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Harriet F. Bergmann

“Teaching Them to Read”: A Fishing Expedition in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Give me back my name
Give me back my name
Something has changed in my life
Something has changed in my life
Something must be returned to us
Something must be returned to us
“Name,” Talking Heads

“And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.”

Job.

Epilogue, *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville

Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* presents its reader with an exercise in learning how to read for survival. The novel argues for a reading that combines emotional and intellectual perception and it demonstrates that without the combination of feeling and thinking, political meaning is lost. Atwood sets her novel in a future America, called Gilead. Pollution and war have resulted in a depletion of the white elite population and after a takeover of the government a stern religious patriarchy institutes a new regime dedicated to increasing the white population. Reproductive control always implies control of women, and Gilead first deprives the female population of all economic power and then divides them into five subjugated classes: “Aunts,” who do the dirty work of the revolution; “Wives,” who, past childbearing age, are married to the commanding elite; “Econowives,” women incapable of producing children, who marry the working classes; “Marthas,” servants of the Wives; and “Handmaids,” who have previously proven their ability to produce children and now are to do so for the elite Commanders. The futurist setting allows Atwood to invent words, reassign meanings, and explore the implications of a patriarchal language involved in creating an especially misogynist world.

The three sections of the novel—the dedication, the tale itself, and the historical epilogue—combine to produce a text which comments on itself, on the act of authorship, and on the act of reading. Within the story itself, three narrative

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times intertwine: that of the present of the novel, that of the immediate past which tells us how the heroine-narrator, Offred, got to where she is, and that of the past of about three years before, leading up to the immediate present. Because Offred's recent past is our very near future, her discoveries about the relationship between her language and her reality uncover versions of our reality to us. The debased and constricted language of the distortedly religious regime which has taken over the United States echoes for us with political urgency.

The difficulty of learning the meaning of the patriarchal language and the implications of its use are presented to Offred and the reader simultaneously. The ambiguity and complexity of language itself uncovers for us the fact that the repressive measures of the new regime are not really new. Atwood has taken pains to argue, in interviews, that every political act depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* has occurred in history. The novel, the questions it poses, and its responses are thus political in the most thorough sense—they affect ideology, they effect change—if, one must add, the novel is read “right.” I will argue that Atwood demonstrates what right reading of her novel is within the novel itself.

In subjugating the first generation of Handmaids, the new regime works first to defamiliarize their own language. New patronymics, made up of “of” and a Commander's name, emphasize ownership; the narrator of the tale is called “Offred.” New formulaic greetings are truncated Biblical statements: “Blessed be the fruit,” says Ofglen, and Offred replies, “May the Lord open.” Any random memory of a place or a word causes Offred to think about the relationship between the old language, the old ways, and the new. As she passes what was once a movie theater, she remembers:

[the film festival showed] Lauren Bacall or Katharine Hepburn, women on their own, making up their minds. They wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word *undone*. These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then. (25)

Undone in its multiple meanings is the sort of word that the narrator puzzles over. Her choices probe the multiple ironies of our language as well as hers.

Offred survives through language. In order to stay alive, she learns to use the new language of her own time so as to seem part of the new order that the language reflects. She quickly understands how much she had failed to value language as Gilead deprives her of word and text. She then learns to read the subtext of the new culture and so to subvert the illusion of absolute power created by its language. Finally, in the oldest of literary ways, she lives on through the text that she hands down to her readers of the future, of whose existence the “Historical Note” informs us.

In telling her own story, Offred shows us her struggle in learning to read her world. Much of the new vocabulary she already takes for granted, and it is her apparent ease with it that tells us that this is, in Herman Melville's terms, an inside narrative. She has learned the new terminology: Unbaby, Eyes, Guardians, Birthmobile. She accepts her new name, thinking of her old one as “something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day” (84). She shows us how words we know have changed meaning, remembering that in pre-Gilead

women were free but not “protected” and showing that now, ironically, they are protected but not free to choose danger. “There is, Aunt Lydia says, freedom from and freedom to.” By working hard at shutting out ambiguity and remembered meanings of words, Offred imposes limits on herself even more stringent than those her repressive society dictates. Her world is contracted, yet she is grateful for what is there: “a chair, sunlight, flowers: these are not to be dismissed” (8). Most prisoners miss things; Offred misses words. The only item in her room with print that she can read is a worn cushion with the word “faith” on it in petit point: “I can spend minutes, tens of minutes, running my eyes over the print: FAITH. It’s the only thing they’ve given me to read” (57). Newly valuing both the items and their signifiers, she exercises language as if it were a new muscle:

I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others. These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself. (110)

Her struggle to match language with the realities of the new political system informs the reader’s perception of both contemporary politics and the politics of Gilead.

The first text that Offred gets that she cannot read is “*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*,” a mock-Latin that translates into “don’t let the bastards grind you down.” She treasures it as a message from the previous occupant of her room, scratched into a cupboard, but she doesn’t know what the words mean. Ironically, they don’t really mean anything—they are in a metalanguage, invented, as the Commander explains, by schoolboys. It’s the equivalent of a graffito, and to prove it he shows her an old Latin text, with the Venus de Milo defaced on its pages and Offred’s motto scrawled in the margin. If the reader is aware of the meaning of the phrase the first time s/he sees it, it is already a suspect text, and the hope that Offred reads into it is equally suspect. When the Commander translates it for her, Offred assumes that her predecessor must have learned it in the Commander’s off-limits study (“Where else? She was never a schoolboy”); this is not necessarily true, for the “message” could just as well have been left from former times, could have been scratched in the closet in the nineteenth century, in fact. Offred’s intuition seems right, however, for she immediately makes reference to her predecessor and the Commander “hardly misses a beat” in reply. Whether she is right or not, the piece of text loses its status as message and therefore its potential to comfort Offred. Not a message of sisterhood at all, it is, at least probably, a male text, in a language as debased as the photo of the Venus de Milo. Offred’s treasuring of it poignantly demonstrates how starved she is for words that communicate meaning. The last time she repeats it to herself she adds, “Fat lot of good it did her” (225).

The other most significant word that Offred learns is also a foreign word—“Mayday,” derived, as she remembers her husband told her, from the French word *m’aidez*. It is the password to the underground, and is the word that tells Offred that there are other silent resisters like herself. Its ambiguity in English

provides the underground with ways to test others for membership; when Ofglen first tries it out on Offred, Offred thinks about the “help me” meaning but, failing to recognize and trust Ofglen because her language itself is so untrustworthy, Offred merely agrees that it is indeed a “beautiful May day.” When the Ofglen she knows is replaced by another woman who takes the same patronymic, and Offred tries the word on her, the new Ofglen rejects it as an “echo.”

Offred’s first “sin” in Gilead occurs in the form of words. Her invitation from the Commander to visit him in private involves not, as she thought it might, secret lust, but forbidden verbiage—they play Scrabble. Denied human touch and sensuality, Offred luxuriates in the feel of the Scrabble tiles, at the same time remembering the warning from the Aunts that the “Pen Is Envy” (186). Desire and language literally merge, so that when Ofglen asks her, later, “What does he want? Kinky sex?” the only truthful answer is “In a way.” Language is, still and always, at the disposal of the male: “He has something we don’t have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once” (88).

Offred was not, we can tell, a person who cared particularly about the written word before the establishment of Gilead. Apolitical, she failed to see the central political importance of language and the control of language. She describes her former anonymity as being outside the text which is the world:

We were the people who were not in the papers.
We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of the
print. It gave us more freedom.
We lived in the gaps between the stories. (57)

Having had, in her pre-Gilead life, no story to tell, she had not valued the means of storytelling, nor had she seen her life as text. Later, reading her own absence in the photograph of her daughter which Serena brings her, she knows that the text that is her life has been edited by events: “Still, I can’t bear it, to have been erased like that” (228). Denied the means of producing her own text, she composes her tale in her head, understanding, always, that “this is a reconstruction,” and that even the reconstruction of the reconstruction is faulty.

Offred at first accepts the totality of the regime that rules Gilead, and accepts its vocabulary without resistance, not even telling the reader her real name. In her attempt to adapt and so to save her own life, she has made her new world and its language her own. Therefore, the first break in her otherwise seamless text occurs when she is trying to describe what she had hitherto thought impossible, the change in the Commander’s behavior toward her. With that crack in the seemingly impermeable wall of the new regime, verbal ambiguity is suddenly possible, making possible an alternate version of her reality for her and then for us, and it is reflected in her discourse. She presents us with two versions of her first evening with the Commander, and then with the impossibility of knowing how it in fact was:

I think about how I could approach the Commander, to kiss him, here alone, and take off his jacket, as if to allow or invite something further, some approach to true love, and put my arms around him and slip the lever out from the sleeve and drive the sharp end into him suddenly, between his ribs. I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands.

In fact I don't think anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that, at the time, but I didn't. As I said, this is a reconstruction. (139–40)

Of course, she has thought of it, if not then, later. There is a kind of political correctness here that her retrospective narrative affords her, and she takes advantage of it. At the same time, we are forced to realize that political correctness and ordinary human reaction may not be one and the same.

The second break occurs in a similar moment. She has stepped even further out on the springboard that could catapult her either into freedom or into exile: she is having sex with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur. He may or may not be the devil incarnate, as his name implies, but he certainly does represent both danger and freedom to her. Should she become pregnant, everyone might benefit: Serena Joy, the Wife who arranged their liaison, because she would have a child; the Commander, because children increase a man's status; Offred, because her life would be spared in the hopes that she would produce more children; even Nick, perhaps, since he too could not resist pride in the fact of having been able to conceive a child.

The language in which she describes her rendezvous with Nick breaks down, again, even as the system breaks down, when she offers us two readings of the event, and then says it didn't happen either of those ways. They speak in "corny and falsely gay sexual banter" and she realizes that "nobody ever talked like that in real life, it was all a fabrication from the beginning" (262). Of course it is, and just as powerful as any reality: "an echo of an echo. All gone away, no longer possible" and still, it makes her cry. At the moment that she learns that language creates reality, she also learns that language reflects reality and, like the retina of a fly, multiplies it beyond whatever recognition would be. Responding to her own desire, she discovers her own ignorance.

Atwood's book is framed by two acknowledgements of serious reading, a dedication acknowledging the past and an epilogue speeding into the future. It is dedicated to Mary Webster and Perry Miller. Mary Webster, an ancestor of Margaret Atwood, lived in times as Puritan as those of Offred, and was in fact hanged as a witch. Like Offred, Mary Webster lived to tell a tale of what was done to her, for her descendant, Margaret Atwood, is well aware of it. In an interview in the *New York Times*, Feb. 17, 1986, Atwood said:

One of the people the book is dedicated to is Mary Webster, who was one of my ancestors. My mother's mother's maiden name was Webster. Mary Webster is one of the interesting people—she was the witch who got hanged and it didn't take. It didn't kill her. (23:3)

Perry Miller, Professor of American Literature at Harvard University when Atwood studied there, was a scholar of Mary Webster's repressive and religion-dominated society, just as James Darcy Pieixoto, the academic who reads a paper on Offred's tale in the epilogue, is of Offred's. The question the dedication provokes, then, is of the connection between the times and their historians. Mary Webster is the teller of the tale, the one who has had the authentic experience. Perry Miller, bringing his twentieth-century white male assumptions to her world, simultaneously awakened his students to the existence of the Mary Web-

sters of history and created, irrevocably, their reading of her world by looking at it. In the Historical Note, Atwood shows in scrupulously ironic detail just how the primary texts of history are made and remade, read and misread by the Perry Millers of academe.

The tone of the historical note is disconcertingly more familiar than the already disconcertingly familiar world of the tale itself. Atwood cleverly warns us to “deny none of it” in the name of the site of the conference, “the University of Denay, Nunavit,” at which a paper is given discussing the text, now almost two hundred years old, that we have just read. The author of the paper describes the text—the transcription, really, since the first form of the tale is as a series of taped recordings—as an historical document and, in the terms of the most ancient of excuses for fiction, it is that. Atwood’s book, of course, is a cultural artifact for their (historical) time even as it is one for our time. The story of Offred is a fictive text which this fictive character assumes to be an historical document from his past. It is monitory and political for us; it is finished and historical for him, and he reads it much the way Perry Miller might have had his students read an Indian captivity narrative. The Handmaid’s tale has already resulted in his world, and he looks at the text only with an eye to finding in its yet undiscovered details some greater “understanding” of his own time.

The historical note is, first of all, funny. The proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies are an impeccable parody of all that is pompous and self-interested in any conference of academics, and the style goes far to defuse the intense emotion aroused by the main text. James Darcy Pieixoto’s name seems to imply that he is a wondrous combination of Jane Austen hero and Aztec, and the chair of the meeting, Maryann Crescent Moon, seems to be Inuit. The Third World has taken over, which would only be logical if the Caucasian Americans of the United States had failed to reproduce. Further, no academic reader of this novel can fail to look shamefaced when told, in the second paragraph of the historical note, that “the fishing expedition will go forward as planned.” After all, here I am.

What has happened to language in this post-Gilead society? It hasn’t really changed at all, and perhaps this is Atwood’s most devastating political statement. Women have seemingly returned to a nominal equality with men, since they are able to attend conferences and chair meetings, but it is still, or perhaps once again, perfectly acceptable to make jokes and puns with women as their subjects, and laugh about the “archaic vulgar signification of the word ‘tail’” or the “Underground Frailroad” of Gilead. In what we see as a bitterly ironic echo of Offred’s litany on the word *chair*, James Darcy Pieixoto accepts his introduction:

PIEIXOTO: 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.*) (300)

Post-Gilead society is, in other words, depressingly like our own, having accepted a modicum of change and nominal liberation and feeling free, therefore, to be

sexist. (Challenge this as sexism, and one is immediately accused of having no sense of humor.)

The novel is, we must remember, a political statement and a “female text” (at least, one written by a woman). Offred has learned to read her society, and so have we. We are shocked by the questions that Pieixoto asks of the text because they are not the ones that concern the reader who has experienced its emotional power, complex irony, and verbal sophistication. Pieixoto’s questions are not answered by the text because they are not its concerns. He cares, for instance, about verification, wishing that Offred had saved us “even twenty pages or so of print-out from Waterford’s private computer.” He wishes she had a “different turn of mind” or the “instincts of a reporter or a spy” (310) so as to fill in the gaps his reading leaves in her text. He seems to refuse to read the document with any emotion whatsoever, distancing himself from the wrenching events as much as possible. He never evaluates it as a piece of writing, merely as a set of data, and he belittles it, with heavy irony, as “crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us” (310). Offred, and through her the contemporary reader, has learned what Pieixoto can’t, and his misreading confirms for us the correctness of our reading.

One sign of Pieixoto’s ignorance is that he doesn’t know Offred’s real name. Offred never tells us her name directly, but the list of names at the beginning of the novel, whispered in the Red Center, indicates that it is probably “June,” since every other name in the list is assigned to a character. A name is perhaps the first word of importance to a person, and her name matters very much to her. By the end of her tale it becomes a kind of password, when her lover Nick persuades her to go with the secret police, called “Eyes,” by calling her by her real name. Pieixoto says she “does not see fit to supply us with her original name” (305), blaming her for not taking a risk he wanted her to take. Thus “June” becomes at once a password into the text for the reader and a sign of Pieixoto’s inability to read the Handmaid’s story. If this sounds like a petulant and irrational demand—“if you loved me, you would KNOW my name”—that is exactly what it is. Pieixoto doesn’t care about Offred, and we do.

At the last minute—on the last page—at the last bit of tape—Offred decides for faith, for love, and agrees to “step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (295). She has learned the necessity of ambiguity and has learned to control language by letting go of control itself. In his scholarly smugness, Pieixoto uses, unwittingly, the language of the end of the tale itself, mocking by his every word his own certainty. His pronouns insist on possessing Offred and her tale, even as he demonstrates his callous misreading: “Our document, though in its own way eloquent, is on these subjects [of what eventually happened] mute. We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment. . . .” Orpheus’ insistence on re/producing his love object demonstrates only his possessiveness, and Pieixoto’s language assumes “our” complicity. By the definition of the gods, Orpheus will sing his song and Eurydice will be ignored, not looked at, out of the picture, marginalized once again as the occasion for the art made by the male singer. Pieixoto continues:

As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day. (311)

But we know better: “echoes” are what the new, politically subdued Ofglen warns Offred of, “echoes” are the dialogues of “falsely gay sexual banter” (262) with Nick from old movies; “darkness” is what Offred now knows is within and without, and what she must trust herself to; “light” is only what we see by at the moment, and ours, no matter when in history we exist, is never good enough. The matrix, the life-producing force that Offred celebrates and Gilead tries desperately to control, cannot be obscure(d).

Only if we read the deep irony of Pieixoto’s statement have we read the whole text properly. In the process of reading we have been emotionally affected in ways that the historians of Gilead’s future will not allow themselves to be. They have, as far as we can tell, not allowed anything to change. Pieixoto quotes the man he has identified as Offred’s Commander as having said, “Our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won’t do that again” (307). He’s wrong. They didn’t teach us to read—like Offred, we had to learn for ourselves. With her we allow the emotion of the moment of reading to exist and to change us. We learn to live in the words, on the page, and not in the margins that Offred inhabited.

Work Cited

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