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MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE: RESISTANCE THROUGH NARRATING

In the futuristic novel The Handmaid's Tale the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood presents a dystopian vision of a world in which the American neo-conservatives and the New Christian Right or New Puritans of the 1980s have seized power in a totalitarian theocratic republic named after the biblical land of Gilead. Like the New England Puritans of the seventeenth century, the rulers of Gilead establish a theocratic state in the area surrounding the city of Boston, Massachusetts, in the year 2000. The rulers of Gilead return to the Old Testament in a reaction against abortion, sterilization and what they consider to be dangerous kinds of freedom of the modern welfare state.

The ideal which Gilead's 'Sons of Jacob Think Tank' devised is an imitation of the biblical land of Jacob and Laban, where Jacob restored hope and fertility with the help of a few Handmaids. Thus the regime uses Commanders who subject Handmaids to a monthly penetration in order to solve the problem of excessive and deliberate infertility in the past. The protagonist Offred, who is the Handmaid-slave of the Commander Fred and his infertile wife Serena Joy, is supposed to enact the biblical story of Rachel and Bilhah: 'Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her' (Genesis, 30).

Margaret Atwood looks at the patriarchal biblical history from the perspective of its female 'victims'. All the women in Gilead are made to play subsidiary parts, the wives of Commanders included, as well as the elderly infertile women, the Aunts, who save their skins by collaborating and who train the Handmaids in self-suppression.

Gilead's victims can find refuge only in a secret Female Underground Road that leads from New England to Canada. Atwood here alludes to the escape route or the Underground Railroad by means of which the runaway slaves of the American South used to enter British-controlled Canada where slavery had been abolished in 1841. Historically, the underground is also a hiding place in the margin of society from which subversives attempt to disrupt the power of the regime above ground.

In my discussion of The Handmaid's Tale, I am particularly interested in recurring discursive forms, in the manner in which the first-person narrator delivers the story-material, and in the composition of the narrative text. For the investigation of the personal voice of the narrator, I use Roger Fowler's notion of 'mind-style'. Fowler was the first to introduce the concept into literary theory at the end of the 1970s. In Linguistics and the Novel, he defines mind-style as: 'the systems of beliefs, values and categories by reference to which a person
comprehends the world'. In *Linguistic Criticism*, he gives the following definition:

Cumulative ideational structuring depends on regular and consistent linguistic choices which build up a continuous, pervasive, representation of the world. This is the major source of point of view in fiction [...] Discussing this phenomenon in literary fictions, I have called it mind-style: the world view of an author, or a narrator, or a character, constituted by the ideational structure of the text. [...] I shall illustrate ideational structuring involving three different types of linguistic feature: vocabulary, transitivity, and certain syntactic structures.

Mind-style is a formal feature of the narrative text that serves the author's technique of indirect characterization. The study of mind-style combines stylistics and narratology, linguistics and literary theory. Mind-style analysis involves a scrutiny of consistent linguistic choices with which the narrator puts ideas or experience into words. I shall give special consideration to lexical forms and syntactic patterns, but also to the metaphors that convey the first-person narrator's conscious and unconscious mental operations.

I shall focus on two types of discourse used by the narrative voice, the discursive law of the theocracy and the narrator's personal, aesthetic discourse with which she counters the authoritarian speech of Gilead. For the description and interpretation of these types of discourse, I rely on some concepts used by the French semiotician Julia Kristeva. In her theory of literary discourse, Kristeva distinguishes between a codified or dominant discourse and another discourse that transgresses the boundaries of dominant sign systems: 'The poetic word, polyvalent and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture. Bakhtin was the first to study this logic, and he looked for its roots in carnival'. According to Kristeva, poetic discourse escapes the linguistic, psychic and social prohibitions of systematizing discourse. In poetic language, heterogeneity manifests itself, for instance, in non-calculable musical effects. Kristeva emphasizes that poetic discourse renovates language: it breaks through governing laws and ideologies and generates new meanings. It embodies a process between sense and non-sense, or that which does not yet signify, a rupturing of 'normal' communication rules or grammatical rules through rhythm. It is my contention that poetic language has a similar function in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as in Atwood's other novels.

The discussion of the narrator's mind-style is followed by an investigation of verbal forms used by the Cambridge dons in the epilogue to *The Handmaid's Tale*, entitled 'Historical Notes'. I am particularly interested in the historians' ironic repetition of Gileadean discourse. I would like to demonstrate that a critical evaluation of the scholarly discourse underlies the design of the text. The mind-style of the historians is judged or evaluated by the 'implied author'.

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Roger Fowler, among others, defines the implied author as follows: 'the design of a text situates the writer, and thus his reader, in a certain location relative to his represented content — the structure of the text contributes to the definition of its author'.

1. Witnessing the Closed Morality of an Absolutist State

In *The Handmaid's Tale,* Offred retrospectively witnesses her personal victimization as a Handmaid in Gilead's theocracy. The totalitarian regime forces the inhabitants to submit to the power of one (moral) law, one true religion, one language code. Gilead's Newspeak makes all other modes of thought impossible. The new regime legitimizes its own meaning system and demands an unconditional allegiance to it. Where meaning is singular and final, ambiguity of meaning and variety of experience are excluded. People are indoctrinated into so-called traditional values that are expressed in terms of universal truths, maxims or slogans. In a society that functionalizes language to the extreme, the potential polysemy of discourse is replaced by absolutely homogeneous, univocal signs.

Though modernity is judged to have been a threatening force, the rulers highly esteem the values of logocentrism and materialism that typify the capitalist spirit. Everything is coded, measured and regulated to an economic value. All human qualities are instrumentalized, and reduced to quantitative values of exchange. In other words, the new rulers equate the value of something and someone solely with validity, usefulness, functionality, economic profit.

Everything and everyone is substantified. People's identity is supposed to coalesce with the coded concepts and the predicated state by which they are defined. Handmaids are supposed to merely think of themselves 'as seeds' (p. 18), as objects with a procreative function that should save the world from the threat of sterility, as 'two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices' (p. 136). The 'deadly' regime paradoxically aims at creating new life.

The governing discourse of the absolutist state is an artificial, so-called Biblical speech. In the theocracy, a metaphysics of truth reigns that conveys the full presence of meaning in what is said to be the Word of God. The rulers have the power over the use and abuse of language whereas lesser human beings are granted the freedom neither to see nor to speak personally, in their own name. Handmaids, who must neither see, nor be seen as individuals, are therefore freed from self-reflection and self-affirmation. Freedom from too much knowledge and from choice are said to be the privilege of the meek. Mirrors are practically absent, because freedom from self-reflection saves one from the traditional search for identity. The ideal is freedom from the constitution of an identity and from the struggle for self-definition. It is part of Gilead's double-think to disguise as privilege people's mindless, wordless condition.

Handmaids are allowed to see only the flat surfaces of the present, i.e. a wall

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of rules and regulations. The eyes of Handmaids are not allowed to move beyond the prescribed edges. Gilead excludes all agency functions of the colonized individuals: ‘The active, is it a tense?’ (p. 97), Offred wonders. Whereas Offred remembers the 1980s as the time when one could freely communicate and ‘squander’ words, Gilead excludes all exchange of personal speech. In a society where social interaction is excessively mechanized and people are reduced to passive recipients of the law, the constitution of subjectivity through interaction between human beings has become obsolete.

As there is no room for a shifting of boundaries, any aesthetic, creative use of language is necessarily outlawed. A bureaucratic rationality that is completely dehumanized censors all dangerous personal, irrational and emotional elements that escape calculation. The ideal is the absolutely unified individual, whose inner life is gradually stultified and in the end totally and finally conditioned by Gilead’s law. Thus Offred is supposed to be a soulless object: ‘My self is a thing […] a made thing, not something born’ (p. 66), she says. She feels she is no-body in particular, a depersonalized ‘it’. Gilead’s logic mutes the flesh and numbs the blood. It mortifies the site of unconscious, ‘irrational’ feelings and desires; the site of heterogeneous elements. Offred says: ‘That is how I feel: white, flat, thin. I feel transparent’ (p. 85) or ‘I too am disembodied’ (p. 104).

The indoctrination sessions supervised by Aunts aim at excluding nostalgia for the past or a yearning for the future. Memories of the past, together with personal desires, are supposed to fade away. Whatever unconscious irrational or emotional forces may remain, in the form of aggression and frustration against the regime, they are drained off, or are guided into collective ritual events. Rituals, ceremonies or clock time dominate in the theocracy to keep the oppressed away from social disruption.

In Gilead, hands and feet are pronounced non-essential tools: ‘Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential’ (p. 91); ‘I feel as if somebody cut off my feet’, says Offred (p. 178). With gloved, folded hands and encased feet, the Handmaid’s body signals its dismembered condition. In the theocracy, the heart is supposed to be no more than a mechanical clock that counts time. The metaphor of cancelled hearts, hands and feet connotes uprootedness, or a soulless existence.

Ironically, the biblical land of ‘healing balm’ (Jeremiah, 8: 22), appears in the new context as a waste land, a desolate area, whose inhabitants are spiritually and emotionally deadened. It is an ‘unreal’ place that resembles an infernal circle, a labyrinth without exit, the trails are dead-ends. Natural colours are ‘a sickly yellow’ (p. 82), white, grey, dim or fading. With nature put to sleep, the womb of the earth is a tomb, or a place where absolute stillness reigns. The lifeless heart or centre of Gilead is a metaphor for the numbed hearts or souls of its inhabitants. The air communicates the reign of violent suppression, inertia, boredom, total stagnation, infertility. In this context, the instrumentalized wombs of Handmaids mainly produce stillbirths.

2. A Tale of Silenced Voices
Offred’s place of narration is an Underground Female Road that is associated
with images of ‘the dark realm within’ (p. 295), ‘some other place’ (p. 268), a ‘cellar’ (p. 303), an ‘attic hiding place’ (p. 311), an ‘obscure matrix’ (p. 311). Metaphorically, the underground is the space in the margin of law and order from which the creative artist ideally expresses her own voice. The dark subterranean realm from which Offred witnesses events of the past is penetrated by light. The image of light associates the tale with the imaginative activity of the mind. ‘I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light’, (p. 295) says the retrospective narrator, who remembers the moment before she found a refuge in the ‘Underground Female Road’.

By bringing into prominence a Handmaid’s personal, aesthetic discourse spoken in the margin of a fundamentalist regime, the eye-witness account is both a report of and a challenge of the meaning system established by the rulers of the theocracy. Offred’s tale is the personal expression of insights that move beyond the historical facts of Gilead, beyond the frontiers of Gilead’s meaning system and, finally, beyond the identity of Handmaid-slave that the colonizing power imposed on her.

From the point of view of Gilead, personal discourse is disallowed, because it is considered too dangerous. However, among the colonized individuals, the total suppression of personal desire and personal speech causes an irrepressible yearning for gratification. In the margin of society, Offred articulates her muted insights and sacrificed feelings, and she evokes absent objects and meanings. Her individual speech produces a profusion of words and desires that are not allowed. Offred crosses the boundaries of accepted meaning by giving voice to an alternative perspective and an alternative discourse that continuously cut through the rigid logocentric texture of the superstructure.

By giving expression to her inner feelings and bodily sensations from her situation on the periphery of society, Offred breaks through the discursive Law of the theocracy. Gilead censors the threatening force of creative self-expression. Yet Offred defies the strict rules of authoritative discourse by giving life to a silenced discourse. She revives the capacity for individual spiritual and emotional life. In the margin, she speaks in her own name, the name that she was supposed to forget once and for all: ‘I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried’ (p. 84). In Gilead, Offred used to silently repeat her hidden name (June) to maintain her existence: ‘I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me’ (p. 97). By recalling her former name, June regenerates her creative energy. She is the grammatical subject and narrative agent of the tale, whereas Gilead reduced her position to that of (grammatical) object and patient.

In Gilead, where Offred is forced to lead a paralysed existence, she suffers from an almost uncontrollable physical desire to take in the smell of organic life — of earth, flowers and warm wet grass — that silently breaks through the hardened surface. She desires to feel alive and become united with the buried voice or life-cycle of the earth, in defiance of the power which the regime exercises over her. The narrator-witness reconstructs the will of the protagonist to survive, to liberate herself from the trap of ‘here and now’.

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The protagonist yearns spiritually and emotionally for a crossing of spatio-temporal boundaries. Offred wants to absorb the smell of objects that bring back to mind the context of the past. The connection with these memories, though it is a painful recollection, is necessary to her survival. She longs to move down, into and through the linear subdivisions on the surface of the petrified city. She desires to give expression to repressed corporeal and affective processes by opening up her hands and feel the blood flow again through the cancelled hands, feet and heart. She gives voice to a want, to a personal desire for touch and for being touched. Against the reign of economic exchange value between commercially valid objects, she posits a desire to create a contiguous, free-flowing relationship with the elements and with other human beings. Remembering what she felt while standing close to the Commander's servant Nick, she says: ‘Whether it is or not we are touching, two shapes of leather. I feel my shoe soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin’ (p. 81).

The loving gestures contradict the reign of folded, gloved, coldly artificial hands. Offred wishes to regenerate subjectivity and undo frozen dichotomies in the object world. She wishes to resuscitate the life of the soul or the heart. She relates spatially and semantically polarized animate and inanimate objects in both/and relationships. From her own world of desire and in her own voice, everything becomes animated: ‘Even the bricks of the house are softening, becoming tactile; if I leaned against them they’d be warm and yielding. It’s amazing what denial can do’ (pp. 153/4).

With her outstretched bare open hands, Offred communicates with the hidden organic, biological rhythm of nature that resurrects concealed corporeal and affective processes. She revives the exchange with ex-centric space in opposition to the sheer exchange between consumer objects in the centralized regime. Adverbials ‘in’, ‘into’, ‘across’, ‘out’, ‘up’ and ‘through’ point to the crossing of limits. The desire for warmth, fluidity, light and life ruptures the reign of cold, dead abstraction and violence.

The absolutist regime wants to abolish the past. Yet Offred re-enacts the past in the present. Her memory of the past brings back to life the excluded pole in Gilead, such as the existence of love and humanity. Offred’s act of retracing the lost connection with her roots in the process of life is a desire to escape from the trap of paralysis and defeatism. It is an act of survival that saves her from despair and that resurrects the missing part of herself. ‘I want to be with someone’ (p. 104), says Offred, who desires to be ‘someone’ who calls ‘someone’ into existence where subjectivity is pronounced obsolete. By activating her silenced inner body, she asserts her will to be visible.

The singularity of Offred’s speech frees words from Gilead’s communicative

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6 In her writings, Margaret Atwood consistently distinguishes between an ‘outer’ and an ‘inner’ body. The outer body is the disciplined surface that is submitted to societal constraints, and it is one’s reified image in the eyes of the other. The inner body is the space of feelings and sensations that is disruptive of the disciplined surface. It is also an image for the unstructured and pre-symbolic, pre-reflexive realm or in Julia Kristeva’s terms, the fluid ‘semiotic’ body.
constraints of language, from denotative speech and from the sign as merely an element of commercial transaction. The narrator’s poetic discourse resists the reduction of reality to coded concepts and of individuals to reified objects. In a society that censors aesthetic speech, Offred’s poetic discourse reactivates the lost potential of language and the conditions for the production of meaning. She revitalizes an otherwise extinct language and inner life, deadened by the supremacy of codes. She resists Gilead’s transparent, quantifiable products of meaning by creating heterogeneity.

Traces of unconscious processes are visible in the narrator’s free flow of similes. She describes the posture of the Handmaid Ofglen as follows: ‘Without a word she swivels, as if she’s voice-activated, as if she’s on little oiled wheels, as if she’s on top of a music box. I resent this grace of hers. I resent her meek head, bowed as if into a heavy wind’ (p. 43). Consider also Offred’s description of the dead bodies of ‘subversives’ that hang on the wall surrounding Gilead: ‘The three bodies hang there, even with the white sacks over their heads looking curiously stretched, like chickens strung up by the necks in a meatshop window; like birds with their wings clipped, like flightless birds, wrecked angels’ (p. 277). Whereas the theocracy wants the gap between the word and its meaning to be filled, and the relationship paralysed, Offred compulsively opens up the gap by using an exuberant flow of similes.

Offred creates a contiguity between spatio-temporally and semantically discontinuous objects by an abundant use of metonymical speech and synaesthesia, as in: ‘my hands; they fill with flowers of light’ (p. 49); ‘Time as white sound’ (p. 69); ‘a thin sound like the hum of an insect; then nearing, opening out, like a flower of sound opening, into a trumpet’ (p. 111). Compare also: ‘Aunt Lydia pressed her hand over her mouth of a dead rodent’ (p. 55) and ‘[Janine’s] transparent voice, her voice of raw egg white’ (p. 129). The rhythmic features of her mind-style appear not only in semantic, but also in phonetic associations, as in: ‘Sun comes through the fanlight, falling in colors across the floor: red and blue, purple. I step into it briefly, stretch out my hands; they fill with flowers of light’ (p. 49).

Offred sets against the impersonal, denotative scrabble game that she is made to play with the Commander, a personal connotative discourse that ideally unites the word and the flesh, that attempts to bridge the gap between language and feelings: ‘I feel like the word shatter’ (p. 103); ‘the [bullet] hole […] the one flash, of darkness or pain, dull I hope, like the word thud, only the one and then silence’ (p. 104).

Offred connects the concrete and the abstract; remembered objects, impressions and sensations of the past (censored events) and events in the present; the visible (the ‘true’ and ‘real’) and the invisible (declared ‘unreal’ and ‘irrational’); conscious and unconscious events. She awakens a sense of things that she has never experienced before. The narrator opens tunnels inside herself that lead towards the unrecorded. As a protagonist, the danger of silently creating relations that are based on fantasy fills her with both pleasure and pain: ‘In a minute the wreath will start to color and I will begin seeing things […] things at the sides of your eyes: purple animals, in the bushes beside the road, the vague outlines
of men, which would disappear when you looked at them straight' (pp. 128/9).

Whereas Aunt Lydia warns the handmaids against the word Love: 'Don't let me catch you at it. No mooning and June-ing around here, girls' (p. 220), June offers an alternative to the mechanized petrification by calling back to mind the power of ancient fertility (moon) goddesses. Offred remembers there once were primitive matriarchal societies that conceived of a goddess as the main element in the formation of the universe. The power of the Great Goddess, the Virgin-Mother who is renewed every month as moon-goddess, or once a year as earth-goddess, fills her with hope for renewal of life. The gift of creative life force which the Goddess offers counteracts the reduction of fertility to a functiona-
ized procreative act. Thus Offred awakens an ancestral memory, a traditional world of culture and value. The Great Goddess is a recurring metaphor in Atwood's novels. She is the origin of life that can be reached only through death. The ancestral mother or Nature Goddess manifests herself in the novels as both a tomb and a womb. Through re-established contact with the Goddess, the protagonist retrieves the willpower to receive and to give new life.

Offred wants to make the 'unreal,' the 'irrational' and invisible happen, and make real fantasies of restored contact with the Great Goddess and creative energy. We read 'in the obscured sky a moon does float, newly, a wishing moon, a sliver of ancient rock, a goddess, a wink' (p. 97) and 'at the edges of my eyes there are movements, in the branches; feathers, flittings, grace notes, tree into bird, metamorphosis run wild. Goddesses are possible now and the air suffuses with desire' (p. 153). Above ground, the air communicates a smell that emerges from the womb of the earth, from the dark matrix that hides the power of the (moon) Goddess of fecundity. Sensations of warmth and life force (water) fill the air, because they know no boundaries: 'It's started to rain, a drizzle, and the gravid smell of earth and grass fills the air' (p. 111).

Offred, who creates an outpouring of words, the rhythm of which is a symptom of her oppressed inner life, notices how, in a similar vein, suppressed but inviolable natural space symptomatically disrupts the logocentric superstructure. From Offred's point of view, the garden of the Commander's wife Serena Joy communicates the invincible power of buried life energy. Offred says: 'There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently' (p. 153). She associates breaks in the social structure with symptoms of silent rebellion of the oppressed.

The narrator recurrently uses the image of an egg, an object that seems to be no more than white and granular on the outside. The egg is an image for the barren surface of Gilead and for the condition of the protagonist's outer body, both of which are 'defined by the sunlight' (p. 110) or by the logocentrism of the rulers. Yet the egg glows red from the inside. Underground, a red, hot pulsing process of life is hidden. Red is the colour of organic, free-flowing blood that reveals the existence of life energy: 'the life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside', Offred says (p. 110).

Against the prescribed mono-tone voice, the narrator creates a personal, multivocal tale: 'this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story'
A range of feelings and responses calls into existence a vulnerable, breathing subject. The voice shifts from hatred to resentment, despair, outrage, mockery, from nostalgia for the past to compassion for fellow-victims. Sometimes, Offred gives voice to hope and belief in new life: ‘It’s this message, which may never arrive, that keeps me alive. I believe in the message’ (p. 106); ‘Out there or inside my head, it’s an equal darkness. Or light’ (p. 194). Spiritual and emotional revival resides in hope for change and belief in love and vitality that will defeat the reign of stasis: ‘hope is rising in me, like sap in a tree. Blood in a wound. We have made an opening’ (p. 169). Offred moves back through layers of history, opens the wounds and retraces the loss. Pain is still possible because of memory, and memory is what the narrator tries to keep alive. The destruction of memory, which Gilead aims at, involves a numbing of the site of personal desire and creative energy.

Offred’s tale moves, emotionally, as well as rhythmically, in contrast with the deathly stillness that reigns above ground. In The Handmaid's Tale, the most striking traces of what Kristeva calls the ‘semiotic’ are rhythm and sound in poetic discourse. The rhythm of the text is symptomatic of traumatic events, and of excluded experiences. The Handmaid's Tale transforms or shifts the boundaries of the conventional dystopic genre. This defamiliarization of the traditional dystopia is an effect of the narrator’s inner journey that results in the subject’s creation of an alternative word and world to the everyday object world. Though the personal voice and perception (mind-style) of a female protagonist are at the centre of the tale, the language spoken from within the margin is not necessarily ‘a woman’s language’, but the discourse of a socially marginalized individual.

3. The Historical Notes: Irony in Retrospect

On the twenty-fifth of June in the year 2195, academics organize a Symposium about the history of Gilead at the University of Denay, Nunavit. The names ‘Denay’ and ‘Nunavit’ allude to the first Canadians, the native Eskimos and Indians, victims of a politics of colonization. The Indians prefer to be called ‘Dene’ and the Eskimos ‘Inuit’. Both words mean ‘the people’. ‘Nunavut’, the Northwest Territories (between Alaska and Greenland) is land claimed by the Eskimos in Canada. Yet Atwood alludes to the Canadian government which even today opposes the demands for autonomy. It also allows the territory of the Innu, who are a nomadic people, to be invaded by military exercises with airplanes that threaten animals and human beings by flying at low level (100 ft. only). The words ‘Denay’ and ‘Nunavit’ may also be Atwood’s pun on ‘deny none of it’, which both applies to the victimization of the native Eskimos and Indians and to the colonization of the inhabitants of Gilead.

At the Symposium, two Cambridge dons, Professor Wade and Professor Pieixoto, are proud of having discovered some thirty fragments of a tale which they have subsequently transcribed. They have entitled the anonymous narrative The Handmaid’s Tale. Offred’s tale turns out to be an oral account and taped narrative that was excavated after having remained buried for about a century.
A spoken text is transcribed, which implies that the tonal voice is deleted (a voice that adds meaning to discourse) and the discourse further hardened. The hardening further removes the meaning of the speaker from the meaning of her discourse. Even though in the taped text Offred insists that neither the truth nor the exact context of her experience can be retraced, let alone pinpointed, the historians attempt to reconstruct the reality about Gilead. Whereas the tale claims neither to be a factual document, nor simply a report and eye-witness account, the historians nevertheless try to figure out what really happened. The joint paper of the scientists, ‘Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid’s Tale’, indicates they are in search of closed interpretations. The narrator, however, repeatedly emphasizes that her tale is a reconstruction, an invention which necessarily involves the loss of the original story. At times, Offred explicitly states that she attempts to remember stories that went on inside her head while she was living above ground. The tale can never be an authentic account of lived experience or a mimetic representation of reality.

Offred asserts that the act of telling covers up the horror of reality, because lived experience is unnameable and irretrievable. Yet positivism pushes to the margins of experience what it cannot explain and control: the irrational and emotional elements that emerge from an ‘obscure matrix’ (p. 311). The self-satisfied Pieixoto and Wade trivialize the expressions of pain to ‘a whiff of emotion’ (p. 303). They exclude from their horizon of perception the act of telling as a re-articulation of reality, as an effort to give expression to inner sensations, or hope and faith in change. They aim at a reconstruction of the historical facts of a patriarchal history. They express more concern for the historical author of the tale and for the position assigned to her above ground, rather than for the unique narrating voice of ‘someone’ who speaks from within the periphery, and who draws strength from her marginalized position.

Proud of their own ‘Enlightened days’, the academics announce the return to, or the continuation of, a supreme rationalism that typifies Gilead. The connection between the mind-style of the narrator and the context is utterly misunderstood by the academics in their own context. They fail to consider the narrator as generator of meaning in their search for ‘objective’ truth. By endowing the non-measurable aspects of the narrative with a sheer decorative value, the academics merely create another subjectivity in relation to the same history. By ignoring the narrator’s attempt to witness to the unspeakable horror, the academics also negate the work of art as a moral instrument. June, who wants her own voice to be heard and her inner life to be visible, is muted once again. In her relationship to the future listeners, the story-teller has failed to be rehabilitated as ‘someone’ who speaks to ‘someone’, for the male researchers turn a deaf ear to her personal voice. Offred fails to achieve her wished-for creative interaction between the ‘I’ who speaks and the ‘you’ who responds, as in: ‘By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there, I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are’ (p. 268). In the academic world, ‘June’ means nothing more than the month during which the Symposium takes place.

The mind-style with which the academics approach Offred’s narrative is char-
acterized by sheer logical reasoning. The scholars attempt to track down clues, proof, evidence that should lead to definitive knowledge about the original identity of the narrator; of the Commander (Waterford?); the place of narration; the original meaning of the tale and the whole context of Gilead. They are interested in as many measurable facts as possible. They are concerned with deciphering the tale precisely ‘in the clearer light of our own day’ (p. 311). This statement recalls the supremacy of ‘the defining sunlight’ (p. 110) or logocentrism in Gilead that fixes the position of everyone and everything. It is no accident then that the Commander Fred calls himself ‘a sort of scientist’ (p. 185). The academics investigate the tale so as to establish its stable meaning and to pinpoint cause and effect relationships: ‘Supposing, then, the tapes to be genuine [...] If we could establish an identity for the narrator [...] to identify the inhabitants [...] to trace and locate the descendants [...] this trail led nowhere [...] we pursued a second line of attack’ (p. 303); ‘whatever the causes, the effects were noticeable [...] her original name [...] Offred gives no clue’ (p. 305).

‘Many gaps remain’, (p. 310) says Pieixoto, who would love to see the gaps between the words and lived experience filled and the narrative ended. He would like to undo the ambiguities and indeterminacies and establish an original, transparent meaning instead. He ignores the narrator who emphasizes the necessity to maintain the gaps between the words and reality, and to be well aware of the existence of unrecorded experience.

The desire of the scholars for univocal, transparent meaning ironically mirrors the authoritative word of Gilead. The logocentric, categorizing mental structures or speech types are analogous to the logocentrism that underlies the tyranny of the Gilead regime. The desire for a metaphysics of truth is equivalent to Gilead’s dogmatism and its illusions of stable, given meaning. The academic scientists similarly exclude polyvalence and ambiguity in favour of essential meaning.

In the manner of Gilead, the scientists push into the margin the subject’s creative individual utterances, the connotative speech of the (female) subject. They (consciously) overlook the narrator’s self-expression and self-affirmation, the rhythmic pulsations, intuitions, the creative power that underlies her poetic speech. Even though the researchers compare Offred to Eurydice, the Creation-death goddess whose voice emerges from a far distance, Eurydice escapes as soon as they try to ‘grasp’ her, that is, understand and control her by looking at her from their own rational perspective. Her voice remains enigmatic and returns to the womb of the earth, where it lies buried. The personal voice is lost to those who do not wish to acknowledge its existence, or who fear to listen. They simply neglect the tale as a work of art, namely Offred’s restructuring of the order of language and her re-visioning of reality. As a result, the historical listener radically fails to coincide with the implied, ideal listener.

The scholars ignore Offred’s conscious effort to call the lost, loved ones back into existence. They do not try to comprehend the articulation of her inner world as a deliberate attempt at survival. Instead, they approach the text in a utilitarian way. From their perspective, more historical data and exhaustive material facts about Gilead would have made the tale a commercially interesting
exchange object. Because the document does not provide the complete picture of Gilead, and has too many 'obscure' passages, it fails as a commodity. The restitution of the whole context and of the meaning of the theocratic model would have been more valuable than the evanescent personal utterances, the woman's expression of hidden feelings and desires that is a wasted effort in economic terms: 'What would we not give, now, for twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's private computer! However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us' (p. 310).

The nightmare that underlies the Symposium has to do with the negation of Offred's tale as a timeless account, for the scholars trivialize the horror of which she speaks by simply regarding it as a moment in history, rather than comprehending it as a warning against the reification of a mental construct that may return at any time in history, in any form. Furthermore, the academics marginalize the narrator's personal mind-style, especially the pain, the hope and the belief in new life, the alternative world and word. Consequently, the novel affirms the survival of darkness, though the age is said to be enlightened. Darkness survives as well in the refusal of male intellectuals, of those who establish a literary canon, to acknowledge the value of a woman's perspective on patriarchal history.

I hope to have shown that mind-style analysis throws an interesting light on the complex psychological and ideological stance of Atwood's protagonists. In addition, readers of Atwood's novels need to pay careful attention to the ironic mirroring of discursive forms, as it is a typical formal feature of her novelistic practice. In her fiction, Atwood uses this technique to critically evaluate or judge a particular perception of reality. The evaluation underlies the compositional structure of the narrative text. It is up to the reader to disclose the design of the text as the hidden signifier.

Some readers apparently fail to do so. In her review of The Handmaid's Tale, the American author Mary McCarthy attacks Atwood for her failure to create a 'true' dystopia: 'the most conspicuous lack, in comparison with the classics of the fearsome-future genre, is the inability to imagine a language to match the changed face of common life. No newspeak. [...] This is a serious defect, unpardonable maybe for the genre: a future that has no language invented for it lacks a personality. That must be why, collectively, it is powerless to scare'.

I consider such criticism to be unjust, for the literal application of biblical texts, the anachronistic use of scriptural phrases, and other such devices that aim at making other modes of thought impossible, are functionally analogous to Orwell's Newspeak. Moreover, not only is it highly questionable that

7 Arnold E. Davidson rightly speaks of the epilogue as the 'most pessimistic part of the book. Even with the lesson of Gilead readily at hand, the intellectuals of 2195 seem to be preparing the way for Gilead again'. In 'Future Tense: Making History in The Handmaid's Tale' in Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms, eds. Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale, 1989), p. 120.


Newspeak is a necessary ingredient of the dystopic genre, but McCarthy's criticism of Atwood's novel also seems to stem from the reviewer's neglect of the context or ex-centric spatial position from which the tale is narrated. It is my contention that by 'designing' the text in such a manner, Atwood precisely aims at shifting the boundaries of the conventional dystopic genre.*

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