, the deployment of intensive agriculture, the modification of ecosystems, animal welfare, the professional responsibilities of agronomists, veterinarians, or food scientists, the use of biotechnology, and the safety, availability, and affordability of food. Public interest in sustainability is increasing and consumers demand that foods are good for them, but also that they do not impact on the environment. A sustainable food system limits waste and optimizes land usage. The challenges to a sustainable world food system include limited land availability, soil health, water scarcity, an uncertain supply and dependence on energy, climate change and greenhouse gas emissions. More detailed evaluation would be required to determine the overall impact in the context of a sustainable food supply chain. A sustainable food system considers which foods are essential, which foods are luxuries, and how food is transported, processed and packaged. According to the study 'Food Security: The Challenge of Feeding 9 Billion People' (Godfray et al. 2010), in the future this will be a very important challenge, because feeding an estimated 9 billion people by the year 2050 will require a sustainable food system that makes the most of limited resources while protecting the world's fragile ecosystem.

Any sustainable activity, however, entails a good deal of social responsibility, requiring everybody to contribute for the good of the community. Atwood focuses her attention on the lifestyle of the God's Gardeners, which is in perfect harmony with this principle. The Gardeners are "canny environmental warriors" (Howells, "Atwoodian Mosaic" 55): they are vegetarians and grow their own food; they keep beehives to produce honey; they make their medicines from the mushroom beds they cultivate; in order to collect and compost human waste they use 'violet-biolets'. The education of the youngsters is based on classes teaching how to live green in the post-apocalyptic world: Fabric Recycling, Bees and Mycology, Holistic Healing with Plant, Wild and Garden Botanical Remedies, Animal

Camouflage, and Emergency Medical Training. Nothing is thrown away and recycling is a central activity in their community. They try to build a consumer free society with a healthful purpose. As Vandana Shiva remarks, the “aim of consumer liberation is to *improve the quality of life*” (254).

As emerges from this brief analysis, the God’s Gardeners’ lifestyle is much more than a mere form of environmentalism; it is a philosophy of sustainable life, an *ecosophy*. In *The Three Ecologies* (2000), Félix Guattari defines *ecosophy* as “an ethico-political articulation... between the three ecological registers (environment, social relations and human subjectivity)” (27). The term, however, was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arnold Naess, the father of the so-called “deep ecology movement”: “By an *ecosophy* I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of *sofia* (or) wisdom, is openly normative, it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe” (Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep” 8). Harmony and active human participation are the constant in both definitions. According to Guattari, the loss of balance is mainly due to the advent of what he calls Integrated World Capitalism, which, through a series of techno-scientific transformations, has led to ecological disaster, against which the French philosopher warns: “The Earth is undergoing a period of intense techno-scientific transformations. If no remedy is found, the ecological disequilibrium this has generated will ultimately threaten the continuation of life on the planet’s surface” (Guattari 27). However, the process of the Earth’s recovery passes through the interrelation between the subject and exteriority. In Guattarian terms, subjectivity eludes the individual-social distinction “as well as the givenness or preformedness of the subject either as a person or individual; subjectivity is both collective and auto-producing” (Genosko 146).

Such a concept of subjectivity is in line with the God’s Gardeners’ eschatology, transmitted through Adam One’s sermons which, while narrating the contributions of the saints to the environmental cause, “inspire the faithful to take actions” (Maxwell 8) for the sake of the collective good. On a more practical level, the Gardeners’ crusade is fought against the *SecretBurgers* chain. The slogan “*SecretBurgers! Because Everyone Loves a Secret*” (Atwood, *YF* 40) aptly represents the philosophy of the chain and the quality of the food it sells, translated into words by Toby’s disquieting testimony, as she was a former employee before becoming an Eve: “The meat grinders weren’t 100 per cent efficient; you might find a swatch of cat fur in your burger or a fragment of mouse tail. Was there a human fingernail, once?” (Atwood, *YF* 40). The Gardeners’ battle is in favour of animals’ rights, but against a certain anthropocentric attitude which sees the submission of all non-human creatures; this approach emerges in the words of Adam One, who tries to dissuade the masses from eating meat by talking about his own life before his green conversion: “I, too, was once a materialistic, atheistic meat-eater. Like you, I thought Man was the measure of all things” (Atwood, *YF* 48).

Lori Gruen identifies meat-eating and the consumption of protein foodstuffs as “the most prominent manifestation of a belief system in which woman and animals are reduced to objects to be consumed” (74). In *The Pornography of Meat* (2003), Carol Adams states that “viewing other beings as consumable is a central aspect of [Western] culture” (12), and through an analysis of food advertisements, she gives the dimension of a cultural dualism which divides the consumers and consumables into two distinct categories (50):

| A | Not A |
|------------|------------------|
| Man/male | Woman/female |
| Culture | Nature |
| Human | Nonhuman animal |
| 'White' | People of colour |
| Mind | Body |
| Civilized | Primitive |
| Production | Reproduction |
| Capital | Labor |
| Clothed | Naked |

While these categories undeniably recall the dichotomy of masculine/feminine, it is also possible to see the association of the feminine with corporeity, intuitive knowledge and nature. As Val Plumwood highlights, the equivalence between nature and women neglects the role of difference and entails the inferior social status of the feminine dimension:

Women's alignment with nature has been matched by the development of an elite masculine identity centring around distance from the feminine, from nature as necessity, from such 'natural' areas in human life as reproduction, and around control, domination and inferiorisation of the natural sphere. (34)

Ecofeminism deals with "ways to challenge the oppression of women and non-human nature effectively" (Otto 76) and harshly criticizes mainstream culture, which emerges as androcentric, dualistic, hierarchical, atomistic, and abstract. The association between women and non-human beings, i.e. animals, dates back to the dawn of civilization; as Gruen notices, it originates with the myth of Man the Hunter, predator of animals and food provider. In this frame of brutality and strength, "woman's body (being smaller, weaker, and reproductive) prevents her from participating in the hunt, and thus relegates her to the arena of non-culture" (Gruen 62). Weakness and vulnerability are qualities which belong to the animal realm as well: animals can be captured, killed, domesticated, used for agricultural work. Later on, with the advent of industrialization, women are confined to the domestic dimension, and their function is food preparation. In her analysis Gruen clarifies the parallel between the female and the animal element: "Certain animals have been domesticated and forced to provide food in a different sense. Women prepare and cook; animals are prepared and cooked. Both play subservient roles in the male-dominated institution of meat eating" (72). This connection is evident also in the commercial context; as Adams notices, the continual juxtaposition of women and animals is consolidated in the language of advertising by the portrayal of the "consumable" animals as feminine, sexual, available to men, just like female human beings.

Such an objectivization of the female body is represented in the narrative universe of *The Year of the Flood* by Toby and by Ren and the other girls who worked at *Scales and Tales*. Before joining the Gardeners, Toby passes through a series of dehumanizing experiences: from changing both her identity and distinctive features, to selling her hair and ova, and then to Blanco's sexual abuses. It is in particular during her job at *SecretBurgers* that

her humanity is completely denied and annihilated by Blanco's physical and communicative brutality: "Cross me up, I'll snap you like a twig" (Atwood, *YF* 45). *Scales and Tales* was a night club for adult entertainment, where women (basically young girls) performed in dancing and acrobatic shows disguised in bizarre costumes made of scales or feathers. The following quotation gives a precise idea of the place and of the objectified female body: "Scales had pictures on either side of the entrance [...]. The pictures were of beautiful girls covered completely with shining green scales, like lizards, except for the hair. One of them was standing on a single leg hooked around her neck. I thought that it must hurt to stand like that, but the girl in the picture was smiling" (Atwood, *YF* 90).

The God's Gardeners' diet is very spartan, essential and yet somehow "repetitious" as Toby herself says, due to the "limited materials available" (*YF* 56). Such a diet, however, does not only imply the liberation of human beings from all forms of oppression, as in the case of Toby; it is strongly linked to the necessity of a more sustainable lifestyle which will help to restore the lost Earth equilibrium claimed by Guattari in *The Three Ecologies*. In February 2010, a special issue of *Science*, the review of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, was dedicated to food security and the necessity of changing our diet in order to guarantee a more balanced distribution of resources: "Reducing the consumption of meat and increasing the proportion that is derived from the most efficient sources offer an opportunity to feed more people and also present other advantages" (Godfray 817), such as solving the problem of obesity or limiting the overexploitation of agricultural land. Godfray and the other authors of the article conclude that the Earth's salvation requires "a revolution in the social and natural sciences concerned with food production" (Godfray 817). This statement echoes Guattari's intuition of linking the spheres of ecology (environmental, social and mental) and emphasizes the central role of subjectivity in restoring the ecological balance. He does not provide the perfect recipe for being ecological, but insists on the necessity for generating a variety of solutions to enact ecosophical processes. The environmental attitudes of the God's Gardeners highlight the fact that each individual's changes contribute to a collective difference, which can produce positive changes on the local, nationwide and global level. As Howells remarks, "unlike everyone else, they have put in place survival mechanisms against disaster, which they have been predicting for a long time" ("Atwoodian Mosaic" 55).

Right from her early novels, Atwood has shown an interest in the environmental issue, which has sharpened in her latest texts. The excessive exploitation of natural resources has brought pollution and a modification both in the distribution of foodstuffs and in their structure (genetically modified crops, for example). In Atwood's novels the motif of food shows the problematic relationship between the characters and the surrounding world, both in the sense of the social world and of living space. In *Oryx and Crake* the consumption of surrogated food is a consequence of the decimation of mankind and of the subsequent suspension of productive activities. In *The Year of the Flood*, the food parable intersects with several eco-critical crucial points: the necessity for a sustainable lifestyle, the importance of a consumer-free standard of living, the promotion of a vegetarian diet, and the respect for all living species. In her latest production Atwood's green perspective encompasses every aspect of our daily life and existence, and becomes a concern with the environment which is "never merely an external place but always the very substance of our selves" (Alaimo 158).

Notes

¹ In the quotations *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* are abbreviated as *OC* and *YF*.

² In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Sigmund Freud argued that God is the representation of the sublimated physical father; therefore, in the totemic sacrifice, those who eat gain power over God, who becomes the sacrificed victim.

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