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Law, the Word of God and Subversion in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Françoise Couturier-Storey*

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the futuristic society of Gilead which is described revolves around the concept of the Law. Who respects the law, who breaks it, how does society organise itself to make sure that law is constantly part of everyday life, how do all its members participate in its perpetuation, and above all how is the "problem" of reproduction solved by making sure it is constantly integrated in a drastic code of manners? We would like to analyse how in this novel the word of God really *is* the Law; the "word," the logos, has a biblical connotation and the interpreters of the Bible, who are the leaders of Gilead, gave the word its meaning, redefining the rules of society in a way convenient to them. In such a society where the word is God, everyday language is going to be used as Law or as a subversion of this Law. All the members of Gilead reflect their obedience or disobedience of the Law of society by their choice of words and their approach to speech or written language. We shall also see how Atwood's novel questions the validity and the actual possibility of such a law-oriented society which has forgotten about the power of Desire, the workings of the subconscious and the very fragile nature of meaning. Finally, we will address a very central preoccupation which is raised in the novel, namely: is subversion opposed to or part of the Law? We shall thus analyse the very ambiguous character of Offred in her relation to subversive action.

At the end of the twentieth century, a terrible accident weakened the people of the United States and left them to deal with terrible health problems and above all with an epidemic sterility. The question of Survival, a concept which is central to Margaret Atwood's work, and actually to most Canadian literature, was raised. In mankind's desperate endeavour to perpetuate the reproduction of the species, the legislators, a group of puritanical fanatics, decided to organise society in such a way that reproduction would be at the centre of collective and thus personal preoccupations. Thus each individual is classified in a strict hierarchy,

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and women above all who are merely recognised for their reproductive potential, to such a point that sterile women of the previously existent middle to lower classes are sooner or later discarded as being “unwomen” and are exterminated. The existence of extermination camps is of course a major preoccupation for those women in charge of reproduction in Gilead, in particular for the Handmaids whose sole function is bearing babies. And the novel is actually narrated in the first person by one of the handmaids of the regime, Offred. Her name is a reference to her Commander, Frederick, who is also her official inseminator; she belongs to him, so she is “of” him, “of-Fred,” just as some other handmaid belonging to a man called Glen will be called Ofglen. But she is not his official wife, as the Commander in the novel is married and lives under the same roof as his wife who is sterile or past the age of child-bearing.

What is interesting here is that this whole social scheme is very regulated and codified, and the Scriptures, the translation of the word of God, are the reference when it comes to justifying the workings of this system. For example, the role of the handmaids and the procreation methods are justified by a passage in Genesis:

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 from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her, and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.¹

The act of procreation itself takes place in a private room of the house but its public dimension is strong as it is codified. The Commander inseminates the handmaid after reading a passage of the Bible, while the official wife sits behind the handmaid. All of this takes place in a very religious atmosphere in which desire and emotions have no room. Sexuality is merely present as a functional element. The outcome of this ceremony, if it materialises into conception, childbearing and birth, remains public. A “birthmobile” comes to pick up all the Commander's women friends and their handmaids who will participate in this collective event. The handmaid gives birth surrounded by the whole community and the child is the property of the Commander's wife who will be in charge of raising it. The handmaid is immediately deprived of her baby as the Law denies her any real function other than childbearing.

¹ *Genesis*, 30:1-3.

The handmaids are protected and well fed because the whole survival of the species lies on their shoulders but they are not granted the right to speak, apart from the very codified language they use that reinforces their status. When a handmaid meets another handmaid, for instance, she greets her by saying: "Blessed be the fruit," and when they part the ritual farewell sentence is: "May the Lord open." The Law, the word of God, is the only possible form of accepted oral expression.

However, in order to purify language from all possible ambiguity, the regime has sometimes deformed the Scriptures and has relegated written words to museums. Even the Bible is not accessible to most people. It is interesting to note that the general headquarters of the regime are in the old library of what used to be a University campus. As any reference to the past is dangerous, books are banned from use, and are considered to be dangerous objects of subversion. References to Nazi Germany are permanently present in this novel which very much reminds the reader of Katherine Burdekin's 1937 novel *Swastika Night*. The written word acquires from then on a subversive quality, which explains why Offred is so intrigued when she discovers in her bedroom, which was previously occupied by another Offred who was sent to camps, the following inscription: "nolite te bastardes carborundorum." She discovers, shortly after, that it means: "don't let the bastards grind you down," which she rightly understands as a message sent from this previous handmaid to encourage breaking the Law.² Interestingly, Offred thinks that the inscription must have a religious meaning as it is written in Latin, and yet its meaning is far from religious.

Not only is the regime suspicious of normal language (which explains why silence prevails) but, in order to make sure that any ambiguity and double meaning is avoided, it has also invented a new everyday language of its own, a very codified sterile language: "compucheks" and "compubites" are types of computers, "Salvagings," "Prayvaganzas" and "Particications" are ritual ceremonies imbued with religious propaganda during which the opponents of the regime are publicly punished. As words in general are dangerous, the regime has been careful to replace them by signs whenever possible; for example, the grocery store doesn't have a proper name, it is symbolised by "three eggs, a bee, a cow."³ Thinking about another store which has known a similar transformation, Offred notes:

You can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were

2 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p. 187.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone.⁴

The use of the word "temptation" here acquires a biblical connotation, as if the mere use of words became sinful because of their potential for ambiguity and playfulness. The regime seems to have a very contradictory attitude towards words; the Word *is* God and the Law, but at the same time words are potentially subversive.

Even in this very sterile language which the regime has promoted, there seems to be room for imagination and subversion to develop. The word of God cannot be restricted to its codified meaning, so that subversion can be present everywhere you look. Even religious language can be misinterpreted in a subversive manner. Let us take an example with one of the phrases inspired by the Bible that keep coming up during the rituals: "there is a balm in Gilead." Offred remembers that her best friend Moira used to point out that "balm" sounded very much like the word "bomb." If "there is a bomb in Gilead," then it means that the Law is ready to explode any second. Homophony serves a subversive purpose. The regime cannot wipe out people's memory of this past language, the reader's present language, so easily, so that language in Gilead is like a palimpsest, made up of several layers of meaning, the present meaning imposed by the regime and the old meaning which refers to our end of the twentieth century culture. The word "palimpsest" is actually present in Margaret Atwood's text, on the very first page of the novel, when Offred is in the Red Centre which used to be a gymnasium. She refers to the music that must have been heard there in the old days, during balls, as "a palimpsest of unheard sound."⁵ Every aspect of reality echoes so much the old days that it has assumed a multiple meaning.

Everyday, apparently harmless codified language thus has a subversive potential. The first Ofglen, Offred's neighbour handmaid who accompanies her everywhere she goes on her daily excursions, once cheers Offred by saying: "It's a beautiful Mayday." Offred is intrigued by this remark as Mayday has come to refer to the underground resistance. Thus, Offred starts wondering at this point if her partner might be part of the resistance.

The legal language which is used in Gilead is one which Offred refers to as being the language of "either/or" which Aunt Lydia likes to use at the Red Centre, meaning by that that the representatives of Law have imposed a system in which only one kind of vocabulary is accepted. Everything that does not belong to this codified accepted language is

4 *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 25.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

banished and therefore punishable.⁶ Interestingly, Margaret Atwood refers to this fixed, mortifying language in a poem of hers entitled "Marsh Languages" in the book of poems *Morning in the Burned House*. The passage reads as follows:

[...] the language of hard nouns,
the language of metal,
the language of either/or,
the one language that has eaten all the others.⁷

She opposes this language with the language of the marshes which she describes as follows:

The dark soft languages are being silenced:
Mothertongue Mothertongue Mothertongue
falling one by one into the moon.
Language of marshes,
language of the roots of rushes tangled
together in the ooze [...].⁸

Moreover the language Offred uses is a very sensual, illegal language. Her sensual approach to reality is very similar to her approach to language. In this society ruled by patriarchy, Offred and many others are looking for the language of yore, the language that underlies the other one. Her great knowledge of her mothertongue actually comes out during her sessions of Scrabble with the Commander and she uses it with such pleasure that these sessions become for her a way of giving full expression to her creative energy and yearning for freedom:

Larynx, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote*. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious.⁹

All games in Gilead are illegal, but Scrabble above all as it uses words, which are dangerous. Offred's inventiveness appears as she excels in this game and has invented new rules with the Commander that allow them to come up with new words such as "smurt" or "crup." Not only are the game and the situation illegal (the Commander and the handmaid are here involved in a private activity), but especially the Commander's involvement and this deserves further inspection.

6 *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 18.

7 "Marsh Languages", in *Morning in the Burned House*, p. 54.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 149.

The Commander reveals Offred his true side when he confesses to her that the Law has killed any form of pleasure, that he does not enjoy in the least their procreative encounters. First he will offer to play Scrabble with her, then he allows her to read magazines, and finally, one night, he takes her secretly to Jezebel's, a private club which looks very much like a whore-house, and manages to get her to bed. But this excursion is described as being a side-effect of the Law. It is almost condoned by it, and the name of the brothel, Jezebel's, reveals that this place should not be mistaken for a place of perfect freedom. As most of its clients are men in power, Jezebel's is the expression of their ambiguity towards the Law. They are not willing to sacrifice their own desires at all cost. And the novel's reference to frequent purges among the holders of the regime reinforces the idea that they are not excluded from the Law. The limits of this Law are then hard to define as it seems that illegality is its necessary component. Facing humankind's inevitable tendency towards the pleasure principle, the Law can only be permanently questioned. But here we have to ask ourselves: is subversion opposed to Law or is it a part of it, at least in this novel?

If we look further into the linguistic system imposed by the Law, we realise that it only manages to create a kind of censorship that actually encourages subversion and playfulness. Like children forbidden to use slang words and who will, therefore, as a way of ascertaining their autonomy and freedom, repeat these words in the face of their parents. The regime's language has only created a vacuum, a blank that remains in constant hidden contact with what used to fill it. The desire to name, for instance, is irresistible, in a society that has deprived most women of their names. So the handmaids, at night, in the Red Centre, introduce each other, and speaking their own past names becomes an act of subversion. God in the Bible is the one who names, and here naming oneself opposes the Law of God.

We may here wonder why Offred has not used her own narrative in order to reveal her real name and give herself a full-fledged identity. The reason she gives is to protect herself and the resistance from potential dangers if her narrative ended in the wrong hands. However, she might also have hidden her name in the narrative, as David Ketterer suggests in his article. At the end of the first chapter indeed, the handmaids in the Red Centre introduce themselves to each other: "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June."¹⁰ As Ketterer correctly points out, all these names come up again in the novel at some point, except for the last one.¹¹ We might be

10 *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 14.

11 David Ketterer, "Margaret Atwood's *Tale*: A Contextual Dystopia", *Science-Fiction Studies*, 16, 2 (July 1989), pp. 209-217.

tempted to believe then that Offred is June, and that would go well with Offred's style of narrating in a palimpsest mode. Naming herself again would allow her then to re-establish a Law of her own, creating her own world with its own rules, its own creative energy and, consequently, its own subversion.

The established order has created a system in which seduction and desire have their place. Offred eventually finds sexual and human satisfaction through her semi-illicit relationship with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur. The Law in itself has its limitations, and even the holders of the regime seem to be aware of that as Offred is encouraged by both the doctor and Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, to have an affair with a man who might not be sterile. In Gilead, only women can be "guilty" of sterility, so that the Commander, who is sterile, cannot be accused and discarded as such. It is interesting to note however that if Offred is encouraged to have a side-affair, it is only for reproductive reasons, but this side-effect of an excessively rigid law gives birth to subversion as Offred also finds some satisfaction in this relationship. The system has created a Law that can only be permanently questioned by even its most faithful adepts.

And here we might come to understand the real nature of Offred's text. Let us remember that the novel is divided in three parts: the prologue (which allows the author to reveal herself as a writing entity), Offred's text, and the "historical notes" at the end of the novel which are the minutes of a conference taking place in Nunavit in 2195 and analysing Offred's text. We learn at that point in the novel that Offred's text was not written but was transcribed from a series of tapes that were found in a metal footlocker, U.S. army issue, after the fall of the regime. The reader had indeed wondered all through the novel how Offred could have managed to access a pen or a typewriter in a context that did not allow women to read, let alone write. And yet there are many references in the text that told us that it was a narration, and not just an interior monologue. Offred insists that her words are a "reconstruction" and permanently attempts to establish a contact with her fictional reader. Her text then is a "message in a bottle" of some kind as she is not sure that the tapes will be found by anyone, if she manages to finish taping her story and if the tapes do not end in the wrong hands. We learn indeed that she made these tapes after she was taken away from Gilead, so we assume she is still in danger of being found and exterminated.

The complexity of the nature of the text which hovers in the reader's mind between orality and literacy, to refer to Walter Ong's book written on the subject, is definitely decisive in the interpretation of the

whole novel.¹² The reader's first contact with Offred's words is written, then we learn they were oral, but as they were transcribed by researchers they end up being considered as written. First, making a parallel with Ong's research, the validity of Offred's message in a bottle is questioned by the researchers of Nunavit precisely because this message is oral. The fact that the symposium takes place in a town called Denay ("deny") in a country called Nunavit ("none of it") reflects the participants' own denial of the reality which Offred described in her tapes. As Walter Ong wrote, since the invention of print, the written word has acquired a legal value, whereas before that, the Law was far more oral. The orality of Offred's text puts it in danger of not being taken seriously by the researchers of Nunavit. However, the fact that the author transformed her oral word into a written text is clearly an attempt at re-establishing a form of Law which would be based more on the spoken word. Offred's text is legitimized by the author's choice of narrative structure. By entering into literacy, Offred's text is validated and interpreted as Law: "this is what Gilead was like, beware of patriarchal Law" (*i.e.* "deny none of it"), might be the author's implicit message, if we take into account the historical notes. The Historical Notes question the impact of Offred's message on the world of Nunavit, and the last sentence of the novel "Are there any questions?" remains unanswered. Nonetheless, the authorial voice is there to remind the reader that, yes, there have to be questions. Nunavit has denied the teachings of the past and the reader has to be lucid enough to understand that it's a failing. Yes, the reader of the twentieth century has to question this world of Nunavit which strangely looks very much like his own. Offred's teachings should encourage the reader to change the Law or at least to make sure it is not going to shift in this nightmarish direction.

We might, however, go further in our analysis by questioning this process. For Offred is not really a subversive character. She has very much accepted the role that has been imposed on her, although she is fully aware of the brain-washing treatment that she has been submitted to. Offred becomes subversive almost against her will, contrary to the Offred described in the movie that was inspired by the novel. In this feature film, starring Robert Duval and Faye Dunaway, the handmaid willingly becomes a resistant and a hero by killing the Commander. In the novel however, Offred is partly responsible for the Commander's doom but she respects him.

Offred's text fails to carry the message that the author tries to convey through the Historical Notes. She is not a hero, but a poet. The

12 Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy, the technologizing of the word* (Londres and New York: Methuen, 1982).

reader has trouble finding her life awful as Offred herself does not seem to find it so awful. She confesses at the end:

The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get to him [...]. Telling this, I'm ashamed of myself [...]. I have made a life for myself, here, of a sort [...], so lazy have I become.¹³

Would the reason for her final acceptance of the Law be that she is actually quite happy in Gilead as she occupies a highly prized role? As in Plato's parable of the Master and the Slave, Offred, the slave, is actually a dominant figure in Gilead. The whole social system relies on her and, in a way, even the time of the insemination ritual with the Commander is decided by her own fertility cycles. A passage at the beginning of the novel reveals clearly that she is happy with her own sexual power. Teasing the guards at the barrier on her way to the market she says to herself:

Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there; I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously.¹⁴

If we accept this interpretation, then Offred's text, which is narrated in the present tense and constantly tries to recapture the present moment of Gilead, although it was inevitably narrated after the events, is a nostalgic text. Through her narration, Offred, who is certainly isolated in a hidden place after the resistance took her away from Gilead, tries to recapture this moment when she was at the centre of all attentions and desires. Like Eve driven out of Eden, Offred remembers the past, sometimes even re-writes it, as if she was repeating over and over the scenario of a fantasy. Her text is not critical and in itself does not try to question the Law of Gilead: it merely expresses longing and maybe even regret. The fact that she is a poet is in a way subversive because she plays with words and thus questions the Word as it has been defined by the regime, but only to a certain point. Her text denounces a system only indirectly. The focus of attention is not really on the failings of Gilead, but on her own present failings. However those critics who have blamed Atwood for not creating a true feminist allegory have totally missed the point. The author has always defended herself by asserting that writing fiction was quite different from writing pamphlets. Those critics who see in *The Handmaid's Tale* a failure precisely because it is not didactic "enough" miss the point and overlook the intensity of the text and its strong poetic value.

13 *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 271.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Offred is a very human character precisely because she exhibits the contradictory facets of a human being who has a distinct and important social role that she cannot entirely endorse. She is part of her society and this allows her to live in some kind of material and psychological comfort. Her personal happiness seems to rely very much on the fact that she is a *useful* member of society. She does not leave Gilead exactly on her own initiative; she is taken away from it by the Mayday Resistance group (or at least that's what the reader is tempted to believe considering the Historical Notes and the fact that Offred has survived her transfer away from Gilead). She does not seem to have the choice at that point, but her sudden departure is not described as a victory: "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."¹⁵ Leaving the Law of Gilead is not as comfortable and easy as it might seem at first.

However, the whole novel reflects very clearly the idea that the world of Gilead is bearable only if there are sufficient clandestine incentives. In this sense, subversion *is* part of the Law. In order to ensure their full collaboration, Gilead offers its members the possibility of temporary escape from the harsh code of behaviour that is otherwise imposed on them. If we understand the novel then as an allegory of life in society, Of-fred *is* Of-the Law; her very name suggests that her identity is one of *belonging* in the sense belonging to, be it a person (Fred is the name of her commander) or a value system. As she belongs to the law, any subversion on her part is a form of civil disobedience; it is a duty. Interestingly, Thoreau's 1849 text was often used by resistance groups to defend ideas of freedom and equality. It was conversely censored by less democratic regimes (as, for example, under McCarthyism in America). Contrary to Thoreau's text, Atwood's novel, again, is not a pamphlet. It is a literary text which, in our opinion, should be read as an allegory, but not as a feminist one. It addresses more largely the question of the compatibility between individual freedom and the need for social cohesion.

The feminist approach, of course, fits right into this issue. Offred's relationship with the Commander can be seen as an expression of bourgeois marriage in our society. Offred and the Commander play the roles of a modern husband and wife, and the text certainly questions the position of a woman's desires in such a system. It also fits into a racial approach, as Nunavit, we should not forget, actually exists; Nunavut is the territory that was given to Canadian Inuits as compensation for the injustice they suffered in the past. Offred could then be seen as

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

representative of a racial minority. We would say, more generally, that *The Handmaid's Tale* addresses the much larger issue of how all women and men deal with their own contradictory desires for freedom and for a sense of belonging to a community. The reader has no choice but to identify with Offred's mixed feelings. In this perspective, the final line of the novel becomes even more relevant: "Are there any questions?" There must be some if the individual being decides to live in harmony with himself and his fellow-citizens. Questioning is the key to personal and social compatibility. The ball is in the reader's court.

