frontières : le courant du postmodernisme. Cet ouvrage bilingue (un peu plus de la moitié des articles sont en anglais) analyse *Handmaid* sous différents éclairages. Il est organisé en cinq parties. La première partie intitulée « Dystopie : genre et subversion » explore le genre de l'utopie/dystopie, établit des comparaisons avec d'autres œuvres du genre (Lynette Hunter est notamment spécialiste de George Orwell), et tente de démontrer comment Atwood subvertit le code. L'article de Jagna Oltarzewska qui clôt cette partie synthétise avec clarté les traits structurels des œuvres uto/dystopiques, et ouvre ensuite le débat vers des questions de langue et de stratégie textuelle. La deuxième partie est intitulée « Idéologie/Pouvoir ». L'article de Marie Buschini qui l'ouvre s'intéresse notamment aux mécanismes du fonctionnement du pouvoir, et démontre comment l'idéologie passe par le discours et la rhétorique. La troisième partie : « Corps/Frontières/Territoires », démontre comment le corps féminin est au cœur des enjeux du pouvoir, et explore les rapports entre corps, identité, délimitations, transformations et transgression. Ensuite la quatrième partie : « Ironie/Satire » aborde la dimension qui caractérise l'écriture d'Atwood, l'ironie fine et tranchante à multiples détentes. Enfin, la cinquième et dernière partie, intitulée « Stratégies narratives et discursives » commence par l'article de Sharon Wilson qui synthétise avec une grande clarté les traits caractéristiques du mouvement postmoderne et qui démontre comment l'œuvre d'Atwood s'insère dans ce courant. Taïna Tuhkunen-Couzic, quant à elle, centre son article sur le jeu de Scrabble, révélateur de la stratégie textuelle du roman et des réseaux dynamiques qui s'y entre-croisent.

1re partie
Dystopie : genre et subversion

Dislocations in Dystopia

Coral Ann Howells

> Here comes the future, rolling towards us like a meteorite, a satellite, a giant iron snowball, a two-ton truck in the wrong lane, careering downhill with broken brakes, and whose fault is it? No time to think about that. Blink and it's here[1].

This scenario of smash-up may serve as emblem for a discussion of varieties of dislocation in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's warning against such a future while it is still emerging and not yet inevitable. It is precisely with the intent of avoiding disaster that Atwood has constructed her dystopian vision of Gilead, urging her Canadian and international readership to pay attention to the possible consequences of trends in late twentieth century Western society, while there is still time to make choices. Within the novel Offred reiterates this warning: "Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it" (66), or as she says elsewhere, things "never come flying out of the blue" (145). Atwood's millennial vision of a North American nightmare where democratic institutions are replaced by a fundamentalist tyranny and where the environment is so dangerously polluted that human survival is threatened represents her anxious version of "What If" in the most powerful democracy in the world. Atwood explained her choice of location when the novel was published: "The States are more extreme in everything" (*Conversations*, 223). Processes of social disintegration culminating in the Gileadean takeover are sketched in *The Handmaid's Tale*, though this public history is not the one I wish to tell here. Instead I shall discuss textual dislocations connected with the topic of genre and gender.

What happens to the history of Gilead when it is told by one of its Handmaids, as Offred transforms "history" into "herstory"? This essay will discuss four different but interrelated varieties of dislocation in Atwood's text: (a) dislocations within the dystopian genre, where comparison will be made with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; (b) spatial and temporal dislocations in Offred's autobiographical narrative, which are of course related to the (c) dislocations in her own life. Her narrative is a reconstruction of her changing social environments and it is also her means of psychological survival. In the process of rehabilitating herself as an individual, Offred becomes the most important historian of Gilead in a narrative which manages to challenge even if it does not dislodge the patriarchal rhetoric of the state[2]. (d) Finally, with the "Historical Notes," comes a radical dislo-

1. Margaret Atwood, "Hardball", in *Good Bones*, London: Virago, 1993, p. 93.
2. There are evidently other spatial dimensions to be explored in *The Handmaid's Tale*, particularly relating to the female body and landscape. However, Offred's body seems to me to

cation in the narrative framework with a second futuristic scenario, set not in the United States but in Arctic Canada two hundred years after Gilead has fallen. The political implications of this shift may be read as feminist, ecological, nationalist and global.

Dystopian Genre Dislocations

We might interpret *The Handmaid's Tale* as a woman's "little narrative" which challenges the "grand narratives" of patriarchy and imperialism, highlighting the importance of storytelling as an act of resistance against monolithic fictions of absolute authority, thereby making a particular kind of political statement. What does Atwood mean by "political"? "What we mean is how people relate to a power structure and vice versa" (*Conversations*, 185). Offred's storytelling is her private act of resistance against the tyranny of Gilead which condemns Handmaids not only to sexual slavery but also to silence, while the form which her story takes represents Atwood's attempt to free herself from the constraints of a male dominated fictional genre like the dystopia. In an interview following the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood made this comment about generic forms in literature:

> You have to understand what the form is doing, how it works, before you say, "Now we're going to make it different, we're going to do this thing which is unusual, we're going to turn it upside down, we're going to move it so it includes something which isn't supposed to be there, we're going to surprise the reader.
>
> (*Conversations*, 193)

This reads like a description of Atwood's project in *The Handmaid's Tale* which, published in 1985, might be read as a revisioning of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Atwood deliberately leaves the time of her dystopia indeterminate, though Lee Thompson cites a manuscript note which records Offred's birth date as 1978, which would place her eye-witness account of Gilead in 2011 (Thompson 36). Certainly these two dystopian texts share common generic features: they both offer warnings against totalitarianism in the not too distant future through the stories of isolated dissidents; they record with documentary detail the ways in which any oppressive military regime tries to control not only the lives but also the minds of its citizens. There are similar efforts to silence opposition at any price, and both novels warn against the dangers of propaganda, news censorship, and the abuses of officialese. (Orwell's Newspeak is paralleled in Gilead's domineering biblico-capitalist rhetoric.) There the close similarities end. This is not simply the result of different specific historical contexts, with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* published in the bleak early Cold War period of the late 1940s in London and *The Handmaid's Tale* published as a critique of mid 1980s North America with global warnings for the late twentieth century. It is also the result of Atwood's choice to surprise the reader by including "something

be a location or site for the speaking subject rather than an appropriate example for my topic of dislocation.

which isn't supposed to be there," and that "something" is her adoption of a feminine perspective through writing her dystopia as a woman's fictive autobiography.

Whereas Orwell's protagonist Winston Smith worked at the Ministry of Truth and was engaged in the official rewriting of history as part of the Party propaganda machine, Offred is confined to the domestic spaces of the home and relegated to the margins of a political structure which has use only for her reproductive capacity and denies Handmaids their freedom to read and write or to speak in public. This contrast between the protagonists' situations makes for different textual emphases, with Winston living in a nightmarish London of monumental buildings, giant telescreens and posters declaring "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU," and having an almost peripheral home life in a miserable bachelor apartment. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the reverse is the case, for Offred is virtually confined to the home of her Commander and her ability to see what is going on around her when she goes out in the streets is severely restricted by the white wings of her Handmaid's headgear. Traditional gender distinctions between public and private are there in the subject matter as well, with Orwell's developed account of the governmental and legal structures of his dystopia supplemented by a long discussion of its political philosophy in the forbidden Black Book which Winston reads. On the other hand, Offred is politically ignorant about Gilead and even about her own Commander's role: "I don't know what he's a Commander of" (195). When she tells him that she would like to know what's going on, his response expresses his patronising contempt for her intellect, for he takes her for a night out to Jezebel's: "You said you wanted to know." In many ways *The Handmaid's Tale* is closer to what Winston's lover Julia's account of Oceania might have been, for she too is not interested in party doctrine or political philosophy, and the two women have the same sceptical attitude towards propaganda and the absolute power of the state. Offred is always on the lookout for "tiny peepholes" or moments of dislocation in the system, and Julia says that she would prefer to break the rules and stay alive rather than to make any heroic gesture of revolt. For both of them private loyalties take priority over ideology, and they both speak out against state regulation of human desires for intimacy and love. When Winston is catechised by O'Brien (who wrongly assumes that Winston could speak for Julia as well), it is she who courageously answers while Winston remains mutely ambivalent:

> "You are prepared, the two of you, to separate and never see one another again?"
> "No!" broke in Julia. (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 180)

This is paralleled in Offred's remark to her Commander that Gilead's policies of social engineering have left out one crucial factor:

> Love, I said.
> Love? said the Commander. What kind of love?
> Falling in love, I said. (231-232)

It is this traditionally feminine voice of resistance which differentiates Offred from Winston, though she is not quite like Julia either, for Offred has far more intelligence and psychological complexity. Unlike both Winston

On her first shopping expedition Offred walks through defamiliarised territory where suburban streets have been converted into a war zone or a police state with checkpoints and barriers manned by Guardians with guns, but once through these and into the familiar topography of city streets, Offred walks through a landscape of memory: "I'm remembering my feet on these sidewalks, in the time before, and what I used to wear on them. Sometimes it was shoes for running, with cushioned soles and breathing holes" (34). Remembering herself as a child, then as a young independent woman with control over her body and her life, she is continually engaged in looking through the "now" back to "then" and making implicit comparisons:

> Lilies used to be a movie theatre, before. Students went there a lot: every spring they had a Humphrey Bogart festival, with Lauren Bacall or Katherine Hepburn, women on their own, making up their minds. (35)

The whole urban geography of Cambridge is reconstructed in Offred's head, even those places down by the river or in the subway where as a Handmaid she is not allowed to go. For Offred everything bears witness to the recent past, and even the hanged male bodies on the Wall appear to her not as objects of fear and disgust but as mute messengers or time travellers: "They've come here from the past" (43). Yet such double vision is not simply nostalgia; it is an effort of will to stay sane as Offred attempts to remember and to revalidate what the regime has been trying to suppress: "I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind" (43).

The combination of closeup and flashback which distinguishes Offred's perceptions yields some surprising revelations as she peers beneath the surface of Gilead into its hidden subtexts. Her X-ray vision sees through the face of her new Commander's Wife so that she is able to read that woman's past history: "I knew where I'd seen her before" (26). That Wife was formerly Serena Joy, a child star on a television gospel show who later became a media personality speaking out for extreme right wing domestic policies. Contemplating her now, Offred makes one of her wittiest and most malicious criticisms of that arch-conservative ideology of femininity:

> She doesn't make speeches any more [...] She stays in her home, and it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word. (56)

Indeed all the women in Gilead as survivors of the time before have their individual histories, and Offred's insistence on telling the stories of many of these silenced women challenges Gilead's claim to absolute mastery by dislocating patriarchal myths about "Woman" and female submission. From a wider historical perspective such dislocations challenge the *Old Testament* dismissal of the Handmaids of the Patriarchs, as Offred writes on behalf of women then and now who have been denied any rights of representation.

Offred's Night Travels

So far I have been discussing momentary dislocations, but Offred has also developed a more deliberate escape strategy in which she repeatedly indulges at night in the privacy of her room:

> The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will [...]
> I lie, then, inside the room [...] and step sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it.
> But the night is my time out. Where should I go? (47)

Offred has managed to transform her room into an escape route out into the spaces of memory and imagination. Here as time traveller, she revisits her past life which is inhabited by her lost family and friends—her best friend Moira from college days, her feisty feminist mother who was a Women's Libber from the 1970s and early 80s, and most crucially her small daughter and her husband Luke, both of them lost to her on the family's failed escape attempt to Canada. Through such remembering Offred establishes her subjective positioning from where she tells her narrative of resistance and hope for the future:

> I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. (49)

On such journeys, Offred's narrative jumps abruptly from one scenario to another with gaps in between, though through all these shifts Offred does not become a dislocated subject herself. She remains self-centred and always hopeful, as she tells her inner-space travel narrative:

> I know where I am, and who, and what day it is. These are the tests, and I am sane. Sanity is a valuable possession [...] I save it, so I will have enough, when the time comes. (119)

It is not possible to separate spatial from temporal dislocations here, for Offred's language blurs boundaries between the two dimensions in subjective experience. The "time before" and "elsewhere" become synonymous: "What they have in common is that they're not here" (279).

Forbidden Places

There are, however, several locational shifts which mark Offred's transgressions within the real world of Gilead. She does leave her room, not only for her customary shopping trips or on Handmaids' excursions to Birth Days or Salvagings, but also for unofficial reasons. She visits four forbidden places: Serena Joy's sitting room in order to "steal something"; she visits her Commander's study after hours; she goes to Jezebel's on her night out with the Commander; and she goes frequently to her lover's room across the garden above the garage: "I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own, without Serena knowing. It wasn't called for, there was no excuse. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely" (280). These visits are all made under cover of night and all of them are fraught with peril. If discovered, she could be sent to the Colonies as an Unwoman, or she could be shot. These are Offred's acts of defiance where briefly she sheds layers of her social

and Julia, who have never known what it is to live differently from their present condition, Offred is always remembering her own past life, so that where Winston experiences a vague sense of the lack of a past, Offred is keenly aware of her sense of loss. She is like a woman in exile who is trying to reconstruct her dislocated life in a present which is foreign to her. As she says:

> You'll have to forgive me. I'm a refugee from the past, and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I've left or been forced to leave behind me, and it all seems just as quaint, from here, and I am just as obsessive about it. (239)

Nineteen Eighty-Four is a grubbier, more miserable and despairing novel than *The Handmaid's Tale*, partly because of differences in scenario and main protagonists, and partly because of differences in plot. In *The Handmaid's Tale* there are small betrayals, but none of the monstrous duplicities of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; in the latter there is no escape for Winston and Julia, and the Party does succeed in its project of brainwashing Winston, who comes to love Big Brother in the end. Offred on the other hand is not reduced to a state of abjection and for her there is the possibility of escape.

Another determining difference is that Oceania is a longer-established and better organised system of oppression than anything yet devised in Gilead. Gilead is a new social experiment, a society in transition which is characterised by instability and a kind of evangelical militancy. The very name "Gilead" means "heap of stones" in Hebrew, and as a frontier territory in the vanguard of a new world order it projects the ideal image for an embattled state run on fundamentalist religious and patriarchal principles (see *Genesis* 31:21 and 37:25). All its adult inhabitants are survivors from the time before whose lives have been dislocated from the mores of late twentieth century American permissive society to a Christian fundamentalist social organisation. The "time before" still fractures and haunts the present "like an afterimage," though paradoxically it is Offred's ability to remember the past which enables her to survive in the present: "What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth... Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be" (153)

Narrative Dislocations

Offred describes her narrative as dislocated, even mutilated, "like a body caught in crossfire," referring both to its structure and to the painful conditions out of which it is told. As the table of contents indicates, this is a story composed of isolated units ("Night," "Shopping," "Night," etc.) with gaps in between and radical shifts of topic over its twenty-five sections. These dislocations might be seen to represent the mental processes of someone in Offred's situation, for she is a virtual prisoner in her Commander's household and her mind jumps between vividly realised details in the present and flashbacks to the past. Offred appears to be telling her story silently to herself in her head, though she is also aware that her telling is her only possible gesture towards communication with the outside world:

> This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed [...]

> When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. (144)

That double emphasis on the speaking voice and narrative reconstruction prefigures the mode of her story's reception, for the version we receive is a further reconstruction made by historians from her jumbled cassette tapes:

> Thus it was up to Professor Wade and myself to arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go; but, as I have said elsewhere, all such arrangements are based on some guesswork. (314)

Reader's Dislocation

Just as provisionality and dislocation characterise the narrative reconstruction at the end, so do these qualities characterise its beginning. In the first section ("Night") we are introduced to an unknown narrator at an unspecified place which is evidently a makeshift women's prison camp set up in what was once a college gymnasium. Even when the location shifts in the second section ("Shopping") into the present tense with the narrator describing her place of residence in a comfortable old Victorian house, we as readers are still quite bewildered: Who is this narrator? When is now, and where is here? Realistic details of the household accumulate, but only gradually do we begin to make sense of the situation and not until p. 29 do we ascertain the narrator's role as Handmaid; we do not know that her name is Offred until she tells us on p. 153. Reading is an exercise in reconstruction as we piece together present details with fragments of Offred's memory narrative, learning to locate ourselves within this woman's subjective discourse of place and time.

Spatial and Temporal Dislocations in Offred's Narrative

The novel presents a curious slippage between realism and memory or fantasy, for Offred's narrative is characterised by temporal and spatial dislocations. As a survivor from the "time before" her greatest psychological resource is her faculty of double vision, for she is a time traveller (though not in a Wellsian futuristic sense) who is forever escaping from the present by remembering the past. We discover that the heartland of Gilead where she lives was formerly "Cambridge, Massachusetts with its Harvard University campus"; it is also Offred's home town so that although names have been changed and buildings put to different uses by the new regime, Offred carries the former city map in her head. Even when she walks down the street on her shopping expedition with her fellow Handmaid Ofglen, she sees everthing through a double exposure or, to use her own layered image, as a "palimpsest" (13). She has perfected the technique of simultaneously inhabiting two different spaces and times, so that her regulated Handmaid's space is continually opening out into more indeterminate spaces of memory and desire. Her narrative represents the complex ways that the mind works where the present moment is never self contained but is always pervaded by traces of other times and events.

Bibliography

ATWOOD Margaret, "Witches" and "Canadian-American Relations" in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
HOWELLS Coral Ann,
• *Margaret Atwood*. London: Macmillan, 1996.
• The Handmaid's Tale : *York Notes Advanced*. London: York Press, 1998.
INGERSOLL Earl G., *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*. London: Virago, 1992.
NICHOLSON Colin (ed.), *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity*. London: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 1994.
ORWELL George, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Penguin, 1989.
THOMPSON Lee Briscoe, *Scarlet Letters: Margaret Atwood's* The Handmaid's Tale. Canadian Fiction Studies 34. Toronto: ECW Press, 1997.
VEVAINA Coomi S. and Coral Ann Howells (eds.), *Margaret Atwood: The Shape-Shifter*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998.
YORK Lorraine M. (ed.), *Various Atwoods: Essays on the Later Poems, Short Fiction, and Novels*. Toronto: Anansi, 1995.

"That Will Never Do": Public History and Private Memory in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

Lynette Hunter

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is written with direct analogy to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, yet there is a world of political and historical difference between the two[1]. Although the central topics that both pursue are identical—history, memory, language and sexuality—the social context has changed. Similarly, the changes in this context have an effect on the stylistic similarities—the construction of fantasy, the mixing of generic modes, and the structural enclosure of the plot—and their significance for the reader[2].

Orwell was writing at a time when there was an impasse in the democracy of western representative nations like those of Europe. Until the end of the 60s much political and social analysis still argued in terms of the autonomous individual and the authoritarian state, being largely concerned with anarchy and revolution on the one hand and totalitarianism on the other. Certainly Orwell's entire career focused on this opposition. However, during the 60s, the analysis gradually shifted toward a concern with ideological relations and the subjects or subject positions they determine. Whereas the earlier concept defined the individual as separate from the nation state, the later idea, one that we still live with, describes the individual as substantially determined by the state. And as this essay will argue, Atwood is concerned with the limits and flexibilities available to the individual, given that they are determined by the state.

Both novels deal with totalitarian states, although Orwell's is global, while Atwood's is regional, a small geographical area somewhere in North America. Totalitarian states in the west usually adopt a particular rhetorical structure, which is parallel to the fantasy genre in literature, but I would like to make clear that neither novel is itself a fantasy. Indeed, the particular generic mix of dys/utopia and naturalism in Orwell's writing and the dys/utopia, realism, lyric and romance in Atwood's, is the primary device available to the reader for understanding the workings of fantasy in the political and individual contexts displayed by the novel. The key elements of this rhetoric, whether it be political or literary, are: verisimilitude, isolation and rationalism. Fantasy literature has to have control over the consistency of its alternate world in order to maintain the reader's illusion of familiarity. Just so, totalitarian states and their liberal Janus-face, need

1. All references to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are taken from the following edition: London: Secker and Warburg, 1949. Page numbers in brackets follow quotations.
2. Substantial sections of close reading in this essay are taken from, L. Hunter, *George Orwell: The Search for a Voice* (London: Macmillan, 1984), and L. Hunter, *Outsider Notes: Feminist Approaches to Nation State Ideology, Writers/Readers and Publishing* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1996).

identity as a Handmaid and reassumes, to varying degrees, her former identity. (During their lovemaking she even tells Nick her real name, a secret which she always keeps hidden from the reader.) These episodes work more simply as spatial contrasts with Offred's room in the Commander's house—they are places where she should not be—though the Commander's study and Jezebel's both carry marks of a double temporal dislocation as sign of their inauthenticity in Gilead. When Offred closes the door of the Commander's study, what she sees is "normal life. I should say: what is on the other side looks like normal life" (147), while for Offred walking into Jezebel's is more like going into a museum than going back into the past: "A movie about the past is not the same as the past" (247). These are places where the past is re-presented as masquerade (rather like the forbidden room above the antique shop in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where Winston and Julia make love until they are caught and sent to prison). I have discussed elsewhere Offred's multiple versions of her lovemaking with Nick where the dislocations of language are part of her narrative of desire (Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 142-143), though what remains constant through all the versions is her keen awareness of paradox within her situation:

> Being here with him is safety, it's a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside. This is a delusion, of course. This room is one of the most dangerous places I could be. (281)

Offred's narrative ends with her departure from the Commander's house like a criminal under guard, and she exits in the Black Van kept to take dissidents away: "And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (307).

These are Offred's last words, for this radical disruption signals her disappearance. Her story is left unfinished, and we never know what happens to her.

"Historical Notes"

The end of Offred's narrative is not the end of the novel, for there is a supplement in the "Historical Notes" which obliges us to look at Offred's story from a different perspective. These Notes are a transcript of a lecture given by a male archivist at an academic symposium on Gileadean studies held in the year 2195, after the map of the world has been redrawn, especially in the northern hemisphere. In this second futuristic vision which supercedes Gilead, the location has shifted from the United States to Arctic Canada, as is wittily coded into the place name, for the conference is being held at the University of Denay, Nunavit. Of course the name contains an admonitory authorial pun addressed to the readers ("Deny none of it"), but the Dené are the Native people who live in northern Alberta, Canada, and Nunavut is the name of the large area of the North West Territories which is set to become the first aboriginal self-governing territory in Canada on 1st April, 1999. (As further evidence for this reading, we have the names of the two academics, Professor Maryann Crescent Moon and Professor Running Dog; these are clearly Native names.) There are glimmers here of Atwood's Canadian nationalism, for in this northern scenario we have left the

polluted nightmarish American republic of Gilead far behind and have entered an unpolluted region where Nature Walks and fish dinners are part of the conference entertainments. This wilderness vision may suggest a Canadian utopia, but equally it may be read as a strong environmental warning to Canadians themselves against using the North as a dumping ground for rubbish and noxious substances[1].

The "Historical Notes" contain one more significant dislocation, for the voice here is not Offred's but that of Professor Pieixoto from Cambridge, England. We learn that Offred's story as we have it is another reconstruction, and that what we have been reading is an edited transcription of her oral tale recorded on cassette tapes recently unearthed "on the site of what was once the city of Bangor" in the state of Maine. It is the male professors who have called it *The Handmaid's Tale* and Offred's voice is in danger of being drowned out by Professor Pieixoto's, as he pursues his interest in the authenticity of her story and its value as objective historical evidence about the vanished civilisation of Gilead. His academic interest leads him to reconstruct the social theory of Gilead and to compare its practices with examples of tyranny from many nations and periods of history: "As I have said elsewhere, there was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead; its genius was synthesis" (319). From his masculinist point of view Offred could be blamed for omitting significant details and confining herself to trivia: "What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's private computer!" (322). Evidently the professor would have been much better satisfied with Winston Smith's account as being more useful to his research. He is not interested in Offred as an individual, and he takes no notice of what she has chosen to tell, which is a tale of the oppression of all women and most men in Gilead. In a curious way he is repeating Gilead's abuse of Offred, even to renaming her story in a gesture similar to Gilead's suppression of a woman's identity. In a final patronising gesture he consigns Offred, like Eurydice, to the world of the dead or at best to the world of myth. We are left as readers in the present, contemplating the double dislocation of two different narrators speaking out of two different futures, as they challenge us to interpret the text we have just finished reading.

The final words of the text are addressed directly to us: "Are there any questions?" (324) This is the point where Atwood's novel assumes the didactic tone which is a distinctive mark of dystopian fiction, though the very fact that questions can still be asked suggests her limited optimism. (If she believed there was no hope for our future, why would she bother writing her novel?) The bright side is that her fictive Gilead has not happened yet. And as Atwood also reminds us, "The bright side is a survival tool. So look on it" (*Good Bones*, 96).

1. See Margaret Atwood's comments on this topic in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1995, pp. 115-116.

may be read. While it is the enmeshed ambiguity and ambivalence of the topics of history, memory, language, literature and politics, Part two of the novel is dominated by the issues of sex and the physical. The sexual consistently keeps Wilson in touch with dream and memory, which become central to the definition of his individuality. Atwood also places sexuality at the centre of subversiveness in *The Handmaid's Tale* — Offred and the Commander, Moira, Offred's relationship with Nick, all suggest points of contact and communication not available elsewhere in this world. Significantly in this novel, sex for procreation, as welle as birthing itself, is firmly under state control and not a place for discussion or contact.

Orwell's novel describes a totalitarian political state, but it also offers an account of an individual who, from the moment that he recognises that the state is manipulating truth, attempts to question his own identity and how far it is also defined by that state. The developing relationship with Julia releases in Winston not only feeling, but also dream and memory. In parallel with Atwood's use of memory, Orwell charts the emergence of a sense of self through memory. Yet in contrast to Atwood, who portrays memory as a self-conscious tool used by the Character, appropriate to a postmodern ethos that is intensely aware of the construction of subject, Orwell integrates the images of memory less reflexively and more immediately into "character."

For example, Winston's growing humanism is indicated by his sudden recognition of the similarity between the gesture of an arm made by his mother in a dream, with that made by a Jewish woman in the film. As he does so he finds that the memory of the dream dredges the earlier image closer to consciousness, giving him access to a picture of himself as a child, his poverty and hunger and his selfish cruelty which causes his sister's death, and is opposed to his mother's contrasting care: her nobility and purity becouse her standards were "private." He says, "It would not have occurred to her that an action which is ineffectual thereby becomes meaningless" (165-6). Hence the importance of the gesture of her arm, and the value residing in the care that it indicates in the relationship between human beings. The recognition allows Winston to understand that the Party denies the value of feelings, as well as of fact, and that 'What mattered were individual relationships' that gave value to the non-functional gestures.

Throughout the final part of the novel, however, Winston gradually learns to forget his newly found skills in value and feeling, in order to preserve his body. As he begins to "accept everything" (278), the reader should note that he ends an argument with "only—!," or works through a situation to "except—!" The possible problems are the "submerged wreckage" of thoughts that are then pushed down, as he trains himself in crimestop and doublethink. When put to the final test, he betrays his feelings for Julia in order to save himself, and Orwell asks the reader to think about two significant interpretations. The first, and more expected, is that the extremity to which he is pushed before he betrays, is an indication of the extreme value of loyalty and trust. The second interpretation is more complex: we are asked to question the value of betrayal and loyalty themselves in the context of the private individual, to question whether the construction of such an individual colludes with the authoritarian political

structures represented by O'Brien. Orwell's great achievement in this novel was to question the helpfulness of a liberal humanist framework that appeared to engender the very atrocities that it set out to deny.

The complex reading is one that is not available to Winston. He becomes a useless bureaucrat who meets with others like himself to discuss notes to footnotes on obscure papers. However, it is available to the reader, and is made available primarily by the genre mixing in the novel. For Orwell utopian literature, like the nonsense literature of Lear and Carroll, was based on a ability to comment by the juxtaposition of radically different created worlds, with the standards of the habitual world. But what both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale* attempt is an extension of the nightmare world of Carroll's Alice which allows the character to re-enter "reality." Both Orwell and Atwood realise, along with Kafka, that the society around the individual constrains a very large part of what the individual does. They are concerned to argue not that this is supportive, although each portrays the state claiming that it is so, nor that the constraints are temporary, as for Alice, but that this power over the individual can be put to terrible ends. For Orwell, working within a framework of anarchy and totalitarianism, Winston is reduced to private acts of rebellion that inevitably fail. For Atwood, the concern is with what the individual then can do to exist within that framework. However, Orwell does provide the reader with a possible way forward, through an allegorical reading.

It is the juxtaposition of the utopian and naturalistic within *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, analogous to the juxtaposition of the world of the novel with the external, habitual world, that generates the complex allegorical reading, fot in that juxtaposition the reader remains interactive and can perceive difference. We can read the images of the final chapter as disturbing and out of place, whereas he cannot, and this is because our response to the character is effected through the narrator as well. This narrator consistently stimulates toward a questioning of language; and through teaching and interaction between reader and text, establishes a stance that is analogous to an alternative language, an alternative politics: of communication, response, and discussion in the public. The reader may not know what specific outcomes the narrator is advocating, but through the choice of genre and its modality, here the ironies of naturalistic and utopian informed by the allegory of their juxtaposition, we do know how to go about searching for them.

The Handmaid's Tale

If Orwell's focus is on the strategies of state control and their effect on individuals still struggling to remain separate from that control, Atwood's focus is on the extents to which the individual can push at the limits of social determinism, the extents of flexibility. *The Handmaid's Tale* is concerned with the possibility for agency once authoritarian structures are in place. The totalitarianism of Gilead may have been generated against the background of the revival of Islamic fundamentalism in for example Iran in the later 1970s, as well as the brutally corrupt systems of Roumania and

control over the way they represent themselves to their populace, and they effect this control through maintaining an illusion of stability.

At the centre of this rhetoric lies the relationship between the individual reader and the author: readers are required to take up their own position of isolation within which they may successfully be coerced by the various strategies. In liberal politics, this position is taken by the "private" individual and is necessary before he can become a citizen. The defining element of theories of fantasy in literature lies here, with some theorists claiming that the aim of fantasy is to deprive the reader of the ability to see outside the constructed alternate world, and others, the majority, claiming that the aim of fantasy is to maintain a simultaneous awareness of the completeness of the alternative world, and its provisional status. Significantly, this is exactly the structure that Orwell found at the centre of authoritarian states: doublethink. Doublethink is the ability in the individual,

> consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word "doublethink" involves the use of doublethink. (38)

It is not surprising that one of the most consistent elements in many of the earlier challenges to nation-state ideology is the reaffirmation of the individual as a fixed essential identity, yet (post)modern techniques of analysis, recognising the new plurality of citizenship, allow that fixity to be fragmented. The fragmentation often leads either to a complete enervation of social and political activity into games or to the formation of small groups of people cohering around fragments held in common and working in the local hyperliberal position that excludes a larger national or international view. The problem of how to validate social decisions besets postmodernist political theory and lies behind the concern with individual identity in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The fantasy ethos of omission, evasion and deception in a rhetoric directed not toward ethics but toward success, provides the framework for Atwood's depiction of events in the novel. Gilead is a small, enclosed community, operating with specific regulations, highly stable representations and determined hierarchies. The community has its own characterising vocabulary and dress code, both taken from interpretations of the Old Testament. Not only is the community isolated from the larger geographical area, with only carefully organised incursions such as that of the Japanese tourists, but so also are the individuals. None of the characters is free to speak to any other, except perhaps for the prostitutes at Jezebel's. Certainly at home the Wives, Marthas and Handmaids do not engage in much discussion. Even when Offred is with Ofglen, whom she has come to like, she cannot trust herself to speak to her. There are no openings for challenge to the system from outside the community, nor for destabilising the representations taken up by the individuals. There are no communities for discussion, simply groups of people acting out predetermined moves. Good and bad actions are clear and unambiguous, inculcated by the Aunts by means of ready-made slogans that have all the force of an effective advertising campaign. There can be no questioning of assumptions.

However, Atwood spends little time detailing how the state is set up. We derive it from the central character's descriptions, while the focus is on how she copes with the system. In contrast, Orwell emphasises the procedure, especially how the state maintains control over stable representations.

Nineteen Eighty-Four

A key narratorial strategy in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* lies in the mixed genre of the dys/utopian and the naturalistic, which provides points of identification and separation for the reader through awareness of the irony and allegory that underpin the novel. As the naturalistic and utopian come close together an ironic tension is generated, but when the reader can separate between them the allegorical stance of interaction becomes possible. In a sense, the ironic is an active demonstration of the power of doublethink, while the allegorical points to the only remedy: discussion. Similarly, one of the primary strategies for control by the state is the manipulation of public memory, or history. Government memory functions by treating the past as alterable and yet unchanged, to fit in with present Government policy. In fact it has to be able to be changed in order to retain the illusion that it is absolute. Through society's acceptance of "the lie," Government memory passed "into history and became truth" (37). Being able to accept the alterability of the absolute is central to doublethink, the theory behind the Party's control of identity. The only alternative appears to be the establishing of a private, individual fantasy to counteract the official. This, for the reader, is the first hint that O'Brien's Brotherhood, that elusive and potentially saving organization of individuals, may be just as isolating as the Party.

Early on in the narrative, the narrator begins by examining the role of words, specifically literary words, in providing identity. Starting with the process of Winston's job in propaganda at the Ministry, there is the casual reference to Winston's "rectifying" not "altering" information and a matter of fact tone which downplays the implications of his actions. The entire process of fantasising"Comrade Ogilvy" into a "fact" makes State control of identity through writing appear possible. This occurs especially through Newspeak, the cut-down version of language being used by the Party. Ultimately the reductionism of this language wil make unorthodoxy impossible because "there will be no words in which to express it" (54). The suggestion provides an interesting contrast to *The Handmaid's Tale* where the individual does have words, but is afraid to use them. Indeed, in the process of saying any words aloud, Offred's character becomes constituted, certain parts of her life fade away, and others become integrated into her present world.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the examination of the Government control of our identity, our history, memory, language and literature, is finally extended to sexuality. The development of the sexual element from authoritarian romance-sex, then into a humanist interrelationship with Julia, where it provides Winston with a different perspective on individuality, and finally into a profound awareness of the physical which belies the whole concept of "reality control" by language, is one of the main figures by which the book

other European countries that were increasingly exposed in the late 1980s, but it is in many ways also simply an extreme version of nation state ideology. Within these conditions Atwood suggests that small group resistance, at the heart of political theories derived from Hans Georg Gadamer or Michel Foucault, is not enough. In addition, change that is too swift, as with the westernisation of Iran, or the women's movement impact on working practices in Euro-American states, will generate backlash. As with Atwood's other novels, this one is remarkably prescient, outlining Judith Butler's later agenda of the performance of gender and the role of the abject within the state, and Susan Faludi's *Backlash*, well before they reached a wider public. In particular, Atwood here explores the question of "how one becomes a subject." In doing so, she is less interested in public memory, or the manipulation of history, although this is raised in the final pages of the novel to which I will return. The initial brutalisation of the individual by state strategies is skipped over rather quickly, as if Atwwod is picking up from where Orwell left off, arguing that the ineffectiveness of the private individual is a given, and that the issue then becomes, what does one do after brainwashing? Given that the state necessarily determines us to some extent, how far can we allow this to happen? To investigate these questions, Atwwod focuses clearly on the area of personal memory and what happens to history and the individual when that memory is erased.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood provides a critical exegesis on the problems of memory as necessary both for a definition of self and for participation in the public or in history. The story of the Handmaid Offred can be retold as: a woman is living in a futuristic fantasy-world-made-real, into which she has entered only with the loss of her personal memory: an amnesia directly caused by agents of the state coming into power. The narrative tells of her attempts to continue to exist in this world-where-she-has-memory, at the same time as she attempts to recuperate her past self and construct some sense of herself as a personal individual. A final twist is put on the story when the reader discovers that the text is an edited version of events Offred spoke into a set of tapes, that has been reconstructed into a historical account by someone else two hundred years later.

From the opening paragraph of *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood's central character-narrative is shot through with attempts at memory that depend almost entirely on sensory events to trigger them off: the smell of the dancehall (13), the feel of the weather (53) (173), the hearing of song and sound (64) (113), the taste of food (173-4) (219); and most of all sight, for seeing is believing. There is a plethora of visual experience tied to memory that accumulates through the narrative although nearly every example is about the deceptiveness of the visual. Offred talks about a television programme she saw as a child, in which Serena Joy, her current mistress, sang as part of a gospel choir. The memory of the past is rendered in precise detail to present a television scene with which many contemporary readers will be familiar and about which possibly sceptical. But it is juxtaposed with the actuality of the present in which Serena Joy's acted out desires have been realised, and the reality is horrific. Or there is the memory of nineteenth-century paintings of women in harems which Offred in her earlier life was taught to read as erotic indolence, and which she now re-

reads knowing more of how enforced idleness feels, as "about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use" (79). Or the Commander posing in front of his fireplace like 'some old come-on from a glossy men's mag' (147) where the memory of the deceptiveness coincides precisely with the present experience.

Many of the triggered memories develop into sequences that are like patches of colour that Offred is uncovering on the obscured canvas of her earlier self. To start, the sequences are brief. For example the memory of Serena Joy on television develops later (55-6) into a sequence about her change from a gospel-singer to an advocate for a new social order by way of a series of memories from newspapers and other television shots. The memory of touching her daughter in the bath (73-4) turns into a sequence where Offred recalls someone stealing her daughter from a pram in a supermarket, and then of the new state stealing her daughter from her. Yet each sequence is halted by the memory of a cliché from the current society, usually mediated by "Aunt Lydia," the women responsible for inculpating the new values: Freedom from, not freedom to (34), Look out for the Wives (56), Don't get too attached to the material world (74) and so on. The process is significantly similar to the construction of Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but whereas there Winston is ironically self-conscious of the procedure, here the linguistic control is presented naturalistically, and as a statement of events. The difference underlines the different perspective offered by each text, the former with a focus on the construction of state control and the latter with a focus on the activity of the individual within that control.

As the narrative proceeds the sequences not only get longer but start to refer to things after Offred loses her memory. One set of visual memory triggers is related to television and film, which by the effect of their own sequential movement set up inner narratives. While these work in a manner similar to the other visual stimuli, usually to highlight change, deception, re-reading as for example in the sequence remembering a television interview with the mistress of a high-ranking Nazi official (154), they also tell stories. Once more in direct resonance with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, at one point in her indoctrination Offred is shown a film of the "Unwomen" or feminists. By chance (?) it contains footage of her mother "very young, very serious, even pretty" (129), and on its conclusion she moves on to narrate the memory of her mother coming over to visit her and her partner Luke, when she is much older "wiry, spunky, the kind of old women who won't let anyone butt in front of her in a supermarket line" (130).

These different versions of her mother are extended near the end of the account when Offred tells about her friend Moira who had seen her mother in a film clip about the "Colonies" to which the present state has sent all undesirables. The extension is significant not only because it completes another part of the sub-plot, the background of nuclear war to the devastation being wrought by the current political state, but also because it presents Offred much more in control of her memory and using it to construct significance. This later sequence shows her remembering something Moira tells her, and then carefully switching into a conscious memory action "I can't remember the last time I saw her…" which develops

a sequence from her past where she finds her mother' house turned upside down by the police. Offred then returns to something Moira has said about her mother when they were both at college, but explicitly concludes the sequence with "I bring myself back, to the here, to the hotel. This is where I need to be" (265). Offred here not only controls her memory with far more skill, but has also internalised the significance of Aunt Lydia's haltings of earlier brief memories: She now does this for herself, just as Winston learned to halt his conjectures with cliché.

Superficially it appears as though Offred is using the memories to build a past for herself, but in effect she is using the past to assimilate into the present as an individual who functions within the state. In contrast, Winston uses the past to define an isolated identity separate from the state. There are many reflections on the activity and process of memory in constructing a self thoughout the narrative, and indeed at several points these become one with comments on writing or telling stories. One of the first observations the narrator explicitly makes on remembering/re-presenting the past immedialtely follows a sequence where she tries to remember her daughter. This sequence is also important because it is the only place where we get some clue as to how she might have lost her memory: she says "I know I lost time" (49). But whether it was 'needles, pills, something like that' (the only "device" Atwood uses) or the shock of severance from her daughter, neither she nor we can know. Offred goes on on to say "I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling" (49) not a reality, for if it is a story she will be able to control the ending. Yet "It isn't a story I'm telling./ It's also a story I'm talling in my head, as I go along" (49). All memories are apparently of factual past events, but are contructed into specific present ones. Further, "I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself... A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say..." (49-50). Like most memory, validation by another person is necessary. This is one reason that Wilson can change and grow once he has met Julia. It is also the main reason why the challenge to the isolation of the private individual is so potentially subversive.

For most of the first twenty chapters, Offred struggles with memories and sequences, trying to order and understand them. One of the greatest hindrances is the lack of communication. As Offred notes of Aunt Lydia's insistence on the acceptance of sacrifice and duty, it can only come about for future generations "Because they will have no memories, of any other way" (127). When the Commander of Offred's house begins to seek her out for his own illicit desires, the fact of their illicit status begins to provide Offred with the example of an "other way." It is from this point that she also begins to take some control over her memories. The exercise begins with her attempt to "reconstruct" her first meeting with the Commander when she asks her to play Scrabble with him (144), to go over what she said, what he said and so on. She even adds obviously fictional details, such as the knifing of the Commander, into this reconstruction. Immediately following she comments "What I need is perspective... Otherwise you live in the moment, which is not where I want to be" (153): or the comment flowing directly into her memory of the filmed interview with the Nazi official's mistress. Just as spelling for the Scrabble games was difficult, "like using a language I'd once

known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world" (164) just so memory and story telling have to be learned and relearned if forgotten. Whereas for Orwell, there is a sense of Winston recovering or discovering memory as an essential element of individuality, with Atwood there is a more active sense that if the state can re-make history, so the individual can re-make their own memories.

As if the earlier chapters are there to give an idea of the difficulty of dislocation, by chapter 26 we move to a narrative impulse where Offred can give us a retrospective account of events in the "present," as if memory has almost caught up with her. Part of the process of telling her story, re-presenting the memories, is to structure her way through the morass of the past to the thing she finds significant. One of the acutely painful experiences is that of forgetting. Early on she says of a memory of her daughter that it "fades," becomes a ghost. Later on, more skilled at reconstructing, she tried "to conjure, to raise my own spirits," the people from her past, but she no longer can (203). Slowly Lukes fades as well (281). Although crossed with the pain of a bereavement, the fading is also presented as positive, as an indication that she cannot remake those particular memories into a self that can deal with the present. In stark contrast is Janine who collapses into the past and has to be re-called by Moira who says "Get right back here! You can't stay there, you aren't there any more" (228). Of herself Offred says: "I don't have to tell it. I don't have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else [...] It's possible to go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you out" (237), but "That will never do."

Memory and its structuring begins to get conflated with explanations of place and time and appropriateness. A clear instance of this sophistication occurs near the end of Offred's narrative when she goes up to the room of the Commander's guard, Nick, to have sex. We are offered three different reconstructions in the form of fictional genres: one romantic, one realist and one lyric. What is important is that Offred is consciously detailed about the events being offered: she is constructing reasons about the validity or appropriateness of the links between memory and action. By the end she has created not only a self but a "you" to listen—both of course part of herself—and here she also recounts the appalling event of "salvaging" and hooks her narrative into historical importance by suggesting that it may in fact be important to exchange the account of events with someone at a later time: it is a record of barbarism that needs to be known. Early on she says that although she and Luke had heard the newspaper stories about mutilations, killings, etc., they had worked hard to remain ignorant of their value: "The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others" (66) that they refused to connect to action.

Significantly, she connects their laborious ignorance with their refusal to participate in writing "We were the people who were not in the paper. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave no more freedom./ We lived in the gaps between the stories" (66-67). Just before the account of the salvaging she notes "I would like to be without shame. I would like to be shameless. I would like to be ignorant. Then I would not know how ignorant I was" (275): without memory, without the possibility

Telling Stories: Resistance to World Reduction in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Jagna Oltarzewska

Introduction: utopia and dystopia, related worlds

Styled alternately as literary genre and philosophical method or "mental experience[1]," the term "Utopia" first appeared in 1516, in Thomas More's letter to Peter Gilles, a close friend who combined the post of Chief Secretary of Antwerp with a career in book-editing. Coined from the Greek prefix *ouk-* (shortened to *ou-* before a consonant, then further abbreviated to *u-*), signifying "no" and the noun *topos*, or "place," the concept slowly infiltrated the vernacular; from the 18th century onwards, it was regularly used as a common noun and its extension gradually widened to embrace a cluster of disparate, if related, meanings. Since my concern here is chiefly with the imaginary world as linguistic construct (with particular reference to Margaret Atwood's "Gilead") I would like to consider some of the semantic tensions that inhabit this signifier; of special interest, in the present context, is the ambivalence that precipitates the shift from *u*topia to *dys*topia, and the change of perspective or "take" on the concept of imaginary world implied by the altered prefix.

Caught between the antagonistic poles of fantasy and reality, utopia is, from the very first, beset by ambiguities. In accordance with More's prototype, utopia soon becomes synonymous with the ideal of a model society, whose distinguishing characteristics are internal harmony, unity, and a high degree of organisation. As it remains an *earthly* paradise, utopia is not entirely free from dissent, friction and the threat of war; it is, however, equipped with punitive mechanisms designed to neutralise tension and restore order. The twin obsession with unity and consensus, together with the typical geography of utopias (the island, the walled city...), have led critics to speculate that their creator is giving expression to a longing for union with the archaic mother, a wish involving regressive phantasies of return to a smooth maternal belly, ritually (if violently) purged of threatening and impure contents[2]. Clashing with the notion of an "ideal," and, by association, unattainable, or purely *imaginary* society (Mr. Windbag's "Noplacia"), is the conception of utopia as blueprint or detailed model for a possible, viable social order. As Ricœur points out, there is a current of utopian thought which veers away from fantasy, and is informed by a powerful impulse to intervene in and change reality:

> L'utopie n'est pas seulement un rêve, mais un rêve qui veut se réaliser. Il se dirige vers la réalité et il la brise. L'intention utopique est sans doute de changer les choses [...][1].

Lewis Mumford is aware of this semantic tension when he puts forward the view that utopias fall into two categories: those representing a flight from reality, and those aiming to provide a serious, realistic programme for lasting social change[2]. In its most positive form, argues Ricœur, utopian thought functions as a necessary critique of the *status quo*, its daring and ingenious imaginary constructions countering tendencies towards rigidity and closure inherent in the workings of ideology. Ironically—and this gives rise to a further ambiguity or semantic tension—there are elements of utopian thought which, as critics have noted[3], imply the very same dangers of stasis, mystification, and inflexibility as those traditionally associated with the concept of ideology. The typical utopian model involves geographical isolation and the absence of History (utopian worlds are mythical, insular, and parenthetical); the keynotes of the utopian state are uniformity, rationality, transparency and regimentation. Utopias tend to congeal into frozen tableaux, an eventless present; the possibility of change is stunted by the denial of time and entropy; privacy and personal identity are eroded by the emphasis on standardization. In the course of a 20th century which has witnessed the "the climax of revolutionary utopianism[4]" in the rise and fall of successive fascist and communist régimes, writers have not been slow to discern tendencies towards totalitarianism in what they construe as the negative features of the utopian model. Utopia is increasingly seen to contain, *in nuce*, the seeds of its potential distortion into the *worst* of all possible worlds[5].

In view of this ambivalence, it is hardly surprising that the semantic centre cannot hold: as the critic C. A. Mihailescu points out[6], utopia splits, in the course of the 19th century, into two opposed but closely related subgenres: *eutopia* (the original spelling, *utopia*, is widely retained) and *dystopia*. The notion of worst possible world has been identified as "a major and obsessive theme of 20th century thinking[7]" and given rise to such modern classics as Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

We may isolate the following generic characteristics as typifying dystopian worlds. The impulse towards symmetry, unity and uniformity, already apparent in More's Utopia (fifty-four cities all constructed along the same

1. For a brief exposition of the philosophical/literary acceptations of "Utopia", see the introduction, by Jacques Moutaux, to Jean-Yves Lacroix's book, *L'Utopie*, Bordas, Paris, 1994, pp. 5-16.
2. I refer here to the discussion of the psychical origins of the concept of Utopia, in Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Les deux arbres du jardin*, Des femmes, Paris, 1986, pp. 147-172.

1. Paul Ricœur, *L'Idéologie et l'Utopie*, Seuil, coll. "La couleur des idées", Paris, 1997, p. 380.
2. Quoted in Ricœur, *op. cit.*, p. 381.
3. Lewis Mumford, "Utopia, the City, and the Machine", in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank E. Manuel, Boston, 1967 (quoted in R. E. Foust, "A Limited Perfection: Dystopia as Logos Game", in *Mosaic*, vol. 15, n° 3, 1982, p. 80).
4. R. E. Foust, *art. cit.*, p. 79.
5. The paradigmatic study, in this connection, is that of Raymond Ruyer, *L'Utopie et les Utopies* (1950), Gérard Montfort, 1988.
6. See C. A. Mihailescu, "Mind the Gap: Dystopia as Fiction", in *Style*, vol. 25, n° 2, 1991, p. 214.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

of connecting dream to action, without being able to tell others. But she opts to do all those things and write herself into an individual position that can communicate and represent significance. If she doesn't they will "erase" her as they erase the memory of her from her daughter's mind, leaving her "blank... between parentheses" (240). At the end, she is left with having translated herself into a present individual who has the memory skills, the skills of re-presenting, to assess and act on needs. The alternating sections of Night/ Day/ Night/ Day/ Night/ Day/ Night/ Day etc. that structure Atwood's text, take Offred between dream and action in chunks that gradually weld together through the action of memory, so that the final 'Night' section is invaded by the realities, demands, immediacies of action: but at least she is prepared.

What Atwood achieves with chilling clarity in the final futuristic section is a repositioning of individual action within the historical memory of 2195 AD. Despite the horror of the Gileadean regime, little has changed, to judge from the university history conference. More to the point, despite the tale of individual struggle and courage, the historians are interested in Offred's account mainly for what it can tell them about the structure of the Gileadean state and the men who set it up and controlled it. The construction of the grand narrative is focused on a better comprehension of the political map of the western hemisphere (312). Its intention is "not to censure but to understand" (315) the action of Gilead: a laudable, tolerant, humanist approach that we are asked to weigh against the nearly-in-the-present actions that we would have no difficulty condemning. The historians want to "establish an identity" (315) for Offred, yet she has established one for herself in the text. They want an identity that will become involved in the grand national narrative, that requires a stable sense of individuality. She has produced one that is in response to immediate need.

History is a way of establishing community but also a way of fixing and manipulating society. Histories may use texts of personal memory for the needs of their own time, but they also underline the impossibility of retrieving personal life: what is missing from this kind of national history is the sense of the indivudual. An individual cannot insert itself into national memory or its historical writing. It can only present the future with the ambivalence of its contradictions, through a different kind of writing. In *The Handmaid's Tale* history makes a "fact" of Offred; and since we have the past context we can assess the extent to which the fact is inappropriate realising that the reappropriation by this "history" is inadequate to her context. Yet as we discover retrospectively, the future historians have access to exactly the same materials. Is it because these historian-editors have reconstructed the narrative themselves that they are left blind to the personal memory? Or is it something to do with the kind of public memory they are recounting with its emphasis on national identity that must subordinate the way that personal memory challenges the stability of the representations that mediate its ideology?

The parallels between Winston's final soul-destroying work as a dusty scholar putting footnotes to notes, and the supposedly enlightened academic conference is striking. Futhermore, the parallels are emphasised by the narrative enclosure of the Appendix on Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which is placed at the end of the work, as well as being footnoted from chapter one. Its enclosing of the text is ambiguous for it presents the narrator as either in the past or in the future of the events of the book, providing a signal warning for alertness. Having read the book we cannot assume that it is past, nor can we know it is in the future. The aim of the narrator is to help us to think and evaluate by providing situations asking for active rhetorical response. The abiding allegorical text is that doublethink is the loss of value through manifested and realized fantasy.

In contrast, what Atwood provides for the contemporary reader is an example of a text in two modes. The last section is in the form of a quasi-documentary; it provides a satire on fact, on historical observation, on national grand narratives. The much longer chunk of the text that makes up Offred's tale is an imaginative rendering of the simultaneous doublethink of all post-Renaissance dys/utopias, which present the social and political controls necessary to maintain the fantasy world, at the same time as the individuals who know that the fantasy world is not real. Here that doubleness is figured forth in the alternating sections of Night and Day, of lyric dream and realism. Initially, neither one can admit the other, but gradually as the personal negotiates the public and puts itself under self-constraints, the two come together in the simultaneous admission and ignoring of certain events.

Although Atwood may delicately prise apart the double-strand of the fantasy stance that has allowed nation states to control their subjects and allowed to individuals a kind of private self, she cannot get rid of it. The distance of genre that criticises and satirises yet does not radically shift, has advantages and disadvantages: it holds the structures that the society uses for shaping representation up to scrutiny; it does not directly challenge them but neither does it alienate the reader. It speaks to the reader about what she or he knows, not about what is unknown or rather unarticulated. Similary, Atwood's approach to women and feminism is immensely critical but never immediately challenging. Atwood's female heroes from Susannah Moodie onward continually write a version of history that is communal but never impinges on state politics in a direct way. While she has been criticised for this indirection, because the position can underwrite women's disempowerment, that communal history is also a structure that permits her to emphasise women's continuing exclusion from power, and to offer both possible and fantastic alternatives in the name of women. If people are not so much concerned to insert themselves into the grand narrative of national history then they may present other ways to write a public memory, and other ways to do politics.

lines; similarities in dress; enjoyment of identical pleasures; universal and unquestioning faith in a divine principle), is exaggerated into a collective quest for fusion with an organic, impersonal social body (Zamyatin) representing a monolithic State. Differences are erased (Zamyatin's people are numbers) as the individual is encouraged to merge with the faceless multitude. The egalitarian principle of uniformity reveals its obverse: the risk of an oceanic loss of self as it is assimilated into units of an ever higher order. Dystopias typically show the workings of a panoptical and repressive structure of supervision (the canonical example being Orwell's "Big Brother"): the avowed utopian (and dystopian) ideal of transparency is accompanied by an obsessive need for observation, monitoring, policing. In dystopia, power is maintained, exercised, and nourished through ritual, propaganda, and recourse to artificial means of stimulation/ sedation (Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) provides a particularly disturbing example); we are reminded of Huxley's "soma" and "orgy-porgies" and the careful channeling and neutralization of anti-State feeling through Orwell's "Two Minutes' Hate." Dystopias are, as several critics have noted, "shrinking worlds"[1]. The drive towards unity is attended by loss of detail on a massive scale; power in dystopia exercises a huge centripetal force which conspires to crush individual resistance, obliterate singularity, and subsume shades of difference. The dystopian world aspires to be One, homogeneous and all-embracing (Zamyatin's "One State," Huxley's "World State," Orwell's "Oceania"). The process of compression this necessarily involves is often accompanied by what Ben Pimlott has called "the assassination of language[2]"—dystopia possesses its own distinctive speech (Orwell's "Newspeak," Burgess's "Nadsat") a reductive idiom at once reflecting and reinforcing simplified, monolithic patterns of thought, or a hybrid language suggesting the influence of a foreign power (Burgess) and degenerating into sloppy (teenage) slang. Finally, unlike the pre-lapsarian, anachronistic time-frame of utopia, the creation of a dystopic universe often implies a fall into temporality.

The Handmaid's Tale: a feminist dystopia

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* exhibits many of the features common to dystopian universes. Set in the not too distant future, Atwood's is a recognizably contemporary world, informed by the writer's thorough knowledge of current US politics and her awareness of the moral issues raised by advances in technology. It is, in addition, a *feminist* dystopia, starting out from Jacqueline Rose's observation that "the symbolic order is always gendered[3]," and setting itself the task of exploring a society in which gender demarcations attain disturbingly rigid and extreme expression. It is the overwhelming presence of the founding father turned fascist father (the

1. *Ibid.*, p. 217. See also Fredric Jameson, "World Reduction in Le Guin: the Emergence of Utopian Narrative", in *Science Fiction Studies*, 1975, vol. 2, pp. 221-230.
2. See Ben Pimlott's introduction in George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Penguin, 1989, p. XII.
3. Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? - Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the return to Melanie Klein*, Blackwell, 1993, p. 42.

rule of the *Commanders*) that gives Atwood's text its unique resonance. Like Huxley's and Orwell's[1], Atwood's world has a slogan, an implicit command that emerges in the ritual retelling of the Rachel and Bilhah story that precedes the monthly Ceremony or coupling between Commander and Handmaid. In a nutshell, this slogan is: *Conceive or perish!*, a categorical imperative that triggers the drastic reduction characteristic of dystopian worlds: Offred's experience shrinks to minute scrutiny of her menstrual cycle and her uterus, "huge as the sky at night" (84) becomes, in effect, her entire universe.

The signifiers coined by the founders of Gilead provide a telling insight into the structure and aims of the new Republic. Gilead's "Newspeak" circumscribes and regulates the day-to-day existence of its inhabitants, foregrounding the indivisibility of power, language, and reality. Language is denied the Handmaids: reading and writing are strictly prohibited. It seems, then, entirely fitting that Offred's resistance to Gilead should be conducted in and through subversive uses of language. In what follows, I shall examine Offred's strategies of resistance to the dominant ideology as she narrates her story for posterity. Her major tactic (in common with that of other Atwoodian heroines, such as Elaine Risley and Rennie Wilford) is that of *bearing witness*, an activity involving the creation of a text (or grammar such as that of painting) through which personal suffering or social injustice are made visible to an implied addressee who is then encouraged, in her turn, to adopt the role of witness. In her attempt to construct a credible story, Offred protects her message through metafictional references to her narrative and its unreliability, a tactic that explicitly draws attention to the imprecisions of language and is designed to engage readerly consent (and belief) and ensure that her message is understood as the "dire warning[2]" (Atwood's own description of dystopia) it is meant to be. Punning and the Scrabble game are reflexive and playful devices which call attention to reality as a network of signifiers, and language as an object of desire and sensual delight, ideas violently at odds with a dominantly utilitarian view of the word. Pleasure in language is a potent weapon against world reduction: the unlimited potentialities of the signifier are mobilised against an over-regulated, highly-codified society whose sign systems betray an infatuation with rigidity and closure.

Resisting the pull of the Centre: language games

Gilead, a shrinking world: the function of narration

Offred's principal tool in the struggle against the dehumanising effects of world reduction is storytelling. She pits her narrative, with its gaps, self-corrections, and contradictions, against the "Newspeak" of Gilead, which strives to compress and simplify the signifier into yielding nothing but pure

1. The World State's motto being "Community, Identity, Stability", Oceania's party slogan the notorious "War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength."
2. See Margaret Atwood, "Justice and the Literary Tradition" (unpublished speech quoted in Hilde Staels, *Margaret Atwood's Novels: A Study of Narrative Discourse*, Tübingen, Francke Verlag, 1995, p. 231, note 8).

denotation. This ideal of verbal transparency and renewal is, of course, severely compromised by the ideology of the language-makers; Gilead's new signifiers are hopelessly value-laden. To gauge the scale of the Handmaid's task, I shall consider the processes of reduction engineered by the dominant ideology, beginning with a brief look at its linguistic inventions.

Society in Gilead comprises *Commanders* (the ruling military élite), *Wives* (their largely infertile and passive partners), *Econowives* (*Wives* of modest means), *Handmaids* (surrogate mothers pressed into the service of the Republic on account of their viable reproductive organs), *Aunts* (disciplinarians and reeducators), *Marthas* (servants), *Eyes* (the secret police), *Guardians* (border guards), *Angels* (engaged in defence and warfare) and *Unwomen* (made up of subversive elements, Handmaids having used up their three "chances[1]" post-menopausal, single women, none of whom can usefully be integrated into the existing symbolic order on account of their failing—or uncooperative—ovaries). The choice of signifier is overdetermined by the Biblical intertext and the reference to traditional family values, each of which exerts its peculiarly reductive powers over language. The logic of the Gileadean signifier is clear: executive power, security risks and surveillance remain the prerogative of men, whilst women retain the age-old tasks of domestic service, education, and childbearing. The Republican mind-set—a form of Puritanical fundamentalism[2]—further emerges in the names given to rituals that punctuate the existence of the Gileadean subject: *Women's Salvagings*, *Particicution* (forms of collective punishment recalling the medieval torture chamber in their acute savagery, and fulfilling much the same social function as the "Two Minutes' Hate" graphically described by Orwell[3]), and *Birth Day*, a communal event underlining the importance of the newborn in a society faced with sterility.

The radically Puritanical ideology dominant in Gilead, and its overriding obsession with a catastrophic birthrate attributed to a permissive and godless past, combine to produce a compressed, linear vision of historical causality and a manichean view of human nature, leading to a restructuring of the social fabric in the course of which individual freedoms are severely curtailed; these restrictions hold true especially for women, whose healthy reproductive organs firmly reinstate them as exchange objects. The Handmaid's first name, changing with each new posting (Of-charles, Of-warren, Of-fred) confirms her status as object and possession. The reduction of identity to biology (Offred refers to herself and her kind as "two-legged wombs," "ambulatory chalices," 146), heralds nothing less than a new temporality—a *somatic* time whose underlying rhythms are the Ceremony and

1. The Handmaids are given up to three postings with three different Commanders. Failure to conceive at the end of this period means reclassification as an Unwoman and a grim future shovelling toxic waste in a border area known as the *Colonies*, although there is a softer option—depending on her age and looks the ex-Handmaid may find work as a prostitute at the clandestine night-club, *Jezebel's*. Gilead predictably views sterility as a female problem.
2. In part, *The Handmaid's Tale* grew out of Margaret Atwood's fascination with Puritanism, and one of its dedicatees is Perry Miller (1905-1963), a Harvard professor who specialised in the history of the New England Puritan community and whose lectures Atwood followed while she was studying in the States.
3. G. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-19.

the Birth Day, and which, in its sluggish and uneventful passage (it is likened to "fried food or thick fog," 279) imposes long periods of watching and waiting. The following passage offers a masterly account of space-time distorsion as identity buckles under the pressure of a relentless social gaze:

> I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumours of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and diminishings of tissue, the droolings of the flesh, these are signs, these are the things I need to know about. Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own. [...]
> I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red [...]. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night [...]. Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. (83-84)

The Handmaid's attention turns inward in sympathy with the gaze so intensely focused on her intimate bodily functions. Her identification with cultural expectations effectively means that her body boundaries are conflated with those of the universe, a metaphorical leap involving a process of simultaneous distension and contraction. Her body cavities are at once "territory," "earth," and "sky" as her daily experience shrinks to the confines of her reproductive apparatus, monitored in excruciating detail. External reality is bracketed; her anatomy, its every fluctuation and secretion, provides her only meaningful environment. The slogan "biology is destiny," a red rag to the second wave feminists of the 60s and 70s, comes into its own in Gilead, where the concept of destiny is also clearly revealed as an ideological construct. It is in keeping with the paradoxes of power that Offred experiences her body as most entirely hers ("*only I* know the footing," "my *own* territory") at a time when it is most obviously expropriated, colonised, and harnessed into the service of the collective good.

The demise of personal identity is a side-effect of the compression of language and reality as these are subjected to the gravitational pull of the Centre and its monolithic desire. The major threat of a loss of self is countered by the Handmaid's recourse to narration. In telling her story, Offred creates a position for herself as speaking subject, or witness: this enables her to avoid the pitfalls of hysterical over-identification with the Gilead doctrine (to which Offred's fellow Handmaid, Janine, and the second Ofglen clearly succumb), psychosis (Janine's ultimate fate), or counter-identification resulting in outright rebellion and certain death (the first Ofglen, and possibly Moira). Any form of testimony to oppression implies, as its minimal precondition, the survival of the storyteller; the position of witness is incompatible with that of martyr or victim. The crucial link between survival and identity is a *leitmotif* of Atwood's work, and nowhere more clearly inscribed than in the act of speech that constitutes Offred's narrative. The basic subject positions—*I* and *you*—enable Offred to assume a future and *dis*identify, however provisionally, with her symbolic mandate as Handmaid:

> You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. [...] Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier [...]
> I'll pretend you can hear me.
> But it's no good, because I know you can't.
>
> Because I'm telling you this story, I will you into existence. I tell therefore you are. (49-50, 279)

The act of telling creates an imaginary circuit of communication in which identity is constructed through the use of first and second person pronouns. Narration becomes, in fact, the sole possible locus and safe-haven for identity in a society which isolates the Handmaid before coercing her into an alienating social role, depriving her of family, friends and paid labour, the basic building-blocks of a sense of self. Offred's mode of survival as subject is implied in her curious rewriting of the Cartesian *cogito*: "I tell, therefore you are." Her speech act is an affirmation of identity only insofar as it postulates (*creates*) an addressee on whom this identity is predicated. Narrator and receiver exist by mutual implication: identity is fundamentally *intersubjective*. We are some way, here, from Descartes' endless solipsistic regress. The identity constructed through an outward-turning narrative is an identity in process, fluid, unfinished, open to possibilities of change, subverting the dystopian tendency towards rigidity and stasis.

If narration serves the core purpose of preserving identity, it also fulfils a classic, therapeutic function by providing an outlet for painful memories of what Offred regularly refers to as "the time before." Offred's narrative is, among other things, a "talking cure"; it protects the protagonist from severe neurosis by furnishing her with an activity at a time when she signally lacks the opportunity for creative labour[1]. Furthermore, narration establishes its own temporality, securing momentary release from the constraints of a purely somatic, artificially distended time-frame. Narrative is also crucial in maintaining a tie with the past (a vital link in the preservation of a sense of self) and in providing a forum for the play of desire. Offred uses her story to describe episodes from "the time before" and conflicting beliefs as to her husband, Luke's, fate (she imagines scenes of death, imprisonment and torture, escape and resistance, 114-116). The logic of memory is revealed as capricious, endlessly inventive, and multivalent, undermining the *either/or* rationale of Gilead and giving expression to illicit hopes and desires repressed by the Handmaid's official mandate.

These desires emerge very clearly in Offred's reflexive gesture of drawing attention to the difficulties involved in narration *per se*. *The Handmaid's Tale* is an overtly metafictional narrative, incorporating a double frame: Offred's insistence on storytelling as "reconstruction" and Professor Pieixoto's *Historical Notes*, the ironic epilogue to her tale. Framing, here, is a rhetorical strategy used with the aim of communicating a "believable evil[2]"—by insisting on the fundamental unreliability of her narrative, Offred appeals to the reader's intuitive sense that "reality"—the raw event, or what phenomenology refers to as "the lived"—undergoes inevitable distortion as a consequence of being put into discourse (the signifier is incommensurable with the happening). This skilful rhetorical move ultimately *protects* the message (the signified or plot) by shifting readerly attention onto the structural shortcomings of the signifier used to record it. For Offred, narration is first and foremost a form of *witness*, and, as narrator, she takes great care in ensuring the reader's belief is captured and held. The Handmaid's framing of her narrative has been criticised as reader "manipulation," her "powerful narrative skill[1]" conflicting with her powerlessness under the Gileadean regime. I would argue that Offred's oratorical gifts of persuasion are mobilised in direct response to the urgency of her message; her act of speech is a "dire warning" and every conceivable strategy is harnessed (to considerable effect, if critical reaction is any measure of success), to engender readerly belief. Within the limits of her own narrative, critical self-examination and questioning have tended to provoke the desired reaction and strengthen the credibility of her tale, much of which is anchored in an extrapolation of perceptible contemporary realities. This, I feel, cannot be said of the secondary frame of *The Handmaid's Tale*—its epilogue—which is also patently intended to reinforce readerly identification with the protagonist and intensify belief in her account. Pieixoto's self-congratulatory and arrogant brand of sexism, his narrow and reactionary academicism are easy targets, and his condescending tone, "clearly designed to provoke reader outrage[2]," inadvertently runs the risk of weakening Offred's (and Atwood's) case by falling into excess and self-caricature. The metafictional frame, primarily a *protective* device, here comes perilously close to backfiring, underlining as it does so the constitutive fragility of the speech act, never adequately insured against the possibility of failure.

1. On the connection between feminine identity, neurosis, and creative labour, see Teresa Brennan, *The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud and Femininity*, Routledge, 1992.
2. Glenn Deer, "Rhetorical Strategies in *The Handmaid's Tale*: dystopia and the paradoxes of power", *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 18, n° 2, June 1992, p. 215.

Language as forbidden fruit: Scrabble games, lone signifiers

In one of his most enigmatic moments, the Commander invites Offred to play Scrabble with him in the privacy of his office. The Scrabble game fulfils a dual function in the economy of the narrative. Firstly, it draws attention to language as an object of illegitimate desire (the Handmaids are denied access to the written word) and inscribes it within a semiotic of clandestine courtship, foreplay and seduction ("Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable," 149). Scrabble games lead to the request for a kiss, the temptation of an extravagant evening dress, the date at Jezebel's where Offred accompanies her escort in the guise of "evening rental," the inevitable bedroom scene during which the Commander's advances force her to elicit some reaction from her unresponsive body.

The Scrabble game also highlights the paradoxes inherent in the protagonists' situations. The Handmaid refers to the game as a "conspiracy," and her pleasure in it is tempered by the realization that she is colluding in the power structures that keep her in a state of subservience and wordlessness.

1. Glenn Deer, *op. cit.*
2. J. Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, p. 156.

Playing Scrabble allows the Commander to project himself as "an ordinary kind of guy" (194), his bland office persona contrasting sharply with the figure of ruthless, puritanical, authoritarian Father he represents within the Gileadean symbolic. The role-play involved in the language game thus unveils the paradox at the heart of totalitarian law, as the latter is revealed as the mirror image of its bourgeois, egalitarian counterpart—its savagery and unfettered violence belong to the public domain and it is only in the domestic, private sphere that it can continue to portray itself as civilized, day-to-day, and inoffensive[1].

If the Scrabble game provides an ambivalent form of escape and a highly compromised taste of freedom, isolated signifiers remain fertile territory for reflection and play. Offred's narrative revels in the associative powers of language and its wealth of connotation. The signifier "egg" is the starting point for a startling meditation on the lunar landscape, God, and minimalist pleasures (120-121). Serena's Joy's garden, in the height of summer, suggests a sensuality captured by the signifiers 'swoon', 'rendez-vous' and "terraces" (161). Reflection on the word "job" leads Offred from the Book of Job to women's relationship to paid labour and gender relations in the time immediately preceding the military *coup* (182-192). Her narrative powers afford Offred the luxury of playing with isolated signifiers and exploring their metonymic logic, a subversive pleasure which founds its own, labyrinthine temporality of reminiscence, enabling her to fill out the "blank time" (80) otherwise spent merely watching and waiting.

Conclusion

The practices of narration and play are fundamentally optimistic, implying that language and the ideology it vehicles are open to *re*signification and change. Offred's construction of a narrative ensures the survival of identity, to be understood as identity in process, a *projective* identity in a state of constant becoming. The affirmation of narrative identity through bearing witness provides a critique of Gilead's rigid demarcation of gender roles and undercuts the dystopian impulse towards anonymity, fixity, and absorption by the One. Atwood's dystopia has none of Orwell's fatalism nor Huxley's masochistic defeatism, since her protagonist, while acknowledging the seduction of power and her own complicities with it, ultimately *dis*identifies with authority through the act of bearing witness or "talking back"; a clandestine *prise de parole* which marks her out as survivor rather than victim and holds out a measure of hope for a (non-dystopian) future.

1. For an analysis of the workings of the law under totalitarianism, see Slavoj Zizek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*, London, Verso, 1993, pp. 54-82.

Bibliography

CHASSEGUET-SMIRGEL Janine, *Les deux arbres du jardin* (1986), Paris, éditions des femmes, 1988 (particularly the chapter entitled "La matrice du complexe d'Œdipe dans l'Utopie", pp. 147-172).

DEER Glenn, "Rhetorical Strategies in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Dystopia and the Paradoxes of Power", *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 18, n° 2, June 1992.

EVANS Mark, "Versions of History: *The Handmaid's Tale* and its Dedicatees", in Colin Nicholson, ed., *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity*, London, Macmillan, & New York, St. Martin's Press, 1994, pp. 177-189.

FOUST R. E., "A Limited Perfection: Dystopia as Logos Game", *Mosaic*, vol. 15, n° 3, 1982, pp. 79-88.

LACROIX Jean-Yves, *L'Utopie*, Paris, Bordas, 1994.

MILOSZ Czeslaw, *La Pensée captive* (1953), Paris, Gallimard, coll. "folio-essais", 1988. (A powerful account of life in Poland as experienced by writers and intellectuals immediately prior to and during Soviet rule, with much that can illuminate a reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*.)

RUYER Raymond, *L'Utopie et les Utopies* (1950), Gérard Montfort, 1988.

STAELS Hilde, *Margaret Atwood's Novels: A Study of Narrative Discourse*, Tübingen, Francke Verlag, 1995 (particularly the chapter on *The Handmaid's Tale*, pp. 157-175).

TOMC Sandra, "'The Missionary Position': Feminism and Nationalism in *The Handmaid's Tale*", *Canadian Literature*, n° 138/139, Fall/Winter, 1993, pp. 73-87.