7

Science Fiction in the Feminine: *The Handmaid's Tale*

My room, then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine, even in this time.

The Handmaid's Tale, p. 60[1]

These words spoken by Atwood's Handmaid, deprived of her own name and citizenship and known simply by the patronymic 'Offred', might be taken as emblematic of a woman's survival narrative told within the confines of a patriarchal system represented by the distopia known as Gilead. Restricted to private domestic spaces and relegated to the margins of a political structure which denies her existence as an individual, nevertheless Offred asserts her right to tell her story. By doing so, she reclaims her own private spaces of memory and desire and manages to rehabilitate the traditionally 'feminine' space assigned to women in Gilead. Atwood's narrative focuses on possibilities for constructing a form of discourse in which to accommodate women's representations of their own gendered identity while still acknowledging 'the power of the (male 'universal') space in which they cannot avoid, to some extent, operating'.[2] Like *Bodily Harm*, this is another eye-witness account by another 'ignorant, peripherally involved woman', this time interpolated within the grand patriarchal narratives of the Bible and of history, just as Offred's Tale is enclosed within an elaborate structure of prefatory materials and concluding Historical Notes. However, her treasonable act of speaking out in a society where women are forbidden to read or write or to speak freely effects a significant shift from

'history' to 'herstory'. Offred's Tale claims a space, a large autobiographical space, within the novel and so relegates the grand narratives to the margins as mere framework for her story which is the main focus of interest. Storytelling is this woman's only possible gesture of resistance to imprisonment in silence, just as it becomes the primary means for her psychological survival. In process of reconstructing herself as an individual, Offred becomes the most important historian of Gilead.

The Handmaid's Tale is Atwood's most popular novel, which is perhaps surprising given its bleak futuristic scenario. It has won many prizes and it has been made into a film directed by Volker Schlondorff and starring Natasha Richardson, Faye Dunaway and Robert Duvall.[3] A great deal of critical attention has been paid to it as distopian science fiction and as a novel of feminist protest.[4] Certainly Atwood's abiding social and political concerns are evident here in her scrutiny of structures of oppression within public and private life as well as her concerns with the environment, and her nationalist engagement with Canadian–American relations. Yet the novel exceeds definitions of political correctness and has provoked much unease in its critique of second wave North American feminism. It is not exactly science fiction, 'if by that you mean Martians, teleportation, or life on Venus. Nor is it a sort of travelogue of the future. It's the story of one woman under this regime, told in a very personal way, and part of the challenge for me was the creation of her voice and viewpoint.'[5] A critical reading which focuses attention on the female narrator's position, on her language, and on the structural features of her narrative might allow us to see how *The Handmaid's Tale* eludes classification, just as Offred's storytelling allows her to escape the prescriptive definitions of Gilead.

Nevertheless, the political dimensions of the distopian model need to be considered in order to gauge the purpose of the fiction, bearing in mind Atwood's definition of what 'politics' means: 'What we mean is how people relate to a power structure and vice versa' (*Conversations*, p. 185). Set in a futuristic United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century after a military coup has wiped out the President and the Congress, Gilead is a totalitarian regime run on patriarchal lines derived from the Old Testament and seventeenth-century American Puritanism plus a strong infusion of the American New Right ideology of the 1980s. Individual freedom of choice has been outlawed and everyone has been drafted into the service of the state, classified according to prescribed roles: Commanders, Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Eyes, down to Guardians

and Econowives. There is strict censorship and border control, as Offred reminds us in her recurrent nightmare memory of her failed escape to Canada with her husband and daughter, which has resulted in her being conscripted as a Gileadean Handmaid. The novel is an exposure of power politics at their most basic: 'Who can do what to whom.' Women are worst off because they are valued only as child-breeders in a society threatened with extinction where, because of pollution, AIDS and natural disasters, the national birthrate has fallen to a catastrophically low level. This essentialist definition of women as 'two-legged wombs' works entirely in the interests of a patriarchal elite, denying women any freedom of sexual choice or of lifestyle. Atwood's feminist concerns are plain here but so too are her concerns for basic human rights. Most men are oppressed in this society: there are male bodies hanging every day on the Wall, while homosexuals, Roman Catholic priests and Quakers of both sexes are regularly executed, and male sexual activity is severely restricted as well. A more comprehensive reading of the novel would suggest that it is closer to the new feminist scholarship which has moved beyond exclusively female concerns to a recognition of the complexities of social gender construction. Offred's tale challenges essentialist definitions whether patriarchal or feminist, showing how state sexual regulation not only criminalises male violence against women and suppresses women's sexuality but how it also militates against basic human desires for intimacy and love. As Offred reminds her Commander, Gilead's policies of social engineering have left out one crucial factor:

> Love, I said.
> Love? said the Commander. What kind of love?
> Falling in love, I said. (pp. 231–2)

The novel represents Atwood's version of 'What If' in the most powerful democracy in the world. She describes her distopian project precisely in an unpublished essay:

> It's set in the near future, in a United States which is in the hands of a power-hungry elite who have used their own brand of 'Bible-based' religion as an excuse for the suppression of the majority of the population. It's about what happens at the intersection of several trends, all of which are with us today: the rise of right-wing fundamentalism as a political force, the decline in the Caucasian birth rate in North America and northern Europe, and the rise in

> infertility and birth-defect rates, due, some say, to increased chemical-pollutant and radiation levels, as well as to sexually-transmitted diseases.[6]

As Atwood has declared repeatedly, both in interviews and in the novel itself, 'there's nothing in it that we as a species have not done, aren't doing now, or don't have the technological capability to do';[7] 'there was little that was truly original or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis' (*The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 319). When she began thinking about the novel in the early 1980s she kept a clippings file (now in the Atwood Papers, University of Toronto Library) of items from newspapers and magazines which fed directly into her writing. These show her wide-ranging historical and humanitarian interests, where pamphlets from Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace sit beside reports of atrocities in Latin America, Iran and the Philippines, together with items of information on new reproductive technologies, surrogate motherhood, and forms of institutionalised birth control from Nazi Germany to Ceausescu's Romania. It is to be noted that Gilead has a specifically American location, for Offred lives in the heartland of Gilead in a city that was formerly Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Harvard Campus (where Atwood was herself a student) has become the site for the Rachel and Leah Women's Re-education Centre, the setting for public rituals like Prayvaganzas and Particicutions, and Gilead's Secret Service headquarters. When asked why she had not set her novel in Canada, Atwood replied:

> The States are more extreme in everything ... Canadians don't swing much to the left or the right, they stay safely in the middle ... It's also true that everyone watches the States to see what the country is doing and might be doing ten or fifteen years from now. (*Conversations*, p. 223)

When we consider that the American 'New Right', as it was called in the 1980s (it is now called the 'Extreme Right', being no longer new), is one of Atwood's prime satiric targets, the location takes on a particular significance. The clippings file contains a lot of material on the New Right with its warnings about the 'Birth Dearth', its anti-feminism, its anti-homosexuality, its racism and its strong religious underpinnings in the Bible Belt.[8] Perhaps by coincidence one of the best known New Right studies is the collection of seminar papers *The New Right at Harvard*, edited by Howard Phillips[9] which includes

papers on family issues, abortion and pornography. These refer to the desirability of building a coalition, 'a small dedicated corps' to 'resist the Liberal democracy' with its 'libertarian positions', so that the militaristic rhetoric of Gilead could already be heard at Harvard three years before *The Handmaid's Tale* was published. It is possible to read the novel as an oblique form of Canada–US dialogue where a Canadian writer warns Americans about their possible future.

If this is a political fable with nationalist implications, then Canadians are implicated in other ways as well. *The Handmaid's Tale* opens out not only into the future (and there are two futuristic scenarios here, one set in America and one in Canada) but also into the space of Canadian prehistory, for 'those nagging Puritans really are my ancestors ... The mind-set of Gilead is really close to that of the seventeenth-century Puritans' (*Conversations*, p. 223). Atwood's interest in Puritan New England is signalled from the start in her dedication of the novel to Mary Webster and Perry Miller. Mary Webster was her own favourite ancestor, who was hanged as a witch in New England in 1683 but who survived her hanging and went free. Recounting this anecdote in a talk on 'Witches' at Harvard in 1980, Atwood commented, 'If there's one thing I hope I've inherited from her, it's her neck ... One needs a neck like that if one is determined to be a writer, especially a woman writer.'[10] Professor Perry Miller who was Atwood's Director of American Studies at Harvard has written two very influential books, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939) and *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953). Much of the rhetoric and many of the cultural practices of Gilead are to be found in Miller's histories, such as the Founding Fathers' references to women as 'handmaids of the Lord' or Cotton Mather's description of a dissenting woman as 'an American Jezebel'. Gilead also employs many of the Puritan practices associated with childbirth, like the Birthing Stool and the provision of refreshments at a birth which were known as 'groaning beer' and 'groaning cakes'.[11] While paying tribute to Miller's scholarship, Atwood shifts the emphasis to reinvent those discordant women's voices which ran counter to patriarchal Puritan voices in a fiction which is presented as historical reconstruction of a future already inscribed in the policies of the New Right. It is at this point that Atwood's fable shimmers with the possibility of a nationalist reading, for behind the threat of totalitarianism lurks an insistent preoccupation with Canada's relations to the United States. A scenario from Canadian prehistory is used to predict the bleak possibility of an Americanised future, where the space to be claimed for a beleaguered Canadianness is delineated within a dissenting Handmaid's tale.

Not only does Atwood satirise the New Right and its Puritan inheritance, but she also takes a critical look at North American feminism since the 1960s. As a feminist with a deep distrust of ideological hardlines, she refuses to simplify the gender debate or to swallow slogans whole, for slogans always run the risk of being taken over as instruments of oppression, like the late 1970s feminist phrase 'a women's culture' which Gilead has appropriated for its own purposes. It is significant that Gilead is a society 'in transition' where all the women are survivors of the time before, and their voices represent a range of feminine and feminist positions dating back to the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s. Offred's mother belongs to that early activist group with its campaigns for women's sexual freedom, their abortion rallies, and their 'Take Back the Night' marches. Thanks to the feminist movement in the United States women gained an enormously widened range of life choices when equal rights and legalised abortion were endorsed by Congress in the early 1970s, despite the opposition of Pro-Life campaigners and fundamentalist Christians. These voices are represented by the Commanders' Wives and the terrible Aunts. Among the Handmaids (who were women of childbearing age who must have grown up in the 1980s and early 1990s) positions are equally varied, ranging from the classic female victim figure of Janine (later Ofwarren), to radical feminists like Moira the lesbian separatist, to Offred herself who highlights the paradoxes and dilemmas of contemporary feminism. Offred, aged 33 at the time she tells her story, must have been born in the early 1970s, a date which would fit with her mother's feminist activities and the film about the Nazi's mistress which she sees at the age of eight; she would have been at university with Moira in the late 1980s. Just as there are many different kinds of women, so there is no simple gender division between masculine and feminine qualities: if men are capable of violence then so are women – even the Handmaids themselves at the Particicution – and Aunt Lydia with her coyly feminine manner is probably the most sadistic character in the novel. *The Handmaid's Tale* may be a critique of feminism but it is a double-edged one which rejects binary oppositions, just as Offred's double vision allows her to evaluate both Gilead and her own lost late twentieth-century America: that was not entirely good, but Gilead is undoubtedly worse. Atwood insists that women have never marched under a single banner: 'As for Woman, Capital W, we got stuck with that for centuries. Eternal woman. But really, Woman is

the sum total of women. It doesn't exist apart from that, except as an abstracted idea' (*Conversations*, p. 201). It is Offred, the witty heterosexual woman who cares about men, about mother–daughter relationships and about her female friends, whose storytelling voice survives long after Gilead has been relegated to past history.

Offred's narrative forms the bulk of the novel, refiguring the space which she can claim as her own within a very restrictive social system. In Gilead woman's place is in the home, though for a Handmaid the home is never her own but that of her Commanders and their Wives. *The Handmaid's Tale* is inner-space fiction, or perhaps space-time fiction, for it deals with the continuities of memory and those persistent traces of social history which survive to undermine the authority of even the most repressive regime. Though trapped within a system where there would seem to be no room for individual freedom, Offred claims her own private space by her refusals; she refuses to forget the past, she refuses to believe in the absolute authority of Gilead, just as she refuses to give up hope:

> Deliver us from evil.
>
> Then there's Kingdom, power, and glory. It takes a lot to believe in those right now. But I'll try it anyway. *In Hope*, as they say on the gravestones ...
>
> Oh God. It's no joke. Oh God oh God. How can I keep on living? (p. 205)

Crucially Offred refuses to be silenced, as in unpropitious circumstances she speaks out with the voice of late twentieth-century feminist individualism resisting the cultural identity imposed on her. She manages to lay claim to a surprising number of things which the system forbids: 'my own time' (p. 47), 'my room' (p. 60), 'my own territory' (p. 83), and even 'my name' (p. 94). She guards her lost name as the secret sign of her own identity and as guarantee of her hopes for a different future:

> I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried ... the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark. (p. 94)

Incidentally, this name is one of the secrets which Offred keeps from the reader though she does trust her lover Nick with it, and at the end the name does seem to act as guarantee of a future beyond

Gilead. One Canadian critic argues that Offred's real name is hidden in the text, there to be deduced from the one missing name in the whispered list of Handmaids' names at the end of the first chapter: 'Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June' (p. 14).[12]

Offred's assertion about the 'space I claim as mine' directly addresses questions about the feminine subject's position within a rigidly patriarchal system and a woman's possible strategies of resistance. Appropriating her temporary room in the Commander's house as her own, Offred transforms it from prison cell into a point of stability from which she can escape at will into the spaces of memory and desire:

> I lie, then, inside the room ... and step sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it.
>
> But the night is my time out. Where should I go?
>
> Somewhere good. (p. 47)

There is a surprising amount of mobility in the narrative as Offred moves out and away into her private imaginative spaces. Her story induces a kind of double vision in the reader as well, for she is always facing both ways as she shifts between her present life and her past or sometimes looks longingly towards the future.

In the face of state repression and domestic tyranny Offred manages to tell her wittily dissident tale about private lives, not only her own story but the stories of other women as well. Appropriating their remembered turns of phrase in her telling, Offred's voice doubles and multiplies to become the voices of 'women' rather than the voice of a single narrator. There is the story of Moira the rebel who spectacularly defies the power of the Aunts and escapes from the rehabilitation centre, only to reappear in the brothel scene at Jezebel's where she satirises male sexual fantasies by looking totally ridiculous as a Bunny Girl with a floppy ear and a draggly tail. There is also the story of Offred's unnamed predecessor at the Commander's house, who scratched a secret message in the wardrobe before hanging herself from the light fitting in the room Offred now occupies:

> Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the centre of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out. There must have been a chandelier, once. They've removed anything you could tie a rope to. (p. 17)

Offred comes to regard that absent woman as her own dark double. She also tells the stories of older women like her mother, the old-fashioned Women's Libber, condemned by the Gileadean regime as an Unwoman and sent to the Colonies to die but who refuses to stay dead. Instead she reappears to Offred and to Moira, preserved on film at the rehabilitation centre, and haunts her daughter's memory. Through time Offred gradually learns to appreciate the heroism of her mother who in life had been such a source of embarrassment, just as she begins to understand the dimensions of her own loss: 'I've mourned for her already. But I will do it again, and again' (p. 265). By contrast, there is the story of the Commander's Wife whom Offred remembers from the time before as 'Serena Joy' a popular gospel television show personality but who now finds herself trapped within that New Right ideology which she had helped to promote: 'She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word' (p. 56). Sitting in her beautiful enclosed garden in her blue gown, Serena appears to Offred like an ageing parody of the Virgin Mary, childless, arthritic and snipping vengefully at her flowers. All these women are casualties of the system though perhaps the saddest figure of all is Janine, a female victim in both her lives. Gang-raped in the time before Gilead, she becomes the Handmaid Ofwarren who produces the required baby, only to see it condemned to death as a 'shredder'. When Offred sees Janine for the last time after the Particicution she has become a madwoman, a 'woman in free fall' drifting around grasping a clump of the murdered man's blood-stained blond hair. Combined with fragments of gossip overheard from the Wives and the Marthas, Offred's story presents a mosaic of alternative female worlds which undermine Gilead's patriarchal myth of women's submissiveness and silence.

Offred describes her narrative as 'this limping and mutilated story', referring both to its structure and to the violent social conditions out of which it is told:

> I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it. (p. 279)

Composed of isolated scenic units with gaps and blanks in between where 'episodes separate themselves from the flow of time in which they're embedded' (*Conversations*, p. 216), the fragmented narrative also represents the mental processes of someone in Offred's isolated situation as her mind jumps between vividly realised present details and flashbacks to the past. Indeed, these are the characteristics of any story reconstructed from memory. As Offred asks herself, why does she need to tell this story? At the time, she tells it in her head in order to survive by seeing beyond the present moment where she does not wish to be and also because she needs to believe there is still someone outside Gilead who is listening to her: 'Because I'm telling you this story, I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are' (p. 279). As an ironic revision of Descartes's famous sentence in his *Discourse on Method* (1637), 'I think, therefore I am', Offred's comment shifts the emphasis away from the isolated thinking subject to the speaking subject whose storytelling becomes a substitute for dialogue. In fact Offred's story is a double reconstruction, as we discover at the end when she tells it again in a second retrospective version, like a letter addressed to '*Dear You ... You* can mean thousands' (p. 50). It takes a long time for her letter to be delivered, though as one critic has pointed out, the cassette tapes on which her message is recorded are found in a metal foot locker 'sealed with tape of the kind once used on packages to be sent by post' (p. 313) and Offred's is one of the missed messages which finally reaches its destination.[13] Though the male historians in Cambridge, England, get it first and rename it 'in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer' (p. 313), it finally comes to us the readers when Professor Pieixoto delivers his paper to the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies. The reader's own position in time is ambiguous, for we are reading in a fictive future which bears an uncomfortable resemblance to our present society.

Offred's story is incomplete and her account of life in Gilead is overlaid by Professor Pieixoto's academic reconstruction at the end, yet it is her voice coming through the transcribed tapes which gives the narrative its interest and continuity. This is history written in the feminine gender:

> I wish this story were different ... I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one's life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow.
>
> Maybe it is about those things, in a sense; but in the meantime there is so much else getting in the way. (p. 279)

Offred's insistence on her preference for traditionally feminine subject matter would seem to suggest that equally traditional equation between 'woman/nature' as opposed to 'man/culture' and

given the literary tradition out of which Atwood comes, we may wonder if Offred's tale is another version of Canadian women's wilderness writing.[14] The answer of course is not simple; Offred is actually very far from the wilderness, being situated in a city and living in a house with a walled garden in a neat tree-lined street. Her husband and daughter have been lost to her in the bush of the borderland territory between Gilead and Canada, so that any wilderness that exists for her would be merely within the inner realm of imaginative possibility. Yet there is, as we have seen with *Surfacing* and *Survival* and *Wilderness Tips*, a distinctive linguistic system relating to wilderness experience, with its signifiers of the unexplored natural world and the quest for freedom with its accompanying emotional and physical revitalisation. It is within this territory of imagination and metaphor that Offred claims the space to write about her body, her memories and her womanly desires, and so manages to elude the confines of Gilead. Her tale is as profoundly subversive as Hélène Cixous's French feminist text of the mid 1970s, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', with which it has much in common as a project to inscribe the complex dimensions of female being.[15] Atwood's novel enacts in practice what Cixous's essay proposes as theory, for Offred is Cixous's woman 'confined to the narrow room' and 'given a deadly brainwashing' but who becomes the 'I-woman, escapee' 'breaking out of the snare of silence' to 'write herself'. (The vocabulary here is entirely taken from 'Medusa'.) Offred's situation might be read as a literal translation of Cixous's highly metaphorical text, except that Atwood is sceptical of any Utopian vision of woman's glorious liberation from the shackles of patriarchy. Offred is not a revolutionary; she refuses to join the Mayday resistance movement in Gilead and she does not want to adopt Moira's separatist feminist space, though she admires her friend's recklessness and swashbuckling heroism. Her own position is much closer to the traditionally feminine role of woman as social mediator, for though she resists the brutal imposition of male power in Gilead she also remembers the delights of heterosexual love and yearns to fall in love again. Her story *is* about love with a strong traditional female romance component and Offred does the very traditional thing of becoming pregnant through her lovemaking with Nick though not through state-regulated sex with the Commander. It is symptomatic of Offred's non-confrontational role that though she finally defeats the Commander's assurance of male superiority, she herself is not in a commanding position at the end (unlike the film version where she murders the Commander and escapes). Led out of his house as a prisoner and feeling guilty at having let down the household, she has no idea whether she is going to her death or towards a new life of freedom when she steps up into the Black Van. Offred never makes Cixous's 'shattering entry into history'; on the contrary, she never finishes her story and her voice is almost drowned out by the voice of a male historian.

However, Offred's story is a 'reconstruction' in more senses than one, for not only is it her narrative of memory but it is also the means by which she manages to rehabilitate herself as an individual in Gilead. Though she begins her tale as a nameless woman traumatised by loss and speaking in whispers, Offred refuses to believe that she is nothing but a Handmaid, 'a two-legged womb': 'I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight' (p. 18). She insists on chronicling her subjective life from within her own skin, offering her own personal history of physical sensations and the impact of emotion on her body, together with those imaginative transformations through which body space opens out into fantasy landscape. According to Cixous's prescription, 'By writing herself [or in Offred's case "speaking herself"] woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display' ('Medusa' p. 250). This is for Offred the uncanny shape of the red-robed Handmaid. Indeed, it is from within this role that Offred finds her strength to resist, for just as Gilead is obsessed with the female body and its reproductive system so this is where Offred turns her attention, though in terms significantly different from patriarchal prescriptions and closer to feminist polemics: 'Write yourself. Your body must be heard ... This emancipation of the marvellous text of her self which she must urgently learn to speak' (ibid.).

The language through which Offred writes her body has significant affinities with Cixous's, for the female body is the 'dark continent' which both claim as their own. Cixous asserts that 'the dark continent is neither dark nor unexplorable', and Offred answers that challenge, using similar images of immense bodily territories, volcanic upheavals and the Medusa's own subversive laughter. There are, however, some interesting cultural differences, one of them being Atwood's use of wilderness imagery. On the evening of the monthly Ceremony of sexual intercourse with the Commander (a time when her body would seem least of all to be her own) Offred becomes the explorer of her own dark inner space:

> I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumours of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and diminishings of tissue, the droolings of the flesh, these are signs, these are the things I need to know about. Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own.
>
> I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will ... single, solid, one with me.
>
> Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. (pp. 83–4)

With her minute attention to physical details, Offred chronicles her bodily awareness and her shifts of perspective under the influence of cultural doctrines which have effected a change in her imaginative conceptualisation of her self. No longer a 'solid object, one with me', her body has become a 'cloud' surrounding the dark inner space of her womb, whose dimensions expand till it becomes Cixous's 'immense astral space' or Atwood's cosmic wilderness, 'huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red, rather than black'. Her intense meditation offers a kind of imaginative transcendence though without Cixous's promise of erotic pleasure, for Offred knows that she is nothing more in Gilead than a breeding machine serving the state. Though it is not rape ('Nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for'; p. 105), intercourse with the Commander 'has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me' (p. 105). What Offred experiences is a sense of dissolution within her body as every month its only issue is menstrual blood: 'To feel that empty again, again. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time' (p. 84). This is the hidden female space where time is kept by the body: 'I tell time by the moon. Lunar, not solar' (p. 209), though 'marking time' also reminds Offred that time is running out and she will be sent to the Colonies if she does not soon produce a child. Offred's condition is one of compromised resistance, where she regrets not becoming

pregnant as the system requires of her ('Give me children, else I die'), while at the same time she resists Gilead's imposition of patriarchal control over her. In her mind her body remains unconquered territory which will be forever beyond the Commander's reach, despite the monthly Ceremony:

> Intent on his inner journey, that place he is hurrying towards, which recedes as in a dream at the same speed with which he approaches it. (p. 105)

Offred's body is capable too of seismic upheavals in what is her most ebullient gesture of resistance to the Commander, her secret outburst of laughter after their first forbidden game of Scrabble. The game provides her with the welcome opportunity to play with words, and her image of the Scrabble counters as candies which she would like to put into her mouth makes a beautifully literal equivalent for Cixous's metaphor of women's seizing language 'to make it hers, containing it, taking it into her mouth' ('Medusa', p. 257). That game and the Commander's forlorn request for her to kiss him as if she meant it is followed by Offred's paroxysm, her own Medusa laughter:

> Then I hear something, inside my body. I've broken, something has cracked, that must be it. Noise is coming up, coming out, of the broken place, in my face ... If I let the noise get out into the air it will be laughter, too loud, too much of it. (p. 156)

In order to laugh, Offred goes into the one hidden place in her room, the cupboard scrawled with her nameless predecessor's secret message, '*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*'. As she asks later: 'How could I have believed I was alone in here? There were always two of us' (p. 305). There in the cupboard with its spectral witness to female solidarity, Offred laughs her defiance:

> My ribs hurt with holding back, I shake, I heave, seismic, volcanic, I'll burst. Red all over the cupboard, mirth rhymes with birth, oh to die of laughter. (p.156)

From such private inner spaces Offred's narrative of feeling opens out into the spaces of desire as her irrepressible energy impels her towards life rather than death. Though still enclosed within domestic spaces and decorums, Offred revels in the summer sunshine of

the Commander's Wife's garden, a space which is of course not her own but which she appropriates imaginatively. She always refers to it as 'our' garden. This garden is not a wilderness, though it is a place of organic natural forces which establishes a correspondence with Offred's remembered past life: 'I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth' (p. 22). Now she turns to the garden as a welcome release from her loveless isolation:

> I wish this story were different ... I've tried to put some of the good things in as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them? (p. 279)

One of the most lyrical passages in the novel is her celebration of the garden in full bloom, a place of fertility and sensuous delights combined with the subtly sexual suggestiveness of the bleeding hearts 'so female in shape' and the phallic irises so cool on their tall stalks:

> There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently. (p. 161)

The garden provides a sublimated image of Offred's own repressed desires, but more than that it becomes suddenly and overwhelmingly the space of romantic fantasy, a 'Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid; the return of the word *swoon*' (p. 161), where traditional images of femininity breathe through Offred's prose as the garden itself 'breathes, in the warmth, breathing itself in. To walk through it in these days, of peonies, of pinks and carnations, makes my head swim.' In this eroticised feminine space conjured by Offred in her state of heightened sensitivity everything signifies romance, temptation and desire:

> The willow is in full plumage and is no help, with its insinuating whispers, *Rendezvous*, it says, *terraces*: the sibilants run up my spine, a shiver as if in fever. The summer dress rustles against the flesh of my thighs, the grass grows underfoot, at the edges of my eyes there are movements, in the branches; feathers, flittings, grace notes, tree into bird, metamorphosis run wild. Goddesses are possible now and the air suffuses with desire. Even the bricks of the house are softening, becoming tactile; if I leaned against them they'd be warm and yielding. It's amazing what denial can do. (pp. 161–2)

In this passage Offred is aware of herself as both female and feminine, an element of 'nature' in her bodily responses and an element of 'culture' as her riot of feelings is filtered through her literary imagination. No wilderness place, this is both a real garden and a place of myth where 'goddesses are possible', a pagan fantasy landscape metamorphosed into Offred's rhapsody of the flesh. Of course it is characteristic that she should see round her fantasy even while revelling in it, wryly recognising that such excess is at least in part a sublimation of her sexual frustrations where longing generates its own scenarios. Yet it is the very intensity of her desire which allows Offred for a moment to transcend her human limits and to enter into the life of the pulsating organic world around her:

> Winter is not so dangerous. I need hardness, cold, rigidity; not this heaviness, as if I'm a melon on a stem, this liquid ripeness. (p. 162)

Offred has become that speaking subject whom Cixous describes in her '*écriture feminine*':

> I am spacious, singing flesh, on which is grafted no one knows which I, more or less human, but alive because of transformation. Write! And your self-seeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood, rising ... with sonorous, perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed. ('Medusa', p. 260)

Cixous's text here runs in harmony with Offred's where images of desire deriving from the human body and the natural world constitute a 'feminine' alternative language which resists Gilead's polluted technological nightmare and its compromised 'biblico-capitalist rhetoric' ('Medusa', p. 257).

Offred's text is truly self-seeking as she tries to win back 'her womanly being, her goods and her pleasures' ('Medusa', p. 250) which have been stolen from her. Even within the restrictive circumstances of Gilead Offred yearns to fall in love again, and she does – not with the Commander whose image is irretrievably tainted with patriarchal authority – but with his chauffeur Nick. Their love story follows the pattern of traditional female romance with its strong undercurrent of sexual magnetism which leads the heroine into dangerous forbidden territory and finally results in her rescue by the hero. There are, however, significant differences from the tradition-

al script, for falling in love flouts all the rules of sexual conduct in puritanical Gilead and Offred knows that she and Nick would be shot if they were discovered in bed together. Their love story is fraught with so many difficulties that Offred has trouble in telling it at all, yet it runs as secret subtext beneath the deprivations of her daily life as a Handmaid. Offred's response to Nick is overpoweringly sexual, for the first time his boot touches her shoe when they are sitting decorously in the Commander's Wife's sitting room, ironically enough on the first night of the monthly Ceremony, she says, 'I feel my shoe soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin' (p. 91). Though Offred moves her foot away, the sudden sensation of coming to life again under Nick's touch is the first signal of the strong physical attraction between them. We are reminded of Atwood's poem, 'Nothing like love to put blood in the language'[16] as Offred attempts to tell the story of her reawakening sexuality and the burgeoning of her romantic fantasies. It is a fragmented narrative filled with obstacles and marked by brief illicit encounters where urgent desire is figured as mutual irrational hunger for the other:

> I want to reach up, taste his skin. He makes me hungry. His fingers move, feeling my arm under the nightgown sleeve, as if his hand won't listen to reason. It's so good, to be touched by someone, to be felt so greedily, to feel so greedy. Luke [addressing the ghost of her lost husband] you'd know, you'd understand. It's you here, in another body.
> Bullshit. (pp. 109–10)

Offred is too honest to substitute one man for another even in her fantasy; after all, that would be to repeat Gilead's own methods. ('Each one remains unique. There is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged one for the other', pp. 201–2.) Yet there is a complex process of doubling and substitution going on here between her lost husband Luke, the Commander and Nick, in parallel to the doublings between Wives and Handmaids, or in this particular case between Offred and Serena Joy, who together set up the liaison with Nick: 'I see the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend. Myself, my obverse' (p. 271). A similar process of doubling happens in Offred's account of her first sexual encounter with Nick, which she tells in two different versions before admitting that neither of them is true. The first version (pp. 272–3) is a minimalist wordless encounter, while the second version (pp. 273–5) follows the script of a tough-talking Hollywood

movie of the 1950s. Yet both these fictitious versions are undermined by Offred's sudden outbursts of overpowering sexual joy (Version 1):

> His mouth is on me, his hands, I can't wait and he's moving, already, love, it's been so long, I'm alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending. I knew it might only be once. (p. 273)

This vibrantly charged '*écriture feminine*' stands in contrast to the second version, which is starker and more elemental (Version 2):

> There wasn't any thunder though, I added that in. To cover up the sounds, which I am ashamed of making. (p. 275)

Offred's assertions, denials and revisions suggest erotically charged experience which can only be gestured towards in language but which can never be accurately written down, for love happens in the gaps between words: 'All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate' (p. 275).

Despite the difficulties, Offred tries to write her loving desire in her confessional narrative towards the end, when we realise that her relation with Nick has been going on beneath the text for quite a long time:

> I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own, without Serena knowing. It wasn't called for, there was no excuse. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely. (p. 280)

Her clear-eyed account offers fascinating glimpses into a woman's sexual feelings which are occluded in love stories told from a male perspective. There is no feminine coyness here, for now it is Offred who is the reckless seeker knocking on the door of Nick's bedroom with 'a beggar's knock', yet there is a kind of diffidence and vulnerability within her daring. She always dreads rejection and so is perpetually overwhelmed with gratitude as everything brims to excess:

> We make love each time as if we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there will never be any more ... And then when there is, that too is always a surprise, extra, a gift. (p. 281)

What Offred emphasises (and the reason why she says 'I did it for myself entirely') is the transforming power of sexual desire, as under

Nick's touch and gaze she feels released into the 'marvellous text of herself':

> He seems indifferent to most of what I have to say, alive only to the possibilities of my body, though he watches me while I'm speaking. He watches my face. (p. 282)

Though neither of them says the word 'love' Offred represents herself in very traditional terms as a woman in love, 'daydreaming, smiling at nothing, touching my face lightly' (p. 283). At the same time, she and Nick have crossed over into wilderness territory of passion and instinct as the imagery suggests, finding there a place of security where like primitive cave-dwellers they cling together in their shared private space – though Offred also knows that this is nothing more than the state of mind of two people in love:

> Being here with him is safety, it's a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside. This is a delusion, of course. This room is one of the most dangerous places I could be. (p. 281)

Her account is written in the double-voiced discourse so characteristic of women, partaking both of 'nature' (as Offred according to the female biological rhythm becomes pregnant through her lovemaking with Nick) and of 'culture' (as she sees herself like a Canadian settler's wife, making a life for herself in the wilderness with the man she loves: '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 at him', p. 283).

However, this is a love story which is cut short and lacks the conventional happy ending (an ending, which incidentally, Volker Schlondorff's film version provides). The romance plot is put to a crucial test when one day Nick bursts into Offred's room accompanied by a party of Eyes (secret police) to take her away in the dreaded Black Van reserved for dissidents. Is this a betrayal or a rescue? Offred does not have the faintest idea and she realises that she knows so little about Nick that 'trust' is, ironically, all that she is left with: 'Trust me, he says, which in itself has never been a talisman, carries no guarantee', p. 306). Her narrative ends with Offred laying herself open to all risks and all possibilities as she departs from the Commander's house like a criminal under guard and climbs into the van:

> I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped.
>
> And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light. (p. 307)

So Offred enters Cixous's moving open transitional space of becoming ('Medusa', p. 264) at the same moment as her voice ceases. This is no Utopian ending but a radical disruption, and we never find out what becomes of her. From the discovery of her tapes there is a strong assumption that she was indeed rescued by Nick, but there is no evidence of what happened after that. (The film version seems more certain of the outcome than Atwood's narrative.) The final frame of the novel is provided by the Historical Notes which introduce several crucial shifts in perspective. They offer an interpretative view of Offred's tale which has truly been 'given over into the hands of strangers', and it can't be helped because Offred is long since dead. Two hundred years later Gilead has become ancient history and knowledge of it is buried in the past, so that only traces of its failed social experiment remain in the form of archaeological fragments, scattered diaries and letters, among which are Offred's cassette tapes. These Notes are a transcript of a lecture given by a Cambridge Professor, Darcy Pieixoto, at an academic symposium on Gileadean Studies held in the year 2195. It is this professor who together with a colleague is responsible for the transcription and editing of the story we have just finished reading, or what he describes pedantically as the '*soi-disant* manuscript ... which goes by the title of *The Handmaid's Tale*' (p. 312). Already the voice of the male academic threatens to drown out the voice of Offred and the significance of this woman's autobiography.

Before pursuing the implications of this shift in voice, it is necessary to consider that other shift in time and place which occurs in these Notes. The novel actually rehearses two different futuristic scenarios: Offred's Gilead set in a nightmarish polluted and fundamentalist United States whose population is threatened with extinction; and there is the second one (post-Gilead) which is set in Arctic Canada (post-Canada as we know it?). This territory is clearly unpolluted, for the conference participants are invited to go on a Nature Walk, having enjoyed a dinner of fish from the sea the evening before. The conference session is chaired by a woman professor, Maryann Crescent Moon, whose name indicates that she is a Native Person (as is Professor Running Dog). The most crucial evidence for the Canadian location is the place name, for the conference is held

at the University of Denay, Nunavit. The Dené are the Native People who live in northern Alberta, while 'Nunavut' is the name of a huge area in the eastern Arctic which will become in the last year of the twentieth century the first aboriginal self-governing territory in Canada. Of course 'Denay, Nunavit' is also a pun, a piece of authorial advice to the reader to believe Offred's story, no matter what interpretations or misinterpretations might be offered in the Historical Notes.

Indeed, misinterpretations are offered in what turns out to be a ferocious satiric thrust at male academic historians; sexist attitudes have not disappeared, as we gather from the professor's sexist jokes about 'tails' and 'frailroads' and in his reading of the Tale itself. He is not concerned with Offred as an individual; instead he is preoccupied with establishing the authenticity of her text and its value as objective historical evidence, while sidestepping the crucial moral issues raised by her account: 'Our job is not to censure but to understand' (at which, to their discredit, the assembled academics applaud). He blames Offred for not keeping a piece of the Commander's computer printout as evidence of the way the Gileadean system of government worked. His reconstruction effects a radical shift from 'herstory' to 'history' as he attempts to discredit Offred's narrative by accusing her of not paying attention to significant things. In response, the reader may feel that it is the professor who is paying attention to the wrong things, for Atwood highlights perspective rather than knowledge or truth as the main feature of any historical narrative. Pieixoto's account obliterates Offred as a person; he never tells what happened to her because he does not know and he is not interested. In fact, he does exactly what Offred feared history would do to the Handmaids: 'From the point of view of future history, we'll be invisible' (p. 240).

The abrupt shift from Offred's voice to the historian's voice challenges the reader on questions of interpretation. We have to remember that *The Handmaid's Tale* was Offred's transcribed speech, reassembled and edited by male historians and not by her. Really the tale is their structure, which may account for some of the disruptions in the narrative. Her tale has been appropriated by an academic who seems to forget that his reconstruction is open to questions of interpretation too. He is abusing Offred as Gilead abused her, removing her authority over her own life story and renaming it in a gesture which parallels Gilead's patriarchal suppression of a woman's identity in the Handmaid's role. No wonder the professor claims to have lost Offred, as like Eurydice's ghost 'she slips from our grasp and

flees' (p. 324), though he is quite wrong to accuse her of not answering him when he has refused to listen to what she has been saying. The challenge of interpretation is finally directed out to the readers, who have heard it all. Finally, I would suggest that just as Offred's story has shown up the limits of Gilead's autocratic power to control the subjective lives of at least two of its inhabitants, so it defies Pieixoto's appropriation 200 years later. This may look like a case of the 'disappearing author', though that is a postmodern position that Atwood vigorously resists (Deny None of It) in the interests of our shared moral responsibility. By putting herself into the text, Offred has put herself 'into the world and into history', challenging readers to connect her world with our own in the present in the hope of averting a nightmare like Gilead for our own future.