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Alistair Rolls

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Telling Tales: The True Story of *The Handmaid's Tale*

ALISTAIR ROLLS

MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* is nothing if not reflexive; it is, in short, a story about storytelling. For Karen F. Stein, "the novel is a provocative inquiry into the origins and meanings of narrative. Among the issues it explores," she continues, is "the narrator's relation to her tale: the simultaneous fear and desire to narrate one's story, and the attempt to create a self through language" ("Scheherazade" 269). My ambition in this article is to take Stein's argument one step further by proposing that this tension between desire and fear produces a double narrative or two stories: the one that occupies the principal space of the text I shall consider a fantasy inspired by this mix of fear and desire; the other, which remains virtual for the most part, I shall read as the true story from which the fantasy of Gilead emerges. I will not argue, however, that these spaces are equal or that the text hesitates between them as it does between fear and desire; instead, the narrative that is only partially glimpsed is shown to be true, whereas the one that occupies the vast majority of the diegesis is false. There is nonetheless ample room for hesitation, since the reader cannot know exactly what prompts the generation of the Handmaid's narrative. This shift of uncertainty — back into pre-diegetic space — prompts me to prefer to read Gilead as a tale, and its narration as tale telling, in opposition to which the novel's story awaits discovery by an actively engaged reader. Interestingly, and almost but (I hope to show) not quite paradoxically, this proposition that Gilead is a space imagined by a character confined (literally) to its textual perimeter is not refuted by the novel's sequel, *The Testaments*, published some thirty-four years later; rather, the witness statements that this novel contains, and that appear to be its sole purpose, are undermined by a leitmotiv of "bearing false witness." As a result, I will conclude this reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* with a brief discussion of *The Testaments*, at the conclusion of which this liminal, imagining figure reappears, as if to

repurpose, perhaps rather than to undo, the weight of evidence in support of Gilead's existence.

One of the questions raised by *The Handmaid's Tale* is that of how the story of the Handmaid's life in Gilead is passed on to the reader. In other words, how does the Handmaid's narration become actualized as text? The "Historical Notes" that complete the story by ending it have a vital but paradoxical role to play in this process: on the one hand, they serve a paratextual function, delivering the Handmaid's account to the reader; on the other, they undermine our reading experience, revealing that what we have just read was not recounted in real (narrative) time, as its present-tense narration implies, but recorded on tape after the fact and reconstituted as text by a third party or parties. Linda Kauffman describes this gap between giving voice to and undoing the voice of the Handmaid's narrative as a process of mediation and, as such, crucial to Atwood's epistolarity: "The novel's re-presentation of speech is a reconstruction several times removed, for Offred's discourse is muted, mediated, and modified by the interventions of time and technology, and by masculine writing appended to her own speech. Her tapes are unearthed and reconstructed in 2195 by a male archivist whose written transcript is the narrative we read" (222).

One of the most disappointing effects of the "Historical Notes," the reader might think, is that the crucial hesitation that is the story's ostensible conclusion is resolved: the end of the Handmaid's tale (the story as narrated by the Handmaid) is not the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* (the narrative made text by someone other than the Handmaid). Had the story ended with the Handmaid's own parting words, the reader could not have known whether the Handmaid was leaving the story for salvation (leaving Gilead) or about to be taken for further punishment (staying in Gilead). As it is, the narrative is reconstituted from tapes that must have been made and secured after the events that it recounts and confirms the former scenario. The Handmaid is therefore saved.

If salvation has something to do with the narrative purpose or textual experience here, however, then the paradox of these "Historical Notes" requires further reflection. As Shoshana Felman so clearly argues in the seminal account of textual salvation that is her reading of (the interpretation of) Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, for the text to be saved *qua* text, it must not submit to the temptation to be either a ghost story or an account of madness; instead, it must forever hesitate between those two states. Without this hesitation, the text becomes

fixed, one of its possibilities claiming definitive ascendancy over the other (and, by extension, all others). In light of this account of textual salvation, the "Historical Notes" of *The Handmaid's Tale* make the choice on the reader's behalf, deny the foundational plurality that is the basis of poststructuralist accounts of textuality, and therefore condemn the narrative even as they appear to confirm its salvation. But, we might object, had the editorial hands behind the "Historical Notes" not *actually* saved the text, the narrative would have been lost and thus never available to be read, and experienced as text, at all. If textual salvation here works against salvation as experienced by the protagonist, then we must be dealing with two types of text: one the physical kind (what text meant prior to poststructuralism and what, in some critical circles, it has gone on to mean since); and the other the virtual kind (that of Roland Barthes and the critics who followed in his wake), which fuses reader and words in an ongoing, and inextinguishable, production of meaning.

The problem that we face now comes close to being that of the nature of textuality versus paratextuality. By this, I mean that the two layers of the text now appear to be opposed in terms of their relative degree of "reality" within the narrative economy of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although the Handmaid's tale functions as the *narrative proper*, occupying the vast majority of the narrative space of the book in which it is presented, the "Historical Notes" present themselves as an editorial validation of that tale. In this sense, as guarantors of the tale's reality as text, they present themselves as more real than the tale itself, for they assemble it, make decisions about its sequencing, and so on. Crucially, they are also presented alongside the Handmaid's tale and within *The Handmaid's Tale*. Their narrative reality depends on their paratextual function vis-à-vis the tale; however, given that they lie inside the borders typically associated with the paratext (put simply, they were written, as was the Handmaid's tale, by Atwood), their status here is in fact textual rather than paratextual. It is this double status, or hesitation between paratext and text, and between "real" story and "real historical events," that interests me here. If the paratextual reality on which the reality of the narrative proper is predicated is itself shown to be a fiction, then what other textual realities might be at play in *The Handmaid's Tale*? I contend that the subversion of the conceit of the "Historical Notes," coupled with the novel's paratextual apparatus proper, including its three epigraphs, indicates the existence of another narrative layer, one more real than the tale of the Handmaid's account of life in Gilead and

at the same time virtual. If what is present is at least partially fictitious in the fictional economy of *The Handmaid's Tale*, then what is absent, while equally a fiction from the perspective of the reader, can be argued to be of a higher reality value in terms of the events that found the novel.

If a clue to this other tale, hidden for the most part by the Handmaid's account, is to be found in the text — that is, revealed even as it is hidden — then a good place to look is the site where all inoculation is administered: at the dermal layer of the body. Logically, the limen between diegesis proper (the body of the text) and pre-diegetic space (what happened before the story begins, outside the textual body) is at its most visible at the beginning of the narrative. As J. Hillis Miller remarks apropos of narration's necessary status as repetition of its constituent events, "Any beginning in narrative cunningly covers a gap, and absence at the origin" (*Reading Narrative* 58). This idea of an original gap enables us to reread a statement about beginnings that Miller makes elsewhere, according to which they have a quasi-magical aspect: "For me the opening sentences of literary works have special force. They are the 'Open Sesames' unlocking the door to that particular work's fictive realm. All it takes is a few words, and I become a believer, a seer" (*On Literature* 24). This unlocking is cunning because literature's liminal spaces are more than double spaces, marking the juncture of the events of the fictive realm and the space in which they are recounted; indeed, the spaces that they open are multiple. Furthermore, what we see at the beginning of a text, as a result of opening one particular door, is also an act of closure. When we become seers, we choose from any number of possible visions of reality. Reading, in other words, is a choice to read one particular set of events; we all have the gift of double vision, but generally we step right over Miller's gap, closing our eyes to any number of textual possibilities.

In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the reader emerges into the diegesis bedazzled by epigraphs; indeed, as Stein notes, "Margaret Atwood begins her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* with two dedications and three epigraphs: a passage from Genesis, a passage from Jonathan Swift's 'Modest Proposal,' and a Sufi proverb" ("Modest Proposal" 57). Such an "abundance of preliminary matter," Stein suggests, can hardly be innocent; rather, it serves to frame the text in a way that conditions the reading experience: "To frame means, among other things, to utter or articulate, to fit or adjust to something, to enclose, to shape or fash-

ion, to invent or imagine, to plan or contrive, to devise falsely (to frame up); all of these meanings resonate in *Tale* (57). Of course, there is a way in which the novel's opening paratextual salvo is itself eclipsed by the concluding device of the "Historical Notes." It is as if, as in the case of crime fiction, with its ultimate revelation of the true solution, end orientation causes the reader to forget what has come before, especially what happened right at the start.

Stein herself notes that discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale's* paratext has been dominated by analysis of the "Historical Notes," in particular insofar as they bring the reader closer to the dystopian world of Gilead ("Modest Proposal" 59). Certainly, bringing the reader into the text, for Gérard Genette, is one of the key marketing roles of the paratext. In this case, as Patrick D. Murphy argues (26-27), the novel's dystopian aspect is made less palatable for the reader by a closing of the gap between the reality of the story (the events of Gilead) and the reality of the reader's situation. Ensuring that the reader does not simply get carried away with the story or read in a way that is passively pleasurable in Barthes's schema heightens the text's political function, sensitizing the reader to the connections between these two realities. Stein is keen to question this ending, and to pay closer attention to the preliminaries, especially to tease out the allusion to Swift's "Modest Proposal." In the context of a reading that focuses on how the fictional reality of Gilead is framed paratextually, it is natural that Stein should question how and why the protagonist and others like her in Gilead are themselves framed by the political system in which they find themselves. She does not, however, go so far as to question whether the embedding of satire in the novel's (framing) paratext *frames* the paratext itself. To do so, I argue, is to throw into question the truth value of the fiction that follows and to pursue Stein's idea of contrivance at the level of the text itself. My question, therefore, is how and to a lesser extent why it is in fact the reader who is framed by Atwood's text.

The Handmaid's tale opens in a gymnasium. Importantly, this space is explicitly described as a "palimpsest" (*Handmaid's Tale* 3). The reader is quickly informed that the present of the narration is a dystopian society in which the women at the centre of the tale are known as Handmaids; the palimpsestuous aspect refers accordingly to the building's pre-diegetic past, and its ghosts are the lingering traces of female sexuality. The narrator describes a "yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that

were on us there and then” (3). To return to the concept of the gap — between the fictional reality of the story and the reality of the reader’s situation — that the paratext ostensibly serves to close, it is clear from the outset that the narrator is concerned with maintaining distance, in this case between “what was always about to happen” and what “was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then.” The specific mention of hands on this opening page — at the point where the novel is still closing down its awareness of its status as a product in the reader’s hands, or its presence to the reader, and just beginning to seal itself off in the narrative past — serves to maintain a bridge between the two spaces *even as the story tells precisely of their separation*.

One way to bring the satire and, I argue, duplicity of the paratext to bear upon the text is to read this liminal discussion of the palimpsest in reverse. Rather than listening to the “unheard sound” (3), the reader might see in the gymnasium a synesthetically coded metonym for an unseen space within the confines of the seen. The reader’s hands are giving way to other hands, but they are not necessarily those of the Commanders of the tale proper. The hands on the narrator *here and now*, in the interstice between the paratext (where the reader handles the book) and the story proper (where Commanders handle Handmaids), are reaching out from another, parallel story. This glimpse of the gymnasium, which Kauffman calls an “afterimage” (231), might not reveal the space of the story’s actual (fictional) present, but it offers readers the elements necessary to reconstruct it. The reading that I am proposing here follows Kauffman’s analysis but takes it away from Gilead, construing that space instead as a virtual reality, a dream-like retelling of events taking place as we begin reading in a space much closer in kind to the gymnasium than the room from which the Handmaid appears to tell most of her tale, a space in which “a forlorn wail” (*Handmaid’s Tale* 3) can already be heard. As Kauffman argues, “The novel . . . condenses two of Foucault’s major subjects: the birth of the prison and the birth of the clinic, the gaze of the panopticon and the gaze of the medical amphitheatre” (235). This idea of two spaces merged as one holds in the framework of the present reading: the two stories contained in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are precisely Kauffman’s Foucauldian spaces. Whereas the tale proper harks back to the gymnasium from a dystopian state that is a prison for most of its inhabitants, the other story remembers the gymnasium, or grafts its contours onto its present, from a medical amphitheatre. Later glimpses of the gymnasium from inside the textual

body of the tale strive to keep the initial palimpsest in view and with it this glimpse of an alternative reality. As Tara J. Johnson describes, when the Commander puts a key in the narrator's hand during their visit to his club, it is "[a]s if they were two teenagers learning the rules of love at a high school dance" (76); indeed, when he comments "I thought you might enjoy it for a change" (*Handmaid's Tale* 256), the reader might question precisely what kind of exchange is being offered.

It is not my contention here that the reader is being offered a key that will fit two doors or that either story can be invested with the status of fictional reality. In such a scenario, textual salvation of the kind proposed by Felman hinges on these two stories being of equal value narratologically. I am not looking to save *The Handmaid's Tale*. Instead, I am proposing to salvage the hidden narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which I consider the actual fictional space, and thus the narrator's reality, in opposition to which the Handmaid's tale stands as a virtual fictional space. In privileging one space over the other, however, I am not seeking to close down narrative space. That would require choosing between two paths previously considered valid options, the case of the ghost-story and tale-of-madness readings of *The Turn of the Screw*. Felman's analysis is predicated on poststructuralism's textual plurality: her aim is to remind readers to keep this plurality alive because James's hesitant text itself strives to keep the reader's options open. It was criticism that closed them down and from criticism that Felman sought to save the text. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the text goes to extreme lengths to obfuscate reality by replacing it almost entirely with an alternative version. Instead of a hesitation between two parallel texts, therefore, the reader of the Handmaid's tale is presented with an actual tale that is unreal, behind which a real story goes virtually untold or whose truth is told virtually. It is the slippage between the actual but artificial tale and the virtual but real story that is crucial, and those points where the latter intrudes upon the former will be my focus for the remainder of this article. Although the reader who glimpses this other story behind the tale does not hesitate to claim it as true, any more than the reader who reads only the story of the tale and accepts the truth of Gilead, this does not mean that there is no room for readerly hesitation. Denying Gilead the status of fictional reality suggests a clear *here and now* (in the form of the medical amphitheatre), but it does not explain how the past fantasies of a young woman in a gymnasium could have led to this

point, what the precise nature of the medical intervention is, or indeed *where to go from here*.

Whenever the narrator takes her walks in Gilead, she is “doubled” (*Handmaid’s Tale* 23): that is, she forms one singular walking party made up of two almost conjoined Handmaids. This kind of doubling has long been discussed by scholars interested in the urban experience as textual analysis, how one not only follows the city streets to which one is present but also gets one’s bearings by remembering the city past. In reference to the kind of *flânerie* in which Parisian poets such as Charles Baudelaire engaged, Ross Chambers has dubbed this feeling of encountering the city as a double space (a simultaneous instance of presentation and representation) a form of “haunting” (217). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this palimpsestuous experience summons memories of Luke, the narrator’s partner from her time before Gilead. Luke and the narrator, we are told, always wanted to live in a house in the quarter where the Handmaids now shop. Their desires then were for a garden and children. This is described as unlikely, unaffordable, a fantasy. The parallel with the here and now of the Handmaid’s tale is stark: the Handmaid now has a garden, and importantly she has a child, albeit one who has been taken away from her. Her daily chores consist of doing almost exactly what she used to do on Sundays with Luke: walking in these streets, fantasizing about an alternative future. On these streets in which the narrator walks double, she also sees double, the here and now mapping uncannily the there and then.

At this point in the tale, reality appears to have taken on the form of a warped version of past fantasies of the future. The reader cannot but recall the space where the disconnection between what one wants (from life, from love) and what the hands on one’s body signify is first made: that is, the gymnasium. The feminism that permeates the tale is bound up with a cautionary tale for young women (be careful what you wish for), which suggests that the streets of Gilead are a nightmarish prediction of how things can go wrong. Yet, in terms of the story beneath the tale, what is remembered from the streets of Gilead is a false memory of the past, generated as a result of life’s disappointments (life is never quite all that you want it to be). From this (new) perspective, the narrator can be seen almost to have it all (the garden, the child, the lover), but it is not how she imagined the future. If the past (and the biblical-sounding Luke) is a heavenly fantasy, then it seems just as likely that the hell of the present (whose Edenic garden, the realm of the satanic-sounding

Nick, is always already defiled) is also a fantasy. Rather than being somewhere in between, the truth is somewhere else.

What might have happened between (the fantasy of) Luke and (the fantasy of) Nick is suggested by the shop called Lilies, which “used to be a movie theatre, before” (*Handmaid's Tale* 25). Previously, a cinema stood in this spot, screening images, we are told, of actresses who could choose to be “undone” or not. Seeing herself on the same screens, the narrator says that “We *seemed* to be able to choose” (25; emphasis added). Choices therefore — of the kind made in the gymnasium — were never real: it was all a fantasy. In the tale, these fantasies are corrupted by the Aunts, who show the Handmaids sadomasochistic pornography and other violent films as a twisted take on the cautionary tale as told by the narrator’s mother’s generation of feminist activists. Even Nick’s casual winks in the garden — his own privileged space in the story, whether it be as fallen angel or guide to the world beyond — appear, in this light, to be a reminder of the possibility of the choice, or path, to take, which looms large at the end of the story when the narrator leaves in an ambulance, her choice made but the destination unknown. The message here is that, if reality and dystopia are so similar, then the truth value of both can be called into question.

The narrator does not stop at Lilies but moves instead, via a couple of other shops, to All Flesh and thus from a reification of virginity to one of carnality. The clearly signposted move here, when mapped onto the narrator’s other life, is from remembered images of choice, and precisely that to be undone or not, to the narrative present and its tale of being routinely undone by Gilead, especially as incarnated by her Commander. In All Flesh, the narrator again sees double, this time oscillating between the chicken that she is buying (here and now) and the chicken that she used to buy with Luke (there and then). Confronted by this vision of the past, the narrator chooses not to take refuge in her memory, to make an idyll of this fantasy; instead, she refuses it and turns away. As she and her double, Ofglen, are leaving All Flesh, the narrator becomes conscious of the gaze of others: “Not here and now. Not where people are looking. I turn, see my silhouette in the plate-glass window” (27).

Again the here and now is called into question. In fact, it is volubly refuted: the here and now of the tale has been reduced to a “silhouette,” as if the haunting of urban double vision has been literalized as a spectral form of self. Thus, what appears to be a simple instance of not

wanting to be seen, voiced in the here and now, can be read as a far more problematic relationship between the narrator and reality as present. A useful way of reading such a self-effacing scene of seeing is offered by Sigmund Freud's study of "The Wolf Man." In that case, Freud reads the analysand's dream in reverse: the three principal elements of the account of being seen by a number of wolves sitting still in a tree outside a bedroom window are reversed in the analyst's explanation: passivity becomes activity, which means that the subject is seeing, not being seen; plurality becomes singularity, which means that the subject is looking on at a single being; and stillness becomes activity, in this case of the scene to which the subject was present as a child.¹ Finally, the singular plurality of the wolves in the tree lends itself to a plural singularity (wolves are always both unique animals and a pack, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari note in their rebuttal of Freud's singularizing analysis²), which of course is that of two people joined as one (as the beast with two backs or, as Freud notes, *a tergo more ferarum*). In this case, rather than a primal scene per se, I am suggesting that what lies behind this active seeing of self as a silhouette is a primal story, which the tale of events in Gilead has served to screen, much as the Wolf Man's dream serves to repress, albeit partially, his traumatic childhood vision of his parents' coitus.

In *All Flesh*, therefore, the narrator turns away from a position of being seen ("not where people are looking") only to find herself seeing. She is still being seen, of course, but she is now the object of her own gaze, watching with the subjective objectivity of something akin to an out-of-body experience. As she emerges onto the street, she sees a group of Japanese tourists coming toward her ("us") (*Handmaid's Tale* 27). The tourists ask whether they can take her picture. Having refused to see herself, the narrator is reluctant to reveal her whole truth to the tourists' lenses: "What they must see is the white wings only" (28).³ In order not to be uncovered, or undone, by the image that she will present on their screens — memories of the women who chose to be undone or not on the screens of the cinema that is now Lilies have now been grafted onto other screens, made "all flesh," in the form of the tourists — the narrator transforms her strategy of being partially seen into one of partial seeing. Her vision of the Japanese tourists focuses on discrete body parts, beginning with their feet: "I'm looking down, at the sidewalk, mesmerized by the women's feet" (29). The narrator, it appears, has erected a fetish. Typically, such an act enables the fetish-

ist to negotiate a traumatic lived reality by disavowing it in favour of a compromise. In this case, a desire for the feet of the tourists screens a fear not only of being seen by them but also of seeing herself being seen. The partiality of the specular strategy (looking at body parts rather than whole bodies) is metonymic of the broader fetishistic process: the erection of a screen memory, which selects an object that will take the place of the original object of desire (and now anxiety), is itself an exercise in partiality, for the screen memory only *disavows* the truth. In Freud's account ("Fetishism"), a young boy sees the truth of his mother's genitals — that is, her lack of a penis — which causes him to fear for the integrity of his own genitals. The screen memory that he erects stands in place of the object of his fear, and it is a false memory — of his mother as phallic (i.e., as she was before he discovered the truth) — that he will henceforth desire in the form of the chosen fetish. Disavowal is a form of partial repression insofar as the fetish not only replaces the original object of desire (causes it not to be seen) but also stands as a constant reminder of it (ensures that it is seen everywhere).⁴ Here, operating as a fetishist allows the Handmaid to cope and to give the following answer to the tourists' question about life in Gilead: "Yes, we are very happy" (*Handmaid's Tale* 29).

Within the economy of the tale, this is a crucial scene. The overabundance of screens, and acts of partial seeing and being seen partially, signpost fetishism in such a way that the reader cannot fail to see it or at least be uncannily aware that something here has not quite been seen. At the same time, this scene serves a fetishistic role at the level of the text itself. In this other role, the flip side of disavowal, its showy signification (a sleight of hand in the here and now), causes the reader to blink and miss, in this case the fact that the narrator is already a fetishist before the Japanese tourists arrive. In fact, her fear of seeing herself forces her to leave the shop, which in turn appears to conjure up the vision of the approaching tourists.

Read in this light, this scene has all the trappings of what Emily Apter has dubbed a *fetish en abyme*: that is, a fetishistic scene inside a fetishistic text. This fetish inside the tale indicates its role as a metonym, part of the story (about parts) standing for the whole story. As such, the fetish is a performance put on not only for but also by the reader, who reads fetishistically by simultaneously seeing and not seeing the truth of the text as it offers itself as a whole screened by a part. In other words, when the narrator makes her declaration inside All Flesh, she not only

reveals herself (she is all flesh) but also screens herself (this is not all of her flesh, not her entire story): rather than a statement of desire (*I do not want to be seen* “here and now”), her words can be read as a refutation of reality (*this is not* “here and now”). The phrase “I turn, see my silhouette in the plate-glass window,” offers a glimpse of another here and now, which I consider to be “real” within the economy of the primal story, in which the narrator is lying supine, looking at a reflection of herself on a glass surface, and — if we run with the foot fetish — stealing an occasional glance down at her own feet. Thus, the shopping scene, with its reflexively staged erection of a fetish, itself stands as a fetish, screening inside the narrative space of the tale another story that it enables to emerge from the background of Gilead. This is a moment of clarity, the vision of a narrator emerging as if from anaesthetic and thus from the silence of her bed in a medical amphitheatre.

It is easy to see how the fetish works in the Handmaid’s tale, how the reader can see its apparatus laid bare but still not see the truth at its origin. One reason is that the tale lends itself to metaphor, to allegory. What Gilead stands in for is the question that looms large and prevents us from seeing that this is also the answer: Gilead is *standing in*. The use of two shops — Lilies and All Flesh — in a scene that signposts the word *double* can be mapped readily onto women’s condition in a patriarchal society: young women who contemplate their futures in their respective gymnasiums know that, in the eyes of the young men looking on, they must choose to be lilies or all flesh. Such metaphors, however, mask the more fundamental role played by the two shops working in tandem within the tale: they stand in for the one space that lies on the threshold of the narrative, the gymnasium itself. Two spaces stand for one, that of the tale and that of the story, which coexist in and as the single text, their doubleness shuddering visibly in fetishistic glimpses.

Readers do not have to wait long for the next such glimpse. After the encounter with the Japanese tourists, the narrator and her double continue their walk in the direction of the wall on which Gilead’s traitors’ dead bodies are hung on display. The relationship between the two Handmaids, a tense synthesis of wariness and the will to trust, can be considered either to affect their attitude toward the wall or to be intensified by it; either way, the “tremor” that the narrator senses “in the woman beside [her]” functions less to describe the scene than to speak its uncanniness, to map the singular doubleness of the Handmaids onto the streetscape (*Handmaid’s Tale* 33). This uncanny response to a vision

embodies the double vision on which the text is predicated. In this way, Ofglen's "tremor" repeats, in an act of reflexive narration, or narration *en abyme*, the "forlorn wail" of the tale's opening scene. If something about the spectacle of the wall sends the text spiralling back to the gymnasium, it is because the bodies on display are doctors. The narrator, we are told, "can't afford to know," which begs the obvious question of what it is that she cannot afford to know (33). One answer, which summons other echoes, including Lewis Carroll's Alice, is *in case she wakes up*. To know here would be to connect the internal reality of the tale to the external reality of the gymnasium. "I won't give anything away," she says (33). It is almost as though Ofglen has just had sex with a boy at the dance, been undone. Such a story must not be told. More importantly, this is an inner echo of the story beyond, which simultaneously must not be told and cannot be held back, bursting through the fabric of the narrative as an uncanny tremor.

On closer inspection, the elements of the gymnasium scene contain the tale of Gilead in miniature. The first line contains a verb whose subject and tense are equally ambiguous: "We slept in what had once been the gymnasium" (3). If we separate this sentence from the events of Gilead, then the sleeping no longer describes that tale's narrative past but the time of the story that lies behind it. Similarly, rather than the narrator and her fellow Handmaids, the first-person plural *we* now describes the narrator and another unknown body. We can speculate legitimately (by which I mean seeing what is not directly visible) that this other body is that of the narrator's unborn child. There is a balcony around the room "for the spectators" (3). These are no longer the ghosts of those who watched as people played sports or danced in the gymnasium; instead, they are trainee doctors watching an operation in the medical amphitheatre. The dramatic display of the (ghostly) doctors on the wall in the scene just discussed tells us as much. Again, as in the case of the Wolf Man, what is seen must be reread as seeing: in the tale, the narrator and her double are looking at immobile doctors; in reality, she and another, more fundamental, double are themselves immobile, being looked at by doctors. In the framework of the tale, the smell of old sex brings to mind memories of yearnings, of intimate encounters that failed to live up to expectations. Yearning and insatiability then morph into failed sleep — "as we *tried* to sleep" (3; emphasis added). An inversion of this particular phrase suggests the precise moment when the narrator fights precisely *not* to sleep, to resist, say, an anaesthetic.

This is the transition from the narrative space of the untold story (which nonetheless can be glimpsed behind the screen of the palimpsestuous gymnasium) to that of the Handmaid's tale, in which the sex act is more egregiously traumatic, compared with which the fumbling and unsatisfying encounters of a prom-night dance pale into insignificance. In this light, fantasy becomes a story of compromise, a means of negotiating reality in the face of the truth: sexual satisfaction was always, and only ever, a myth.

To return to Felman's critique of textual salvation through ambiguity, the truth of the events behind the story that lies behind the screen in, and of, the gymnasium can never be known. That the operation that the narrator is undergoing is the unsuccessful delivery of a wanted child is suggested by the figure of the lost child in the Handmaid's tale: to have a living child but not be able to see her can certainly be interpreted as a compromise in the face of a reality in which the child has died.⁵ Alternatively, the operation might be the termination of an unwanted pregnancy, which scenario can be mapped logically onto the ritual in the bedroom of the Commander, in which he tries to force his seed into the Handmaid. Here, too, her horror in the face of such abuse is tempered by the realities of survival in Gilead: another compromise has to be sought. The reading of salvation, which arguably saves the narrator by leaving her reality open ended (though this is likely a poor kind of salvation indeed), suggests and promotes unknowability; the reading that I am attempting here, conversely, uncovers a knowable alternative story behind the screens of the host tale. What the narrator (behind the narrator) gets out of this process is one of the (newly discovered) unknowables. Clearly, if a pact is being made with the reader, then it is one that involves the breaking of another at the level of the tale proper. As Stein notes, any reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* walks such a tight-rope to some extent: "Reading the handmaid's tale, we are drawn into complicity with her in the illegal act of narrative: our reading validates her narrative and her subjectivity. Yet, at the same time, all readings also distort and change her narrative" ("Scheherazade" 270).

Dreams dreamed from the Handmaid's bedroom suggest that this room of her own is a space of dreaming; it is a translation — from story to tale — of the gymnasium. As the narrator says, "I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance" (*Handmaid's Tale* 39). Thus, storytelling gives the narrator a chance to

recover from the reality of the medical amphitheatre. The repression that it affords is only partial, for the tale told does not entirely exclude glimpses, tremors, of the original truth; as has been shown, it screens only partially, letting the truth pass through the tremulous rents in the fabric (albeit in the inverted view of the *camera obscura*, no doubt another function of the Handmaid's room). As the narrator later says in the garden, in something of an oxymoron *en abyme*, "Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently" (151).

At times, the rents in the fabric admit into the narrative veritable commands that the reader see the truth. One example is a childhood memory of the narrator's mother and an activist friend burning pornographic magazines. In one, there is an image of a woman hanging naked from a ceiling. The narrator recalls being interested, not frightened. Her mother, however, responds violently: "Don't let her *see* it" (38). This command is a mirror image of Freud's description of the acquisition of the fetish. Instead of a young boy seeing the truth of his mother's genitals, which causes him to develop castration anxiety, here we have a young girl being ordered by her mother not to look at an image of female nudity and violence, in which the threat of woman's truth has been restrained and bent to the will of the male gaze. The inversion and redeployment of the stock elements of the fetish scenario create a rent in the fabric of the tale, breaking the fourth wall and impelling the reader to *see it*. The narrator remembers being told to throw the magazine onto the fire and thus to repress the image, to erase it. Instead, the magazine separates into its discrete (body) parts, ensuring that even as the image of the woman's body burns it is also burned onto the narrator's retina and fixed in her unconscious. As a result, these images return time and time again, be it as trussed chickens at All Flesh, bodies hanging on the wall, or, perhaps most hauntingly of all, the narrator's predecessor at the Commander's house, who hanged herself from the ceiling in the narrator's room.

In response to the novel's final words, "Are there any questions?" (314), Stein asks "What possibilities does narrative open, what doors does it close?" ("Scheherazade" 278). We have seen how narrative can close the door on itself while opening itself up not only to but also, and more importantly, as otherness. What we as readers are compelled to see at the end requires that we remember, that we reach back to the initial space of the gymnasium with its "garlands made of tissue-paper flowers" and "cardboard devils" (*Handmaid's Tale* 3). These primal ele-

ments are echoed in the form of Lilies and the satanic figure of Nick, respectively, and they are interchangeable, for in the gymnasium there is also a “revolving ball of mirrors” (3), in which flowers turn into devils and vice versa. The ball of mirrors ensures a hesitation that will endure in the text until the Handmaid steps into the van at the end of her tale and thus “into the darkness within; or else the light” (297). Looking back beyond the mirrored reflections and the afterimage that precedes them, however, the reader is able to cut through the ambiguity of Gilead and locate the storytelling space with medical precision.

As I conclude this reading, I am conscious of the need to justify this questioning of the truth value of Gilead, especially since Atwood has gone on to write a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* in the form of *The Testaments* (2019). This second volume, as its title implies, bears witness to the harsh realities of the Gilead regime, thus appearing to address, and indeed to dismiss, the premise of my analysis. Here we have three witness accounts proving that Gilead is no fantasy: these are the narratives of Aunt Lydia, whose emblem in the text is the pen and who thus appears to stand as the author *en abyme*; Agnes Jemima, a young woman who has grown up in Gilead as the daughter of a Commander; and Daisy, a.k.a. Nicole, a young woman who has grown up in Canada but turns out famously to have been taken from Gilead as a baby whose picture now serves as a rallying call both for the regime and for its opponents. Their narratives converge, telling the story of Gilead's demise. As is *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* is book-ended with paratextual elements, including a large number of quotations from newspapers, almost all of which speak to the relevance of Atwood's novels as allegories of the fragility of our contemporary Western democracies. In the Vintage edition (2020), one such quotation from *Time* is given prominence on the inner cover: “Margaret Atwood saw it all coming.” The “all” here will be interpreted by readers according to their personal situations, but the events of 6 January 2021 in Washington, DC, loom large. Yet, despite its setting in Canada and parts of what was the United States, the allegory cannot be pinned down, echoing the accounts of refugees and victims of totalitarian regimes throughout history. In other words, the contemporary relevance of Atwood's novels is simultaneously supported and undermined by the repetition of history: the events to which they bear witness have always happened, all over the world. To describe Atwood as a seer is also to overlook the appendix that follows, and echoes, the revisiting of the Symposium on Gileadean

studies (*Testaments* 407-15). In “A Trip to the Archive with Margaret Atwood” (*Testaments* 425-36), readers find themselves in the position of the scholars of Gileadean studies. Like them, they are brought within the covers of the book, their paratextual status being just one degree more *real* (more *para*, less *textual*) than that of the scholars *en abyme*. Atwood reveals in these pages a number of the newspaper clippings that pertain to various historical events that informed *The Handmaid's Tale*. The anonymous questioner ends *The Testaments* thanking Atwood for revealing the real truths behind her fictional regime: “And on that note, I’d like to say thank you, Margaret, for taking the time to give us this tour of the stories behind *The Handmaid's Tale*, and other strange and fascinating diversions” (436). It is on this note that I also wish to end, for this document repeats the function of the triple narrative of the diegesis proper and the text of the thirteenth symposium: it not only speaks to, and questions, historical truth but also admits the presence of other, more properly fictional, elements, interestingly described here as “fascinating diversions.” My reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* simply reverses the polarity and reads its historical and political allegories as a diversion from its fundamental status as fiction. None of this undoes the power of the story (of Gilead); it simply reminds readers that it is (nonetheless but clearly) just that, a story. As noted by Professor Pieixoto, who returns in *The Testaments* for another keynote lecture, “You can take the historian out of the storyteller, but you can’t take the storyteller out of the historian!” (414). As if to reinforce this point, albeit implicitly, he ends his lecture with a reproduction of the words written on the base of a statue of Aunt Immortelle, a.k.a. Becka, who helped Agnes and Daisy/Nicole to escape from Gilead. The conclusion of his lecture integrates the text of the diegesis proper by taking on the function of a framing device, for *The Testaments* opens with Aunt Lydia’s discussion of the statue erected to her in her lifetime. What Aunt Lydia experiences in the text as a feeling of being “petrified” (3) simultaneously operates paratextually, revealing that the witness statements of *The Testaments* are also critical reflections on *The Handmaid's Tale* and its own paratext, or the stories that the novel has taken on, be it through readers’ discussions or the famous MGM and Hulu television series that Atwood herself lauds in the acknowledgements (418). Indeed, when Lydia considers the possibility of her impending execution, her comment — “Right now I still have some choice in the matter” — is much like a declaration of self-determination in the face of an adaptation of her story created in real

time, in the light of which the following statement — “I am well aware how you must be judging me, my reader; if, that is, my reputation has preceded me” (32) — must surely address viewers of the screen adaptation and readers of *The Handmaid’s Tale* as well as the historians who will unearth these documents in the future of Gilead’s fictional reality.

In *The Testaments*, the motto that Lydia has chosen for the Aunts’ Hall, *Per Ardua Cum Estrus*, is wilfully “slippery” and open to interpretation (33).⁶ It replaces on the walls of Ardua Hall, formerly a library, the word *Veritas*, and in so doing it stands for a type of textual truth less transparent, and more difficult to read, than its abstract, metaphysical predecessor. This new truth, which stands for Gilead, has, *inter alia*, “female progenitive labour” at its source (33). This is the motto, in other words, of a fictional reality that can be read in any number of ways, one of which, and by far the most self-evident, has to do with the labour of childbirth: that is, the story that was born other (born as other) in a medical amphitheatre and is both hidden and recovered, reborn, through textual work (*reread*, not *taken as read*).

Crucially, then, the witness statements of *The Testaments* offer the same textual duplicity as *The Handmaid’s Tale*. If the later novel’s very title underpins the fictional reality of Gilead by bearing witness to it with three mutually supporting historical documents, then it is itself undermined by recurrent references to bearing false witness. We learn first from Aunt Lydia’s account and then from Agnes’s account that bearing false witness is “done frequently,” that it is “common” practice in Gilead (255, 308). This practice bleeds into the paratextual presentation of the testaments by Professor Pieixoto. His usurping of his female graduate student’s research material at once replicates the patriarchal suppression of women’s rights and possessions in Gilead and goes against the motto of Ardua Hall, which acknowledges the foundational importance of female labour. Pieixoto notes that witness accounts of life in Gilead are rare because “It is hard for those deprived of literacy,” in this case women, “to leave such records” (412). Clearly, the juxtaposition of this reflection with the graduate student’s act of passing her findings on to him suggests that Pieixoto is not only explaining Gilead but also keeping it alive. At the same time, by blurring the lines of the paratextual and the textual, he also encourages readers to look again at suppressed scenes of female labour. The dyadic structure of Atwood’s two Gilead novels offers just such a scene; indeed, the framing device of the statue that conjoins the diegesis proper and the historical paratext

within *The Testaments* reflects another framing device, one that conjoins the diegeses proper of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*.

The three witness accounts of *The Testaments* produce two endings, the stories of Agnes and Daisy/Nicole converging into one story when they leave Gilead together as half-sisters. The young women's journey ends precisely as the Handmaid's tale, as presented here, begins — in a space of childbirth or at least with a woman holding her children in her arms. It also ends on the limen between sleep and wakefulness. Having arrived, we are told, miraculously at the Campobello Refugee Medical Centre and been pumped full of antibiotics, Daisy/Nicole asks after Becka (for whose salvation Agnes has been praying since they left Ardua Hall) and then, "feeling dizzy," closes her eyes (398). In a reversal of roles, Agnes tells Daisy/Nicole that Becka is not there, to which Daisy/Nicole, who felt as though she was guided over the rocks by Becka's presence as they made it to land, responds in a whisper that "She did come. She was there on the beach. . . . I heard her" (399). Daisy/Nicole then resumes her account: "I think I went to sleep. Then I was awake again. 'Does she still have a fever?' said a voice" (399). Given the text's vacillation between states at this point, it is not clear whether the question of Daisy/Nicole's fever is posed in the Campobello Refugee Medical Centre or in the space of the medical amphitheatre posited in my analysis. Similarly, the presence of the mother is no more real or imaginary than the spectral form of Becka. And, by the same token, the question of who is febrile is equally unclear. The lines that follow, I argue, pertain equally to both medical centres: "I opened my eyes, and it was very bright, but there was a woman standing there. She looked sad and happy, both at once; she was crying a little" (399). In the narrative economy of Daisy/Nicole's account, whether this woman is her mother or not is a matter not of historical truth but of trust ("I felt it must be her"). Just as the "afterimage" that opens the Handmaid's tale is smelled, here too smell evokes a memory: "She smelled right. It was like an echo, of a voice you can't quite hear" (399).

By slipping into and out of consciousness, and by testing the boundaries between fantasy and reality, this conclusion to the young women's testimonies slips equally between Atwood's two Gilead texts. In this way, this scene, both happy and sad, frames *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* as a pair, not only balancing the Handmaid's sadness with the happiness of her daughters' escape and the eventual fall of Gilead but also echoing, and responding to, the opening medical

amphitheatre scene that has been my focus here. In addition to mapping that initial scene onto two novels, the final breaching of the limen between consciousness and unconsciousness recalls the foundational twinning of our virtual but real and actual but unreal narratives. What we have at the end, therefore, is the possibility of bestowing on the opening of *The Handmaid's Tale* at least some measure of happiness. If Gilead is built in part upon the strengths and possibilities — including for multiple meanings — of female labour, then the trauma of the initial scene in the medical amphitheatre, which the diegesis proper of *The Handmaid's Tale* taints with images of rape and unwanted and/or unsuccessful births, can now also have its share of (possible) happiness. Here, in other words, we have a glimpse, if just a glimpse, of a woman who successfully gives birth to children who are wanted.

The Testaments provides three witness accounts to prove the existence, and destruction, of Gilead. At the same time, it bears false witness, attesting to Gilead's other status, as a fictional construct and as a story within a (hi)story. The power and importance of Atwood's storytelling certainly lie in history and politics, but they cannot erase its "fascinating diversions." As Aunt Lydia states in *The Testaments* at the end of her account, with a suitably ambiguous play on words, "Such excellent embroiderers, women are" (404).

NOTES

¹ Freud is perhaps an uncomfortable fit in the framework of a critical approach to Atwood's novel. Stein, for example, likens the scholars' treatment of the Handmaid's tale at the end of the text to Freud's exploitative relationship with female patients such as the famous Dora. She considers both to be voyeurs; she even uses the term "parasite" ("Scheherazade" 274). Here, Freud's role can be considered parasitical in a much more positive light, by which I refer to Miller's deconstructionist understanding of the *paratextual* role of a text's internalized nihilism: that is, its tendency to carry its own will to otherness inside itself ("Critic as Host"). Certainly, the narrator's supine position in a medical amphitheatre can be mapped easily onto that adopted by an analysand.

² Deleuze and Guattari suggest that Freud's fundamental misunderstanding of the wolf's singular plurality (as pack) leads Freud, erroneously, to trace the origin of the Wolf Man's neurosis back to that familiar, and singular, figure that is the father.

³ For Emma Williamson, "One of the key themes of the book, represented by the descriptions of the little that the Handmaids can see from beneath their extensive wimples, is the power and tension of resistance. Like reality, resistance exists on the margins, but is sometimes visible" (266). In the framework of my analysis, the tunnel vision of which the Handmaids' wimples are metonymic is as much that of the reader as that of the protagonist. The simultaneous appeal to be seen and will to keep hidden staged here is therefore

a description *en abyme* of the partial reading experience of *The Handmaid's Tale* that is a blind acceptance of the Handmaid's tale.

⁴ In French, for example, Freud's original term, *Verleugnung*, generally translated into English by the term "disavowal," is given as *le refoulement partiel* or "partial repression."

⁵ The traumatic birthing scenes in the tale are thus internal echoes, translations into the tale of the events that found the story behind the medical amphitheatre.

⁶ Transmedial adaptation is internalized in Lydia's account of Gilead in *The Testaments*. At first glance, her envy of Commander Judd's collection of books appears to constitute a misattribution of authorship. The books that she covets are "Doré's *Inferno*, Dalí's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Picasso's *Lysistrata*" (316). The given "authors" are in fact the illustrators of particular editions who have replaced in importance (depending on the audience) the authors of the original texts (Dante Alighieri, Lewis Carroll, and Aristophanes, respectively). The allusion to the screen adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* is obvious, as are the political and historical dimensions of one regime replacing another, including repurposing its iconography and grand narratives. More interestingly, perhaps, this is an instance of bearing false witness, or at least of feigning it, of muddling fact and fiction or of playing with the ways in which one can pass as the other.

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