

4. Dystopia: The Dream as Nightmare

Today, examining the utopias of Bellamy and Wells with all the benefits conferred by hindsight, their regimentation appears more than a little alarming. While the subjection of individual conduct to incessant public scrutiny, the subordination of private freedoms to the interests of public welfare, are equally characteristic of the Renaissance utopia, the eagerness of Bellamy and Wells to use the resources of modern technology in the service of an imposed, centralized social order now seems decidedly suspect. To be fair, neither writer had any real experience of what a modern, centralized, totalitarian state could be like—but such innocence of the consequences of seeking to impose order on humanity in its own best interests soon becomes impossible. Where the utopian dream of order appears later in the twentieth century (with the exception of such maverick productions as B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two*), it is most strikingly in the form of parodic inversion—in the nightmare visions of Zamyatin, Huxley, Orwell, and more recently, Atwood.

Challenges to the utopian ideal, of course—whether in the form of direct rebuttal or of parody—are hardly an exclusively modern phenomenon. Examples of the former range from Aristotle's strictures on Plato, through J. Lesley's attack on James Harrington, 'A Slap on the Snout of the Republican Swine that rooteth up monarchy,'¹ to the numerous abusive reviews of *Walden Two*; while in the latter category one might include Jonathan Swift's grotesque send-up of the Baconian scientific ideal in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*, as well as his far more disturbing portrait of the 'perfect' society of the cold, rational, genocidal Houhyhnhnms in Book IV. Bellamy's *Looking Backward* inspired a veritable rash of parodic responses,² primarily designed to show what his utopian ideal would lead to in practice—perhaps the most noteworthy being A.D. Vinton's *Looking Further Backward*, which portrays a future United States in which individual initiative has been so far sapped by the abandonment of the capitalist competitive ethic that it easily falls prey to a Chinese invasion.

Yet it is only in the twentieth century that dystopian fiction, combining a parodic inversion of the traditional utopia with satire on contemporary society, begins to take on the kind of mythic resonance that underlies the appeal of the traditional utopia from the time of More on. Indeed, many of the very factors that undermine the appeal of the utopian dream of order in the modern era also serve to heighten the relevance of the dystopian parodic inversion. Where utopian fictions gave expression to humanity's

growing sense of mastery over both social conditions and the natural world, the works of writers such as Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell speak to an audience increasingly disillusioned by the consequences of such controlling aspirations. Where Bellamy's belief in the virtues of an industrial army and Wells's vision of a world where nature is groomed and manipulated to suit human convenience now seem disturbingly naïve, the totalitarian nightmares of Zamyatin and Orwell, or Huxley's portrait of a society dominated by mindless consumerism, seem hardly less apposite now than when they were written.

There are several reasons for this. The first and most obvious—as has already been suggested—is the modern experience of totalitarian governments whose conduct has called into question the traditional utopian premise that strong, centralized authority would act in the best interests of the citizen. Implicit in Vinton's parody of Bellamy, however, is a second concern—that, even were the institution of a benevolent utopian state possible, the consequent resolution of social problems would deprive its citizens of the challenges necessary to sustain progress, and that they would consequently lapse into a state of decadence that would render them easy prey to more vigorous, if less perfect societies. Vinton, in fact, was tapping into an anxiety, current in both America and Britain during the later nineteenth century, that progress had already rendered such decadence a real danger—an anxiety reflected in a whole series of invasion narratives.³ Perhaps the most memorable of these is Wells's science fictional reworking of the theme in *The War of the Worlds*, yet it is in his earlier *The Time Machine* that he points most clearly to what he fears might be the inherent weakness of a future utopia. Arriving in the distant future, Wells's Time Traveller finds a beautiful, apparently peaceful, pastoral world—yet one whose inhabitants have degenerated into either effete lethargy or mindless cannibalism, and he reflects on the bitter irony that, having achieved its goal of 'comfort and ease, a balanced society with security and permanence as its watchword' (p.97)—a 'perfect world' with 'no unemployed problem, no social question left unresolved' (p.97)—humanity had removed all incentive for further development:

'It is the law of nature we overlook, that intellectual versatility is the compensation for change, danger, and trouble ... Nature never appeals to intelligence until habit and instinct are useless. There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change. Only those animals partake of intelligence that have to meet a huge variety of needs and dangers.' [p.97]

Implicit in such evolutionary pessimism, however, is not simply the mournful conclusion that resolving our current problems would merely

create others, probably much worse, but also what is surely at the root of the dystopian distrust of utopia: the fear that we are simply creatures of our society—that what we take to be our essential identity is in fact socially constructed, and hence susceptible to radical change under different social circumstances. While utopias, as Levitas argues, ‘are seen by their opponents as totalitarian because they visibly shape needs and match them with available satisfactions, thus moulding the individual to the system’ (*Concept of Utopia*, pp.184–5), they also imply, perhaps more alarmingly, that we are *already* products of our social environment, and that it is only the unpredictable outcome of competing conditioning influences that creates the illusion of individual freedom and essential identity. Not the least of the reasons for the continuing appeal of dystopian fiction is that it addresses this fear, but at the same time mobilizes against it the reassuring notion that there is, after all, some essential and invariant ‘human nature’ that is in the last analysis immune to such conditioning influences.

In addition, unlike the traditional utopia, dystopian fiction posits a society which—however outlandish—is clearly extrapolated from that which exists. Where utopian fiction stresses the *difference* of the society it depicts, often obscures the connection between the real world and its alternative, and rarely indicates *how* such an alternative might be created, the dystopian writer presents the nightmare future as a possible destination of present society, as if dystopia were no more than a logical conclusion derived from the premises of the existing order, and implies that it might very well come about unless something is done to stop it. Thus Zamyatin, in *We*, while depicting a society of the far future, clearly takes as his starting point Lenin’s Socialist Order, and the contemporary artistic fascination with the aesthetic of the machine, to project a world where that order is now absolute, and where the *only* beauty is mechanical. Not the least impressive of Zamyatin’s achievements, in fact, is his ability to convey not only the horror and cruelty of his future society, but also something of the terrible appeal of the dream of order which underlies it—the appeal of sensing oneself part of something far greater than the mere sum of its parts. Although *We* charts the process whereby an individual comes to rebel against the authority of the One State, we are given a powerful sense of the difficulty he experiences in breaking away from beliefs and assumptions he has held all his life. Until the seeds of doubt are sown in his mind, D-503 is not merely a good citizen, giving unquestioned allegiance to authority; he is also the designer of the spaceship *Integral*, with which the One State proposes to conquer the universe—a man genuinely committed to the ideas and values of his society. Part of the power of Zamyatin’s narrative lies in the vividness with which he dramatizes not just the struggle between the individual and the State, but also the internal struggle which precedes it.

Huxley, by contrast, takes the consumer society of modern capitalism as the starting point for his satiric extrapolation. While the names of some of the characters in *Brave New World*—Lenina Crowne, Benito Hoover, Morgana Rothschild, Helmholtz Watson, and so forth—suggest a plague-on-all-your-houses approach, with capitalism, communism, fascism, modern science, all featuring as ancestors of the society of the future, it is Henry Ford who is its presiding deity. Huxley not only takes the production line that Ford pioneered several steps further, applying its principles to the creation of human beings as well as motor vehicles, he also works out the implications of Ford's wage policies, in part designed to assist in creating a market for his own products, and comes up with a vision of a consumer society based on an ethos of endless self-sustaining economic growth which bears a disquieting resemblance to the western society of today. Indeed, there are striking parallels between Huxley's depiction of a world where citizens acquiesce in their own conditioning, where ostensible sexual liberation is instrumental in sustaining oppression, and where solitude is almost impossible, and Marcuse's analysis of postwar American society as one where people are conditioned by a process of 'repressive desublimation' to acquiesce in their own enslavement, and where 'solitude, the very condition which sustained the individual against and beyond his society, has become technically impossible' (*One-Dimensional Man*, p.71).

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* returns to communism, this time of the Stalin era, for its inspiration. Although the ambience of Orwell's future society, with its rationing, appalling food, and general seediness is very much that of post-war Britain, there can be little doubt as to who is the model for the mustachioed Big Brother, whose face gazes down from innumerable posters. While certain features of Airstrip One, as Britain has been renamed (such as the use of children to spy on their parents) appear to have been derived from the example of Nazi Germany, the bulk of the parallels—between Goldstein and Trotsky, for example—are clearly with the Soviet Union. Certainly, there is no doubt as to what *Pravda* saw as the main target of Orwell's satire. There, Orwell is described as:

... slobbering with poisonous spittle ... he imputes every evil to the people ... It is clear that Orwell's filthy book is in the spirit of such a vital organ of American propaganda as the *Reader's Digest* which published the work. [Quoted in Chilton and Aubrey, p.11]

In the United States, the message appears to have been equally clear. Isaac Deutscher describes being recommended the book by a New York news vendor with the words: 'Have you read this book? You must read it, sir. Then you will know why we must drop the atom bomb on the Bolshies' (p.265)!

Dystopian fiction, then, for all that it is set in futures of varying degrees of remoteness, reasserts the *connection* between the actual and the imagined which the traditional utopia so often obscures. In its parodic inversion, the essential identity between many features of utopia and those of the world to which it proposes an alternative re-emerges. Where utopian satire on the existing order (such as Bellamy's parable of the coach) stresses the disparity between the real world and its utopian alternative, that difference constituting the measure of the former's deficiencies, dystopian fiction highlights the resemblances between our own world and the projected society of the future. Dystopia, in effect, satirizes both society as it exists, and the utopian aspiration to transform it. From the dystopian perspective, it is by very reason of its roots in existing society that utopia is unable to transcend it: conditioned by what exists, utopia can only offer more of the same, on a larger scale. Utopia's apparently noble dream of creating a better world is seen as arrogant and presumptuous—the reflection of an unquestioning belief in mankind's right to control and manipulate both humanity and nature.

Dystopian Narrative

In terms of narrative impact, this altered relationship between the actual and the imagined carries with it a number of benefits. In parodically inverting the utopian model, the dystopian text succeeds in establishing a dialectic between existing society and the projected alternative which, while to some extent present in More's *Utopia*, is generally lacking in the work of his more literal-minded successors. While the traditional utopia seeks to forestall critical judgement of the alternative society, utopia constituting the standard by which our own world is judged and found wanting, dystopian fiction positively demands that readers judge the projected society by the standards of their own. Confronted by a world where everyone lives in glass boxes, as in *We*, under the constant surveillance of telescreens, as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or under the inescapable influence of both pre- and post-natal conditioning, as in *Brave New World*, it is almost impossible not to conclude that the dystopian projection is less desirable than the world as it stands. Yet at the same time, the evident resemblances between dystopian and existing society encourage a parallel process, whereby readers are encouraged to judge their own society by the extent to which it embodies dystopian features. In its parody of the traditional utopia, the dystopian text at the same time satirizes many features of existing society—and, in the grotesque distorting mirror which it holds up to reality, the reader is enabled to see, in some respects more clearly, the extent to which society manifests the dystopian

characteristics of mindless conformity and acceptance of authoritarian control. Rather than being embedded in the static portrait of a more perfect society, the values implicit in the dystopian text emerge from an active interplay between the reader's critical judgements of both actual and imaginary worlds.

This is not to say, however, that dystopian fiction is any less manipulative of the reader than is its utopian counterpart. While the reader of a dystopian text may well experience a greater freedom in passing judgement, that freedom is clearly constrained and determined by the terms in which the comparison between the two worlds is set up. When Huxley, in *Brave New World*, portrays babies being given electric shock treatment to encourage an aversion to books and flowers, followed by an official sermon from the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning on the benefits of replacing a taste for the simple pleasures of literature and nature by a desire for far more technologically sophisticated—and accordingly expensive—artifacts and pursuits, the reader's response is not hard to predict: initial revulsion, followed by recognition of the obvious parallels between Huxley's dystopia and modern consumer society. Such crude, though undeniably effective, satire is in essence just as clear in its designs on the reader as the standard scene in traditional utopian fiction, where a depiction of utopia's positive aspects is closely followed by a parallel scene in the real world, in which health, cleanliness, and happiness are mirrored by decrepitude, squalor, and misery.⁴ The only real difference is that it works better. Where utopian narrative ostensibly juxtaposes two different viewpoints, the utopian and the non-utopian, it is clear that, as Bakhtin puts it:

This is not a clash of two ultimate semantic authorities, but rather an objectified (plotted) clash of two represented positions, subordinated wholly to the higher, ultimate authority of the author. The monologic context, under these circumstances, is neither broken nor weakened. [*Problems*, p.188]

In dystopian parody, by contrast, the monologic authority of the utopian voice (for example, that of the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning) is undermined by the parodic context in which it is placed. What is introduced, by implication, is, as Bakhtin suggests, 'a second voice' with 'a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one' (p.193)—and in the light of which it is impossible to accept the first voice as authoritative. Where the monologic character and schematic oppositions of utopian narrative are liable to create resistance on the part of the reader ('this is what I am *supposed* to think'), their dystopian parodic counterparts are a far more effective rhetorical device for securing the reader's assent to the author's point of view. In addition, because the dystopian text tends

to *dramatize* both the similarities and differences between the real and imagined, rather than spelling them out, the reader is also spared the presence of the usually uncritical narrator or visitor, whose opinions the reader of the traditional utopia is so clearly intended to share. In effect, dystopian fiction demonstrates a greater readiness to trust both the reader's intelligence and the writer's own technical skill.

This is perhaps most clearly evident when the first person narratives of such utopian texts as *Looking Backward* or *A Modern Utopia* are compared with the equivalent use of the device in dystopian fiction. Bellamy's and Wells's narrators, as we have seen, speak with the conviction of the converted: to them, the virtues of utopia are self-evident, and in representing them as desirable they speak with confidence and authority; yet at the same time, they exhibit a curious passivity. Bellamy's Julian West, in the face of the still more authoritative utterance of Dr Leete; Wells's narrator (at any rate during the overtly fictional sections of the text) when confronted by his utopian *alter ego*: each displays an uncritical acceptance of what he is told, and in doing so, as has been suggested, offers an implicit model for the reader. The narrators in Zamyatin's *We*, or indeed Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are more active, by contrast, yet at the same time less confident. D-503 and Offred are hesitant, reluctant to pass judgement, sometimes even confused, and their narratives reveal, not minds already made up, but rather minds in the process of being made up. D-503 reveals himself as engaged in an internal struggle over what to think, over whether to accept or reject the values of the One State, while Offred, although clearly opposed to the fundamentalist values of Gilead, is occupied throughout the book with the question as to what she can or should do about her situation. The narrative, in other words, embodies a process, is—to use Wells's terms—'not static but kinetic,' and as a result offers the reader a very different model with which to identify. In its parodic inversion of the traditional utopia, dystopian fiction portrays a society whose undesirability is far more clearly self-evident than is the desirability of its utopian counterpart, while at the same time it presents a protagonist whose actively critical attitude towards it is far easier to endorse.

Dystopian fiction, then, would seem—at least at first sight—to be free from many of the narrative limitations of the traditional utopia. Gone are the ponderous narrative mechanisms used to account for the visitor's transfer to utopia: the fictions of Zamyatin, Huxley, Orwell, Atwood all begin *in medias res*, often with arresting narrative devices calculated at once to stimulate curiosity and alert the reader to the *difference* of the world being described:

A squat grey building of only thirty-four stories. Over the main

entrance, the words, CENTRAL LONDON HATCHERY AND CONDITIONING CENTRE, and in a shield, the World State's motto, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY. [*Brave New World*, p.15]

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. [*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.7]

What then follows is an account of life in the different society filtered through the consciousness, not of the admiring tourist, but of the inhabitant, living with it day-in, day-out, and lacking any other standards by which to judge it—unless one counts the rapidly fading memories of Offred and Winston Smith. The only visitor to dystopia, as such, is Huxley's Savage, whose background is almost as alien to our own reality as the society he visits. Hence the details of dystopian society emerge, not in the course of the traditional guided tour, but in the process of an inherently far more dramatic narrative of oppositional struggle; while, as we have seen, where there *are* expository set pieces, such as the Directory of Hatchery and Conditioning's pompous lecture on the history of conditioning techniques in *Brave New World*, their effect is radically different, inviting ridicule rather than acceptance.

Nevertheless, for all these differences in narrative strategy, dystopian fiction continues to reproduce many features of the traditional utopia—and not always just parodically. While extrapolated from the very different value systems of Soviet communism, consumer capitalism, and fundamentalist Christianity, the dystopias of Zamyatin and Orwell, Huxley, and Atwood all display a family resemblance whose source is not difficult to divine.⁵ All constitute parodic reworkings of the traditional utopian paradigm, but while the primary function of parody is of course to expose the limitations of the original, the very closeness of its relationship to the original often means that these limitations are also to some extent reproduced. Given the degree to which the utopian paradigm is characterized by tension and contradiction, it is perhaps unsurprising that these should also inform dystopian parody. As will be seen, some of the most characteristic features of the traditional paradigm resurface—in sometimes unexpected forms—even in a parodic context.

In terms of what dystopian fiction *exposes*, perhaps the most immediately striking feature of all the works under discussion is their common emphasis on the extraordinarily public character of life in the societies they project. Like the traditional utopia, dystopia portrays a society which is regimented and hierarchical—and also one where adherence to the societal ideal is ensured by an almost obsessive concern with surveillance, with the subjection of the individual to public scrutiny. Not only do its citizens conform to the standards of the monolithic state—they must be *seen* to

conform, and it is this visible conformity which is seen as essential to the preservation of stability and order in utopia and dystopia alike. More, in *Utopia*, sees the elimination of privacy as the key to ensuring individual virtue: no one is likely to do wrong 'because they live in full view of all' (p.49). Dystopian fiction simply takes this one step further, exposing it as a fundamental principle of both utopian and dystopian order: ultimately, the only way to be *certain* that society's norms are consistently observed is by watching everyone, all the time. Accordingly in dystopia all the resources of modern technology are employed to ensure that privacy is kept to an absolute minimum. The glass bedrooms of *We*, the telescreens of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (precursors of the video cameras which grace today's banks, stores, public buildings, and even men's washrooms), the spies and hidden microphones of *The Handmaid's Tale* all serve the same essential purpose as do the social provisions of More's *Utopia*. *Brave New World*, indeed, resembles *Utopia* still more closely, in that the element of overt coercion present in other dystopias, where the consequences of being seen to act antisocially are made abundantly clear, is replaced by a benign confidence in the powers of conditioning. The citizens of *Brave New World* are conditioned to *want* to spend all their time 'in the full view of all'; such privacy as they preserve is devoted to such harmless (and in society's terms, respectable) practices as sleep, recreational sex, and the consumption of stupefying drugs.

Conformity is assured, and so too is uniformity—in the most literal sense. The citizens of all four dystopias wear uniforms, reinforcing the sense that (as in so much utopian narrative) people are types rather than distinct individuals. (Huxley and Atwood make their uniforms colour coded, like electrical wiring, further enhancing the sense that the individual is merely part of the social machine.) In *We*, everyone does everything at the same time, while all four future societies have communal rituals in which individual identity is submerged in that of the group, ranging from public executions, in Zamyatin and Atwood, through Orwell's *Two Minutes Hate*, to the group sex of Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Even this last may be seen as having its roots in the provisions of the traditional utopia, with its characteristic blurring of the lines between the public and private spheres, which is nowhere more apparent than in its treatment of sexual relations. Campanella, as we have seen, organizes sexual intimacy under the supervision of astrologers, physicians, and matrons, with not only the choice of sexual partner but the exact time of intercourse dictated by the state. Yet this, while extreme, is scarcely an aberration. Implicit in both Bellamy's substitution of sexual for economic rewards, with women providing the ultimate incentive for male productive efficiency, Wells's depiction of marital relations as ultimately the concern

of the state, rather than of the individuals involved, is the same impulse to subordinate all aspects of individual experience to the needs of society. Again, dystopian fiction simply takes this one stage further: Zamyatin's sex-vouchers, the universal promiscuity in *Brave New World*, where 'everyone belongs to everyone else,' the reduction of women to mere mechanisms for procreation in *The Handmaid's Tale*, all serve to expose the implications inherent in the sexual provisions of utopia. Ultimately, whether in utopia or dystopia, the message is the same: that individual agency cannot be trusted, even in the most intimate sphere of personal relations; in the end, the overriding interests of the state must prevail.

In taking the utopian emphasis on the virtues of conformity and the need for supervision of every aspect of individual behaviour to its logical conclusion, dystopian fiction makes explicit the extent to which the utopian ideal is premised on the suppression of any distinct individual identity. Such identity is acquired only gradually, in the process of growing up, as individuals begin to make choices and take responsibility for their actions: in effectively removing responsibility and choice from the individual sphere, utopian society minimizes the opportunities for such identity to emerge—which in part explains why attempts to incorporate elements of novelistic characterization into the traditional utopian narrative are so seldom successful. Dystopian fiction, however, portrays a process which renders the implications still clearer: in suppressing the emergence of individual identity in the interests of stability, security, conformity, the dystopian state clearly seeks to discourage the development of any kind of mature, adult awareness—of any form of consciousness sophisticated enough to perceive and articulate the society's limitations. There is in consequence a distinct childishness evident in the behavioural norms of dystopian society, suggesting that the regressive aspect of the utopian ideal—its desire for a return to womb-like security—has been correctly intuited.

It is Huxley who exposes these implications most clearly. As well as providing an abundance of food, diversion, and guilt-free sexual gratification, his future society reduces work to an undemanding minimum (as the same time conditioning the individual to enjoy it), and leaves the responsibility for running things to a ruling élite of World Controllers. It is a world which is not merely innocent, but quite explicitly infantile: infantile behaviour constitutes the socially approved norm. When Bernard Marx talks to Lenina Crowne of wanting to act like an adult, her response is one of simple incomprehension, and Bernard is later reprimanded for his 'lapse from a proper standard of infantile decorum' (p.85). For well-adjusted citizens, by contrast, the ideal state is one of blissful unconsciousness—the symbolic implications of which are made only too

clear. When Lenina and Henry Foster conclude their evening out with a trip to the Westminster Abbey Cabaret (featuring the music of Calvin Stopes and his Sixteen Sexophonists), their last, drug-enhanced dance together is described in unmistakable terms:

Lenina and Henry had what they wanted ... They were inside, here and now—safely inside with the fine weather, the perennially blue sky. And when, exhausted, the Sixteen had laid by their sexophones and the Synthetic Music apparatus was producing the very latest in slow Malthusian Blues, they might have been twin embryos gently rocking together on the waves of a bottled ocean of blood-surrogate. [pp.69–70]

In the more hostile environments depicted in other dystopian fictions, particularly *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this aspect is less overt. Nevertheless, the elimination of individual responsibility, the enforced conformity, the endless organized activities in which the citizens of both Orwell's and Zamyatin's future societies are obliged to participate all serve to suggest a pattern almost as regressive. If womb-like security is the ideal of the citizens of *Brave New World*, the ambience of *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is more akin to that of a gigantic boarding-school, governed by routine, ritual, and arbitrary acts of authority. And in all three works, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, any indication of an adult tendency to independent thought or action is the ultimate heresy.

The parallels between the childlike, infantile, or even foetal dependence fostered by dystopian society and the underlying pattern of the traditional utopia are clear enough, but the resemblance does not end there. In each case the regressive dependence of the individual is secured by essentially similar means—by the imposition of a distinctively patriarchal order. In *We*, it is the larger-than-life figure of The Benefactor who rules the One State which protects its citizens from the terrors of the unexpected and the dangers that might accompany the 'savage state of freedom' (p.19). In fact, The Benefactor is merely a man: 'a bald-headed, a Socratically bald-headed man' (p.205), perhaps modelled on Lenin; but he is normally described in terms that suggest he is gigantic—rather as a father might appear to a small child. In an interview with D-503, The Benefactor, concerned by his involvement with the rebels, significantly invites him to 'talk as grown-ups do when the children have gone off to bed' (p.204), much as the privileged eldest son might be invited to join with his father in man-to-man conversation.⁶ Equally significantly, it is a woman who represents the disruptive force which tempts D-503 to taste the forbidden delights of freedom—and it is a woman whose destruction is essential to the preservation of the stability of the patriarchal state. It is the woman's,

E-330's,⁷ attempt to take possession of the *Integral*, the phallic spaceship with which the patriarchal One State seeks to penetrate the heavens, that constitutes the ultimate, unforgivable act of rebellion; when it is thwarted by the intervention of the male Guardians, order is thereby restored.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* an almost identical scenario unfolds itself; indeed, the parallel is so close that it is clear that Orwell must have been indebted to Zamyatin for the inspiration. Here it is another woman, Julia, who arouses the protagonist, Winston Smith, to go beyond mere sullen resentment of the Stalin-like Big Brother and take action against authority. Once again, however, the woman proves no match for the patriarchal state: tortured and brainwashed, Winston disowns Julia, and ends up in gin-sodden adulation of Big Brother. Here, however, the power of the patriarchal ruler is mediated by the presence of another male authority figure, O'Brien, for whom Winston feels much the same instinctive regard as does the narrator in Wells's *In the Days of the Comet* for the politician, Melmount—although here the homoerotic implications are even clearer. Larger and stronger than Winston, O'Brien treats him—even while torturing him—with an almost indecent intimacy. All the while Winston is being subjected to the most unspeakable agonies, O'Brien is there, hand on his shoulder, to reassure him that it is all for his own good, and, (as Gerald Fiderer points out) there is a distinctly masochistic element in Winston's response:

At sight of the heavy, lined face, so ugly and so intelligent, his heart seemed to turn over. If he could have moved he would have stretched out a hand and laid it on O'Brien's arm. He had never loved him so deeply as at this moment ... It made no difference. In some sense that went deeper than friendship, they were intimates. [p.217]

O'Brien even invades Winston's dreams, which had hitherto been primarily about his mother, and on this unconscious plane re-enacts the triumphant suppression of the female by the male. By the end, Winston has betrayed and forgotten not only his lover, but also his mother—both have been replaced by males.

Amid the rampant heterosexual promiscuity of Huxley's World State, the element of patriarchal dominance is less immediately apparent (although the confrontation between the rebels and the World Controller, Mustapha Mond, replicates the power dynamics of the equivalent scenes in *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—indeed, faced by Mond's unassailable authority, Bernard Marx reverts completely to the status of a child: he bursts into tears, and has to be put to bed). None the less, while men and women apparently enjoy an equal degree of sexual freedom (or lack of it, given that promiscuity is more or less compulsory), it soon becomes clear

that equality ends there. Henry Ford, rather than Lenin or Stalin, is the presiding male deity, in whose name the (apparently all male) World Controllers rule the acquiescent masses. And while humanity is segregated into genetically predetermined castes, which are conditioned to have as little as possible to do with one another, there appears to be an exception which allows for sexual relationships between Alpha males and Beta females. It is a revealing contradiction, indicative of the extent to which Huxley's futuristic extrapolation remains governed by the assumptions of his own time: despite imagining a world whose sexual morality is radically different, Huxley uncritically reproduces the *gender* relations of his own era. Significantly, the only members of the Alpha élite we encounter are male, with the exception of the Headmistress of Eton, who is a 'freemartin'—a female who has been rendered sterile by prenatal doses of male sex hormones. (The status of the central female character, Lenina, is left ambiguous: although Theodor Adorno describes her—rather oddly—as 'a well-groomed and polished American career woman' (p.105), her occupation points to a Beta, rather than an Alpha classification.) In a world whose only sexual taboos are against celibacy and monogamy, and where pregnancy and childbirth have been superseded by mechanical reproductive technology, the word 'Mother' is the ultimate obscenity. ('Father' is only mildly smutty by comparison.) Although there is no counterpart to the subversive females of Zamyatin and Orwell, it is noteworthy that the main opponent of the dystopian society—the Savage—is devoted to his mother. The work ends, once again, with the destruction of the central female character—in this case the hapless Lenina—and the death, rather than the acquiescence of the defeated rebel.

While there may be less overt glorification of male power in *Brave New World* than in *We* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in removing women's reproductive power, and replacing it with a male invention—the production line—Huxley takes the utopian dream of a male-dominated order still further. At the same time, he takes to its logical conclusion the longstanding utopian preoccupation with selective breeding: in *Brave New World*, humanity is quite literally designed to fit the demands of the state. The conformity which in the dystopias of Zamyatin and Orwell is secured by such relatively clumsy means as brain surgery or torture is painlessly ensured in Huxley's World State by the technologies of mass production:

One hundred and seven heat-conditioned Epsilon Senegalese were working in the foundry. Thirty-three Delta females, long-headed, sandy, with narrow pelvises, and all within 20 millimetres of 1 metre 69 centimetres tall, were cutting screws. In the assembling room, the dynamos were being put together by two sets of Gamma-plus dwarfs.

The two long work-tables faced one another; between them crawled the conveyor with its load of separate parts; forty-seven blond heads were confronted by forty-seven brown ones. Forty-seven snubs by forty-seven hooks; forty-seven receding by forty-seven prognathous chins. The completed mechanisms were inspected by eighteen identical curly auburn girls in Gamma green, packed in crates by thirty-four short-legged, left-handed male Delta-minuses, and loaded into the waiting trucks and lorries by sixty-three blue-eyed, flaxen and freckled Epsilon Semi-Morons. [pp.130–1]⁸

To such visions of the future, in which human beings seem hardly less mechanical than the machines they use, it is hard to respond without a degree of revulsion—and part of the narrative appeal of dystopian fiction stems from the writer's ability to exploit the reader's reaction against the society portrayed. Whereas it is often difficult to share the visitor to utopia's uncritical enthusiasm for the wonders of utopian society, the horrors of dystopia guarantee a sympathetic reaction on the reader's part to anyone who stands out against the mindless conformity imposed by the monolithic state. On occasions, such sympathy is still further exploited for ironic effect, as when Huxley, having first established Bernard Marx as a sympathetic figure by making him a cogent—indeed, almost the *only*—critic of the appalling world he lives in, then proceeds to undercut the reader's natural tendency to identify with such a character by showing him succumbing all too readily to the lures of success. But this is a comparative rarity: while none of D-503, Winston Smith, the Savage, or Offred are by any stretch of the imagination idealized portrayals, they are so much preferable to the worlds they live in that the actual *nature* of their opposition to dystopian society may easily escape critical examination—given that in such a society any opposition seems better than none at all.

The forms which opposition to dystopia takes, however, are worth looking at more closely, for it is here that the extent to which dystopian fiction shares the limitations of the original it parodies begins to become apparent. There is in fact a family resemblance, not only between the patterns of the various dystopian societies, but also between the modes of rebellion against them. Thus, for example, the first form which resistance takes is invariably the repudiation of the demand that life be lived primarily in public. At E-330's behest, D-503 finds himself conniving in the use of the hours of privacy sanctioned only for sexual purposes for other, more subversive purposes. Secret knowledge, secret behaviour are seen as in themselves subversive, almost irrespective of the nature of the secrets involved. Bernard Marx establishes himself as suspicious simply by virtue of his desire to spend time by himself, rather than in the mindless

gregariousness which is seen as normal. And Winston Smith, for all his terror of the state's power of physical coercion, deliberately risks his safety in his pursuit of privacy:⁹ at first timidly, in the tiny alcove out of sight of the telescreen, where he keeps his journal; and later more boldly, with his illicit liaison with Julia in their secret meeting place above a junk shop.

What is significant, however, is the consistency with which this reassertion of the desire for privacy is associated with the past. The early meetings of D-503 and E-330 take place at the House of Antiquity, a relic of the past preserved for instructional purposes; Winston and Julia pursue their liaison in a room above a shop that sells antiques. Both E-330 and Julia shock and entice their lovers by wearing old-fashioned clothing, while Winston Smith records his subversive thoughts in a lady's keepsake album which is attractive partly because of its age, writing with an old-fashioned pen-nib on 'beautiful creamy paper' (p.11) which is no longer manufactured. And the past, in its turn, becomes the main source of the values in comparison with which dystopian society is judged and found wanting. In *Brave New World*, the energy and verbal richness of the Savage's beloved Shakespeare is used to highlight the clichés and emotional poverty of dystopia; while such ancient texts as the Bible and the writings of William James and Maine de Biran are seen as so subversive that they are kept securely locked away in the safe of the World Controller, Mustapha Mond.

At first sight, the subversive import of such survivals from the past would seem to be largely symbolic. Certainly there *are* relics of the past whose political relevance is immediately evident, as when Winston Smith comes across a newspaper photograph of three party members who officially no longer exist—or indeed ever existed. Here there is objective evidence that the authorities are lying—yet in terms of its impact, the actual use that can be made of the information, there appears to be little effective difference between the photograph and the keepsake album in which Winston keeps his diary. Ultimately, the subversiveness of an interest in the past lies not in the implications of any specific piece of information, but rather in the fact that there was a past at all.

Dystopian society, like that of most traditional utopias, has as its ideal a condition of eternal and static stability. Once perfection (of whatever kind) is achieved, change automatically becomes a threat—and the problem with the past is that, simply by showing that things were once different, it demonstrates that change is at least *possible*. The very existence of the past where things were different implies that society is 'not static but kinetic,' and dystopian societies uniformly go out of their way to obliterate its memory. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, history is systematically rewritten to conform to the changing necessities of the present: even so dramatic an event as the replacement of Eurasia by Eastasia as Oceania's

enemy in the endless world war is so effectively glossed over that within a matter of days the fiction that Oceania and Eastasia have *always* been at war is almost universally accepted as fact. To show an interest in what the past was really like is almost certain evidence of thoughtcrime, punishable by anything from twenty-five years imprisonment to death. In *We*, the past possesses a certain exotic fascination, but it is generally viewed as hopelessly primitive, infinitely remote from the present: a 'wild epoch' (p.34), peopled by 'brutes,' 'apes,' whose behaviour is repeatedly described as 'laughable' and 'incredible,' and whose art is referred to as 'wild, unorganized, insane ... epileptically distorted' (p.41). Although the World State in *Brave New World* preserves an enclave of tribal society on the New Mexico Reservation, its squalor, and the 'queer' behaviour of its inhabitants serve primarily as an object lesson to visitors of the horrors from which the World State has liberated them; otherwise, the prevailing view of the past is summed up by the celebrated dictum of the Godlike Ford: 'History is Bunk.'

Yet despite its satiric exaggeration, the dystopian attitude towards the past is little more than the logical development of a tendency implicit in the traditional utopia. In *A Modern Utopia*, history proves as malleable as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: to render utopia possible, the entire course of human history is blithely rewritten in less than a page. In *Men Like Gods*, the allegedly intellectual curious Utopians show singularly little interest in the more primitive culture of the Earthlings: a single brief conference serves to tell them all they need to know, and they show scarcely any curiosity thereafter. Even in *Looking Backward*, where the arrival of a visitor from the past does arouse considerable interest, his account of the past serves only to confirm existing assumptions. The general attitude of Bellamy's utopians to their past is one of self-congratulation for having escaped from it so easily: the 'old musty books' (p.166) that talk of the past hold little fascination, while in their celebrations of the year 2000 we are told that 'the almost universal theme ... has been the future rather than the past, not the advance that has been made, but the progress that shall be made, ever onward and upward' (p.xxii). Skinner's *Walden Two* is hardly exceptional in its explicit assertion that the ideal society would deliberately set out to 'discourage any sense of history' (p.235).

Rebellion in dystopia, then, expresses itself through a series of binary oppositions. It opposes the public with the private, and counters the dystopian aspiration to permanence and stability with the destabilizing evidence of history and tradition. In addition, the rebel finds in the rural, pastoral world beyond the confines of dystopian society a space and freedom otherwise denied. Dystopia shares with the traditional utopia a predominantly urban emphasis, and here again rebellion takes the form

of simple antithesis. Freedom from the One State in *We* lies beyond the 'Green Wall,' among the more natural, primitive humans who refuse to be conscripted into the conformist world ruled by The Benefactor. It is in the countryside that the Savage seeks refuge from the horrors of Brave New World, and it is in the countryside, too, that Winston and Julia first share the liberation of sexual ecstasy. Where the Wellsian utopia offers a vision of humanity in control of nature, in dystopia the natural world offers virtually the last refuge from the tyranny of the state. Once again, dystopia makes absolute what in utopia is only implicit. Where even Wells allows nature at least some role, however subordinate, dystopia draws the lines more starkly: the natural, organic character of the rural world is inalterably opposed to the controlling human design of dystopian society.

In opposing this controlling impulse, the dystopian rebel inevitably challenges the prevailing ethic of infantile or childlike dependence fostered by the patriarchal state. Not only privacy and tradition, but adult behaviour of any kind are seen by the state as inherently subversive. Thus, when E-330 upholds the value of independent individual initiative, or the Savage argues for the benefits of deferred, rather than immediate gratification, it is primarily their defiance of the regressive norms of their society that constitutes a threat. Yet for all this, the *form* such defiance takes often seems curiously limited in scope: only *We*, for example, portrays any kind of effective *political* challenge to the State. For the most part, resistance manifests itself more in the sexual than the political realm—and then most often in the form of the reassertion of more traditional sexual values.

In *We*, where the *Lex Sexualis* states that 'Every number has the right of availability, as a sexual product, to any other member' (p.37), securing the sexual services of anyone one desires is a simple matter of applying to the authorities for the appropriate pink coupons, which entitle one to have sex during the private sexual hours. And it is this indiscriminate, yet regulated gratification of desire that E-330 resists, both by engaging in sexual activity outside the designated hours, and refraining from it during them. Sexuality is restored to the individual's control, and with it responsibility for the consequences of her actions. Yet it is here that the implications of E-330's challenge to the One State's sexual norms become more equivocal. On D-503's first trip with her to the House of Antiquity, she exchanges her androgynous uniform for more traditional garb:

She had on a black hat, a short, antiquated, glaringly yellow dress, black stockings. The dress was of light silk: I could clearly see that the stockings were very long, reaching considerably above her knees, while the neckline was low, revealing that shadow between her—
[p.43]

And here D-503 breaks off, as though barely able to control himself—as he does again on a subsequent occasion, where the nature of the costume's allure is made even more explicit:

She was in a saffron-yellow dress of an ancient cut. This was a thousandfold more wicked than if she had had absolutely nothing on. Two sharp points, glowing roseately through the thin tissue: two embers smouldering among ashes. Two tenderly rounded knees—
[p.65]

Clearly, the utopian project of stripping sexuality of guilt has been less than successful, given the immediacy of D-503's response to this traditional stereotype of female sexuality, teasingly provocative in its simultaneous offer and refusal of gratification. This, Zamyatin seems to be implying, is what human beings (or, more precisely, men) really want, as opposed to the bureaucratically regulated permissiveness of the One State. Yet in opposing one form of objectification to another, in presenting the socially constructed sexual stereotypes of his own day as more 'natural' than the more overtly regulated sexuality of his future society, Zamyatin effectively does little more than reinscribe his own society's norms. While *We* posits a future society with a radically different sexual ethic, the implications of this are never really thought through: in a world where everyone is sexually available to everyone else, *We* reproduces the familiar scenario of a traditional bourgeois narrative of adulterous love. D-503 has an officially approved partner, O-90, who is short and chubby, talks faster than she thinks, and goes on rather tiresomely about wanting to have a baby; he deserts her in favour of E-330, whose sharp white teeth, exotic taste in clothing, and body—'slender, hard, wilfully pliant as a whiplash' (p.24)—clearly have a rather different kind of appeal; and the result is disaster. In the world of the far future, not a great deal seems to have changed.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the prevailing sexual ethic is repressive rather than permissive (there is even a State-sponsored organization called the Anti-Sex League), the form rebellion takes is still strikingly similar. Once again, any form of sexual activity other than that sanctioned by authority is seen as inherently subversive. As Winston reflects: 'The sexual act, successfully performed, was rebellion. Desire was thoughtcrime' (p.62). It is the instinctual, spontaneous, uncontrollable quality of sexual desire that makes it a threat to officially imposed conformity, and indeed part of Julia's appeal to Winston lies precisely in her promiscuity, which he sees as representing a breach in the 'wall of virtue' which the state has tried to erect:

His heart leapt. Scores of times she had done it: he wished it had

been hundreds—thousands. Anything that hinted at corruption always filled him with wild hope. Who knew, perhaps the Party was rotten under the surface, its cult of strenuousness and self-denial simply a shame concealing iniquity. If he could have infected the whole lot of them with leprosy or syphilis, how gladly he would have done so! Anything to rot, to weaken, to undermine! [p.111]

Here, at the outset, there is an almost carnivalesque quality to Orwell's depiction of sexuality: even in corruption and disease there is the spark of life, the hope of renewal. 'Simple undifferentiated desire' (p.112) is a force that the official values of society can never wholly contain or repress: 'that was the force that would tear the Party to pieces' (p.112). And Winston is quite clear as to the implications of his desire:

Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act. [p.112]

Yet as the relationship between Winston and Julia develops, this anarchic, carnivalesque celebration of desire soon gives way to something far more conventional. Defiance of the official sexual morality increasingly takes the form, as it does in *We*, of a reinscription of traditional stereotypes. Julia speaks of her desire to wear a 'real woman's frock' rather than trousers, to 'wear silk stockings and high-heeled shoes'—to be 'a woman, not a Party comrade' (p.127). In a scene clearly influenced by Zamyatin's example, Julia enhances her allure, not only with old-fashioned clothing, but even make-up:

Her lips were deeply reddened, her cheeks rouged, her nose powdered; there was even a touch of something under the eyes to make them brighter. It was not very skillfully done, but Winston's standards in such matters were not high. He had never before seen or imagined a woman of the Party with cosmetics on her face. The improvement in her appearance was startling. With just a few dabs of colour in the right places she had become not only very much prettier, but, above all, far more feminine. Her short hair and boyish overalls merely added to the effect. [p.126]

While it is her 'animal instinct' (p.112) that Winston finds attractive at first, it is paradoxically the old-fashioned artifice of make-up¹⁰ that reveals her 'true' femininity. Moreover, although it is Julia who first takes the lead in their relationship, she soon reveals more stereotypically feminine qualities. Unlike Winston's, her opposition to the Party proves to be instinctual, rather than intellectual: she has little interest in political ideas, falls asleep when he reads her the subversive writings of Goldstein, and regards 'any kind of organized revolt against the Party ... as stupid' (p.117).

It is Winston who initiates their joining what he takes to be the resistance, at which point the formerly promiscuous Julia declares that, even in the interests of overthrowing the Party, the one thing she will not countenance is their separation. Her resourcefulness, so striking at the outset, soon becomes largely confined to finding black market food for them to consume in the rented room that is 'almost a home' (p.133), where they meet to make love and 'g[i]ve themselves up to daydreams of escape' (p.134). In the end, what is opposed to the massive tyranny of the state is little more than a bourgeois domestic idyll, a brief, fragile dream of quasi-marital bliss. Like Zamyatin, Orwell opposes to the monstrous sexual conformity of the dystopian state a purportedly 'natural' sexuality which is in fact no less socially constructed.

Brave New World also creates an opposition between the sexual norms of dystopian society and more traditional values—but here the contrast is less uncritical. Huxley portrays a society more permissive even than Zamyatin's, where everyone has not merely the right, but the duty to have sex with as many partners as possible, both privately and in communal sex-orgies. Extrapolated as it is from the realities of capitalist society, there is no bureaucratic regulation of the operations of the sexual free market—which is probably just as well, given that the volume of pink coupons required would most likely have exceeded the capacity of the World State's paper production. In such a world, about the only possible subversive form of sexual activity is to refrain from it, which is precisely what the various rebels attempt to do: Helmholtz Watson, though once an 'indefatigable lover' (p.62) with a track record of six hundred and forty sexual conquests in less than four years, gives up sex altogether in the hope that the energy thus saved will enable him to think more clearly, while Bernard and the Savage justify their aversion to immediate sexual gratification by imagining they are in love. Yet while this might seem to suggest a yearning for authenticity, for something more 'real' than state-sanctioned promiscuity, the fact that in the case of both Bernard and the Savage the object of their desire is the vacuous Lenina rather undercuts the effect of their romantic idealism. The old-fashioned male ideal of chivalric love, rather than being held up as a contrasting positive, is exposed as mere fantasy projection (onto a singularly blank screen), quite as ludicrous as the mindless sexual indulgence to which it is opposed—and for that matter, quite as clearly socially constructed.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that Huxley altogether avoids the trap of merely reversing the utopian equation, and judging the alternative society by the standards of today's, rather than vice versa. While the search for authenticity in the form of true love may be represented as bogus, it is clear that Huxley does imply *some* absolute standards whereby the values

of *Brave New World* can be judged as specious and inauthentic. As Adorno points out, although Huxley satirizes conventional morality, showing a world where promiscuity is just as moral as sexual decorum used to be, the ideological bias of his own critique is hardly less conventional:

In its proclamation of the bourgeois nature of what claims to be unbourgeois, [Huxley's] thesis itself becomes ensnared in bourgeois habits ... Like that of many emancipated Englishmen, his consciousness is preformed by the very Puritanism he abjures. He fails to distinguish between the liberation of sexuality and its debasement. [p.103]

For Huxley, what is most repellent about *Brave New World* is not so much its oppression of its citizens (in any event, he is only really concerned with the problems of the Alpha élite), as the vulgarity of its mass culture. Of the rebels, the only one who is not also the object of satire is Helmholtz, the creative artist who is unable to find an audience in a world of mindless conformity—a world where even Shakespeare is no longer relevant. What Huxley proposes as sources of absolute value by which dystopia is judged and found wanting are Art, and still more so, Religion—it is instructive to discover what the *really* forbidden books are that Mustapha Mond keeps locked up in the safe in his office: the Bible, *The Imitation of Christ*, William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, works by Cardinal Newman and Maine de Biran. These, it is implied, represent the objective, transcendent reality lost sight of in *Brave New World*'s pursuit of subjective happiness—a reality whose ideological character Huxley never acknowledges.¹¹

Despite such variations in approach, however, the pattern of resistance in dystopian fiction remains remarkably consistent: the reassertion of traditional and individual values is accompanied in each case by the displacement of political resistance into the sexual realm. While D-503 and E-330, Bernard, Helmholtz, and the Savage, Winston and Julia all desire the destruction of the State, at any rate in theory, what is actually dramatized is more their sexual than political unorthodoxy. Yet perhaps the most striking similarity of all lies in the fact that, in every case, rebellion is shown as doomed to defeat. Although in *We* the battle goes on, E-330 is executed, and the lobotomized D-503 renews his allegiance to The Benefactor; Helmholtz and Bernard are exiled, while the Savage commits suicide; and Winston and Julia betray both themselves and each other. For all its parodic inversion of the utopian ideal, one feature which dystopia reproduces virtually unchanged is the myth that resistance is futile. Indeed, there is a curious inevitability to the process whereby the individual takes on the might of the monolithic State, and is ultimately destroyed by it—

an inevitability which perhaps stems from the terms in which the confrontation is set up. To begin with, the dualistic opposition between the values of the individual and those of society ultimately places the individual in a situation where defeat can scarcely be avoided. While secrecy and privacy are appealing in the context of the invasive surveillance practiced by the dystopian state, they remain essentially defensive strategies; collecting obsolete artifacts, wearing old-fashioned clothing, and engaging in anachronistic sexual behaviour offer only symbolic resistance to the power of the State, while the individual, alone and isolated, can realistically do little to challenge the collective might and technological resources which society can deploy. As in the traditional utopia, there is very little by way of collective organization to mediate between the individual and centralized authority. Significantly, Zamyatin's dystopia is the one where resistance is shown as coming closest to success. It is hardly coincidental that it is the only one where resistance is shown as collective and organized, rather than merely an individual gesture of defiance.

Yet the oppositional struggle that dystopian fiction dramatizes is not simply that of the individual against society. In its parodic inversion of the utopian dream of order, dystopian fiction effectively rewrites its underlying fantasy of the patriarchal appropriation of the powers of the mother, focusing instead on the dream of the son's unsuccessful rebellion against the father. It is noteworthy, to begin with, that all the male rebels against patriarchal authority (with the lone exception of Helmholtz) feel themselves to be in some way inadequate: D-503 feels his hairiness is somehow primitive; Bernard is sensitive about his height; the Savage's insecurity goes back to his lonely, fatherless childhood; and Winston is painfully aware of his physical frailty. Yet they all take on an authority symbolized by a larger-than-life male figure who has all the confidence and power that they lack. D-503 is clearly intimidated by The Benefactor: although at one point, briefly, he laughs at his baldness, it is rather guilty laughter, and for the most part the emphasis is on The Benefactor's almost superhuman power. Bernard is intimidated, and the Savage outargued by the sleekly self-confident World Controller, Mustapha Mond, and the symbolic authority of Big Brother is given concrete expression in O'Brien's physical domination—most glaringly in the scene where he actually pulls out one of Winston's teeth with his bare hands.

The outcome of such a confrontation is predictable enough—to the extent, indeed, that the actual conclusions of *We*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are strikingly similar. All three end with the defeat of the rebellious male, the triumph of paternal authority, and the incidental destruction of the female who has been presumptuous enough to usurp the love which the father-figure sees as rightfully his. In *We*, the conclusion

is particularly disturbing, with the now acquiescent D-503 sitting alongside The Benefactor as E-330 is tortured:

Then she was led in under the Gas Bell Glass. Her face became very white, and since her eyes were dark and large, this created an extremely beautiful effect. When they started pumping the air out of the Gas Bell Glass she threw her head back, half closing her eyes and compressing her lips: this reminded me of something ... This was gone through three times— [p.221]

The sexual overtones of D-503's description are unmistakable, and it is clear that the triple repetition of this quasi-orgasm is not merely an arbitrary exercise in cruelty, but also a manifestation of superior potency: only The Benefactor could induce such symptoms three times in rapid succession.

The conclusion of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is equally indecent, as Winston is alternately tortured and comforted by the muscular O'Brien. When he encounters Julia again, after his release, she arouses no feeling in him other than a vague distaste, and he leaves her to return to the café, where he can indulge in loving thoughts of Big Brother—and in an almost voluptuous longing for the bullet which will penetrate the back of his neck:

He was walking down the white-tiled corridor, with the feeling of walking in sunlight, and an armed guard at his back. The long hoped-for bullet was entering his brain.

He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-sodden tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother. [p.256]

Even in *Brave New World*, where the homoerotic overtones are less overt, the scenario concludes in a similar fashion. The Savage's mother dies, Lenina is killed (whether actually or only ritually is never made quite clear), and the Savage expiates his sexual guilt for having succumbed to heterosexual desire by hanging himself in, of all things, a lighthouse—which continues to point to the sky as the Savage dangles dead at its base, in yet another symbol of triumphant phallic authority.

Thus, while dystopian parody of the utopian ideal exposes many of its underlying implications, the very closeness of the relationship between parody and original results in the reproduction of some of the latter's most problematic features. While designed as an attack on the utopian dream of a static, all-embracing order, dystopian fiction nevertheless accepts

utopia's underlying premise: that its ideal of a synchronous total system is the only viable alternative to the chaos and flux of history in process. All that differs in dystopia's parodic inversion is that the utopian ideal is presented as undesirable, the corollary being that a return to the world as it is now becomes the goal. As a counter to the threat of a utopian future, the dystopian writer often ends up merely reasserting the values of the past.¹² In its own way, in fact, the basic impulse of dystopian fantasy is just as regressive as that of the traditional utopia, and for all its success in transcending some of the latter's narrative limitations, it may be seen that the underlying structure of the traditional utopian paradigm still persists. Although, as we have seen, dystopian narrative begins *in medias res*, rather than with the customary journey to utopia, this is not to say that the journey motif is altogether dispensed with. Where the utopian narrative starts in the everyday world, moves to utopia, then returns, what dystopian fiction enacts is the same process, only in reverse. Here the narrative begins and ends in the dystopian future, but frames a symbolic return to the past. D-503's first 'irrational' act is to accompany E-330 to the House of Antiquity; Bernard and Lenina travel to the tribal Reservation; and Winston's first illicit assignation with Julia takes the form of a trip out to the unspoiled countryside. And while these symbolic journeys may be seen in the light of dystopian fiction's overall opposition of the values of the past to those of the nightmare dystopian future, their underlying psychological implications prove on closer examination to be strikingly similar to those of their utopian counterparts.

In *We*, D-503 and E-330 are greeted at the House of Antiquity by an old crone, whose mouth 'consist[ing] solely of pleats and folds' seems 'grown over, somehow' (p.40). When she opens this vaginal aperture, much to D-503's astonishment—it seemed altogether unbelievable that she would break into speech' (p.40)—it is to invite them into her house. They ascend a 'wide dark staircase' (p.40) into an apartment whose gorgeous organic chaos 'could not be reconciled in any equations whatsoever' (p.41), and D-503 finds himself unaccountably reminded of the sexual act. Bernard and Lenina, in *Brave New World*, ascend to the reservation by way of a channel between precipitous banks; after rounding a projection, they then enter 'a water-worn ravine' (p.92), accompanied all the while by the sound of drums 'as though the whole air had come alive and were pulsing, pulsing with the indefatigable movement of blood' (p.92). On finally reaching their destination they encounter the ultimate object of disgust—a real, live biological mother, Linda, whose previous employment just happens to have been in the Fertilizing Room. And in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a similar pattern is evident: Winston and Julia make their way along a narrow track into the woods:

They came to the fallen tree that she had spoken of. The girl hopped over and forced apart the bushes, in which there did not seem to be an opening. When Winston followed her, he found that they were in a natural clearing, a tiny grassy knoll surrounded by tall saplings that shut it in completely. [p.106]

Here they proceed to make love, but before doing so, Winston actually sees the landscape which has been recurring in his dreams—a landscape invariably associated with his mother. As in the traditional utopia, the underlying dream is of finding refuge in the security of the maternal womb.

In addition, albeit from a different perspective, dystopian fiction reenacts the triumph of an essentially masculine dream of order. As we have seen, at the conclusion of dystopia and utopia alike (with the partial exception of *We*, where resistance continues despite the defeat of E-330 and D-503) patriarchal authority is shown as reigning supreme.¹³ While this may be undesirable, it nevertheless indicates an implicit acceptance of the premise of the traditional utopia—that the establishment of a permanent, static order is at any rate practicable.¹⁴ Writing in 1939, Orwell declared that:

The terrifying thing about the modern dictatorships is that they are something entirely unprecedented. Their end cannot be foreseen. In the past every tyranny was sooner or later overthrown, or at least resisted, because of 'human nature', which as a matter of course desired liberty. But we cannot be at all certain that 'human nature' is constant. It may be just as possible to produce a breed of men who do not wish for liberty as to produce a breed of hornless cows. The Inquisition failed, but then the Inquisition had not the resources of the modern state. The radio, press censorship, standardized education and the secret police have altered everything. Mass suggestion is a science of the last twenty years, and we do not yet know how successful it will be. [*Essays, Journalism, Letters*, Volume 1, p.419]

Paradoxically, while the concept of some kind of essential, invariant human nature lies at the root of dystopia's critique of the traditional utopia, what dystopia dramatizes is the possibility of that nature being altered—a horrifying possibility which can only be avoided by a return to the past. Thus, while the traditional utopia may be characterized as a narrative 'in which an oppositional impulse is embedded in an essentially conservative form' (Bammer, p.45), dystopian fiction, as Jean Pfaelzer argues, 'is formally and historically, structurally and contextually, a conservative genre' ('Parody and Satire', p.61)—one in which even the 'oppositional impulse' leads back to the status quo.

Nevertheless, there are alternatives to the depiction of order

triumphant: despite the defeatist tendency of much dystopian fiction—its despairing acknowledgment that the worst may very well happen—such defeatism is not necessarily an inherent feature of the genre. Although the result of the struggle between the all-too-human individual and virtually superhuman authority is predictable enough, the outcome of a struggle depends not only on the relative strengths of the opponents, but also to some extent on the terms of the contest. As in real life, to confront a more powerful opponent directly is to court defeat, however gallant—to opt for failure, however heroic. D-503 in the presence of The Benefactor, Bernard and the Savage in that of Mustapha Mond, Winston in the hands of O'Brien, have already lost before they even meet their opponents. The transaction is a foregone conclusion. Yet it remains to be seen whether there are not other strategies—the fictional equivalent of guerilla tactics, perhaps, where the weaker side chooses the conditions of battle, and may ultimately triumph, even over a stronger opponent.

Rewriting Dystopia: Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

In this context, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is worth looking at more closely. Although, as has been suggested, Atwood's text is in very much the same tradition as its dystopian predecessors, it also reveals some interesting departures from the norm. Gilead, Atwood's vision of a theocratic dictatorship set in the United States of the not-very-distant future, in many ways closely resembles the worlds portrayed by Zamyatin and Orwell: it, too, is an authoritarian, patriarchal state (authority being wielded in the name of that ultimate patriarch, God the Father), and is once again a primarily urban society, which relies on extensive surveillance to enforce both political and sexual orthodoxy. At first sight, indeed, it would appear that the individual is equally powerless in the face of authority. Offred, the protagonist, is as helpless a victim as any of her fictional predecessors. Even the religious basis of Atwood's dystopia makes relatively little difference to the essential nature of the society described. While Gilead's *values* may differ ostensibly from those of Zamyatin's One State or Orwell's Oceania, the basic principle of insisting on universal conformity remains constant. Despite abolishing the worship of God, in fact, Zamyatin's, Orwell's, and indeed Huxley's dystopias all effectively replace it with quasi-religious cults centred on a patriarchal authority figure. Religion serves, as it does in Atwood's Gilead, as an effective instrument of control; if it figures more largely in her dystopia, the difference is primarily one of emphasis.

Where Atwood's fiction differs most obviously is in the gender of its protagonist, which radically alters the underlying scenario of conflict

between father and son, in which the average male confronts the omnipotent authority or the supermale patriarch, and is doomed to defeat. This is not to say, of course, that Offred *does* any more by way of effectively challenging authority: at best, she is a witness to the challenges of others—her mother's, her friend Moira's, her companion Ofglen's, all of which end in varieties of defeat. Even her attempts at escape are orchestrated by others—by her husband, Luke, or by Nick, her lover. Indeed, in many ways she is the most passive of all the rebels against dystopia. Yet for all her passivity, Offred is by no means *simply* a victim of the all-powerful state. Although she is humiliated, forced against her will into what is tantamount to slavery, separated from her friends, husband, child—even stripped of her name—she never concedes defeat, as do D-503, the Savage, or Winston Smith. In sheerly practical terms she may do even less than they by way of actively challenging authority, but what differs is the way in which her resistance is represented. Far more exclusively than any other dystopian writer, Atwood chooses to focus on the private consciousness of her protagonist—on the one realm that the State cannot successfully invade.

Whether this is in fact the case is, of course, arguable: as we have seen, a central premise of the earlier dystopias is that, in the last analysis, the State *can* control individual consciousness—that the human mind is simply another territory that can be colonized. Lobotomized, D-503 renews his allegiance to The Benefactor and the One State; tortured and brainwashed, Winston Smith lapses into maudlin adoration of Big Brother. Huxley's World State, more confident of its power, sees independent thought as so little of a threat that such radical procedures are not even needed: the small minority of dissidents can easily be contained on the margins of society, in penal colonies in places like the Falkland Islands; only the Savage, lacking the benefit of proper conditioning, tries to lead an existence wholly independent of the State—but ends up killing himself. Yet while this might seem the ultimate admission of defeat, suicide is presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* in a different light, as a radical refusal of the State's authority. Both Ofglen and Offred's predecessor as the Commander's handmaid take that route, and are to an extent honoured for doing so: while self-destructive, suicide is seen as a gesture of defiance, rather than surrender—a willed removal of oneself from the sphere of the State's coercive power. It is not Offred's solution, however: she sets as her goal survival, which in turn involves compromise, though not surrender. What *The Handmaid's Tale* charts is the process whereby Offred, even though a prisoner of the dystopian state, attempts the precarious task of preserving both her life and her integrity.

In focusing on this, Atwood resorts, like Zamyatin, to first person narration. Whereas the narrative perspective of *Brave New World* and

Nineteen Eighty-Four, showing the individual *in* society, serves to heighten the sense of his helplessness and vulnerability, Atwood's narration shows the State through the subjective perspective of the individual. The effect, however, is very different from that created by Zamyatin's use of the same device. While everything is filtered through D-503's consciousness, his narrative utterance is permeated by the controlling discourse of the State. Even as he is led by E-330 into increasingly active resistance, he engages in an incessant inner dialogue as he tries to explain and justify his conduct in the light of the official values which he has so thoroughly internalized. In effect, it is his subjective consciousness that constitutes the main battleground for the tension between the conflicting ideologies of the State and the dissidents, whose challenge to assumptions long taken for granted causes him such acute discomfort. D-503 is already a product of the State: the very language he uses reflects the extent to which its values are a part of him, and when he finally undergoes the Grand Operation to cure him of 'fantasy'—that is, the power of independent thinking—one senses a certain feeling of relief on his part that the tormenting inner dialogue has finally been stilled, that things have been made simple once again.

In *Offred's* case, however, the values of Gilead have never been part of her consciousness: she is a creature of her own past, and while this does not automatically transform her into an active opponent of the new order, there is little doubt as to her contempt for it. There is no battle between competing discourses to be fought out within her mind, since she is already clear which side she is on. Although her thoughts are about all she *does* have left her, the privacy of her mind remains inviolable. For all the elaboration of the State's surveillance mechanisms, it cannot prevent her from committing treason in her own mind, from thoughtcrime, to use Orwell's terminology—remembering with affection those whom the State has sought to destroy, judging the system and its representatives and finding them wanting. Admittedly, much the same could be said of Winston Smith, prior to his arrest—but again, the difference of perspective is crucial. By focusing so exclusively on *Offred's* subjective consciousness, Atwood privileges her perceptions to a far greater degree. While she is scarcely in a position to take effective action against authority, that authority is seen *only* through her eyes—a context in which its pretensions become more than a little ridiculous. 'Context is all' (p.136), *Offred* remarks at one point, and her narrative goes a long way towards demonstrating the truth of this.

In the context of *Offred's* narrative, for example, patriarchal authority no longer looms as large: in place of the superhuman, machine-like Benefactor, the Godlike Ford, the all-seeing Big Brother, is—a void. Nominally, Gilead is a society dedicated to the great glory of God the Father, but from *Offred's* point of view His is not a presence, but an absence: in

His place there are merely rather pathetic surrogates—the Commanders. Unlike the representatives of authority elsewhere (the suave Mustapha Mond, the brutal O'Brien) the Commanders almost invariably appear in contexts which render them ridiculous. Offred's own Commander, with his desire for the forbidden delights of Scrabble, his furtive glee over the schoolboy obscenities scrawled in his Latin textbook, his excitement at a trip to a brothel where sexual allure is provided by old cheerleaders' outfits and secondhand Bunny costumes, is merely ludicrous. Even his real power, his power over life and death, is undermined by being presented in the context of Offred's accompanying awareness of his confusion and incompetence. He appears genuinely puzzled by the course of events, surprised by Offred's dislike of her role, as if dimly aware that the perfect order that has been created is not quite working as it should. And as a representative of God the Father, he is conspicuously lacking in the sexual vitality of the Old Testament patriarchs, being both probably sterile (as even his wife concedes) and sexually inept: 'I've had him,' Moira remarks offhandedly, 'he's the pits' (p.228). Unlike Mond or O'Brien, Offred's Commander appears vulnerable: at the end he is shown as 'worried and helpless' (p.276), visibly shrinking as he sees himself being dragged down by Offred's apparent disgrace—the victim, in effect, of his failure to control someone he had regarded as a mere possession.

Nor do the other male figures fare much better. In her earlier fictions, Atwood's virtuosity in evoking sexual disgust is already apparent: in *Life Before Man*, for instance, a woman describes a sexual encounter with a particularly bland civil servant as like being in bed with 'a large and fairly active slab of Philadelphia cream cheese' (p.213)—and in *The Handmaid's Tale* she allows that virtuosity full rein. At the Prayvaganza, Offred reflects that while the presiding Commander, with his uniform and decorations, may appear impressive enough, she has the power to imagine him otherwise: 'in bed with his Wife and Handmaid, fertilizing away like mad, like a rutting salmon' (p.204). And at the mass wedding ceremony for military heroes newly returned from the front, Offred again imagines the reality of their sexual lives:

.... momentous grunts and sweating, damp furry encounters; or better, ignominious failures, cocks like three-week-old carrots, anguished fumbings upon flesh cold and unresponding as uncooked fish. [p.209]

Laughter becomes a powerful weapon in *The Handmaid's Tale*. 'It does so do good. It does,' insists Moira (p.208) when Offred (repressing her impulse to giggle) protests at her crude but vivid fantasy of one of the trainees engaging in oral sex with the redoubtable Aunt Lydia. In its

carnavalesque reassertion of the physicality of the body, such laughter implies the hollowness of the régime's official façade of reason and spirituality. Laughter asserts the humanity of the person who laughs, while at the same time undermining the authority of those who are laughed at. For all its limitations as a practical political tool (although satire and ridicule have never been particularly welcome to those in power), in the context of a fictional narrative it decisively affects the impression made by the representatives of the dystopian state. While Zamyatin, too, sees laughter as a liberating force, it works only sporadically: although D-503 may laugh at the bald-headed man who is the reality behind the cast-iron image of The Benefactor, his power is too real to be laughed at for long. Mustapha Mond and O'Brien are not laughed at at all. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, 'mirth rhymes with birth' (p.138): laughter provides a way out of the all-embracing security which the State seeks to impose on the individuals whom it is striving to mould in its own image. Where the dystopian dissidents of Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell seek refuge from the State's authority in the womb-like security of the past, Atwood presents liberation as a process of going forward, into the unknown.

In addition, laughter represents the assertion of alternative perspectives on reality; it speaks a different language, one which challenges the official discourse of the State. Beneath its surface frivolity lies something more serious: while the schoolboy dog-Latin—*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*—scrawled on the floor of Offred's cupboard may be merely a furtive joke to the Commander, for Offred it is a coded inscription, a gesture of defiance from a woman whose death has put her beyond the reach of the State's authority. While, as Orwell perceived, the standardization and impoverishment of language is an essential of the State's control of individual thought, Atwood's rebels exploit the richness and ambiguity of a linguistic realm over which the State has no jurisdiction. (It is significant that Offred's interactions with the Commander, outside the sphere of their official relations, involve their playing a competitive word game.) In the end, the State's attempt to impose the authority of its own official, monologic discourse is thwarted by the sheer variety of associations which language derives from contexts beyond its control. The very codeword of the resistance—Mayday—is fraught with complex and ambiguous associations wholly alien to the simplistic fundamentalism of the dystopian state: Mayday is a call for help in a foreign language, a carnival reminder of pagan fertility rituals, and the chief festival of international socialism. In the context of the book, it is also a declaration of independence.

In Atwood's hands, then, opposition becomes both more complex and more far-reaching than in the earlier dystopias: what she grasps is the paradox that the farther the State attempts to extend its power, the more

arenas it creates where resistance is possible. As Barthes argues in his discussion of Fourier, the utopian impulse to determine everything down to the last detail ultimately deconstructs itself, establishing a system so complex that it inevitably breaks down. Thus, the more that is forbidden, the greater the number of potentially subversive actions becomes. And while Offred makes no effort to conceal her weaknesses, her defeats, her failures in courage, her passivity, her shameful dependence on her lover, her opposition to the monolithic authority of the State is in fact a good deal more effective than she realizes. However passive her resistance, she provides an audience for the resistance of others, a space in which the implications of their actions can resonate. The point that Atwood stresses is that no matter how powerless, how often defeated, the rebel is *not* alone. When Moira escapes from the Re-Education Centre, after overpowering Aunt Lydia in the washroom, hers is not merely a personal bid for freedom; at the same time she exposes the limitations of authority:

Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was the lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. [p.125]

It is, indeed, in Bakhtin's terms, a classic example of the carnivalesque uncrowning of official authority. Aunt Elizabeth, the symbol not only of authority, but of female purity, is overpowered in a lavatory overflowing with excrement; she is led downstairs to the basement, where she is stripped of her clothing, and dressed in the red garments of the Handmaid, while Moira now dons the robes of authority. In one action the official hierarchy of dystopian society is completely reversed.

Thus, despite the extent of the State's attempt to impose the authority of an all-embracing static system, the result is merely to increase the potential scope of opposition. Even something so apparently trivial as gossip becomes subversive: when Offred asks the Commander to tell her 'what's going on', her choice of language implies a process, a continuous dynamic which may at any moment result in change. The necessity of imposing control implies the continued existence of something that has to be controlled. The television news, though rigorously censored by the authorities, implies by its self-evident selectivity the fact of other events, which are *not* reported. The more absolute the authority the State seeks to wield, the more precarious it becomes. This is not to say, of course, that this renders the collapse of authority inevitable. As Stuart Hall observes:

The multiplication of new points of antagonism ... characteristic of

our emerging 'post-industrial' societies, while making available new potential sites of intervention, further fragments the political field, dispersing rather than unifying the different social constituencies. [Quoted in Levitas, *Concept of Utopia*, p.197]

Like Orwell and Huxley, and to a lesser extent Zamyatin, Atwood chooses not to address the question of *how* effective resistance to the all-powerful state may be mounted (an evasion which clearly echoes the utopian reluctance to specify how the more perfect society might be created): at best, she shows more clearly the points at which it is vulnerable.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Atwood effectively transforms both the main terms in the classic dystopian equation, creating a protagonist whose passive resistance and satiric eye produce a very different impact than do the direct challenges to authority presented by the male rebels of earlier dystopian fiction, while at the same time stripping patriarchal authority of much of its aura of invulnerability. In addition, she is more sceptical of the basic premise of utopia and dystopia alike, that the creation of an enduring total system is actually *possible*. Unlike Zamyatin's One State, Huxley's World State, or Orwell's Oceania, Gilead has clearly indicated limits, both spatial and temporal. There are other places to which escape is possible, and it is apparent that, as a social experiment, it has only a finite existence.¹⁵ In the epilogue, Gilead becomes the focus of a twenty-second century academic symposium, from which it becomes clear that its existence was merely a transient historical phenomenon—albeit one which provided an abundance of research opportunities. Unlike the earlier dystopias, whose terror lies partly in the threat of their being eternal, Gilead is ephemeral, deprived of an eternal future in part because of its inability to sever itself from the past. The connection with contemporary reality, which utopian fiction seeks to obscure, and dystopian society to obliterate, is here clearly manifest. Gilead's fatal weakness lies in its inability to cut itself off from history: Atwood demonstrates what is one of the principal limitations of all revolutions, whether for good or ill: the fact that they are made by those who have been conditioned by the values of the society which the revolution seeks to overthrow.

It is the State's belief, of course, that this limitation can be overcome. The 'aunts' repeatedly assure their sceptical charges that, while they may find it difficult to adjust to the new order, it will be easier for generations to come:

You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts.

She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way. [p.111]

Until that time, however, memory, with the different perspectives it provides, remains a potent threat to the authority of the State. Offred is just one of innumerable individuals who remember how things were before, who remember the outrages perpetrated in the name of the new order, who can contrast now with then, and consider the implications of the difference. Nor are the rulers themselves immune to the power of memory, to the influence of the past: unable to control their previously socialized lust for women as sex-objects, they recreate the brothels which their puritan revolution was meant to abolish. Between the hypocrisy of the rulers and the mocking laughter of the ruled, it is clear that the new order is constructed on shaky foundations.

In both its narrative approach, then, and in its presentation of the nature of the authoritarian state's limitations, *The Handmaid's Tale* represents a radical extension of the dystopian critique of the traditional utopia. Nor is it only the limitations of utopian idealism or authoritarian trends in contemporary society that Atwood seeks to expose; in places, it is clear that *The Handmaid's Tale* is also addressing the flawed assumptions underlying specific aspects of earlier dystopian fiction. In particular, Atwood challenges Zamyatin's and Orwell's stereotypical depiction of traditional images of female sexuality as more 'natural' than, and hence subversive of the State's sexual norms. As we have seen, both Zamyatin's E-330 and Orwell's Julia resort to old-fashioned methods of sexual allure by way of defying the official sexual ethic of the State, and by doing so render themselves far more attractive than the state-approved partner with whom the protagonist has previously been involved. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, the equivalent scene, in which Offred sheds her nun-like uniform and puts on make-up, high heels, and a revealing outfit largely comprised of feathers, is designed to illustrate, not the subversive power of 'natural' female sexuality, but rather the extent to which such stereotypes are merely the obverse of the male fear of female sexuality which informs Gilead's puritanism. While Gilead's stringent moral code is ostensibly designed to protect women from predatory male sexuality, its designers continue to dream of the old stereotypes, and find their sexual outlets at that archetypal locale of male fantasy, the brothel. Perhaps the most ludicrous aspect of Offred's trip to the brothel with her Commander is his pathetic belief that the trip is somehow exciting for *her*. Where Offred defies the State's sexual norms is not in overt displays of male-approved traditional femininity, but in her illicit encounters with the Commander's chauffeur, which take place in the darkness, and which she never really

finds words to describe. The subversiveness of such sexual conduct lies, familiarly enough, in its privacy—something which her monthly couplings in the Commander's marriage bed signally lacks—yet even so, Offred remains dubious as to just how far this too constitutes a form of compromise with male authority. Where Winston Smith sees his sexual relations with Julia as 'a battle, the climax a victory ... a blow struck against the Party ... a political act' (p.112), for Offred, so simplistic an opposition of 'natural' sexuality to official authority is impossible. Having experienced the unequal sexual power relations not only of Gilead, but of the society that preceded it, she cannot help but be aware the sexual arena is one where, while rebellion may be possible, it remains fraught with complicity.

Thus, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a dystopia where the lines of battle are far more ambiguously drawn. Offred's challenges to the State's authority are not always uncritically presented as positive, and while her memory constitutes an alternative perspective by which the State can be judged, there is far less of the nostalgia that characterizes both *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the past is portrayed as somehow more authentic, more 'real' than the present. By contrast, Offred's recollections of contemporary America, with its pornography, its sex industry, its continual threat of rape and violent assault, hardly offer a glittering alternative to the new morality of Gilead. Indeed, it becomes abundantly clear in the course of the narrative that many of her survival skills, her capacity for secrecy and passive resistance, were learned from her experience as a woman in the society which Gilead replaced. Indeed, while Gilead evidently collapses at last, it is clear that the world of the future that succeeds its fall is far from ideal either. The academic discussion of Gilead, with its sexist jokes, its smug refusal to take any kind of moral stance in its discussion of what happened, indicates much the same kind of intellectual elitism and abdication of responsibility that was presumably one of the preconditions for the establishment of Gilead in the first place.

This sense of the force of historical continuity, of the overlap between past, present, and future, enables Atwood to avoid the often simplistic, polarized alternatives of earlier dystopian fiction. The dualistic opposition between future and past—the one associated with totalitarian conformity, the other with a vaguely liberal conception of 'freedom'—is replaced by an altogether more complex sense of their interrelationship. The result is a vision which is critical, not only of utopia, or of the society to which utopia proposes an alternative, but also of the dystopian response itself. It is this critical—and indeed, self-critical—impulse which may be seen to underlie a series of attempts to likewise transform the nature of the utopian vision.

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