

Partial Transcripts: dialogues with history in
Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.¹

‘Begin at the beginning’, the King said gravely, ‘and go on till you come to the end: then stop’.²

Is the beginning of a given work its real beginning, or is there some other, secret point that more authentically starts the work off?³

Beginning at the beginning, as the King advises in *Alice in Wonderland*, makes perfect sense, but only if you know where the beginning begins. For, as Edward Said suggests, there might well be other, secret points of beginning, points which in turn complicate the establishment of origin, of authenticity, and, by extension, claims to authorship and authority. Paradoxically, establishing the relevance of this to Margaret Atwood's dystopian projection, *The Handmaid's Tale*, involves fast-forwarding past the end of the tale. Past the end of the tale, though not to the end of the text itself. The King's demand to go on till

¹ John, 1.1.

² Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Methuen, 1978), p. 78.

³ Edward Said, *Beginnings; Intention and Method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 3.

you reach the end also makes perfect sense, but only if you know where the ending ends. And *The Handmaid's Tale* ends more than a dozen pages after the handmaid's tale. Only beyond the end of Offred's tale, then, does fuller understanding of its 'beginning' begin.

The distinguishing of *Tale* from tale operates as a formal feature in the novel: following the end of Offred's account, 'Historical Notes' are appended. And the verb fast-forwarding is appropriate, the 'Historical Notes' disclosing that the tale of a sexual surrogate in the Christian fundamentalist state of Gilead has been transcribed from thirty or so cassette tapes. The Notes themselves are presented as a 'partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, as part of the International Historical Association Convention'.⁴ Academic pretension endures a mild cuffing here, though a more obviously important, and more startling, fact is subsequently revealed—the conference takes place in the year 2195. What for late-twentieth century readers has appeared a small but plausible historical leap into the unnerving near-future world of a fundamentalist dictatorship, is transformed, by the conceit of the conference in the twenty-second century, into a return to the distant past.

⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; London, Virago Press, 1987), p. 311. All subsequent references are to the Virago edition.

Said's suspicion of other, secret beginnings finds form in the Notes, for they detail the extent to which what appeared to be a provocative but relatively unproblematic 'text' has been fashioned by academic historians two centuries after the events seemingly occur. The tale itself ends in ambiguity, enough, Offred pondering tentatively:

Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped.

And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light. (p. 307)

But the post-tale notes establish that, while Offred has put herself into hands of strangers in Gilead, her narrative has been placed into the hands of strangers (in the form of historians) two hundred years into the future. The Notes invite, indeed demand, a rethinking of the 'innocent' reading to that point. Virginia Woolf's fantasy biography, *Orlando*, prompts a similar realignment, for the eponymous 'hero' dramatically changes sex on page 134 of the World's Classics edition, and, over the course of five centuries, never ages. Gillian Beer points out that with *Orlando* 'the reader is jestingly made aware of how much we believe our reading'.⁵ In *The*

⁵ Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 57.

Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood provokes the more serious considerations of how and why we believe our reading of history, and of who provides our reading matter.

The Historical Notes largely consist of a conference paper entitled 'Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*', delivered by Cambridge historian Professor James Pieixoto. The continuing centrality of powerful universities such as Cambridge University in analysing cultural history of itself deserves attention, but of more practical and immediate significance is Pieixoto's account of the process of transcribing cassette tapes to text. One problem for Pieixoto and his colleague, the gnomically named Professor Knotly Wade, derived from the fact that the tapes, when initially discovered in an army surplus locker, 'were in no particular order'. As professional historians, Pieixoto and Wade 'arrange the blocks of speech in the order they appeared to go, but, as I have said elsewhere, all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research' (p. 314). The scholarly rectitude is laudable, though a harsher reading of the phrases, 'as I have said elsewhere', and 'pending scholarly research', would note the advancement of academic careers in tandem with academic knowledge.

The admission to the conference delegates of the provisional status of the text reinforces an earlier statement that 'what we have before us is not the item in its original form' (pp. 312-13). Once again, questions of beginnings, of origins, have implications, for, '[s]trictly speaking, it was not a manuscript at all' (p. 313). Other difficulties of transcription involve those 'posed by accents, obscure referents and archaisms' (p. 314), but, interestingly, though logically, the original cassette tapes 'bore no title' (p. 313). *The Handmaid's Tale*, Pieixoto reveals, was chosen by Knotly Wade, 'partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer', but partly because of the pun involved 'in the archaic vulgar signification of the word tail' (p. 313). This blokey aside, underlined by another pun playing on the associations of the word 'bone', sits oddly with the more overtly scholarly allusion to Chaucer. The reaction of the conference goes, however (registered as 'Laughter, applause'), suggests that Pieixoto shares the sense of humour of his audience, or that such humour is itself humoured. Evidence begins to accumulate, however, not only of the degree of scholarly fashioning of Offred's account, but also of particular biases informing that scholarly work.

These admissions alone might be troubling, but such concerns are reinforced by the fact that in his conference paper Pieixoto repeatedly has

difficulties with the original orality of Offred's tale. At first he labels it a 'manuscript', before admitting that when first discovered it was not a manuscript at all. Next, he describes it as 'an item—I hesitate to use the word document' (p. 313). Still later he explains that '[i]f we could establish an identity for the narrator, we felt, we might be well on the way to an explanation of how this document—let me call it that for the sake of brevity—came into being' (p. 315). Here, as Said, suggests, the question of beginnings merges with that of authenticity and, ultimately, of authority. At the end of his paper Pieixoto dispenses entirely with his earlier hesitation, commenting that '[o]ur document, though in its own way eloquent, is on [a variety of topics] mute' (p. 324). Tellingly, the possessive 'our' here signals a potential transfer of authority from the original oral teller to the text-originating scholar. And Pieixoto's recourse to the trope of speech (or its absence) in the term 'mute' again suggests something incommensurable between textuality and orality, for logically and literally, a document can be nothing other than mute.

The importance of this distinction for the historian is exposed unconsciously in Pieixoto's final remarks, where he presents a particular conception of the past, and of the historian's task:

As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day. (p. 324)

The past conceived as a collection of voices and echoes patently applies to the original oral form of Offred's tale, but Pieixoto fails to appreciate that, speaking literally, the voices that may reach us from the past are no more 'visible' in the clearer light of our own day than in the dark. Crucially, however, the same is not true of the artefacts Pieixoto both creates and interprets: texts. Implicit in his closing remarks, then, is a distinction between a 'past' which is oral, and 'History' proper, which is textual. And as text History comes under the ministering hands of historians, becomes their possession. The handmaid's tale becomes worthy of consideration at the International Historical Association Convention when it exists in its textual incarnation, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Despite his modest recognition of the difficulties of deciphering even in clearer light, Pieixoto's intellectual disability is not so much blindness as deafness.

Pieixoto instinctively and repeatedly favours the textual over the oral. 'Accent' is a technical

problem to be resolved, blocks of speech need to be arranged in order. Gaps in the oral account prove frustrating, especially for an academic historian: 'Some of [these gaps] might have been filled by our anonymous author, had she a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she the instincts of a reporter or a spy' (p. 322). A possible solution, for the historian, resides in the textual: 'What we would not give, now, for even twenty pages of so of printout from Waterford's private computer!' (p. 322). In these remarks, a verbal hierarchy established and reinforced by Pieixoto is melded with that of gender, the female being linked to the inferior oral, the male to the superior textual. A similar hierarchy operates in the world of Gilead itself, men controlling the Bible, the textual blueprint and justification for that state, by keeping it locked away. The women's only access is through the oral level, as Offred recognises: 'We can be read from it, by him, but we cannot read' (p. 98).

Before taking this connection further, however, more general implications of the hierarchy between the textual and the oral bear consideration. Complaining that Offred might have filled gaps had she had a different turn of mind, Pieixoto describes her as 'our anonymous author', but her anonymity poses the problem of authentication:

'[i]f we could establish an identity for the narrator' (p. 315), the authenticity of the story could be verified. Said's suspicion seems well founded that secret starting points, in this case the work of Pieixoto and Wade, might complicate the question of authenticity. Authenticity threatens to erode Offred's authority over the tale, her anonymity reducing her to the status of mere narrator. The distinction between author and narrator corresponds to that between textual and oral, the narrator telling a story that the author commits to paper. In this circumstance the narrator cedes authority, and therefore control, to the author. The consequences of this in Offred's case are significant, for her oral account is transcribed, corrected, arranged and named by Pieixoto and Wade. *The Handmaid's Tale* literally (in both senses of the word) would not exist but for their scholarship. The transcription of oral to textual, then, entails the transfer of authorship and authority. The tale has one female narrator, but the *Tale*, seemingly, has two male authors.⁶

The ideological implications of this situation are especially pertinent given the patriarchal dominance in Gilead itself. But questions of the oral account's status in relation to the textual have

⁶ It remains unclear (perhaps purposely) whether Professor Knotly Wade is male or female. The reasons behind Wade's choice of the title suggest a male, but that assumption cannot be proved, and this ambiguity prevents simple conclusions being drawn.

ramifications beyond the pages of Atwood's novel. The 1997 report into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, for example, published as *Bringing Them Home*, incorporates oral testimony of 'experiences of the removal processes'.⁷ Extracts from these accounts were later gathered into the compilation, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*.⁸ Steven Spielberg's recent project to record video interviews with Holocaust survivors also relies on oral testimony. Yet, in each case, what might be taken to be simply or primarily oral accounts only find a reproducible, widely distributable, and at least semi-permanent form by transfer to another medium. Does this transfer involve the loss of authority at work in *The Handmaid's Tale*? And do oral accounts have the same status as historical records as do texts?

The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, in his essay 'History from Below', acknowledges that most history has been written about, and perhaps for, ruling elites. The history of traditionally marginalised groups, what he terms 'grassroots history', has suffered in relation to the history of

⁷ *Bringing them Home: report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997), p. 21.

⁸ *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, ed. Carmel Bird (Sydney: Random House, 1998).

elites, and differs from it, 'inasmuch as there simply is not a readymade body of material about it'.⁹ While sympathetic to and in part a practitioner of 'history from below', Hobsbawm is wary of one relatively recent source of evidence with obvious relevance to *The Handmaid's Tale*—taped oral history: 'most oral history today is personal memory, which is a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts' (p. 206). For Hobsbawm, in 'Identity History is Not Enough', the foundation of History as a discipline is 'the supremacy of evidence'.¹⁰ Whatever the undeniable emotional power of oral accounts, he considers that they do not carry the same authority as textual evidence. While accepting that, in some senses, History might be 'an imaginative art', he argues that 'it is one which does not invent but arranges *objets trouvés*' (p. 272). James Pieixoto echoes this argument in his conference paper. He fails, however, to consider, or even to recognise, the relation between arrangement and authority.

Within the state of Gilead, authority, and beginnings, are less ambiguous, for they reside in God's word: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. But if in the metaphysical sense the Word was

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'History from Below', in *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997), p. 204.

¹⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Identity History is Not Enough', in *On History*, p. 271.

with God, in Gilead authority is invested in the Bible, the Word made text. The holy book provides that state with its name, Gilead being part of the Promised Land shown to Moses (Deuteronomy, 34.1). The Bible also provides the justification for sexual surrogacy, Rachel offering her handmaid to Jacob, 'that I may have children of her' (Genesis, 30.3). The Bible is controlled by men, and utilised for the subjugation of women. Offred underlines this when commenting sarcastically on the advice of Aunt Lydia to 'cultivate poverty of the spirit. Blessed are the meek'—'[s]he didn't go on to say anything about inheriting the earth' (p. 74). The Bible might be seen as *the* authoritative historical text, not only recording the act of Creation but also 'pre-recording' the End of Days. And yet, at the same time, the Bible is endlessly 'contemporary', ever able to be resurrected and invoked. The Bible seems to function outside history, and the control of it by men potentially allows them access to some of this power. Women, by contrast, are forced to operate solely in the oral realm, writing being denied them. Offred explains that she must 'tell, rather than write [her account], because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden' (p. 49). Forbidden to women, as Offred understands when she enters a 'forbidden room where I have never been, where women do not go.... What secrets, what male totems are kept in here?' (p. 147). The room is a library.

Ideas drawn from the work of the Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, are useful in dealing with issues raised not only by the discursive power of the Bible, but also with the relationship between the oral and the textual, the complexities of history, and of historical interpretation. Michael Holquist employs the term 'dialogism' to consider Bakhtin's assumption that dialogue is a key to an understanding not only of discourse, but of social relations and of history. Bakhtin argues that the fundamental consideration in language is not the single utterance, but the intersection of utterances in dialogue. Dialogue, Holquist explains, 'is a manifold phenomenon ... composed of an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two'.¹¹ Speech is always oriented to the prospect of a reply, necessarily to some future event. Offred embodies this idea when she thinks to herself:

I would like to believe that this is a story I'm telling

If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick it up where I left off.

It isn't a story I'm telling.

¹¹ Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London, Routledge, 1990), p. 38.

It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along.

Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else.

Even when there is no one. (p. 49)

The belief in a dialogue with someone else is manifest, despite the realisation that that someone has no physical presence in the present. Offred's 'dialogue', by necessity, is with the future, though which future is also unknown to her, and unknowable. Ironically, in that future, she does not have control over the ending, having given up her account into the hands of strangers. The modification of the phrase 'It isn't a story I'm telling' to 'It's also a story I'm telling' plays on the tensions being stories as pure narrative and stories as fictions, potentially lies. Offred here unconsciously registers her own understanding of authenticity, authorship and authority.

Against the dialogic aspect of language, Bakhtin opposes the impulse towards a single unitary language or sensibility, what he labels 'monologism'. Monologism attempts to deny the existence of other consciousnesses, is deaf to the dialogue of others. This has ideological ramifications, because '[m]onologic belief

systems invariably hold that a single truth is contained in a single situation, such as the State, or in a single object, such as an idol or text, or in single entity, such as God'.¹² The pertinence of this to *The Handmaid's Tales* is self-evident, the Bible functioning as a monologic text, Gilead as a monologic state. The threat from otherness, or from a dialogic plurality, is encoded in Aunt Lydia's statement that '[w]e were a society dying ... of too much choice' (p. 35). Choice involves something beyond the single situation, the single object, or the single entity. Or a single, orthodox language, something Holquist associates with totalitarian states, and which he labels 'official discourse'. Such languages, he argues

are masks for ideologies of many different kinds, but they all privilege *oneness*; the more powerful the ideology, the more totalitarian (monologic) will be the claims of its language. Extreme versions of such language would be religious systems and certain visionary forms of government ...¹³

The compulsion towards a single language in Gilead accounts for the regular Bible readings, the depersonalising nomenclature (Commanders; Handmaids; Aunts; Guardians; The Ceremony)

¹² Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 348.

¹³ Holquist, *Dialogism*, p. 53.

and most forcefully the renaming of a Handmaid in accordance with the name of her male Commander, as in Offred and Ofglen. Certain words, phrases, and forms are also prohibited, including 'songs that used words like *free*. They were considered too dangerous' (p. 64). The patriarchal bias of this control becomes clear in Offred's shock when a doctor temporarily sets aside the linguistic straitjacket and reveals:

'Most of the old guys can't make it any more ... Or they're sterile'. I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are barren, that's the law. (p. 70)

Language control reinforces official ideology, exonerating the male while simultaneously shifting blame for infertility to the female. Such control also paralyses the heterodox, or causes them to pause anxiously, as when Offred meets Ofglen. Wondering whether Ofglen might be a 'real believer', Offred checks her curiosity by recognising that Ofglen 'has never said anything that was not strictly orthodox, but then, neither have I ... I can't take the risk' (p. 29).

The fundamentalist push towards official discourse unwittingly provides humorous moments, as when Offred and Ofglen engage in conversation:

'The war is going well, I hear', [Ofglen] says.
'Praise be', I reply.
'We've been sent good weather'.
'Which I receive with joy'.
'They've defeated more of the rebels, since
yesterday'.
'Praise be', I say. I don't ask how she knows.
'What were they?'
'Baptists. They had a stronghold in the Blue
Hills. They smoked them out'.
'Praise be'. (p. 29)

The zany clash of registers, mixing religious pieties with gangster slang, substantiates Bakhtin's perception that

language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects ... but also—and for us this is the essential point—into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, 'professional' and 'generic' languages, languages of generations and so forth.¹⁴

Discourse inherently incorporates a variety of languages, what Bakhtin labels 'heteroglossia', from the Greek for 'other or different tongues'. For all the pressures towards linguistic and ideological orthodoxy in Gilead, Offred's world is replete with other 'tongues', other supposedly

¹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 272.

prescribed languages. To take only several of many examples, she sings what she describes as the ‘lugubrious, mournful’ ‘Amazing Grace’ to herself, as well as ‘Heartbreak Hotel’, understanding both to be ‘outlawed’ songs. Suggestively, though unknowingly, she ‘misquotes’ the former, interpreting the line ‘Was blind, but now I see’, as ‘Was bound but now am free’ (p. 64). The use of the word ‘free’ constitutes a liberating and subversive manoeuvre in Gilead, though this rebellion is counter-balanced by the erasing of the first person pronoun, with an implied loss of identity. Acts of linguistic subversion pervade Offred’s account, as when Rachel’s cry to God in Genesis, ‘Give me children, or else I die’, the fundamental fundamentalist text in Gilead, is queried: ‘There’s more than one meaning to it’ (p. 71). Or, when Offred refigures Ofglen’s innocuous phrase ‘It’s a beautiful May Day’, playing on the homophonic word *mayday*, and remembering its derivation from the French word ‘*M’aidez*. Help me’ (p. 54). Despite the monologic aspirations of the authorities in Gilead, the heteroglot nature of language functions as a form of resistance.

The interrelation of language, memory, and language’s own historical aspect, plays a subtle but vital role in Offred’s narrative. Her tale incorporates not only the ‘present’ world and

language of Gilead, but also her own past, itself a source of subversive memories and phrases which overflow the ideological barriers of fundamentalist Christianity. Offred, for instance, plays the seemingly innocent game of 'Scrabble' with the Commander, the act prompting her realisation that, in using words such as prolix, quartz, sylph, and rhythm, 'I was using a language I had once known but nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world' (p. 164). At other times historical phrases deceive her, as in the acceptance that Marx and Engels' maxim, crucially modified to read, 'From each according to her ability; to each according to his needs' (p. 127), originates from the Bible.

But a more persistently evasive, and far more important phrase from history is one which Offred first comes across by chance:

I knelt to examine the floor, and there it was, in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*.

I didn't know what it meant, or even what language it was in. I thought it might be Latin, but I didn't know any Latin. Still, it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't been discovered. Except by me

It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman ... It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through ... (p. 62)

The discovery is rich with significance (that the phrase was discovered while kneeling; the sheer physicality of a message carved with pin or fingernail) but of particular interest given the ideas of Bakhtin are the presence of dialogic communication, the incorporation of an 'other tongue' into Offred's linguistic arsenal, and the historical implications of that language being one supposedly 'dead'—Latin. For while arguing that language is stratified and heteroglot, Bakhtin does not neglect the historical dimension:

stratification and heteroglossia, once realised, is not only the static invariant of linguistic life, but also what ensures its dynamics: stratification and heteroglossia widen and deepen as long as language is alive and developing.¹⁵

Heteroglossia, 'other tongues' , in other words, contribute to the dynamics of language, which need to be considered temporally as well as spatially, as stratified languages. Offred comes to an understanding of the phrase only over time, initially acknowledging it purely as a subversive act. Later she invokes it as a prayer, for though

¹⁵ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 272.

still not knowing what it means, 'it sounds right' (p. 101). Eventually, the Commander translates it for her as 'Don't let the bastards grind you down' (p. 197). His easy ability to translate from the Latin, the traditional language of intellectual discourse, clearly reinforces the control of 'official language' by men through history. Yet Offred's instinct, that 'it sounds right', is confirmed, and the implications of the gendered term, 'bastard', are obvious, once understood.

The dialogic dimension of language (its orientation towards replies; its incorporation of other tongues, both contemporary and historical) resists monologic, totalitarian impulses. And what holds true for language holds also for history, which itself is comprised of 'other tongues'. James Pieixoto comments that 'there was little that was truly original or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis' (p. 319). Even the putatively monologic state, then, draws its forms from other moments in history, Pieixoto suggesting that the Handmaid's red costume, for example, 'seems to have been borrowed from the uniforms of German prisoners in Canadian "P.O.W." camps of the Second World War era' (p. 319). These historical borrowings are camouflaged by the apparent monologic force of the Bible, which functions in Gilead to stifle other tongues. Offred recalls the lunchtime reading of the

Beatitudes: 'Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent'. Yet she challenges the overtly monologic final phrase, commenting: 'I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking' (p. 100). Memory, though faulty, struggles to re-establish a dialogue with the text.

Offred recognises the revolutionary potential of such an act, in explaining why the Bible is locked up, for '[i]t is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it' (p. 98). The 'we' here are women, and getting their hands on it allows the checking out of the text, comparing Gileadean dogma with the Biblical original. With the gaining of authority over the text comes the possibility of critique, and freedom. Furthermore, the act of reading involves a realisation of the dialogic nature of the Bible itself, for the notion of the Bible as a stable, coherent text is mistaken. In *The Great Code*, Northrop Frye argues that 'the Bible is more a small library than a real book...[w]hat is called "the Bible" may only be a confused jumble of badly established texts'.¹⁶ Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett make a similar case, pointing out how the transfer of the original Biblical scrolls into a

¹⁶ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. xii.

bound manuscript, or 'codex', involved the selection of 'which works did, or did not constitute the scriptures [and] the exact order in which the constituent works should occur'.¹⁷ One senses the metaphorical hand of James Pieixoto reaching back to perform such work.

Against this impetus towards unity and standardisation of the Biblical narrative, Carroll and Prickett contend that it is 'arguable that every grand narrative detected in the Bible breaks down under critical scrutiny, and that the Bible is, in fact, more a collection of open-ended stories and narratives, as in the Jewish tradition, than one grand narrative from creation to consummation imposed on it by Christianity' (p. xxxii). The competing impulses of monologism and dialogism might be seen at work here, but the essential dialogism of the Bible need not be restricted to the textual level, for

any reader who really begins to engage with the Biblical text is, in spite of the occasional moments of familiarity, inevitably reminded of how essentially *alien* are the worlds of both Old and New Testaments. (p. xxx)

Though they do not conceive of the Bible in Bakhtinian terms, their argument suggests the dialogic

¹⁷ Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Introduction to *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xi.

aspect of history running through that text. The reader, in dealing with the historical otherness of the Bible, must enter into a dialogue with the past as presented in a text that is itself, perhaps, dialogic, a collection of ‘open-ended stories’ rather than a grand historical narrative.

Beyond the interpretive actions necessary for readers of the Bible, textual and historical dialogism have intermeshed, practical implications for the state of Gilead itself. Though in Deuteronomy, God shows Moses Gilead as part of the Promised Land, in book of the prophet Amos, God threatens to punish ‘the transgressions of Damascus’ because ‘they have threshed Gilead with threshing instruments of iron’ (Amos, 1.3). God also threatens the Ammonites, ‘because they have ripped up the women with child of Gilead, that they might increase their border’ (Amos, 1.13). The historical destruction of the near-future Gilead should come as no surprise, therefore, because it is already written in the Book.

Recognition of this ‘fact’ draws attention to the surprising optimism of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in that the fundamentalist regime eventually, indeed inevitably, falls. Margaret Atwood has commented on this aspect, connecting her book to another apparently pessimistic text, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell, like Atwood, places his dystopia in the near future for his book’s

initial readers, and he also uses the literary device of an appended note to Winston Smith's tale. Focussing on the latter point, Atwood argues that

[m]ost people think the book ends when Winston comes to love Big Brother. But it doesn't. It ends with a note on Newspeak, which is written in the past tense, in standard English—which means that, at the time of writing the note, Newspeak is a thing of the past.¹⁸

For Atwood, the 'Historical Notes' in *The Handmaid's Tale* function not only to inform, but also, as in her reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to suggest the historical decline of all totalitarian regimes. In Bahktinian terms, the monologic inevitably gives way to the dialogic.

For James Pieixoto, in 2195, this state of affairs constitutes his reality. Gilead is of no more than historical interest, another tale in a narrative read from his own historical position. But, as an academic historian, he does recognise the interaction of different historical 'tongues' in Gilead itself:

As we know from the study of history, no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without incorporating many of the elements to be found in the latter, as witness the pagan

¹⁸ Margaret Atwood, in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton, New Jersey: Ontario Review Press, 1990), p. 217.

elements in medieval Christianity and the evolution of the Russian “K.G.B.” from the Czarist secret service that preceded it, and Gilead was no exception to this rule. Its racist policies, for instance, were firmly rooted in the pre-Gilead period, and racist fears provided some of the emotional fuel that allowed the Gilead takeover to succeed as well as it did. (p. 317)

Holquist, drawing on Bakhtin, makes the point that ‘the present is never a static moment, but a mass of different combinations of past and present relations’.¹⁹ For all the drive towards ideological homogeneity, Gilead is premised on the incorporation of historical forms, rituals, and (with the Bible) texts.

Pieixoto’s reflection on the integration of what are, to him, borrowings for a distant past, illuminates the significance of historical perspective in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. For Pieixoto, the pre-Gilead period simply operates as a precursor to the era in which he is interested. To the initial readers of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, however, Pieixoto’s distant past constitutes their present. We, as those readers, are transformed by the device of the Historical Notes from observing subjects to observed objects. This involves not only a degree of self-criticism of our own

¹⁹ Holquist, *Dialogism*, p. 37.

historical period, but also an examination of how we, as historical observers, perceive and construct our pasts, or our Histories. Which voices from the past do we hear; to which are we deaf? Do we listen, or is the listening done for us by historians with their own biases and 'disabilities'? How do those 'listeners', those historians, transcribe the many pasts into History?

Initially, the Historical Notes spring the surprise of a dialogue between the near-future Gilead and the Symposium on Gileadean Studies. But in the course of considering those Notes, present-day readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* are also drawn into this dialogue, are forced to consider the acuteness of their own historical hearing, and that of the historians charged with committing those voices to text. The seemingly innocuous statement that the Historical Notes are a 'partial transcript' of conference proceedings hides a double, and double-edged, meaning—History can be partial in the sense of being 'incomplete', but also of being 'biased'. The answer to the implicit problem presented in the Historical Notes, of how we can begin to overcome that partiality, is suggested at the end of the Notes themselves. Pieixoto's peroration, unconsciously uncovering his own historical 'deafness', is followed by applause, and the traditional conversation crusher, 'Are there any questions?' At academic conferences, such a

rhetorical nicety can be followed by a silence that is menacingly brooding, or one that is empty of thought. *The Handmaid's Tale* ends with the textual equivalent of the latter—the blank page. But that blankness, that call for questions, which is left ‘unanswered’ in the text, presents a challenge: to open our hearing to the suppressed voices from the past, and to start a dialogue between our presents, pasts, and, by implication, our futures. With the ending of the text, this process of dialogue can begin.

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