Life After Man?: Posthumanity and Genetic Engineering in Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake and Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go

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Investigating Nature is one thing and so is defending yourself against it, within limits, but fooling with it is quite another.¹

In her novel Life Before Man (1979) Margaret Atwood explored questions of science, human relationships and the threat of human extinction. More than twenty years later, she published Oryx and Crake (2003), a novel that tackles the same topics, only now in the light of current scientific advances in the field of genetics and technological breakthroughs. Atwood’s novel is a portent of what might happen in the not-so-distant future, warning us of the fatal consequences of newly acquired scientific knowledge and technology for the human race (a theme later linked with the current debate over ethical implications of genetic engineering). Although Atwood supports the view that science is not intrinsically bad in itself, which her personal involvement with this area of knowledge makes clear, Oryx and Crake shows that human motives and actions should not be manipulated and that there are multiple human responses to a given situation, as the open ending of the novel seeks to illustrate.

In a similar way, Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go (2005) pays attention to genetic engineering and human relationships, but in an understated way, by portraying the life of cloned children, bred to provide organs for normal people in a posthuman world. By focusing on emotions and personal relationships, the novel participates in the current scientific debate over genetic engineering and cloning from the point of view of individuals, which ultimately brings about questions

¹ Margaret Atwood, Cat’s Eye, London, 1989.
of human existence. Atwood wrote a review of Ishiguro’s novel, entitled “Brave New World”, where she argues that the author “has chosen a difficult subject: ourselves, seen through a glass, darkly”. The aim of this present article is twofold: firstly, it will be argued that Atwood and Ishiguro are writing speculative fiction, as Atwood herself has claimed, rather than science fiction. Secondly, it will be pointed out that in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* ethical issues are presented as contributions to the ongoing debate over the possible consequences of genetic manipulation. Although “speculative fiction” is often used as an umbrella term for many kinds of imaginative writing like utopia, fantasy and gothic, I would like to concentrate on these novels as felicitous examples of the collaboration between literature and science in which the limits of science and science fiction merge. Both Atwood and Ishiguro are making use of newly acquired knowledge to explore imaginatively new ways of perceiving reality and to add a new dimension to the furthering of knowledge, which intersects with the growing public concern over the unforeseen results of current advances in the life sciences.

Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* is a dystopian novel, a genre that she had already used in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and later *The Blind Assassin* (2000) – for which she received the Booker Prize – where there is a dystopian society in the embedded story of the novel. *The Handmaid’s Tale* was interpreted as a satirical depiction of the United States in the 1980s, fictionalized as the totalitarian state of Gilead. Amin Malak, who analyses the features of the genre, situates *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the context of dystopia. *Oryx and Crake* fits perfectly well into the definition of a dystopian novel since Atwood shows us the dramatic consequences for the human race of crossing

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3 Margaret Atwood, “The Handmaid’s Tale and Oryx and Crake in Context”, *PMLA*, CXIX/3 (May 2004), 513-17.
4 According to Malak, these features are firstly, power, totalitarianism and war; secondly, dream-nightmare, fantasy and reality; thirdly, binary oppositions; fourthly, characterization; fifthly, change and time and lastly, *roman à these* (Amin Malak, “Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition”, *Canadian Literature*, CXIX [1987], 10-11). All of these characteristics can be located in *Oryx and Crake* as well, but their discussion goes beyond the scope of this article.