

## Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Multidimensional Critique of Rebellion

(反乱、その多元的クリティークとしての  
マーガレット・アトウッド『侍女の物語』)

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**SUMMARY IN JAPANESE:** ディストピア小説はザミャーチンの『われら』(1921)、ハックスリーの『すばらしい新世界』(1932)、オーウェルの『1984年』(1949)に代表されるジャンルである一方、マーガレット・アトウッドは『侍女の物語』(1985)において当ジャンルの形式を領有しつつ、独自のディストピア小説を発表した。ここでまず問題となるのは、主要ディストピア作品におけるステレオタイプ化された女性表象(①権力の機械的信奉者、②社会から疎外された男性主人公を権力への反抗へと導く「ファム・ファタール」、③「母性本能」の具現、あるいは次世代への希望が生まれる場としての母親)である。さらに、上に挙げたアトウッド以前の代表的作品は、彼女らを概して知的活動に興味を持たない人物として描くことで、ジェンダー役割に関する精神と身体の二分化を強調する。これに対しアトウッドはオブフレッドという上の範疇に回収されざる女性主人公を提示した。従って、当該事項がもたらす意味作用を明らかとする為には、作品間の相互テクスト性を十分に鑑みる必要がある。

ただし『侍女の物語』の曖昧なナラティブは、「フェミニスト・ディストピア」(代表的ディストピアへのフェミニストからの批判)として直ちに称揚されるものではない。アメリカ合衆国をクーデターにより制圧したギレアデ共和国の支配の中、生殖役割に特化された「侍女」として生きる主人公は、

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反抗の戦略として①ギレアデ以前の記憶を保持すること、また②ニックとの禁じられたロマンスに耽ることにより、権力の手の及ばぬ個人的領域を主張する。さらに、③言語・意味の相対性を数々のアイロニーによって示すことにより、ギレアデの支配も、歴史的な脈の相対的性質に逆い、一義的、あるいは永遠であり続けることは不可能であるとする。しかし主人公がその不安定で両義的なナラティブで示すように、過去・ロマンスは自身、あるいは女性が解放されるべき場・手段として、その説得力は疑問に付されざるを得ない。また権力の歴史的相対化は、主人公の立場をも相対化してしまい、その痛々しいナラティブは自己言及的牢獄から抜け出すことができず、後に残るのは諦念のみに思える。以上のオブフレッドの自己批判も辞さない態度、同時に「行動」を忌避する傾向をメランコリー論にも触れながら十分に吟味した上で、現在はもちろん、過去・未来の可能性にも懐疑的とならざるを得ない主体の行き詰まりが社会批判小説として如何なる意味を持ちうるのかを明らかとする。またその際『1984年』との比較などを通じ、『侍女の物語』のナショナルアイデンティティにも言及する。

さらに、アトウッドは『1984年』に倣い「歴史的背景に関する注釈」を付加することにより、犠牲者のナラティブの解釈における問題も提示する。このように『侍女の物語』は抑圧、反乱（あるいはその失敗）といったディストピア小説の形式を踏襲しながら、権力への反抗という問題に対し、一面的な批判ではなく、社会批判それ自体に対する、多層から成るクリティークを読者に提供するものである。以上より当論文は、『侍女の物語』が伝統的ディストピア作品とは一線を画した社会批判小説として評価されなければならないことを明らかにするものである。

## 1. The Road to *The Handmaid's Tale*: Women in Dystopia

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has, as the author herself indicates, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a "direct model" (*In Other Worlds* 146). Indeed, it clearly belongs to the genre of dystopian fiction, a genre which flourished in the early twentieth century. Although its exact origin is arguable, Gregory Claeys aptly categorizes H. G. Wells's novels such as *The Time Machine* (1895) and *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) as forerunners of the undisputed classics—Yevzeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) (Claeys 109).

With regard to their central theme, the main characteristic of these dystopian novels is resistance or conflicts in a static, prison state; the protagonists, feeling alienated and disillusioned, attempt to challenge the norm of a pseudo-utopian society which is in fact controlled by an oppressive regime. On these aspects, dystopian fiction operates as social criticism. Yet what becomes problematic here is the complex subjectivity of the rebellious protagonists. This becomes more or less a cause of their complete surrender to authority, which produces their death or near-death states in the end. This mythical structure of the inevitable failure of rebellion confirms the pessimism of the genre; even the possibility of any positive outcome appears to be voluntarily rejected, and any eventual salvation of humanity seems equally inconceivable.

Meanwhile, in contrast to the profound ambiguity of male protagonists in dystopian fiction, women tend to be represented within a comparatively simple role. Atwood states that in her work she attempted to establish a female figure beyond the stereotypes of the genre, i.e. "sexless automatons or rebels who have defied the sex rules of the regime" (*In Other Worlds* 146). These tendencies are first illustrated in *We*, where they are concretized in two women who continue to disturb D-503's mind: that is, childlike O-90 and subversive I-330. The former is D-503's mundane girlfriend, or in Atwood's words "sexless automaton," who is nonetheless supposed to desire desperately their child (note that her longing is anti-social in the novel since reproduction should only occur in test-tubes instead of wombs). Here, her maternal instinct is represented as something which cannot be pre-eradicated by ruling dogmas and technologies.<sup>1</sup> In turn, I-330 is the leader of the under-

ground, whose sexual allure compels D-503 to participate in her plot against authority. This makes her fit into the role of seductress, which is in fact a figment of male fantasy. Secondly, in Huxley's work, beta-class Linda, an ideally docile citizen in the World State, is offered the significant role of John's actual mother. This natural birth is as illegitimate as in *We* since it runs counter to eugenics. In her role as seductress, it is the "wonderfully pneumatic" Lenina's (unusually) persistent approaches to the crippled Marx as well as to John that provoke rebellious remarks and conduct by these two outcasts (BNW 49).<sup>2</sup> In both these texts, the assumption of an innate maternity in women (O-90, Linda) and treacherous sexual impulses (I-330, Lenina) appear regarded as indispensable to develop and promote the counter-narrative of rebellious male protagonists.

Orwell then provided his protagonist Winston Smith with a cunning woman named Julia, who is reminiscent of the seductive I-330 but is seemingly devoid of any political agenda. Julia rather inherits Lenina's blind promiscuity, although even this requires taking enormous risks in Orwell's puritan Oceania. For Winston, who has been disgusted by his "goodthinkful"<sup>3</sup> ex-wife's frigidity (she conforms to the orthodoxy which is hostile to sexual pleasure) and horrified by perfunctory intercourse with an old prole prostitute, young and healthy Julia appears to be his private savior, "a rebel from the waist downwards" (NEF 163).<sup>4</sup> Winston also admires the ideal of stable maternity as represented by two figures; his caring mother whose nurturing instinct is undeniable and a prole woman who becomes even monstrous in her role as, in Daphne Patai's words, "a vigorous and enduring breeder" (248). It can be said that Orwell's stereotyping of women in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is no less flagrant than in the other two novels.

Furthermore, in these patterns of representation of women in dystopia, the common assumption is that they are lacking in any significant intellectual capacity, thus justifying Atwood's earlier comment in which she refers to them as an "automaton."<sup>5</sup> In terms of this tendency, Daniels and Bowen put particular emphasis on the fact that in these dystopias women are not only discouraged but even forbidden to read and write; this represents "the body in opposition to mind dichotomy" (435), which may accelerate a condition where "other-defined" women are "denied a culture of their own" (435, 436). On the other hand, in Atwood's novel, the narrative is told by an intellectual female called Offred who strives to defy such assigned roles as referred to

above; yet she is far from being a straightforward figure of hope and change. With regard to this, Kathryn M. Grossman rather hastily claims that women in dystopian fictions are the key to rebellion and make space for hope: “the creator of this new world, its prime mover, is the alluring female who shows man the beauty and goodness of the unknown”; “The face of that alternative future is, in fact, also that of a benevolent *femme fatale*” (144). Offred’s narrative, however, negates this image, which signifies a sexually attractive woman as a holder of the truth which may eventually lead to people’s liberation. Nevertheless, it appears that she eventually drowns herself in a destructive stream of solipsistic thoughts, produced by her play of linguistic irony; indeed, her tale finishes in a harshly ambivalent way as follows:

*Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped.*

And so I step up, *into the darkness within; or else the light.* (HT 331, emphasis mine)

## 2. How is Gilead Dystopian?

Before analyzing the protagonist’s complex subjectivity, the setting of *The Handmaid’s Tale* should be examined. First, the Republic of Gilead was originally established around the beginning of the twenty-first century by a military group called “Sons of Jacob,” through killing the president of the United States and halting the political system as well as the constitution.<sup>6</sup> Its official purpose is summarized by Nathalie Cooke as follows: “Gilead’s ‘practical’ solution to the ills of its society (which are, not coincidentally, the ills of our own society)—pollution and its resulting infertility,<sup>7</sup> crime, and the disintegration of personal relationships—is regimented behavior” (133) and particularly for the purpose of “protect[ing] women” (127). As Ingsoc (English Socialism), the philosophy of Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is officially presented as most beneficial to workers, that of Gilead is to women.

Then what specifically qualifies Gilead as dystopia? As has been referred to already, the fall in the pregnancy rate presumably due to environmental contamination, the expansion of sexually transmitted diseases, the im-

provement of awareness about women's rights and the promotion of abortion, have become unacceptable to the founders of Gilead. The group exploits the Bible as the basis for a fertility cult, and has skillfully enslaved appropriate women into a state of surrogate motherhood, calling them the Handmaids, on behalf of the sterile Wives of the Commanders.<sup>8</sup> Although they are accommodated with sufficient food and hygienic shelter, there are no wages or any prerogative for them to make their own choices. The subjugation is conducted by imposing "dos and don'ts" such as wearing a red uniform, strictly preordained daily habits, and participating in ceremonies like Birth Day, Pray-vaganza, Salvaging and Particicution.<sup>9</sup> The most conspicuous among these orders is a total prohibition on reading and writing, which would be nothing but a distraction from fulfilling the function of a literal womb, serving as a substitute wife in the ritual of insemination. The mind and body dichotomy is rehearsed here in a rather direct way:

Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them. . . . My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What is really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. . . . Below it the Commander is fucking. (HT 109)

The Handmaids are nothing but "two-legged wombs, . . . sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (HT 156); arousal or orgasm, which apparently belongs to the mind, is now regarded as unnecessary, or "outdated" as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (HT 110). If any of the Handmaids failed to become pregnant and deliver a child within three placements at a Commander's house, they would be branded as Unwoman, and sent to the Colonies with other dissidents, where people must keep burning rotten corpses or sweep "the toxic dumps and the radiation spills" without any protection (HT 283). In these ways, the Handmaids are commodified into performing the monotonous function of a purely reproductive body, not being left any chance to escape the dystopia.

Meanwhile, instead of promoting artificial insemination as suggested in other dystopian novels, what is particularly emphasized by enslaving certain women in this manner is that such a society could be constructed without

much reliance on alienating development of science or mechanization of life.<sup>10</sup> The exploitation of technologies is in fact only described in the use of devices in the pre-Gilead America such as the CompuDoc or Compuchek for identification of people, and the Compucard (form of electronic currency) and the CompuCount (bank account), which suggests that cash had already been abolished. This governmental administration of personal information and credit system facilitated the subjection of women in Gilead, or “any group labelled as *other*” by simply halting their accounts (Mohr 239, emphasis in original). Yet Gilead seems to sense little need for a high-tech surveillance system such as the telescreen in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, whereas an intelligence service called “the Eyes” encourages people to spy and inform on each other. Thus it can be said that *The Handmaid’s Tale* particularly foregrounds the nature of power relationships among humans rather than the inverted subjugation of man at large by machines<sup>11</sup> or science technologies.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, a line of gloomy wisdom from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be neatly applied to Atwood’s dystopia: “technological progress only happens when its products can in some way be used for the diminution of human liberty” (NEF 201). In this sense, by not presenting technology itself as a major cause of problems, *The Handmaid’s Tale* places responsibility for social oppression onto the corrupted nature of humanity even more so than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

On the other hand, it should be noted here that, as Coral Ann Howells clarifies, Gilead is not dystopia only for the Handmaids but also “a failed utopia for everyone, with its male bodies hung on the Wall, its religious intolerance, its racial oppression, and beyond that Atwood’s wider vision of environmental threat and the potential abuses of technology” (“Transgressing Genre,” 142). Nathalie Cooke also contends that even supposed founders of Gilead like Serena Joy and Commander Fred are “trapped” (116). Indeed, there appears to be almost no character that completely takes pleasure in living in Gilead. They seem merely to play their assigned roles, which provide for the novel an uncanny aura of stasis, not leaving any sense of redemption.

Yet it should be emphasized here that playing a certain role and simultaneously forcing others to do the same is in fact a way to maximize enjoyment. Disguising his motive as liberating, Commander Fred (Offred’s master) first explains his criticism of, and subsequent solution to, women’s harsh situation in the pre-Gilead consumerist society of America:

We've given [women] more than we've taken away. . . . Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? *The meat market*. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. (HT 249, emphasis mine)

Commodified images<sup>13</sup> of women are interpreted as denigrating and threatening to them; Gilead announces the end of this aversion or perversity regarding women's condition and claims that it has restored to them an authentic role, as the Commander says that "All we've done is return things to Nature's norm" (HT 250). Here, the phrase "*The meat market*" above is in fact almost identical to the image which Bernard Marx in the consumerist *Brave New World* employs to blame other men's attitudes towards women as mere temporary sex partners.<sup>14</sup> Yet while Bernard in turn simply romanticizes Lenina and takes her on a lake trip, the Commanders do so by even reorganizing the state. Commander Fred, quite cynically, reveals that his "main" (HT 239) motivation is to give a solution to men's problem: "Inability to feel. Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage" (HT 240). To regain the "ability to feel," as Tae Yamamoto indicates, they officially created the Republic of Gilead based on Puritanism, while slyly securing an illegal space for a brothel called Jezebel's, where unorthodox women (including ones who had engaged in intellectual work such as sociologist, lawyer, or business executive [HT 271]), are all sterilized and forced into providing sexual services (Yamamoto 200). Fiona Tolan further notes about Jezebel's ostensible liberal contents (fashion, alcohol, other stimulants, and sex) that it offers "the symbols of consumerism," which are "confused with symbols of liberty" (162). As Tolan then explains that "the variety of the women's costumes soon homogenizes into a monotony of cheap male fantasies, uncomfortable and tacky," Jezebel's is far from being a desirable work place which can facilitate a sense of freedom on the side of women (163). The Commander again uses "Nature" as a rationale: those prostitutes are allowed to wear a variety of clothes since "Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan" (HT 270). By illegally taking his Handmaid to the sex



club, the Commander can relish his obsession. Yamamoto criticizes this as “a mock Victorian, stereotypical double standard for men and women” (200). Linda S. Kauffman also interprets the Commander’s remark above as “male identity [which] derives from and depends on domination” (235). Indeed, the Commander’s appearance and attitude are frequently characterized by his politeness and benign smiles so as to continue displaying himself as, in his words, “just an ordinary kind of guy” (HT 211); the fact that there is no need for him to look powerful and oppressive in front of Offred indicates his conviction of the unshakable state of the relationship between them.<sup>15</sup> For these reasons, Gilead can be regarded as a pastiche of rigid ideologies, only serving to fulfill the desires of certain types of men. As Atwood remarks, *The Handmaid’s Tale* now resembles the plot of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*: “The pigs in *Animal Farm* get the milk and the apples, the elite of *The Handmaid’s Tale* get the fertile women” (*In Other Worlds* 147).

### 3. Is Offred Rebellious?

Being forced to act out the role of the Commander’s sex doll, Offred searches for a way out of this degrading prison state. Yet in the dystopian tradition, resistance more or less ends up confirming the impossibility of plotting the crucial event to change it—thus there comes about the prevalence of static narrative closure. Much like D-503’s and Winston’s diary, Offred records her own experiences and memory through storytelling on cassettes. Since her testimony cannot be taped within Gilead, it indicates that Offred at least physically escaped from the regime in the end. This a distinctive feature, given that dystopian protagonists are conventionally doomed to submit to monolithic authority; comparing this ending with that of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Jocelyn Harris comments that “. . . *The Handmaid’s Tale* begins where *1984* [sic] leaves off. Instead of charting the destruction of a rebel, it shows a victim learning to survive” (69).

Nevertheless, whether this kind of survival is triumphant or not is a separate matter. Here, it seems pertinent to compare Offred to Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in terms of the difference between their respective manners of justifying themselves. For the latter, the sense of nostalgia is indispensable to counter totalitarian control. Winston longs for past times

where the peace of private life could have been still appreciated; out of memory, he invents and fossilizes his dream of a "Golden Country"<sup>16</sup> into "the glass paperweight," which was sold in an antique store (NEF 154). Through this process, he romanticizes and becomes fixated on his own (though imaginary) pastoral utopia of the past. It is here worthwhile to mention Orwell's previous novel, *Coming Up for Air* (1939). In order to escape from the war atmosphere and trace his authentic origins, the middle-aged protagonist George Bowling returns to his hometown (Lower Binfield) where he could enjoy the peace of everyday life which had been lost in London. Yet he discovers that small businesses have been already swallowed by Americanized factories and stores and its natural landscape also destroyed, which completely punctures Bowling's personal, nostalgic dream.<sup>17</sup> What is problematic here is the content of his dream; he, as Winston, eulogizes his inner feelings towards the countryside and his childhood life, though at the same time he consciously ignores the social issues lurking behind it.<sup>18</sup> Bowling emphasizes the threat from outside (Fascism) as is the case with Winston who loathes Big Brother. It can in fact be pointed out that this is a way *not* to confront already-existing conflicts which have not been resolved. In this sense, Fascism and Big Brother operate as a scapegoat for both protagonists' inability to deal with problems of gender, class struggle, and colonialism, which are also places of domination, if not totalitarian.

On the other hand, as is also noted by Joseph Browne, Atwood wrote a similar novel of nostalgia titled *Surfacing* (1972), whose title strikingly evokes Orwell's (156). In *Surfacing*, the nameless female protagonist decides to go back to her rural hometown in Canada in order to search for her missing father, simultaneously hoping to regain an authentic subjectivity which was lost in her life in New York. Yet as is the case with Orwell's Bowling, such a journey is doomed to fail: what is notable here is that her native place is in danger of being purchased and, ironically, changed into a retreat resort by an American man, "a member of the Detroit branch of the Wild-life Protection Association of America" (94). In Orwell's work, Upper Binfield, a formally pristine area where Bowling used to go fishing, had likewise been changed into "the Woodland City" for people who practice "Vegetarianism, simple life, poetry, Nature-worship," though "[t]here was nothing left of the woods" (227, 228). Bowling then places his last glimmer of hope on the big pool in the deep woods where there was "the great black fish,"

which has been his object of desire until the time of his visit (223). Yet to his great disappointment, “They’d drained the water off” from the pool and now it was “half full of tin cans” (229). Analogously in *Surfacing*, the protagonist encounters impending threats to her native island and lakes (one of the lakes is indeed her object of deference): “My country, sold or drowned, a reservoir; the people were sold along with the land and the animals, a bargain, sale, *solde*. *Les soldes* they called them, sellouts, the flood would depend on who got elected, not here but somewhere else” (133, emphasis in original).<sup>19</sup> It seems plausible that Orwell and Atwood, before writing their influential dystopian fictions, needed to write about alienated protagonists’ nostalgic travel to their hometowns. In these novels, both figures display the same structure of justification by condemning external entities (Fascism/America) in order to present their victim position as an unarguably palpable fact.

Yet as her journey proceeds, the protagonist in *Surfacing* cannot help reflecting on her past more critically and thus her political position becomes quite ambiguous. Similarly, Offred also offers her detached and quite ironic views on the past in more detail than the largely oblivious Winston, for her standpoint is not fixed on the past or anywhere outside herself. Indeed, what is revealed in her recollection of the pre-Gilead era is far from being exuberant; her memory is as smeared with fear and anxiety as is her present experience. In particular, she mentions two times her experience of reading news about cruel incidents in the newspapers; in Chapter 10, they are about the discovery of “corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated” (HT 68) and she claims that the victims are women. Again, a slightly expanded account appears in Chapter 35, where corpses which “are found . . . in ditches or forests or refrigerators in abandoned rented rooms with their clothes on or off, sexually abused or not; at any rate killed” (HT 257). This time, men and children are also included as victims, yet Offred maintains that they are mostly women. This represents her acute sense of helplessness against the power of men in a previous era; ironically in Gilead, women are protected from such occasional, physical violence unless they disobey an order. Also in the first case, the paragraph is concluded as follows: “We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print [of the newspapers]. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories” (HT 68). In contrast, after some paragraphs in the referred-to section in Chapter 35, there is a similar statement: “I am a blank, here [in Gilead], between

parentheses. Between other people” (HT 259). What is displayed here is her sense of irony; while “gaps” in the former conclusion suggest that space is not framed externally by other specific signifiers, in the latter formulation it is parenthesized more distinctively in the figures of “other people.” Yet in fact, “gaps” in the former statement does not directly represent women’s freedom in the pre-Gilead America. The blank space of the newspapers, though negatively, already signified the undeniable possibility that one might be a victim in tomorrow’s paper; that is, one can easily move from “gaps” to “stories.” Offred is now acutely aware that until this point she had been willing to refuse to acknowledge this precariousness of life: “We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it” (HT 67). This omnipresent threat is represented throughout the novel as a kind of unconscious awareness, which is continually repressed, yet still waiting to re-emerge through the veneer of everyday life. Feeling a keen sense of the grim continuity between her past and present, Offred, unlike Winston, cannot find any reassurance in her memory; she has been trapped all along, even from before the novel begins.<sup>20</sup>

The past does not offer roots, and the present is abominable. Not having any foundation for acting for the future, what is necessary for Offred to survive is to transcend reality, which is, though somewhat paradoxically, to fall in love or to become one of the “falling women” (HT 256). Whereas in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, erotic love in the form of romance with Julia is signified by Winston as political (perhaps as a form of compensation), Offred in turn becomes infatuated with a member of the Underground named Nick, disguised as the chauffeur of Commander Fred. At first, under the command of Serena Joy, their meeting was only for the purpose of increasing the chances of conception. After that, however, Offred ventures to risk her life quite frequently to rendezvous with Nick: “Being here with him is safety; it’s a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside” (HT 304). Thus, these secret meetings operate as Offred’s “private utopia” in Howells’ term (*Margaret Atwood* 106). Although Offred herself knows “[t]his is a delusion” (HT 304), she nevertheless indulges in this love affair, intentionally halting her stream of thoughts: “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (HT 305).

Nevertheless, just as Winston cannot fully engage in the idea of love as

political (he ends up betraying Julia),<sup>21</sup> Offred likewise cannot commit herself to acting out such romance as a form of active social engagement: “far from viewing lovemaking as liberating, Offred approaches it as if death is imminent” (Kauffman 250). Howells emphasizes “Gilead’s control over life and death” which is especially concretized in the sudden suicide of Offred’s partner Ofglen. Though this later disables the former’s attempt to rebel, it should not be overlooked that it is she herself who decided to reject her relationship with Nick (*Margaret Atwood* [2005], 106): “I’ll give up Nick, . . . I’ll renounce” (HT 322). She could continue to keep meeting her lover and possibly discuss a way to escape as Ofglen did with other secret renegades,<sup>22</sup> yet Nick remains a mysterious figure in Offred’s storytelling, a figment of her imagination only to be romanticized: “I make of him an idol, a cardboard cutout” (HT 304), which is equivalent to what Winston did for Julia.<sup>23</sup>

The point which Allan Weiss clarified in “Offred’s Complicity and the Dystopian Tradition in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” is of specific importance here. He disagrees with other critics who rather hastily “interpret the protagonists’ romantic relationships as profound expressions of emotion and political engagement, and their defeats as tragic” (128). As Weiss maintains, this interpretation is too sympathetic to the protagonists; in other words, the system can still be subverted when room for imagining alternatives is at least left. Totalitarianism does not have to be always ahistorical or the end of history once and for all; such a reified understanding is indeed itself totalitarian.<sup>24</sup> Thus it is not necessary to regard Offred’s despair as inevitable.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, she herself seems to realize that an alternate narrative remains possible even if she believes that she cannot tell it in any other way: “I wish this story were different. . . . But there is nothing I can do to change it” (HT 301). What kind of reason, then, can explain Offred’s tendency to evade having faith in acting to free herself?

As is shown above, “gaps” and “blanks” seem to be keywords for unraveling Offred’s standpoint; instructively, “O” in the first letter of her name signifies her recurrent anxiety about her own empty subjectivity. Although her name here is patronymic as applied to all Handmaids, it seems that Offred takes it at face value more than other characters. In Gilead, the Handmaids are deprived of subjectivity, living as “void” until they conceive the Commander’s child.<sup>26</sup> Yet especially in Offred’s case, it is doubtful whether she has ever had a sense of rooted subjectivity or not, that is, even in the

time before Gilead. Offred worked at a library, yet not as a librarian, but as a “transcriber” (Cooke 126). She was employed in monotonously “transferring books to computer discs, to cut down on storage space and replacement costs” (HT 198), although she had graduated from university (Cooke 125). Offred rarely argued with her partner Luke, fearing to lose his interest. Indeed, any period spent without him is “empty time,” not free time (HT 179). In this context, it is not surprising that Offred sympathizes with the Commander from time to time, even at the presumably degrading ceremony of insemination (HT 103). After their secret affair was set up, her nerves are actually somewhat calmed: “To him I am not merely empty” (HT 188). This is because the Commander offers her the opportunity to read and someone to play Scrabble with, reassuring her so that she feels “no longer merely a usable body” (HT 188). On the other hand, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is Julia who ventures to wear cosmetics and to procure forbidden costumes, bringing illegal commodities like chocolate and coffee to Winston (NEF, Part II, IV). *The Handmaid's Tale* parodies this by making the Commander provide those goods for Offred. Moreover, if O'Brien the torturer passes Winston the Bible of rebellion (in the form of “The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism”), the Commander allows Offred to devour magazines and novels such as *Vogue*, *Mademoiselle*, *Esquire*, *Ms.*, *Reader's Digest*, a Raymond Chandler, and Dickens' *Hard Times*, which are all forbidden to possess (HT 211). Offred has been suspicious of his intent; finally being forced to commit adultery in the illegal hotel, she cannot help but be inert like “a dead bird” after she realizes that this is all planned in order for the Commander to enjoy having sex without the inhibiting presence of an insensitive spouse,<sup>27</sup> wallowing in a sense of licensed immorality (HT 290). Offred's tactics of replenishing her “empty” body with words is thereby negated skillfully by the Commander as is the case with Winston and O'Brien.

Yet Offred's reaction is not fury, but indifference. After Ofglen commits suicide as a result of covering up for Offred, the threat of immediate death forces the latter to seriously contemplate how to perform one last act of sabotage against the regime; she thinks of arson against the Commander's house, hanging herself, beating Serena Joy to death, simply walking away as far as she could reach, or begging Nick for help. Yet none of these ideas seem compelling to her: “Each one of them seems the same size as all the others. Not one seems preferable. Fatigue is here, in my body, in my legs and eyes. This

is what gets you in the end. Faith is only a word, embroidered” (HT 328). Offred attempts to reject Gilead’s gaze, which regards her only as a body or container, yet at the same time, she cannot take subversive concepts at face value, since they are nothing but words, which can be broken at any time in the way that the pieces of Scrabble are supposed to crumble.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a Critique of Interpretation

As discussed above, Offred shares with Winston Smith a sense of paradoxical complicity with an authority to which they are apparently opposed. It is this ineptness that presumably explains why Atwood herself did not regard this work as a “feminist dystopia” (*In Other Worlds* 146). This hesitation about militant action is analogous to her own view on her earlier novel *The Edible Woman* (1969); Atwood sees it as “protofeminist rather than feminist,” because the gender problem which is represented in the work is not overcome by the struggle of its protagonist (Introduction to *The Edible Woman*, x). By calling the novel “protofeminist,” Atwood suggests that “[i]t’s noteworthy that my heroine’s choices remain much the same at the end of the book as they are at the beginning: a career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it” (x). This also holds for Offred’s stance; she does not take any initiative to carry out her rebellion and is likewise supposed to be disillusioned by conventional love-romance with Nick.<sup>29</sup> The idea of choice which might liberate Offred is rather shockingly intimidating to her: “I’ve given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It’s the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation” (HT 73).<sup>30</sup>

In order to analyze this stance of Offred’s in more theoretical terms, it is here worthwhile to apply Freud’s famous theory of melancholia.<sup>31</sup> Melancholia is a symptom where one cannot overcome the loss of an object in which one had libidinally invested one’s self. Whereas in mourning this object is nameable and thus a subject can learn to be reconciled with reality by forgetting it, in melancholia one cannot realize what that object signifies outside in the first place. The problem here is, as Slavoj Žižek argues,<sup>32</sup> that the lost-but-unknown object has, in reality, never existed from the outset; it is about losing something which did not exist. It may seem contradictory, yet this conceptual ambiguity or instability allows a process of demystification to

occur. Here, one cannot help but negate reality (almost completely) since it is a condition in which the object which one desires has been wholly "lost." In this sense, Offred's sense of emptiness can be interpreted as a result of her melancholic state of mind; this prevents her from endorsing any causes including feminism, let alone American (pseudo-)liberalism or Gileadean (cynical-)fundamentalism. Each of these belongs to this plane of reality and thus cannot be freed from its particularity, or reconciled with the perspective of cultural/historical relativism.

Furthermore, Offred's storytelling appears to consist of self-denigrating complaints, but these should be read as a form of stark accusation; if she thinks herself empty, what is empty is the world.<sup>33</sup> Identifying with an object which is always/already lost (but which can therefore be regarded as authentic) could be partially utopian in its potential power to deconstruct existing discourses. Yet what ought not to be ignored is that Offred in fact privileges her standpoint of extreme skepticism, regardless of whether it epistemologically negates her existence or not. She would never be able to admit the arbitrariness of her own testimony, since to her this criticism would also be merely arbitrary and have no value since, as she claims decisively, "Context is *all*" (HT 166, emphasis mine).

Yet the novel should not be dismissed hastily because of its protagonist's ambivalent political stance. Rather, what characterizes this novel is its way of struggling to broaden the possibilities of political action. It is then particularly notable that, as I referred to earlier, it is Offred who could (though by coincidence) have succeeded in freeing Gilead while other women remain trapped. Moira, a more unabashed feminist who has been forced into a secret brothel for the Gileadean Commanders, ends up resigning herself to the regime. Offred's mother too, who had been a feminist activist, has been sent to a Colony, waiting for death in a radioactive area. And also Ofglen, who clandestinely participated in the Mayday Underground, eventually takes her life in order to prevent herself from confessing information about the group. In contrast, as Amin Malak stresses, the majority of female characters are represented more orthodoxly as conforming to Gilead's androcentric philosophy. Not only the Wives, but the Marthas (housemaids) despise the Handmaids. Nevertheless, the Marthas simultaneously anticipate the pregnancies of the Handmaids, hoping to relish Birth Day as a brief moment of escape from tedious chores in their daily life (HT 155). Although living in fear of



being sent into the Colonies, some women, epitomized by Aunt Lydia and Elizabeth, are even willing to help in the re-educating (brainwashing) of the Handmaids. In the same way that Orwell's party members are continually spying on each other to get honored by Big Brother, the suppressed majority cannot establish connection with each other out of fear of torture and annihilation. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women other than the Handmaids serve only to "[appropriate] male values" for their desperate survival (Malak 12). When compared to these characters, Offred's inaction due to her downright skepticism seems to become a little more appropriate; the text appears to suggest that her very indecisiveness can itself paradoxically be one possible way of political intervention.

Besides, these arguments can be supported by attention to the geographical issues in the novel. First, it is alleged that she escapes from Gilead to Canada. The cassettes which recorded her testimony were discovered at a station on "The Underground Femaleroad" between these countries (HT 281, 337, 340, 347, also see below). It is evident that this refers to the "Underground Railway," through which slaves "entered British North America between 1820 and 1860 . . . from the American South out of reach of American courts" (Kelly and Trebilcock 52).<sup>34</sup> Yet, as Sandra Tomc argues, Canada is not described as utopia or a promised land of freedom: "the iconic move of crossing the border into Canada will no longer represent the escape from American persecution which it had, variously, in the eighteenth century to the United Empire Loyalists, in the nineteenth century to Southern American slaves, and in the twentieth century to refugees of the draft" (83).<sup>35</sup> Indeed, in the novel's appendix, Offred's final destination is speculated not to be in Canada, which would be the obvious adjacent territory, but in England, since "the Canada of that time did not wish to antagonize its powerful neighbor, and there were roundups and extraditions of such refugees" (HT 348).<sup>36</sup> With regard to this, Atwood's following remark in a public speech titled "Canadian-American Relations: Surviving the Eighties" is of importance: she claims that "the Canadian experience was a circumference with no centre, [and] the American one a centre which was mistaken for the whole thing" (*Second Words* 379). This Canada's relationship with the neighbor America is gendered in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Offred's "empty" position of being rootless and indecisive towards the past and the future makes her unable to conceive any plausible ways to come to terms with her male oppressors.

Although it is tempting to read Atwood's stance here as unambiguously satirical, that is, asking Canadians to take action, she seems to have intended something more complex and subtle. In the novel, Offred criticizes her lesbian friend, Moira: "if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away. . . . You couldn't just ignore them" (HT 197). It can be assumed from this statement that Canada, which is represented by Offred, also should not succumb to what John Whalen-Bridge terms "counter-fundamentalism" against America, which is represented as Gilead in the text. In the conclusion of her essay above, far from being a simplistic nationalist, Atwood instead urges people to engage in "the study of human aggression" and especially issues of totalitarianism, which are obviously the main subject of *The Handmaid's Tale* (*Second Words* 391).

Taking this into consideration, the "Historical Notes,"<sup>37</sup> attached to the end of the main text as is the case with the appendix (an essay titled "The Principle of Newspeak") in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is significant since it operates as evidence for the demise of the regimes and thus signifies another space after Gilead, which turns out not to be emancipating in its nature. It is an attached transcription from an academic conference in the year 2195, where professors of various origins report their research results on the Gileadean theocracy, which becomes now past history. Though hopeful as it seems, it is revealed that what is thought to be Offred's narrative has been edited and reconstructed by those male historians. Surprisingly, not only is their sexist view presented through the lecture (the choice of the word "tale" in the title of the document, making explicit play on "tail" as sexual organ [OED 5c] and also punning on "The Underground Femaleroad" as "The Underground Frailroad"), but the value of Offred's story is undermined by the accusation by Professor Pieixoto, who maintains that the author lacks "the instincts of a reporter or a spy" (HT 348). Offred's fragmented and discursive narrative is supposed to be dismissed since it is too subjective and pensive, thus unreliable for any attempt to deduce the facts about the past from it. Here, Offred's emptiness is unable to be solved by anyone including herself; it is then only to be filled with History. This is ironic since it is only the readers of her story (or listeners to her cassettes) that the usually cynical Offred trusts in an explicit way: "Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (HT 302). The space that the addressees belong to is at

least “not here” or “some other place” (HT 301). Yet they include notorious Professor Pieixoto, who cannot take Offred’s decentralized narrative at face value because of his entrenched academic perspective. As if she was aware of this, she despairs over this possibility in advance: “I’ll pretend you can hear me. But it’s no good, because I know you can’t” (HT 50). Thus, the “Historical Notes” appears to complete the novel’s anti-utopian logic of human nature, which continues to produce victims.

Meanwhile, regarding the problem of interpretation, Atwood claims that “the process of reading is part of the process of writing, the necessary completion without which writing can hardly be said to exist” (*Second Words* 345). From this view, it is notable that the conclusion of the novel is in fact, not the infamous “Historical Notes,” but actually the end of Chapter 1, where the real names of Handmaids who are focused on in this novel are mentioned: “Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June” (HT 10). As other critics have also detected, June turns out to be Offred’s autonym since June is the only person whose name is not linked to other characters in the course of the work.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, readers of the novel can obtain a piece of information which even the future historian overlooks: “For those of us who reread this extraordinary book, June comes alive” (Andriano 96). Besides, the enigmatic phrase at the beginning of the “Historical Notes”—Denay Nunavit (“Deny None of It”)<sup>39</sup>—allows readers to engage in what Fredric Jameson terms “Archaeologies of the Future,” and so to examine forward-directed representations as those which consist of unignorable historical facts, which may reveal the present condition in more depth.<sup>40</sup> Kauffman also concurs with this perspective: “Atwood has written a history of the present” (262). The story of a future allows the present to be historicized by mobilizing the pastness repressed in the latter.

It can be concluded now that *The Handmaid’s Tale* offers not only a critique of rebellion, but also that of interpretation, by questioning how victims’ voices have to be assessed. First, as a critique of rebellion, the text represents the alienated protagonist’s “void” of subjectivity and her vacillating points of view, which refuse to put forward any political cause. Yet at the same time, the novel demands that readers be aware of the risk of misinterpreting the victim’s story and thus dismissing its power to critique the status quo; in this sense, only sympathizing with the victim is also insufficient since, by doing so, highly sophisticated conflicts of ideas in the work are left unsolved. On

this point, Theo Finigan indicates that this interpretive risk in *The Handmaid's Tale* which is illustrated by the "Historical Notes" has been already inscribed formally into *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. That is, Finigan regards the following fact as evidence for the reconstruction of Winston's story by an authority: the existence of the footnote in the main text in fact refers to the appendix, where the protagonist's name, "Winston Smith," is mentioned (Finigan 451, NEF 5, 320). Although Atwood herself suggests that the appendix in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* "is written in standard English, in the third person, and in the past tense" and it "can only mean that the regime has fallen, and that language and individuality have survived," as in her work, it is possible that Winston's story was also not taken at a face value by the future author of the appendix, leaving political issues embedded within it untouched (*In Other Worlds* 146). Otherwise, why does the appendix only focus on "The Principle of Newspeak" without scrutinizing Winston's hopeless condition in more detail (312)? In this sense, these two works are totalitarian not only in their content, but even in their form; individual accounts are always/already supposed to be absorbed into the dominant narrative.<sup>41</sup> Without taking this aspect into deep consideration, interpretation of the novel's social criticism will be insufficient and likewise ineffective to formulate authentically radical thoughts on Atwood's "study on human aggression." Therefore, *The Handmaid's Tale* stands as a multi-dimensional critique about rebellion and victimhood, in which readers are compelled to engage from every aspect. As the last word of the novel is "Are there any questions?," the novel requires readers to formulate their own "questions" in order to break the closed structure of the text and make space for a future which they have never seen before (HT 350).

#### Abbreviation

BNW: Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

NEF: George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

HT: Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

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### Notes

- 1 D-503 explicitly longs for "a mother like the Ancients: my—yes, exactly—my own mother. She would know me as—not the Builder of the Integral, and not cipher D-503, and not a molecule of the One State—but simply a fragment of humanity, a fragment of herself, trampled, squashed, thrown away. . . . And whether I am nailing or being nailed—maybe it's all the same—she would hear what no one else heard, her old-woman lips, overgrown with wrinkles" (*We* 189). This yearning for an all-accepting mother is inherited by Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Winston eulogizes "private loyalties" about which he gives two examples: one is his mother's selfless attempt of offering children something or "love" when there is in fact nothing to give and the other is "the refugee woman" who desperately tried to protect her child from a stream of bullets with her body (NEF 172). These sacred figures of motherhood are not described in such detail that they work as a stereotype of firm bonding between mother and child.
- 2 Linda is beta-minus and Lenina is possibly beta-plus. (In Chapter 11 of *Brave New World*, John and

- Lenina watch a feelie in which a love story of “a gigantic negro and a golden-haired young brachycephalic *Beta-Plus* female” can be felt directly by the audience [BNW 154, emphasis mine]. These characters can be regarded as a projected image of John and Lenina). Interestingly, the existence of any women of alpha class, who would engage in intellectual affairs, is hardly suggested in the novel. What is uncanny is that “the Head Mistress of Eton” is a “freemartin” (BNW 149, also see Ferns 117).
- 3 “*Goodthinkful*” is one of the Newspeak words, “meaning naturally orthodox, incapable of thinking a bad thought” (NHF 152).
  - 4 Julia is twenty-six years old (NEF136). She works at “Pornosec, the sub-section of the Fiction Department which turned out cheap pornography for distribution among the proles” (NEF 137). It is stressed that she is not “literary”: “Of course I was only on the kaleidoscopes. I was never in the Rewrite Squad. *I’m not literary, dear*—not even enough for that” (137, emphasis mine). There seems no need for intellectual activity in dealing with “the kaleidoscopes.”
  - 5 Except Zamyatin’s I-330, the leader of revolts.
  - 6 As though foreshadowing post-9/11 anti-Muslim hate crimes, people in the novel regard the terrorists as Muslims: “They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time” (HT 199).
  - 7 About this environmental pollution, the future professor speculates in the section titled “Historical Notes” in the novel: “Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period, as well as to leakages from chemical-and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites, of which there were many thousands, both legal and illegal—in some instances these materials were simply dumped into the sewage system—and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays” (HT 341). The means by which the people in the late twenty-second century (i.e. after Gilead) solved these problems are not developed in the novel. Or it can be said that those were not crucial for human survival; if so, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not focused on the environmental problems *per se*, but on how those problems are exploited or could even be fabricated to promote further techniques of social control.
  - 8 In the novel and also in the film adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1990), Offred’s doctor implies that it is the Commander who is sterile (HT 72, also see page 346 for a similar hint in the “Historical Notes”). Yet the possibility of his lying is undeniable since his cunning grin seems only to imply his desire to establish a sexual relationship with Offred.
  - 9 Birth Day is a delivery party; Prayvaganza is a group wedding; Salvaging is public execution by hanging; and in Particution, the Handmaids are forced to lynch political criminals.
  - 10 Atwood emphasizes that her “rule for *The Handmaid’s Tale*” was not to “put into this book anything that humankind had not already done, somewhere, sometime, or for which it did not already have the tools” (*In Other Worlds* 88). On this point, there is a similar mention in the “Historical Notes” in the novel: “there was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis” (344). A critic, Fiona Tolan, further comments that “the dystopia shares common ground with the parody or pastiche of postmodernism” (148).
  - 11 This theme is specifically exemplified in E. M. Forster’s dystopian short story, “The Machine Stops” (1909).
  - 12 Fredric Jameson comments on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, that “the central contradiction of the novel’s framework lies . . . in the inconsistency between the advanced technology of the all-seeing and infallible surveil-

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- lance system and the repeated assurances that science cannot function under totalitarianism (an assurance reinforced by the shabbiness of Oceania itself)" (200). Andrew Milner disagrees with this and claims that this is not a contradiction at all; "as Jameson must know, science is by no means coextensive with technology" (109). In this context, science as empirical search for truth is what should be suppressed in the totalitarian regime, whereas the progress of technology is promoted as long as it serves the purpose of the controllers (the same strategy is applied in Huxley's *Brave New World*). This trope of "scientists selling their soul to authority" is indeed a main theme of Atwood's later dystopian fiction *Oryx and Crake* (2003).
- 13 Kauffman notes that in the film adaptation of the novel, "each handmaid's wrist is encircled with a slave bracelet engraved with the kind of codes that are electronically read at the supermarket checkout counter; in order to pass checkpoints in the city, the guards pass the sensor over the woman's wrist" (237), marking a contrast with tattoos on the ankles of Handmaids in the novel. The movie intensifies the image of commodification of women in the world of consumerism.
  - 14 Having heard the men's talk about Lenina, Marx gets furious: "'Talking about her as though she were a bit of meat.' Bernard ground his teeth. 'Have her here, have her there. Like mutton. Degrading her to so much mutton'" (BNW 51).
  - 15 "He smiles. The smile is not sinister or predatory. It's merely a smile, a formal kind of smile, friendly but a little distant, as if I'm a kitten in a window" (HT 158). In the Commander's private study, there is even "a desktop notepad with a little smile-button face printed at the top of the page" (HT 213). The film adaptation likewise underscores the Commander's smile and laughter in front of Offred throughout, which continues till she eventually slashes his neck with a knife.
  - 16 The Golden Country or Winston's private utopia is as follows: "He was in the Golden Country, or he was sitting among enormous glorious, sunlit ruins, with his mother, with Julia, with O'Brien—not doing anything, merely sitting in the sun, talking of peaceful things" (NEF 288). Allan Weiss aptly claims that "[i]t is noteworthy how similar this vision of a static, and therefore preferable, world is to Oceania's own totalitarian denial of history" (131). What is more striking is that there is O'Brien in the Golden Country. This exposes Winston's hidden complicity with him (see Daphne Patai's analysis on this aspect by applying game theory [219-263]).
  - 17 The following passage summarizes Bowling's sense of nostalgia for his hometown and disillusionment during his visit: "All those years Lower Binfield had been tucked away somewhere or other in my mind, a sort of quiet corner that I could step back into when I felt like it, and finally I'd stepped back into it and found that it didn't exist. I'd chucked a pineapple into my dreams, and lest there should be any mistake the Royal Air Force had followed up with five hundred pounds of TNT" (237).
  - 18 "I know perfectly well that we've got to work. It's only because chaps are coughing their lungs out in mines and girls are hammering at typewriters that anyone ever has time to pick a flower. Besides, if you hadn't a full belly and a warm house you wouldn't want to pick flowers. But that's not the point. Here's this feeling that I get inside me. . . . I know it's a good feeling to have. What's more, so does everybody else, or nearly everybody. . . . Stop firing that machine-gun!" (173).
  - 19 Yet it is significant that, whereas Bowling rather immediately (re-)escapes into the city after his nightmarish visit to the countryside, Atwood's protagonist gradually realizes that she has to stop wallowing in her sense of nostalgia and anti-Americanism:



To become like a little child again, a barbarian, a vandal: it was in us too, it was innate. A thing closed in my head, hand, synapse, cutting off my escape: that was the wrong way, the entrance, redemption was elsewhere, I must have overlooked it. (133)

- At this point, she senses the necessity to be critical of her past and move on to another possible alternative to reclaim her identity. This kind of reflection is lacking in Orwell's two novels.
- 20 In the film adaptation, on the other hand, the prison only exists in the totalitarian military regime of the present, and the flashbacks of the past are limited to those of Offred's daughter (named Jill in the film); i.e. there is no criticism of the pre-Gilead American society which is largely focused on in the novel. Thus the movie only foregrounds abomination towards totalitarianism. This is emphasized in the opening short explanation of the movie: "Once upon a time/ in the recent future/ a country went wrong. The country was called/ The Republic of Gilead." In the novel, what went wrong is not only a perverted cult's state, but American culture as well. Indeed, the director Volker Schlöndorff intended the movie to have this critical aspect especially on consumerism: "We eliminated [from the film] what characterizes our society: the apparent wide variety of objects and choices. But in fact, they [the descriptions of Gileadean culture] are not so different even today, they are all more of the same, they're just recycled so that they look a little different" (quoted in Kauffman, 251). Yet it is difficult to notice his intention in the film because there is no scene which connects the pre-Gilead America and the current regime.
- 21 Even before betraying Julia, Winston reveals his ambivalent feelings after being detained in the Ministry of Love: "He loved her and would not betray her; but that was only a fact, known as he knew the rules of arithmetic. He felt no love for her. . . . He thought oftener of O'Brien, with a flickering of hope" (NEF 240).
- 22 In contrast, in the film adaptation, Offred willingly participates in Nick's plot to make her kill the Commander.
- 23 Sandra Tomc reads this rather soft sentimental plot as Atwood's challenge to the hard androcentric discourse of Puritan Studies which she studied under Perry Miller in the early 1960s: "Both the position of Canada with respect to Reagan's America in the mid-1980s and the self-designations of the Americanist scholars with whom Atwood was familiar determine her combined advocacy of self-protective autonomy and the unsanctioned texts of women's popular culture" (84).
- 24 The term "totalitarianism" can be used both in descriptive and evaluative ways; it is the latter usage that is here problematic, since one could exploit the word only for justifying his or her position. See Žižek, especially 1-7.
- 25 Offred's position can be explained by "Victim Position Two," which is discussed in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (47).
- 26 Andriano notes that "[t]he letter O becomes the numeral zero. June [Offred] is null and void" (94).
- 27 The film version presents a memorable scene (which does not exist in the novel) where the Commander and Serena Joy agreeably talk in order to appear as an ideal married couple. Ironically, the scene in which the affair between the Commander and Offred is shown follows immediately afterwards.
- 28 Andriano claims that the "Scrabble games the Commander plays with the narrator provide a vivid image of the collapse: the monolithic Word, the tablet of stone, crumbles into Scrabble tiles, a scattering of letters that form a myriad of words having only accidental semantic and syntactic elements" (92). Yet what is

## Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Multidimensional Critique of Rebellion

- problematic here is the cynical aspect of this logic, which can surely be applied to Offred's thoughts, that is, a counterpoint to the structure of totalitarianism.
- 29 Howells also concludes that "*The Handmaid's Tale* may be a critique of feminism but it is a double-edged one which rejects binary oppositions, just as Offred's double vision allows her to evaluate both Gilead and her own, lost, late twentieth-century America" (Margaret Atwood [2005], 98).
- 30 However, it should be noted that the remark above is given when Offred rejects a gynecologist's offer to have sexual intercourse which is apparently meant to help her with getting pregnant secretly. Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor understands this reaction of Offred's as "Her perception of the truly profound irony of her situation . . . the 'choice' is no choice; the 'way out' is in fact a 'way in'; this 'salvation' is a damnation" (87). Offred is well aware that being furtively inseminated by the doctor to fulfill her duty would only complicate the problem; his benign offer can be another justification of his raping her. Here, a choice produces a sense of freedom; yet it can only be illusory if its consequences are the same as those of the other choices. On the other hand, in the film adaptation, Offred unambiguously chooses to reject the doctor's offer. She is depicted throughout the movie as a more courageous woman; this is also exemplified in the scene where Offred blinds Aunt Lydia with a piece of cloth and threatens her with a cattle prod in order to help Moira with her runaway. And of course, she kills the Commander in the end.
- 31 My argument is based on Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Freud's concept of melancholia in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* where he discusses the relationship between melancholia and action; thus it is relevant to the problem of revolution in dystopia (which is epitomized in the structure of More's *Utopia*; part one is a somewhat melancholic accusation, while part two deals with revolution, or the realization of utopia).
- 32 "In short, the mourner mourns the lost object and 'kills it a second time' through symbolizing its loss; while the melancholic is not simply the one who is unable to renounce the object: rather, he kills the object a second time (treats it as lost) *before the object is actually lost*" (147, emphasis in original). It can be said that in melancholia, one identifies with an apparition; that which exists as infinite regression without any content.
- 33 Freud suggests about the self-denigration of melancholic individuals that "[t]heir complaints are really 'plaints' in the old sense of the word. They are not ashamed and do not hide themselves, since everything derogatory that they say about themselves is at bottom said about someone else" (248). He adds that "[a]ll this is possible only because the reactions expressed in their behavior still proceed from a mental constellation of revolt, which has then, by a certain process, passed over into the crushed state of melancholia" (248).
- 34 But the following fact should also be considered: "A substantial number of the refugee slaves returned to the United States when the Emancipation Act of 1863 freed slaves after the U.S. Civil War" (52).
- 35 Arguing Americans' tendency to "take [their own culture] with them" while going outside their native country rather than to adapt themselves to another one, Atwood comments on this issue that "those draft dodgers of the sixties who made it as far as Canada nearly died of culture shock: they thought it was going to be like home" (*Second Words* 380). The plausibility of this remark surely has to be assessed by historical research on this issue: for example, in his analysis of the process of reconstruction of identity among draft evaders, John Hagan insists on "the overall reduction over time in recalled feelings of American identity and increases in present feelings of Canadian identity" (177).
- 36 Regarding the specifically Canadian nature of the narrative, it can be suggested as follows. On the one

- hand, Gilead represents the threat of US consumerism over the border. On the other hand, it always/ already exists in Canada, as an internalised mechanism of repression, despite the apparent plurality and tolerance of Canadian institutional structures.
- 37 As is also noted by John Whalen-Bridge (185), Jack London's (proto-)dystopian fiction *The Iron Heel* (1907) anticipates this narrative structure where the protagonist's testimony is framed by historical notes (in London's case, not only is it an explanation of the document attached to it, but also it is heavily annotated by a future historian). Interestingly, the author of the testimony is female, though she is more dauntless and committed to the underground than Offred.
- 38 Offred's real name is mentioned early in the film version as well (she is named Kate in the film). However, its presentation is more direct; at the beginning, Offred tells other characters that she is Kate, which is not cryptic as in the novel. For detailed analysis, see Setsu Ito's essay on the film version of *The Handmaid's Tale* in *Gendai Sakka Gaido: Margaret Atwood* (The Guide for Contemporary Authors: Margaret Atwood), published by Sai-ryu-sha in Tokyo, 2008.
- 39 This is the name of the place where the conference is held (it is mentioned two times). Howells notes that "[t]he name Denay, Nunavit, clearly signals the Canadian location of this second futuristic scenario, for Nunavit is the name of Canada's first aboriginal self-governing territory, which in the 1980s was scheduled to come into existence in 1999. This has now happened" (*Margaret Atwood* [2005], 198). Thus the pun is discreetly hidden in the text in the way that Offred's true name is.
- 40 "For the apparent realism, or representationality, of SF has concealed another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us 'images' of the future—whatever such images might mean for a reader who will necessarily predecease their 'materialization'—but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization" (*Archaeologies* 286, emphasis in original).
- 41 This mechanism of closure is indeed so relentless that it could even be symptomatically read in terms of authors' hysterical gestures emerging out of a structure of trauma, which can be explained by their following intentions in writing these works. First, Orwell regards his novel as "a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism" and declares that "totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere" ("Orwell's Statement on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" 136). In a similar vein, Atwood considers her novel as "speculative fiction about things that really could happen," warning against undesirable consequences that might arise: "if you see a person heading toward a huge hole in the ground, is it not a friendly act to warn him?" (*In Other Worlds* 6, 244). This somewhat patronizing way of presenting a bleak and nightmarish narrative in a threatening manner seems able to be regarded psychologically as the two authors' desire to justify their own ideas and opinions which are more or less not able to avoid being biased.