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The Value/s of Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Anti-Utopian Tradition

In attempting to relate Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* to what might be seen as an anti-utopian tradition, I shall be referring primarily to three of the most important dystopian fictions of the twentieth century: Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The resemblances between these three works have often been pointed out, and indeed Orwell went so far as virtually to accuse Huxley of having made unacknowledged use of Zamyatin's work in *Brave New World* (*Coll. Essays* 485). Huxley, for his part, denied ever having read *We*; and certainly there is an ironic aspect to Orwell's accusation, given that, if any work is derivative of Zamyatin, it is his own *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Leaving aside such questions of direct influence, however, there are other, more interesting resemblances between the three works. Each constitutes an extrapolation of what its author sees as a significant tendency in modern society, and while the starting points (Leninist socialism in Zamyatin's case, Stalinism in Orwell's, consumer capitalism in Huxley's) may differ, each ends up with a vision of a static, hierarchical, authoritarian society, where power rests in the hands of a small élite. In all three cases, it is a vision of the future as nightmare; yet at the same time that nightmare represents an inversion, a mirror-image of a much older dream—the dream of a more perfect society, of an ideal social order: the dream of utopia. *We*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are not merely grim warnings as to what the future might hold in store: they are also conceived of as challenges to and subversions of the ideology implicit in earlier fictions of a utopian society.

Utopian fictions, of course, exhibit their own family resemblances. Taking More's *Utopia* as a starting point, and the utopian fictions of

H. G. Wells as a convenient terminus, one finds that the majority of examples present a social ideal which is also static, hierarchical, and authoritarian—the only real difference between utopia and dystopia in this regard being that in the case of utopia it is assumed that power will be wielded in the common interest. In most utopias the social order is also distinctively patriarchal—in many cases even more so than that of the actual societies to which utopias propose an alternative. Yet at the same time the majority of utopian fictions are rife with details which suggest that at a much deeper level the utopian dream has a strongly female aspect: in the geography of utopia, in much of the symbolism, and above all in the often bizarre narrative mechanisms used to transfer the visitor or narrator from the real world to utopia, one finds ample evidence to support the view that the utopian dream is also, at least in part, a dream of returning to the womb. One of the central paradoxes of utopian fiction, in fact, may be seen as lying in its attempt to reconstitute, by means of a distinctively male order, the primal security provided by the mother.

Dystopian fiction, in seeking to challenge and subvert the norms of the traditional utopia, exposes many of the contradictions and evasions inherent in the political and social aspects of the utopian dream. By the very fact of providing an opposition, dystopian fiction not only provides a dramatic focus which utopian literature so often conspicuously lacks, it also highlights the inherent authoritarianism which many utopian writers seek to conceal by showing authority only in its most benign aspects. At the level of sexual politics, however, dystopian fictions are less successful in exposing the fundamental contradictions within the traditional utopian dream. Indeed, it may be argued that, while it may not endorse it, dystopian fiction nonetheless enacts the same suppression and rejection of the feminine so characteristic of the male utopian ideal. Thus, while the provision of an oppositional presence in dystopian fiction is clearly one of its most significant features, equally significant is the fact that in every case the defeat of the opposition is shown as virtually inevitable. And when the *nature* of that defeat comes to be examined in more detail, its inevitability may be seen to stem from the terms in which opposition is conceived: D-503 in *We*, Bernard Marx and the Savage in *Brave New World*, Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—all represent not just ordinary males, but males who are in various ways insecure about their own masculinity, yet nevertheless go on to challenge the supermale authority of the patriarchal state. Of course, given the terms of the contest, the defeat of D-503 by the superhuman power of The Benefactor; of Bernard and

the Savage by the sleekly self-confident Mustapha Mond, earthly representative of Our Ford; of Winston Smith by Big Brother and his intermediary, the brutal but charismatic O'Brien: each is a foregone conclusion. Yet it is not sufficient for patriarchal supremacy to triumph over an inferior male opponent: the real enemy is in fact the woman—a fact that becomes more evident when one considers the manner in which the final defeat of the opposition is depicted.

In both *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is significant that the male hero's opposition only begins due to the influence of a woman: it is E-330 who tempts the hitherto loyal D-503 into both sexual and political rebellion; while it is only after meeting the sexually subversive Julia that Winston Smith's furtive gestures of dissidence give way to full-blown revolt. In defeat, however, it becomes necessary for the male to disown the female by whom he has been led astray. Lobotomized, D-503 sits next to The Benefactor to witness the torture of E-330—a process which is described in decidedly disquieting terms:

Then she was led in under the Gas Bell Glass. Her face became very white and, since her eyes were dark and large, this created an extremely beautiful effect. When they started pumping the air out of the Gas Bell Glass she threw her head back, half closing her eyes and compressing her lips: this reminded me of something . . . This was gone through three times. (221)

What it reminds him of, of course, is his lover's appearance during orgasm, and in this context the triple repetition becomes, not merely an arbitrary exercise in cruelty, but a manifestation of the superior potency of The Benefactor, who is able to induce such symptoms three times in rapid succession.

If there is something indecent about the voyeuristic satisfaction with which D-503 witnesses his former lover's torture, the conclusion of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is even more disturbing. While in the Ministry of Love, Winston Smith is alternately tortured and comforted by the muscular O'Brien, with whom he develops a curious intimacy. He even dreams of O'Brien—who significantly displaces his mother in his dreams—and it is of course O'Brien who engineers Winston's betrayal of Julia. At the very end of the work, he meets Julia again, but feels nothing but distaste for her: rather than follow her, he returns to the comfort of the café, where he can indulge in loving thoughts of Big Brother, and in an almost voluptuous longing for the bullet which will kill him.

He was walking down the white-tiled corridor, with the feeling of walking in sunlight, and an armed guard at his back. The long-hoped-for bullet was entering his brain.

He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache . . . O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! . . . But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished . . . He loved Big Brother. (256)

The homoerotic overtones of such a passage can scarcely be ignored, yet while they are of course far less apparent amid the rampant heterosexual promiscuity of *Brave New World*, even here the disavowal, the destruction of the female is enacted. After witnessing the death of his mother, the Savage takes refuge in the countryside, where he later participates in an orgy in which the woman he once loved is killed (whether actually or merely ritually is never made quite clear). Overcome by sexual guilt, he then commits suicide by hanging himself in, of all things, a lighthouse—which continues to point to the sky as the Savage dangles dead at its base, in yet another symbol of male authority triumphant.

In this context, it becomes all the more interesting to examine a dystopian fiction not only written by a woman, but featuring a woman as its central character—and to see whether, and how far, this changes the terms of the dystopian equation. Offred, the protagonist of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, is also confronted by an apparently invulnerable and omnipotent male authority: Gilead, the fundamentalist theocracy of Atwood's novel is ruled in the name of that supreme patriarch, God the Father. At first sight, indeed, she appears less of a rebel against male authority, than a helpless victim of it. Yet for all her passivity, Offred is by no means *simply* a victim. Although she is humiliated, forced against her will into what is tantamount to slavery, stripped of her friends, husband, child—even her own name—she never concedes defeat, as do D-503, the Savage, or Winston Smith. In practical terms she may do less than they by way of effectively challenging authority; what differs is the *way* in which her resistance is presented.

Far more exclusively than any other dystopian writer, Atwood focusses on the private consciousness of her protagonist—and in doing so she resorts, like Zamyatin, to first-person narration. Huxley and Orwell, by contrast, adopt a third-person narrative perspective designed in part to show the individual *in* society, and to do so in such a way as to heighten the sense of his helplessness, of his being merely one unit in the enormous sum of the State. Yet even in *We*, where every-

thing is filtered through the consciousness of the central character, the power of the State intrudes: D-503's consciousness becomes a battleground for the conflicting ideologies of the State, whose values he has internalized, and the dissidents, who challenge the assumptions he has so long taken for granted. D-503 is already a product of the State: its values are an integral part of him, and when he finally undergoes the Grand Operation to cure him of "fantasy"—essentially the power of original thought—one senses a certain feeling of relief on his part, now that things have been made simple once more. In Offred's case, however, the values of the State have never been part of her consciousness: while she is scarcely a heroic opponent of the régime, there is little doubt as to her contempt for it. There is no battle to be fought within her mind, since she is already clear which side she is on. And though her thoughts are about all that she has left her, the privacy of her mind is something that remains inviolable. For all the elaboration of the State's surveillance mechanisms, it cannot prevent her from committing treason within her mind—thoughtcrime, to use Orwell's terminology—remembering with affection those whom the State has sought to destroy, judging the system and its representatives and finding them wanting. Admittedly, much the same could be said of Winston Smith, prior to his arrest. What makes the *effect* of Atwood's narrative so different is the perspective adopted: by focussing so exclusively on Offred's individual consciousness, Atwood privileges her perceptions to a far greater degree. While Offred is hardly in a position to take effective action against authority, that authority is seen *only* through her eyes—a context in which its pretensions become more than a little ridiculous. "Context is all," Offred reflects at one point—and her narrative goes a long way towards demonstrating the truth of this.

In the context of Offred's narrative, for example, patriarchal authority no longer looms as large as it does in earlier dystopian texts. Nominally, the society is run to the greater glory of God the Father, but from Offred's point of view His is not a presence, but an absence. In His place there are only the somewhat pathetic surrogates—the Commanders. And unlike the representatives of authority elsewhere—the suave Mustapha Mond, the formidable O'Brien—the Commanders almost invariably appear in contexts which make them seem ridiculous. Offred's own Commander, with his desire for the forbidden delights of Scrabble, his furtive glee over the schoolboy obscenities scrawled in his Latin textbook, his excitement at a trip to a brothel where sexual allure is provided by old cheerleaders' outfits and second-hand Bunny costumes, is merely ludicrous. True, his power is real

enough; yet even that power is undermined by the sense of his confusion and incompetence. He appears genuinely puzzled by the course events have taken, surprised by Offred's dislike of her role. And as a representative of God the Father he is conspicuously lacking in the sexual vitality of the Old Testament patriarchs, being both probably sterile—as even his own wife concedes—and sexually inept. “I’ve had him,” Offred’s friend Moira remarks offhandedly, “he’s the pits” (228). Unlike Mond or O’Brien, Offred’s Commander is vulnerable: at the end we see him “worried and helpless,” almost visibly shrinking as he sees himself being dragged down by Offred’s apparent disgrace—the victim, in fact, of someone he had regarded as a mere possession.

Nor do the other males fare much better. In her earlier fictions Atwood had already demonstrated her virtuosity in the evocation of sexual disgust. In *Life Before Man*, for example, a woman’s sexual encounter with a particularly bland civil servant is described as like being in bed with “a large and fairly active slab of Philadelphia cream cheese” (213), and in *The Handmaid’s Tale* she allows her virtuosity full rein. At the Prayvaganza, Offred reflects that while the presiding Commander, with his uniform and decorations, looks impressive enough, she has the power to imagine him otherwise “. . . in bed with his Wife and his Handmaid, fertilizing away like mad, like a rutting salmon.” And at the mass wedding ceremony for the military heroes, newly returned from the front, Offred again imagines the reality of their sexual lives:

. . . momentous grunts and sweating, damp furry encounters; or better, ignominious failures, cocks like three-week-old carrots, anguished fumbings upon flesh cold and unresponding as uncooked fish. (209)

Laughter, particularly that fuelled by sexual contempt, becomes a powerful weapon in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. “It does so do good. It does,” insists Offred’s friend Moira, when Offred protests at her fantasy or oral sex between one of the trainee Handmaids and the redoubtable Aunt Lydia. Laughter is at once an assertion of the laugher’s humanity, and an undermining of the authority of the person laughed at. As a practical political tool, it is perhaps ineffective—although satire and ridicule have never been very welcome to those in power—but in the context of the fictional text it decisively affects the impression made by the representatives of the dystopian state. Zamyatin, too, sees laughter as a liberating force, but in *We* it works only sporadically: though D-503 may laugh at the bald-headed man who is the reality behind the cast-iron image of The Benefactor, his power is too real, too

lethal to be laughed at for long. Mustapha Mond and O'Brien are not laughed at at all. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, "mirth rhymes with birth"—laughter provides an avenue of escape from the all-encompassing security which the State seeks to impose on the individual whom it is striving to mould in its own image. Laughter is both an assertion of independent identity, of an alternative mode of perceiving reality, and part of a larger mechanism whereby the individual reclaims experience and endows it with a personal significance. Beneath the surface frivolity of laughter lies something more serious: while the schoolboy dog-latin—*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*—scrawled on the floor of Offred's cupboard may be merely a furtive joke to the Commander, for Offred it is a coded inscription, a gesture of defiance from a woman whose death has put her beyond the reach of the State's authority. While, as Orwell perceived, the standardization and impoverishment of language is an essential prerequisite for an extension of the State's control of individual thought, Atwood's rebels exploit the richness and ambiguity of a linguistic realm over which the State has no jurisdiction. (It is significant that one of Offred's main interactions with her Commander takes the form of a competitive word game.) The very codeword of the resistance—Mayday—is fraught with complex and ambiguous associations altogether alien to the simplistic fundamentalism of the dystopian state: "Mayday" is a call for help in a foreign language, a reminder of traditional pagan fertility rituals, and the chief festival of international socialism. In the context of the book, it is also a declaration of independence.

What *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates, in effect, is the paradox that the further the State attempts to extend its power, the more arenas it creates where resistance is possible. The more that is forbidden, the greater the number of potentially subversive actions becomes. Thus, while Offred makes no effort to conceal her own weaknesses, her failures in courage, her passivity, her opposition to the monolithic authority of the State is in fact a good deal more effective than she realizes. Simply by existing, however passive her own resistance, she provides an audience for the resistance of others, a space in which the implications of their actions can resonate. What Atwood stresses is that, however powerless, however often defeated, the rebel is *not* alone. When Moira escapes from the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre, after overpowering Aunt Elizabeth in the washroom, she not only makes a personal bid for freedom, but also exposes the limitations of authority:

. . . Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was the lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. (125)

In the context of the State's attempt to establish an all-embracing static norm, even gossip becomes subversive: when Offred asks her Commander to tell her "what's going on," her very choice of words implies a process, an assumption that there is a continuous dynamic that might at any moment precipitate change. Even the news on TV, though rigorously controlled by the authorities, implies by its blatant selectivity the fact of other events, which are *not* reported. The more absolute the authority the State seeks to wield, the more precarious it becomes.

There are other limitations to the power of the State as well: unlike the earlier dystopias, Atwood's Gilead has finite boundaries in both space and time. It is not a world state—there are other places to which escape is possible—and in the epilogue, in which Gilead becomes the subject of an academic conference, it becomes clear that it was only a transient social experiment. Unlike the dystopias of Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell, whose terror lies partly in the threat of their being eternal, Gilead is ephemeral, deprived of an eternal future by its inability to sever itself from the past. Unlike the previous dystopias, which contrive to cut themselves off from history, Gilead illustrates one of the principal limitations of all revolutions, whether for good or ill: the fact that they are made by those who are themselves products of the society which the revolution seeks to overthrow. While the State's representatives look forward to the time when everyone will have grown up accepting its values, until then memory, with the perspective it provides, remains a potent threat to authority. Offred is only one of innumerable individuals who can remember the way things were, who can recall the outrages perpetrated in the name of the new order, who can contrast now with then and consider the implications of the differences. Nor are the rulers themselves immune to the memories, or indeed the desires of the past: unable to control their previously socialized lust for women as sex-objects, they recreate the brothels which their puritan revolution was meant to abolish. Between the hypocrisy of the rulers and the mocking laughter of the ruled, it is clear that the new order is constructed on shaky foundations.

Yet it is not only the limitations of utopian authoritarianism that Atwood seeks to expose; in certain of its aspects it is clear that *The Handmaid's Tale* is also designed as a rebuttal of some of the assump-

tions of dystopian fiction as well. In particular, Atwood challenges Zamyatin's and Orwell's stereotypical endorsement of traditional female sex-roles as more "natural" than, and hence subversive of, the State-ordained sexual ethic. Zamyatin's E-330 defies the State by abandoning her uniform in favor of more traditionally sexy attire, which emphasizes the breasts to an extent that renders the narrator practically inarticulate with excitement; while Orwell's Julia, declaring that she wants to be "a woman, not a Party comrade," (127) acts out her defiance by plastering herself with heavy make-up. In Atwood's case, however, the equivalent scene, where Offred sheds her nun-like uniform and dons make-up, high-heels, and a revealing outfit made largely of birds' feathers, is designed to illustrate, not the subversive power of "natural" female sexuality, but rather the extent to which such stereotypes are merely the obverse of the fear of female sexuality which fuels the puritanical norms of her dystopian society. Gilead's stringent moral code is ostensibly designed to protect women from predatory male sexuality, yet its designers continue to dream of the old stereotypes, and find their sexual outlets at the archetypal locale of male fantasy, the brothel. One of the most ludicrous aspects of Offred's trip to the brothel with her Commander is his pathetic belief that the trip is somehow exciting for *her*. Where Offred defies the State's sexual norms is not in displays of male-endorsed traditional femininity, but in her illicit encounters with the Commander's chauffeur, which take place in the darkness, and which she never really finds the words to describe. The subversiveness of such sexuality lies essentially in its secrecy, its privacy—features which both her monthly couplings in the Commander's marriage bed and the brothel signally lack. Yet even there, Offred remains dubious as to how far this too constitutes a form of compromise with male authority.

The Handmaid's Tale remains a dystopia where the lines of battle are far more ambiguously drawn: while on the surface hardly less defeatist than its predecessors, it avoids the sometimes oversimplified alternatives which they present. Mere nostalgia for the past, and the acceptance of a vaguely liberal conception of "freedom" as the only alternative to conformity (which only Huxley, among the earlier writers, seriously questions) are both avoided. Instead, Atwood creates a dystopian vision which is critical, not only of the utopian authoritarian impulse, but also of the dystopian response to it. It is this critical—and indeed self-critical—impulse which is one of the most distinctive features of Atwood's dystopian vision: that, and her insight into where the weaknesses of the authoritarian state really lie. Moira's mocking pun

on the words of a hymn—"There is a bomb in Gilead"—may constitute a rather feeble attempt at humor, but it also expresses a profounder truth. For there *is* a bomb in Gilead: like all authoritarian attempts to impose a total, static order on humanity, it contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. And instead of presenting an oppositional strategy where the individual courts certain defeat by confronting authority at its strongest point, Atwood's narrative relies on the guerilla tactics of humor, evasion, survival, all devices designed to allow the seeds of destruction within the authoritarian monolith to grow and bear fruit.

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