The Art and Politics of Rewriting. Margaret Atwood's *Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale*

Michaela PRAISLER*
Oana-Celia GHEORGHIU**

Abstract

Among the many frameworks of interpretation that Margaret Atwood's dystopia (or ustopia, as she calls it) The Handmaid's Tale *allows, a particularly challenging one is its reading in/as palimpsest. Choosing not to favour an attempt at hierarchizing the narrative construction and the fabula contained in Offred's spoken tale – transcribed from audiocassettes two centuries after the deployment of the Christian fundamentalist coup d'état that turned the United States into a horrifying inferno for women –, and also leaving on the sidelines the seductive, yet rather facile feminist evaluation that the novel invites, this paper focuses on metafiction and the rewriting of "herstory", in an analysis of the 'Historical Notes' that conclude the novel, going backwards rather than forwards in tracing its art and politics.*

Key words: *metafiction, rewriting, authenticity, intertextuality, canon*

Introduction

Probably the most famous novel written to date by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has enjoyed wide critical attention since its publication, having been inscribed in the category of the 20th-century most accomplished dystopian works, next to Huxley's *Brave New World* or Orwell's *1984*. Its recent adaptation into a successful TV series, and the announcement of a sequel in 2019, *The Testaments*, which will supposedly answer some of the questions left unanswered by not one but two open-endings, alongside an increased concern with what is

* Professor, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galaţi, Romania, michaela.praisler@ugal.ro
** Senior Lecturer, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galaţi, Romania, oana.gheorghiu@ugal.ro

currently going on in the United States in terms of state policies and the political stance assumed by the author in the media, have brought the novel back into the limelight three decades after its publication. In this context, it is futile to insist on plot development, all the more so as its disrupted chronology and back-and-forth vacillation on the temporal axis make it rather difficult to resume. Much more interesting seems at this point, when postmodernism appears to have been replaced with 'something else', that some call post-postmodernism for lack of a better term, to try and reconstruct the subversive, postmodern deconstruction of the canon at work in this novel, from the dual perspective of the art and politics of rewriting, as the title of this presentation announces. The plot will only be outlined, contending that it might turn useful for an analysis of the metafictional practices employed throughout the text. The focus is laid on tracing these practices backwards, setting out from the addendum that concludes the novel, *Historical Notes*, which constitutes the core part of the study.

Gilead penitentiary

The Handmaid's Tale, whose title is a direct reference to the stories in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, as acknowledged in the novel (Atwood 2010: 313, henceforth *HT*), is a speculative narrative of a *possible* world taken over by religious fundamentalism. A political novel, Atwood's writing focuses on the domestic sphere which is, nevertheless, easy to extrapolate to the entire social milieu under the regime in force. "The family is 'an interior' in crisis like all other interiors" (Deleuze 1992: 4), and the Gileadean family is a space of confinement of a "carceral texture" that "allows the body to be captured and observed" (Foucault 1995: 304). By extension, the entire country is a prison, and not one that "thinking makes it so" (*Hamlet* II, 2) but a very actual one.

Though not specifically determined, *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the near future (judging by its being written in the 1980s, it could be happening, scarily so, right about now), in what was left of the United States of America after a violent overthrow of the democratic regime and the coming to power of a group of Christian radical insurgents, known as the Sons of Jacob. The country is renamed Gilead, a name of Old Testament resonance (*Genesis* 31: 21), and its laws follow closely – and literally – precepts inspired from the same source. Women are gradually stripped of all rights – the reader finds out, in numerous flashbacks that crisscross the

narrative of the 'present' – that they have lost their bank accounts, then their jobs, their right to read, etc., prior to the current state of affairs, which has divided them into several categories: Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives, Jezebels and Unwomen. Central to the story is the handmaids' institution, which turns fertile women with a history of unruly behaviour, according to the power in force (divorcees, women in second marriages, lesbians, etc.), into reproductive domestic assets in the houses of the potentates of the regime. The larger political and social framework is an alarmingly falling birth rate, whose apparent cause is men's infertility produced by environmental abuse. Of course, in the official narrative, there is no such thing as men's infertility: only women can be `barren'. Women find themselves in the position of being consensually raped (the oxymoron is intended) in order to breed, to give birth to children that will not be theirs. They are given a choice, as the narrator, a handmaid, stresses: "nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some and this is what I chose" (*HT* 105). The other choices are death, deportation to 'Colonies' – a place where they would clean radioactive waste – or, as later revealed, prostitution in brothels designed for the same potentates, as "everyone's human, after all" (248). Not a lot of choice, indeed, but it still questions the ethics of the handmaids who accept, oxymoronically again, to be 'privileged sex-slaves'. The mating ritual, stripped of sexuality, yet, technically speaking, still a *ménage a trois*, is inspired from the *Book of Genesis*, as alluded to in the very first motto to the novel:

> And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (*Genesis*, 30: 1-3)

The narrator is a woman whose real name is never given, her identity being restricted to her being the property of the Commander: Offred (objectified as 'of Fred'). The text actually provides, metatextually, the explanation for this name:

> It was a patronymic, composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question. Such names were taken by these women upon their entry into a connection with the household of a specific Commander, and relinquished by them upon leaving it (*HT* 318).

Her story is told in a diaristic manner, a first person narrative which focuses on the domestic aspects of life under a Christian dictatorship, which has attracted both criticism and praise for Atwood for having created a piece of *écriture féminine*, a contention that she refutes, claiming that the novel is solely about power. Aside from the 'Ceremony', the reader is fed with conversations on the weather – the only topic without subversive qualities – between women shopping and participating in celebrations together – the Prayvaganza, the Salvaging, and the birth of the children of the handmaids fortunate enough to become pregnant and go through the nine months of pregnancy. Language is constantly sterile and formulaic, limited to religious set-phrases (*Blessed be the fruit! - May the Lord open!*), but what is more interesting is that the narrator's thoughts become, at times, aligned with the doctrine, which may be surprising for someone who has not lived in totalitarianism. Though absurd, life in Gilead and the surveillance of its citizens bear strong resemblance to the 'societies of control' (Deleuze 1990) exerted by communist dictatorships, which comes to enforce Atwood's claim that everything "that happens in her novels is possible and may even have already happened" (*The Guardian* 2011).

The storyline, slow-paced and, as mentioned, often interrupted by inroads into a past mediated by memory, which serves to construct the historical framework of the events that have led to the respective state of affairs, is complemented by several intertwined subplots which seem to work together towards Offred's fleeing from the yokes that keep her and other women in this absurd religion-driven bondage. The first is an illicit love-story between Offred and Nick, the family driver and, seemingly, an agent of the regime, an Eye. Their relationship is prompted by the Commander's Wife, Serena Joy, a former televangelist who used to promote patriarchy and women's subservient role in it, and who secretly believes that her husband is unable to impregnate the handmaid. She desperately wants Offred to have a child, by whomever possible, perhaps, at least in part, to be excused herself from playing her assigned role as the biblical Rachel in the 'Ceremony'. Another one is the attempt to recruit Offred for the resistance movement known as Mayday by a fellow handmaid, Offglen, who, at some point, disappears without a trace, in a manner reminding of NKVD/KGB practices. There is also the equally illicit relationship between Offred and the Commander, which culminates with him taking her to Jezebel's, the brothel, where she meets her friend from the past, Moira, an escapee from the Red Centre for handmaids' training.

The last 'tableau' involves Offred's being arrested for "violation of state secrets" (*HT* 306), and Nick's whispering to her that the agents are actually members of the resistance come to her rescue. The closing lines play on binary opposites (end/beginning, darkness/light), advancing multiple questions and ambiguous answers rather than a dénouement proper:

> Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light (307).

The Handmaid's Tale is, from the mottos page, a genuine sample of applied postmodern literary theory, which can be used as a textbook, for reasons that will be further argued. However, hardly can any part of it be more effective in subverting the canon and, implicitly, patriarchy, than the last chapter, which encourages the re-evaluation of the first 300 pages: the overt metafictional paratext *Historical Notes*, whose construction (as art of fiction) and function (as politics of fiction) will be outlined in the following section.

The art and politics of fiction in *Historical Notes*

If, while reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, one has felt that Offred's presumed interior monologue suffers from artificiality and inconsistency, pinning it to a stylistic maladroitness comparable to that of Orwell's *1984*, once reaching the *Historical Notes,* one definitely ought to reconsider. The framing narrative which concludes the novel is not meant to clarify anything, as one would expect from a postface. That would be very *un*-postmodernist of a writer so fond of transtextualities that she plays with the readers' expectations starting from the Chaucerian title and all along the novel, only to leave them wondering at the end. It is in a deconstructionist manner that she chooses to discredit the narrative that has just been delivered, all the while giving it the appearance of authenticity, vouched for by historians and by the 'omniscient' academia, as structures of power and authority.

The meta- dimension covered by prefaces and postfaces, fashionably in vogue today, has been frequently under scrutiny by literary scholars. In 1981, for instance, Derrida was asking "what do prefaces actually do?" (2004: 7), a question that he had actually responded to even before formulating it: "a preface would retrace and presage a general theory of deconstruction […], would announce in the future tense ('this is what you are going to read') the conceptual concept or significance" (6). Genette furthered the notion of authority, responding to the

deconstructionist philosopher's question by averring that prefaces were used "to ensure that the text [was] read properly" (1997: 197). But *Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale* is not a preface, in other words, it does not direct the reading towards a predetermined understanding of the text; quite the contrary, it entails re-reading and textual reassessment, which would, theoretically, draw it near the function of a postface. In fact, *Historical Notes* is an apocryphal, pseudo-allograph paratext similar in intention with Borges's epilogue to his *Complete Works* – "a bogus 'Borges' article in an encyclopaedia of the twenty-first century with its inevitable share of errors, both factual and judgemental" (Genette 1997: 238). It is neither a postface, nor an epilogue intended to supplement the information already delivered by the fictional text; it is, in fact, a fictional text in itself, which emphasises the fictionality of Offred's narrative and undermines the already shaken credibility of the narrator.

In essence, *Historical Notes* is "a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies held as part of the International Historical Association Convention, which took place at the University of Denay, Nunavit, on June 25, 2195" (*HT* 311). This 'paratext of the paratext' creates the premises for mocking more than one authority – firstly history, as alleged keeper of the truth about the past, and then the academia, a patriarchal enclave, a Gilead in its own right, with its own 'laws' and claims to truth. It is unclear whether Dunay, Nunavit is, as speculated, a pun on 'deny none of it', or whether it is only intended as a mapping instrument (with Nunavut, in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago coming to mind); the wordplay would definitely add to "putting into question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality" (Hutcheon 2004: 129). Is *the handmaid's tale* presented history or fiction? The conference is one of anthropology and history: convenors deliver papers on military tactic and elements of eclecticism in the state religion of Gilead. It would appear, from the first lines of this so-called transcript, that the reader should have read Offred's non-linear, disrupted account as history, and consequently, 'deny none of it', even though the text disregarded "the workings of the Gileadean empire" (*HT* 322), focusing instead on domestic life during the fundamentalist dictatorship. This New Historicist approach of looking into "private papers, newspaper clippings" (Greenblatt 2005: 27), regarding personal accounts (diaries, for instance) as representative for the wider cultural context of their production, as history, is immediately

subverted by an authoritative voice which comes to question the truth, genuineness, authenticity of the narrative discourse and, at the same time, the authority of the author/narrator of the 'source text' under the lens.

The keynote speaker, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, is Director of "twentieth and twenty-first century archives, Cambridge University, England" (311), therefore, a respectable authority judging by his position and affiliation (as well as gender, one could add), but his presentation implies 'Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*' (312). In other words, the text deconstructs its own authenticity, subverting the readers' newly-found conviction that what they have read borders reality, by signalling and stressing again that it is, in fact, fiction.

As Gilead used to "discourage adverse publicity in foreign countries" (323) and destroyed the official records of the early meeting of the Sons of Jacob, the reconstruction of a past that is, as any other past, "a great darkness and filled with echoes" (324) is a problematic task for historians who are supposed to grasp history "in the clearer light of our own day" (324). Pieixoto and his colleague, Wade, are thus trying to make sense of the greater history of Gilead relying on Offred's story, which, as the former explains, turning upside down the readers' previous construing of the narrative, was rendered neither as an interior monologue 'uttered' shortly after the events narrated, nor as a piece of feminine writing (a diary), as 'the author', as he keeps calling Offred (implying construction, fictionalism, alteration of reality) did not have access to writing instruments. It was spoken discourse, uttered and tape-recorded after her escape from the Commander's house. Owing to distancing in both time and space from the events narrated, the testimony is mediated by memory and re-creation. Atwood chooses to address the eventual concerns with textual inconsistency through the voice of her secondary 'narrator', who points out, in the manner of a literary critic, that "there is a certain reflective quality about the narrative that would rule out synchronicity. It has a whiff of emotion recollected, if not in tranquillity, at least *post facto*" (315). Therefore, the text is, in the narrator's view, both subjective and uncreditable.

The fact that the historical text, "the *soi-dissant* manuscript" (312) is authored by a woman who chose to focus on her private existence instead of gathering evidence for future historians is not fortunate either, according to the authoritative, omniscient male speaker. The discourse is misogynistic. On the one hand, it abounds in sexual double-entendres (to 'enjoy' a woman, the pun on *tale/tail*, as per the latter's usage in Old and

Early Modern English, the allusion to the secondary, sexual meaning of the noun *bone* in the idiom *bone of contention*, etc.). On the other hand, the document is dismissively regarded as "crumbs" (322), pointing to the irrelevance of a woman's story on the scale of his(s)tory.

The speech is constructed along the lines of a canonicity of historical texts proper, of which Offred's account is not and cannot be a part – hence the need for 'authentication'. This term refers to the action taken by historians for proving the genuineness of a piece of historical data, so the intertextual relation established between the text and the scientific language of the field seems, at a glance, sufficient to render this re-narration more reliable than the former. Appealing to authority is also present in the speech, when experts are mentioned to have vouched for the authenticity of the recordings and medium used – the cassette (audiotape), whose use was discontinued in the 1990s, to be replaced by the compact-disk. However, this creates another (intentional, no doubt) chronological inconsistency. The tapes have been discovered in a footlocker belonging to US Army, dating from around 1955. Pieixoto grants no significance to this object, despite the fact that, being army goods, it may point, yet again, to authority and control.

More interesting, in the context of this discovery, is the music recorded on the tapes, which can recreate the cultural context of the age – the fictional pre-Gilead era, which overlaps the 1980s, i.e. the time when the novel was written. Aside from folk and classical music, there is Elvis Presley, whose sexy attitude on stage was widely criticised by conservatives, Boy George, who delivered a transsexual image and, most importantly, Twisted Sisters. The latter were a porn-rock band with a shocking image, extremely successful in 1984-1985, who were subject to an investigation in the Senate, prompted by PMRC (Parents Music Resource Center), led at that time by Tipper Gore, Al Gore's wife. The hearing was followed by the introduction of the 'parental advisory' stickers on media presumably containing indecent music, and it is considered an act of censorship of cultural products, although it is in force even nowadays. Although the hearing was held in September 1985, a date by which Atwood had already finished the novel for three months, according to her notes – "On 10 June there is a cryptic entry: Finished editing *Handmaid's Tale* last week." (*The Guardian* 2012), it is beyond doubt that the scandal around the band, alongside the rise of the Christian Right at the end of the 1970s, with their condemnation of the moral decline of America, should be read as (cultural) intertexts, as extra-textual hypotexts for the narrative of the

Gileadean era as a whole. By mentioning Twisted Sisters, the literary text goes beyond the democratisation of the novel as a product of high culture through reference to popular culture, which is common with postmodern literature: it actually metafictionally discusses its sources (and it is high time we mentioned that such a practice is not at all singular, as similar allusions also crowd the core part of the novel).

Similarly, mentioning the real, historical case of Romania, which "had anticipated Gilead in the eighties by banning all forms of birth control, imposing compulsory pregnancy tests on the female population, and linking promotion and wage increases to fertility" (*HT* 317), alongside the polygamy practised by the inhabitants of Utah in the nineteenth century, and some references to Communism and Nazism, the text points to its sources and to the intertextuality of history:

> As we know from the study of history, no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without incorporating many of the elements to be found in the latter, as witness the pagan elements in mediaeval Christianity and the evolution of the Russian KGB from the Czarist secret service that preceded it (317).

In this respect, *Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale* would probably allow a line-by-line analysis meant to unveil all intertextual sources, all hypotexts that support the narrative in the former part, and constitute an important device for the art of *meta*fiction employed in the latter. However, such endeavour serves no other purpose than that of an inventory, as the point has already been made, and it may be more interesting to displace the accent from art, moving it more towards politics, although the two are hard to separate in the novel architecture.

Political engagement dominates *Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale*. It is observable in the 'stature' of the condescending main character, in the academic rhetoric of Pieixoto's speech, in the post-truth context outlined. The professor, an 'authority' in his field, seems to start from the premise that he is bringing civilisation to the wilderness of the Arctic, which entitles him to be rude to his host, the female academic from Nunavit (Nunavut) who presides the session and gratefully introduces him: "Thank you. I am sure we all enjoyed our charming Arctic Char last night at dinner, and now we are enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair. I use the word "enjoy" in two distinct senses, precluding, of course, the obsolete third. (*Laughter*)" (312).

It also emerges from the not-so-subtle references to "The Underground Frailroad" (313), the "whiff of emotion recollected" (315), "hypothetical occupants" (315) in view of highlighting the unreliability of the female narrator recording a voice otherwise denied her, and accordingly outlining gender politics. Likewise, the question of race is alluded to in the sections dedicated to "the age of plummeting Caucasian birth rates" (316) in Gilead as elsewhere at the time, and to the extreme measures implemented to preserve this master population. Caucasian eugenics and racial purging are mentioned in connection with the sources of inspiration for Gileadean Particicution and Salvaging politics. Ethnicity is yet another issue tackled in the passages related to the Second World War era, as well as in the comments on anti-Semitism or the horrors of "the Jewish repatriation scheme" (319) preceding the formation of Gilead. Lastly, education policies are noted – "Our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won't do that again." (320) – and totalitarianism is defined – "As the architects of Gilead knew, to institute an effective totalitarian system […] you must offer some benefits and freedoms, at least to a privileged few, in return for those you remove." (320)

The ustopia announced by Atwood (2011) and mapped in *Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale* thus results from the marriage of opposites, where the imagined perfect society is Gilead and its dysfunctional other is the US – historiographically represented as fiction potentially influencing reality.

Concluding lines

Though oblique, the politics advanced by Atwood is clear, as is her criticism: history is practically his story, overlooking hers; the academia is a structure of authority and control, shaping the grand narrative of who we are, in disrespect of the 'petites histoires' which go into its making; if writing is used for propaganda, re-writing works as further manipulation. *Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale* – the disclaimer interrogating the very nature of fact vs. fiction – brings literary art to cover political ground via Pieixoto's authenticating endeavour, which focuses on 'the commander' (Judd, Waterford – male characters based on real, documented people), not on Offred – female undocumented narrator, therefore unreal. The post-truth situation which allows multi-media discourses to construct memorable images and impose biased viewpoints by appealing to emotion rather than intellect is deliberately brought forth in association with the

notions of femininity and masculinity emphasised and personified by the characters populating the novel's universe, and in support of the subversion of the mainstream, patriarchal ideology / literary canon. In short, the typically Canadian story of survival and its protagonist – victim of accelerated Americanisation in *The Handmaid's Tale* hides a political core accessible only by pealing the successive layers of literary artifice, beginning with the ending, i.e. *Historical Notes*.

References

Atwood, M., 2010. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Vintage.

Atwood, M. 2011. 'Margaret Atwood. The Road to Ustopia'. *The Guardian.* 14 Oct. 2011. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/margaret-atwood-road-to-ustopia [May 3, 2019].

Atwood, M. 2012. 'Haunted by The Handmaid's Tale'. *The Guardian*. 20 Jan 2012. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/20/handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood [May 3, 2019].

Deleuze, G. 1992. 'Postscripts on the Societies of Control'. October 59 (winter): 3-7. MIT Press https://www.jstor.org/stable/778828 [May 3, 2019].

Derrida, J. 2004. *Dissemination*. Transl. by B. Johnson. London: Continuum.

Foucault. M. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Transl. by S. Smith. New York: Vintage

Genette, G. 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Transl. by J. Lewin. Cambridge University Press.

Greenblatt, S. 2005. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Hutcheon, L. 2004. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge.

Shakespeare, W. 2007. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. In D. Bevington (ed.) *Shakespeare's Tragedies*. London and New York: Pearson Longman

**** *The Old Testament*, Genesis, 30-31.