

MARGARET ATWOOD'S "THE HANDMAID'S TALE" AND THE DYSTOPIAN TRADITION

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IN *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault impressively articulates the complex, formidably paradoxical relationship between sexuality and power, arguing how power dictates its law to sex:

To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition. Its objective: that sex renounce itself. Its instrument: the threat of a punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed; do not appear if you do not want to disappear. Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification. Power constrains sex only through a taboo that plays on the alternative between two nonexistences.¹

Any reader of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* needs to recall Foucault's observation to contextualize the agonies of the narrator-protagonist, Offred, the victim of such a prohibition ordinance. By focusing the narrative on one central character, Atwood reveals the indignity and terror of living under a futuristic regime controlled by Christian fundamentalists. The heroine is one of several "handmaids" who, because of their "viable ovaries," are confined to a prison-like compound in order to be available for periodically programmed sexual intercourse with their "Commanders of the Faith." This church-state regime, called Gilead, condones such an unorthodox practice out of necessity to overcome a fertility crisis amongst the dwindling Caucasian population; as one of the novel's epigrams suggests, the polygamy of the Old Testament provides the sanction. True to the precedent set in Genesis, the Commander's Wife arranges and supervises these sex sessions, in which the handmaid, desexed and dehumanized, is obliged to participate. The dire alternative for the handmaid is banishment to the Colonies, where women clean up radioactive waste as slave labourers. The dictates of state policy in Gilead thus relegate sex to a saleable commodity exchanged for mere minimal survival.

One of the novel's successful aspects concerns the skilful portrayal of a state that in theory claims to be founded on Christian principles, yet in practice miserably lacks spirituality and benevolence. The state in Gilead prescribes a pattern

of life based on frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear, and terror — in short, the usual terms of existence enforced by totalitarian states, instance of which can be found in such dystopian works as Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984*.

In order to situate Atwood's novel within the relevant context of dystopia, I wish to articulate the salient dystopian features those three classics reveal. The ensuing discussion will be an elaboration on Atwood's rendition and redefinition of those features.

1. *Power, Totalitarianism, War:*

Dystopias essentially deal with power: power as the prohibition or perversion of human potential; power in its absolute form that, to quote from *1984*, tolerates no flaws in the pattern it imposes on society. Dystopias thus show, in extreme terms, power functioning efficiently and mercilessly to its optimal totalitarian limit. Interestingly, war or foreign threats often loom in the background, providing the pretext to join external tension with internal terror.

2. *Dream-Nightmare: Fantasy: Reality:*

While dystopias may be fear-laden horror fiction (how the dream turns into a nightmare), the emphasis of the work is not on horror for its own sake, but on forewarning. Similarly, while dystopias contain elements of the fantastic with a "touch of excess" carrying the narrative "one step [or more] beyond our reality,"² the aim is neither to distort reality beyond recognition, nor to provide an escapist world for the reader, but "to allow certain tendencies in modern society to spin forward without the brake of sentiment and humaneness."³

3. *Binary Oppositions:*

Dystopias dramatize the eternal conflict between individual choice and social necessity: the individual resenting the replacement of his private volition by compulsory uniformitarian decisions made by an impersonal bureaucratic machinery; Zamyatin's heroine poignantly sums up the conflict: "I do not want anyone to want for me. I want to want for myself."⁴ The sphere of the binary opposition expands further to cover such dialectical dualities as emotion and reason, creative imagination and mathematical logic, intuition and science, tolerance and judgment, kindness and cruelty, spirituality and materialism, love and power, good and evil. The list can go on.

4. *Characterization:*

Dystopias often tend to offer two-dimensional character types; this tendency is possibly due to the pressure of the metaphorical and ideological thrust of these

works. Moreover, the nightmarish atmosphere of dystopias seems to preclude advancing positive, assertive characters that might provide the reader with consoling hope. If such positive characters do exist, they usually prove miserably ineffectual when contending with ruthless overwhelming powers.

5. *Change and Time:*

Dystopian societies, consumed and controlled by regressive dogmas, appear constantly static: founded on coercion and rigid structures, the system resists change and becomes arrested in paralysis. Such a static life “shorn of dynamic possibility,” becomes for the underprivileged members of society mediocre, monotonous and predictable: “a given and measured quantity that can neither rise to tragedy nor tumble to comedy.”⁵ Accordingly, dystopias are not associated with innovation and progress, but with fear of the future. They use, however, the present as an instructive referent, offering a tacit alternative to the dystopian configuration.

6. *Roman à These:*

To varying degrees, dystopias are quintessentially ideological novels: they engage the reader in what Fredrick Jameson calls a “theoretical discourse,” whereby a range of thematic possibilities are posited and polarized against each other, yet the novels eventually reveal a definite philosophical and socio-political outlook for which fiction proves to be a convenient medium.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES ATWOOD’S NOVEL from those dystopian classics is its obvious feminist focus. Gilead is openly misogynistic, in both its theocracy and practice. The state reduces the handmaids to the slavery status of being mere “breeders” (a term bearing Swift’s satirical coinage):

We are all for breeding purposes: We aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us. . . . We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.⁶

In addition to the handmaids, Gilead offers its own state-sponsored brand of prostitutes called the Jezebels: dolled-up women whose sole function is to entertain foreign delegations. In order to erase the former identity of the handmaids, the state, moreover, cancels their original names and labels them according to the names of their Commanders, hence the names Offred, Ofglen, Ofwayne, Ofwarren. The women then become possessed articles, mere appendages to those men who exercise sexual mastery over them. The handmaid’s situation lucidly illustrates Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion in *The Second Sex* about man defining

woman not as an autonomous being but as simply what he decrees to be relative to him: "For him she is sex — absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other."⁷ This view of man's marginalization of woman corroborates Foucault's earlier observation about the power-sex correlative; since man holds the sanctified reigns of power in society, he rules, assigns roles, and decrees after social, religious, and cosmic concepts convenient to his interests and desires.

However, not all the female characters in Atwood's novel are sympathetic, nor all the male ones demonic. The Aunts, a vicious élite of collaborators who conduct torture lectures, are among the church-state's staunchest supporters; these renegades turn into zealous converts, appropriating male values at the expense of their feminine instincts. One of them, Aunt Lydia, functions, ironically, as the spokesperson of antifeminism; she urges the handmaids to renounce themselves and become non-persons: "Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen — to be *seen* — is to be — her voice trembled — penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable. She called us girls" (p. 39). On the other hand, Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, is involved with the underground network, of men and women, that aims at rescuing women and conducting sabotage. Besides, Atwood's heroine constantly yearns for her former marriage life with Luke, presently presumed dead. Accordingly, while Atwood poignantly condemns the misogynous mentality that can cause a heavy toll of human suffering, she refrains from convicting a gender in its entirety as the perpetrator of the nightmare that is Gilead. Indeed, we witness very few of the male characters acting with stark cruelty: the narrative reports most of the violent acts after the fact, sparing the reader gory scenes. Even the Commander appears more pathetic than sinister, baffled than manipulative, almost, at times, a Fool.

Some may interpret Atwood's position here as a non-feminist stance, approving of women's status-quo. In a review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Lorna Sage describes *The Handmaid's Tale* as Atwood's "revisionist look at her more visionary self," and as "a novel in praise of the present, for which, perhaps, you have to have the perspective of dystopia."⁸ It is really difficult to conceive Atwood's praising the present, because, like Orwell who in *1984* extrapolated specific ominous events and tendencies in twentieth-century politics, she tries to caution against right-wing fundamentalism, rigid dogmas, and misogynous theosophies that may be currently gaining a deceptive popularity. The novel's mimetic impulse then aims at wresting an imperfect present from a horror-ridden future: it appeals for vigilance, and an appreciation of the mature values of tolerance, compassion, and, above all, for women's unique identity.

The novel's thematics operate by positing polarized extremes: a decadent present, which Aunt Lydia cynically describes as "a society dying . . . of too much

choice" (p. 35), and a totalitarian future that prohibits choice. Naturally, while rejecting the indulgent decadence and chaos of an anarchic society, the reader condemns the Gilead regime for its intolerant, prescriptive set of values that projects a tunnel vision on reality and eliminates human volition: "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (p. 34). As illustrated by the fears and agonies that Offred endures, when human beings are not free to aspire toward whatever they wish, when choices become so severely constrained that, to quote from Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, "only the necessary is necessary," life turns into a painfully prolonged prison term. Interestingly, the victimization process does not involve Offred and the handmaids alone, but extends to the oppressors as well. Everyone ruled by the Gilead regime suffers the deprivation of having no choice, except what the church-state decrees; even the Commander is compelled to perform his sexual assignment with Offred as a matter of obligation: "This is no recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty" (p. 105).

Since the inhabitants of Gilead lead the precarious existence befitting victims, most try in varied ways to cope, endure, and survive. This situation of being a victim and trying to survive dramatizes Atwood's major thesis in her critical work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, in which she suggests that Canada, metaphorically still a colony or an oppressed minority, is "a collective victim,"⁹ and that "the central symbol for Canada . . . is undoubtedly Survival, *la Survivance*."¹⁰ Atwood, furthermore, enumerates what she labels "basic victim positions," whereby a victim may choose any of four possible options, one of which is to acknowledge being a victim but refuse "to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable."¹¹ This position fully explains Offred's role as the protagonist-narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred's progress as a maturing consciousness is indexed by an evolving awareness of herself as a victimized woman, and then a gradual development toward initiating risky but assertive schemes that break the slavery syndrome. Her double-crossing the Commander and his Wife, her choice to hazard a sexual affair with Nick, and her association with the underground network, all point to the shift from being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor. This impulse to survive, together with the occasional flashes of warmth and concern among the handmaids, transmits reassuring signs of hope and humanity in an otherwise chilling and depressing tale.

What makes Atwood's book such a moving tale is its clever technique in presenting the heroine initially as a voice, almost like a sleepwalker conceiving disjointed perceptions of its surroundings, as well as flashing reminiscences about a bygone life. As the scenes gather more details, the heroine's voice is steadily and imperceptively, yet convincingly, transfigured into a full-roundedness, that

parallels her maturing comprehension of what is happening around her. Thus the victim, manipulated and coerced, is metamorphosed into a determined conniver who daringly violates the perverted canons of Gilead. Moreover, Atwood skilfully manipulates the time sequence between the heroine's past (pre-Gilead life) and the present: those shifting reminiscences offer glimpses of a life, though not ideal, still filled with energy, creativity, humaneness, and a sense of selfhood, a life that sharply contrasts with the alienation, slavery, and suffering under totalitarianism. By the end of the novel, the reader is effectively and conclusively shown how the misogynous regime functions on the basis of power, not choice; coercion, not volition; fear, not desire. In other words, Atwood administers in doses the assaulting shocks to our sensibilities of a grim dystopian nightmare: initially, the narrative voice, distant and almost diffidently void of any emotions, emphasizes those aspects of frugality and solemnity imposed by the state, then progressively tyranny and corruption begin to unfold piecemeal. As the novel concludes, as the horror reaches a climax, the narrative voice assumes a fully engaged emotional tone that cleverly keeps us in suspense about the heroine's fate. This method of measured, well-punctuated revelations about Gilead connects symbolically with the novel's central meaning: misogynous dogmas, no matter how seemingly innocuous and trustworthy they may appear at their initial conception, are bound, when allowed access to power, to reveal their ruthlessly tyrannical nature.

Regardless of the novel's dystopian essence, it nevertheless avoids being solemn; on the contrary, it sustains an ironic texture throughout. We do not find too many frightening images that may compare with Oceana's torture chambers: the few graphic horror scenes are crisply and snappily presented, sparing us a blood-curdling impact. (Some may criticize this restraint as undermining the novel's integrity and emotional validity.) As in all dystopias, Atwood's aim is to encourage the reader to adopt a rational stance that avoids *total* "suspension of disbelief." This rational stance dislocates full emotional involvement in order to create a Brechtian type of alienation that, in turn, generates an ironic charge. This rational stance too should not be total, because Atwood does want us to care sympathetically about her heroine's fate; hence the emotional distance between reader and character must allow for closeness, but up to a point. Furthermore, Atwood is equally keen on preserving the ironic flair intact. No wonder then that she concludes *The Handmaid's Tale* with a climactic moment of irony: she exposes, in a hilarious epilogue, the absurdity and futility of certain academic writings that engage in dull, clinically sceptic analysis of irrelevancies and inanities, yet miss the vital issues. "If I may be permitted an editorial aside," blabbers the keynote speaker at a twenty-second century anthropological conference,

allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judge-

ments are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (Applause.) (pp. 314-15)

The entire "Historical Notes" at the end of the novel represents a satire on critics who spin out theories about literary or historical texts without genuinely recognizing or experiencing the pathos expressed in them: they circumvent issues, classify data, construct clever hypotheses garbed in ritualistic, fashionable jargon, but no spirited illumination ever comes out of their endeavours. Atwood soberly demonstrates that when a critic or scholar (and by extension a reader) avoids, under the guise of scholarly objectivity, taking a moral or political stand about an issue of crucial magnitude such as totalitarianism, he or she will necessarily become an apologist for evil; more significantly, the applause the speaker receives gives us a further compelling glimpse into a distant future that still harbours strong misogynous tendencies.

WHILE THE MAJOR DYSTOPIAN FEATURES can clearly be located in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel offers two distinct additional features: feminism and irony. Dramatizing the interrelationship between power and sex, the book's feminism, despite condemning male misogynous mentality, upholds and cherishes a man-woman axis; here, feminism functions inclusively rather than exclusively, poignantly rather than stridently, humanely rather than cynically. The novel's ironic tone, on the other hand, betokens a confident narrative strategy that aims at treating a depressing material gently and gradually, yet firmly, openly, and conclusively, thus skilfully succeeding in securing the reader's sympathy and interest. The novel shows Atwood's strengths both as an engaging story-teller and a creator of a sympathetic heroine, and as an articulate craftswoman of a theme that is both current and controversial. As the novel signifies a landmark in the maturing process of Atwood's creative career, her self-assured depiction of the grim dystopian world gives an energetic and meaningful impetus to the genre.

NOTES

- ¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1978; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 84.
- ² Irving Howe in *1984 Revisited: Totalitarianism in Our Century*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 8.
- ³ Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 242.
- ⁴ Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Mirra Ginsberg (New York: Viking, 1972), p. v.
- ⁵ *Politics and the Novel*, p. 240.

- ⁶ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985), p. 146. All subsequent quotations will be followed parenthetically by the page number in this edition.
- ⁷ *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (1953; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p. xvi.
- ⁸ Lorna Sage, "Projection from a Messy Present," *Times Literary Supplement* 4, no. 329 (21 March 1986), 307.
- ⁹ (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 36.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

SOCRATES AT THE CENTAUR

Irving Layton

I played Socrates at the Centaur
 for the townsfolk one night,
 the local yokels tagging me the 'stage sage'
 and the label stuck. I was the darling
 of Athens' gilded youth, making their heads spin
 with ideas that had their sleek Daddies
 scowling and biting their lower lip. Aristocrats,
 they knew in their bones what was good for them
 and what not, knew thinking was the bane
 of action, its greatest enemy; as it was
 of energy and the Will to Power.
 No ruling class that values its rights
 would have me around for a second.
 I was poison more lethal than hemlock,
 more dangerous to them than one of Sparta's
 uncovered spies. But the conceited fools,
 freshly scented from their baths and letting
 the folds of their togas slip down to display
 their exercised bodies were rivals
 for my interest, my affection. Not for them
 to smell a rat, one already gnawing their vitals.
 I dazzled them with my specious logic,
 had them hanging on to every word I spoke,