Eye to I, Tail to Tale: Atwood, Offred and the Politicized Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This essay suggests the effectiveness of using Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as an experiential base from which to theorize about the definition of political action; about reading as a feminist, especially of an arguably feminist text; about the construction of "subject," both in fiction and in the politicized classroom of Women's Studies; about the mechanisms of control by means of extreme visibility (Foucault); about the philosophical theory of "conflictual conversation" (Young-Bruehl), both as personal resource and as political strategy. The short essay that follows (p. 104) demonstrates how the concept of "conflictual conversation" works to explain the experience of a Native girl in a Canadian residential school in the 1960s.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article suivant suggère l'efficacité d'utiliser le roman *La servante écarlate* de Atwood comme base expérientielle à partir de laquelle on peut théoriser sur la définition de l'action politique; sur la lecture en tant que féministe, surtout d'un texte qu'on peut considérer féministe; sur la construction du «sujet» dans les ouvrages de fiction et dans la salle de classe politisée d'un cours d'études sur les femmes; sur les mécanismes de domination au moyen de la visibilité extrême (Foucault); sur la théorie philosophique de la «conversation conflictuelle» (Young-Bruehl), tant comme ressource personnelle que stratégie politique. Le court texte qui suit cet article (p. 104) démontre comment le concept de la «conversation conflictuelle» permet d'expliquer l'expérience d'une jeune autochtone dans un pensionnat pendant les années 1960.

> *[T]he political to me is a part of life. It's part of everybody's life. What we mean [by political] is how people relate to a power structure and vice versa. And this is really all we mean by it. We may also mean some idea of participating in the structure or changing it. But the first thing we mean is how is this individual in society? How do the forces of society interact with this person?* — Margaret Atwood[1]

CURRICULUM DESIGN FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY courses in Women's Studies presents unusual problems. How can the instructor create common experiential bases from which to theorize about women's experience, when the students themselves come from several generations, different class, race and ethnic backgrounds, family and work experience, sex, sexual orientation and, not least problematic, varied academic training? While one does not wish to erase or homogenize their differences, a class needs shared positions from which, and by means of which, to explore theoretical and political questions.[2] In my experience, the study of women's fiction and poetry is one of the most effective ways of providing such *points de départ.* Since creative literature is already widely used in Women's Stud-

ies curriculum, many of us who teach it have obviously already reached this conclusion. However, it is the purpose of this paper to reflect on ways feminist readings of women's literature can create a politicized classroom.

As British feminist educator Moira Monteith points out, reading literature is often highly significant in the educational development of students. For example, in many post-secondary institutions, including Canadian ones, first-year English courses operate as entrance or "access to study" courses. Yet, "such readers' own experience ironically is often at odds with the values made explicit in the proffered discourse [both within the literary text and within the authorized, i.e., professorial, reading]."[3] A particular difficulty exists for women students: how to read male texts from a woman's body without becoming an intellectual male, "immasculated."[4] How can they, despite their academic inexperience and gendered insecurity about the value of their own experience, learn to resist a social/textual order that remains hegemonically androcentric? Some women students do not care to resist, of course, but for those who do, the process of reading *politically* has begun.

As a second stage, they must confront the issue of control, focusing on "how people relate to a power structure and vice versa." Barbara Godard describes this process:

> Who owns the meaning of the black marks on the page, the writer or the reader? Whose interests are served by them? She begins to explore the *dual axes of what is in the text and what she brings to the text* [my emphasis]. Women's liberation movement becomes "readers' liberation movement."[5]

However, how does this double perspective operate when the text being studied is a woman's? A feminist's? Does the female reader allow herself to be merged into the female text? Does she create there an identity that becomes her intellectual homeland? If she does — and surely the longing for such a home is very strong among those who have lost their "natural place" in the men's house — what price does she pay, and exact, to maintain "stable notions of self and identity [that] are based on exclusion and secured by terror...."?[6] Yet, if she struggles to understand and work with differences among women, does she not find it dismaying to confront a woman's text that refuses the female complicity for which we long, the validation of our experience as women?

This sense of feminist betrayal is a common one for readers of Margaret Atwood. While she always recognizes, at some level of her texts, that women have a "shoddy lot in this world which is, globally, dangerous for women, biased against them," her narrative focus is often directed at female treachery and weakness, monstrous in its effects. She defends the necessity of this: "...writers are messy and undependable. They often see life as complex and mysterious, with ironies and loose ends, not as a tidy system of goodies and baddies usefully labelled."[7]

Atwood's undependability offers an opportunity for the practice of feminist reading. Instead of offering students a model of harmonious exchange, of "collective conversation" and caretaking, she inscribes a model of "conflictual conversation" — not dialogue, but dialog in the Bakhtinian sense:

> For the focus of the dialogic is on contradiction and change, on bodies and social formations as s(c)ites of transgression, of transformation.... All our thought — philosophic, scientific and *artistic* — is born and shaped in a process of interaction and *struggle* with others' thought which foregrounds the *transformative* impact of confrontation. The energy of this struggle through its transformative capacities feeds not only women's writing but also their reading.[8]

Later we shall see how, according to feminist philosopher Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, this model of "conflictual conversation" in thinking also offers a model for a radically democratic political system. First, however, I examine Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* a novel that explores the possibility of

politicized thought and practice even in a women's prison, while forcing the female reader into confrontation with the text.

I teach this novel in a discussion format in which students offer their diverse readings and interests; therefore, the following four-part discussion of the novel is never so tidily delivered. It does represent, however, the broad outlines of some theoretical tools useful for Women's Studies students.

Following my own essay is a text by Alestine André (p. 104), a student in a class that read Atwood's novel. With her permission, I offer her text, one of ten journal entries she wrote as part of the course assignment, as a demonstration of the "conflictual conversation" as personal and political resource.

Constructing the "Story," Part I: History as Narrative

At the beginning of class, I announce that I wish to read them a contemporary Canadian reproductive tale, the lead story in a daily newspaper.

Someone asks which newspaper. I welcome this question so that I can agree that we have, on any given day, several possible newsprint versions of the day's stories available to us. It could be any day's paper for the point I am about to make but, as a way of providing focus for Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* I read a front-page story from the Toronto *Globe and Mail,* part of Canada's ongoing abortion narrative. Its headline is: "Ruling against abortion upheld." My local paper, Victoria's *Times-Colonist* — the fascinating possibilities of the concepts of "Globe" and "Colony" I postpone for the moment — finds the abortion story to be of secondary importance, although both articles give the same three quotations from the protagonists in the day's court battle.[9]

"I feel like a victim.... I have more rights than a twenty-week fetus," says the pregnant woman denied an abortion.

"I intended to raise the child, but with her [the pregnant woman]," claims the ex-boyfriend who has brought the injunction preventing the abortion.

"A conceived child that is not yet born is a human being under Article 1 of the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms," proclaims the judge who has been told by the ex-boyfriend's lawyer that "you, your honour, are the person who can come to the aid of this human being." The human being here, in case one is getting lost among the stories, is the twenty-week fetus.

The point I am working toward with the newspaper reference is that we are being provided not just with a newsstory situated among, and contextualized by, other newsstories, but with three versions of the same event, three narratives that construct the reality these people are living so publicly. From here, one can make the more general epistemological observation that "reality" is constructed, shaped by human consciousnesses. Among the multiple constructions, and after a struggle, one story, or ideology, may predominate. This, then, is not a question of the narrative of history but rather history as narrative.

Constructing the Story, Part II: The Principle of "One"

> I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.
>
> If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.
>
> It isn't a story I'm telling.
>
> It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along.
>
> Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else.
>
> Even when there is no one.[10]

With these obsessional reworkings, Atwood has her narrator alert the reader early in the narrative to the multiple meanings of the word *story* and to the problem of audience. Again and again in the text,

the reader is reminded of the fictiveness of the story and of the life of Offred, the narrator, as Atwood's text circles back to the idea of "story" and the human need to live a believable fiction.

> I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born. (76)

Late in the novel, speaking of Janine's need to make her life a story, Offred asserts that "people will do anything rather than admit that their lives have no meaning. No use, that is. No plot" (227).

Only at the end of the novel does the reader realize that Atwood's present-tense narrative has lulled us into inattention, into forgetting that the narrative is not being constructed as it happens — is not even being reconstructed by Offred along the lines of her earlier construction. By the time Offred tells this story, she is no longer Offred but a woman restored to her "own," undivulged name,[11] taping her tale at some place where, presumably, "writing" is not forbidden. Yet even the narrative we are reading is, according to the concluding "Historical Notes," a reconstruction done two centuries after the events by Professors Pieixoto and Wade: "All such arrangements [of blocks of speech] are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research" (284) — thus making and remaking the story just as Offred must compose her life/plot. The phallocentric, logocentric professors are willing to maintain the fiction, even if only for professional reasons, that further research *can* establish historical reality. Offred, wanting, she says, to be honest, states that all she can "hope for is a reconstruction..." (275):

> When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then, too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, half-colours, too many. (144)

The shape she wishes for her tale, she borrows from the fiction of "falling women": romance, awakening, beauty, "Love" as the "incarnation" (238-39). These were part of the plot she had constructed of her life with Luke, the memory of which is, at first, her most important survival mechanism in Gileadean captivity. However, the subsequent sexual encounters with Nick violate Offred's Luke story and her behaviour with Nick, judged by her previous, no longer strategically useful tale, humiliates her. I ask the class, however, to delay consideration of the Offred/Nick liaison until we can examine the ways in which other important political issues converge on Nick.

The focus on sexual politics leads to the related politics of reproductive technologies, another major theme in this course and in Atwood's dystopian novel. Before making that shift, however, I remind the class that Atwood has Offred fictionalize her audience: "Because I'm telling you [Luke? The reader? Her rescuers? Future historians?] this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (279). In other words, the "you" addressed, the reader, myself and my students, must constitute ourselves as subjects; in the terms of *The Handmaid's Tale,* this means constituting ourselves as politicized readers.

Calling attention in this way to the text's postmodern self-reflexivity is a useful starting point for teaching this novel.[12] Such a device is particularly useful in an interdisciplinary class where students of diverse academic backgrounds and perhaps no training in literary criticism are often likely to approach a novel as though it were part of the tradition of classic realism, intended by the author to be a transparent reflection of the world. Questions about genre give students a way of reading and a more complex idea of "subject." It could also serve, by analogy, as an illustration of the ways in which gender is created socially. From there we could consider the myriad women's issues in the novel and — this is where Nick will return — the novel's analysis of socially inscribed power structures.

It is at this point that my newspapers become vital props. I remind the class that the white spaces or margins are essential to the definition, in its

multiple meanings, of the black print/news narratives. Then we consider Offred's description of her pre-Gilead life:

> We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom.
>
> We lived in the gaps between the stories. (66)

Offred was neither stupid nor ignorant, nor were the papers in those (our) days remiss in their reporting of the "usual" atrocities. "We lived," she says, "as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (66). Freedom from knowing, refusing the political challenge, gave Offred and all those careless citizens (readers, us) "freedom from being seen" (60). Believing in the myth of the rights of the individual, aspiring to the ideal of personal liberation, she had ignored the knowledge that she was also part of a larger, communal life that was creating its own plot. The Commander and his regime represent this hegemonic individualism in a vicious institutionalized form: he insists to Offred, in a misogynist dismissal of women's intelligence, that "one and one and one and one don't make four.... [but remain] just one and one and one and one" (195). Offred fails to see the political consequences of his statement when she adapts it to her own ideology of romantic love:

> What the Commander said is true. One and one and one and one doesn't equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other. Nick for Luke or Luke for Nick. (201-02)

The signs of impending political disaster were there in pre-Gilead (our own) days, but trained as she is to believe in freedom and personal privacy, Offred chose to ignore them. Her friend Moira, conditioned by her lesbianism to recognize abuses of political power, tried to warn her of the dangers. Offred preferred her own story; later, however, in captivity, Offred's frequent recollections of Moira's voice and behaviour form an important part of the internal conversation Offred maintains in a search for possible models of political resistance.

Reproductive Control of the Handmaid's "Tail"

> One day, when [my daughter] was eleven months old ... a woman stole her out of a supermarket cart.... I heard her start to cry. I turned around and she was disappearing down the aisle, in the arms of a woman I'd never seen before. I screamed and the woman stopped...
>
> She's just crazy, Luke said.
>
> I thought it was an isolated incident, at the time. (73)

This, I maintain to the class, is one of the crucial passages in the book. It signals the epidemic infertility that was afflicting the American population at the end of the twentieth century, brought about, as Professor Pieixoto tells his audience, by various forms of venereal disease, contraception/sterilization, pollution, chemical and nuclear abuse of the environment (316-17). This crisis of infertility, particularly as it afflicts the white middle classes, is the material basis for the creation of the Gilead empire, and source of its name: "Is there no balm in Gilead, is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughters of my people recovered?" Jeremiah 8:22.

"My people" is a key term here, sign of the patriarchal kingdom, realm of the Gileadean commanders. To maintain their control, they must control the crucial resources by which they perpetuate their power. In the time of mass infertility, "viable ovaries" (153) are a rare and precious national resource so must belong to the power elite. Seizing these resources — which of course happen to be housed inside the bodies of living women — requires a supporting ideology that author-izes their seizure. Fortunately for the commanders, a ready-made one is at hand; it has the advantage of being one in which women have been for thousands of years deeply complicit — the Judeo-Christian tradition:

> Women should learn in silence and all humility. I do not allow them to teach or to have authority over men; they must keep quiet. For Adam was created first, and then Eve. And it was not

> Adam who was deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and broke God's law. But a woman will be saved through having children, if she perseveres in faith and love and holiness, with modesty (1 Timothy 2: 11–15).[13]

The commanders need only cite the evidence of the terrible danger to male-less women in pre-Gilead society (66, 231), then declare the need to create a woman-protection policy.[14] Combine this pernicious but commonly held ideology — women need men to protect them from men — with a form of "birth service" (317) — in this case, the age-old practice of concubinage shorn of its possible eroticism — and we have the institution of handmaidhood. This institution can be forced upon the resistant fertile women by female token torturers (the aunts) and guarded by elite-class women (wives) who profit from the enslavement of "lower-order" women, whether handmaids, Jezebels, Econowives, Unwomen, or Marthas.[15] These class/gender/race structures are clear enough, and their resemblance to present social practice so obvious that I do not need to belabour them. What is less obvious, however, is Atwood's analysis of the ways successful power structures maintain themselves, and of the chinks in the Gileadean system that make it susceptible to subversion. A focus on reproduction can illustrate these points.

As Professor Pieixoto points out, revealing by rhetorical indirection his own acceptance of sexist/classist/racist hegemony, late twentieth-century "northern caucasian societies" had (have) resorted to three types of conceptive reproductive technologies: artificial insemination, fertility clinics using such methods as *in vitro* fertilization, and "surrogacy."[16] He reports that Gilead rejected the first two as "irreligious" but, with this term, he masks the real power issue. Fertility treatments require vast medical resources dispersed among a very few privileged individuals, a situation beyond the means of war-torn, environmentally damaged Gilead. Artificial insemination would be the most efficient means of producing offspring, but its use would undermine the patrilineal, patriarchal position of the male head of family, for admitting to infertility is a confession of "weakness." So the practice of "surrogacy" is adopted officially, complete with religious ceremony. Privately, however, the handmaids, sometimes with the connivance of the wives, and perhaps even with the knowledge of the patriarchs, engage in a form of "artificial" insemination by donor. A lower-caste male, like Nick, "donates" his seed to the handmaid's owner who is, according to official discourse, the "real" inseminator. The flaw in this arrangement is that the inseminator is alive, conscious, and present in the sexual act; the sexual partners and their owners are thus involved in an underground activity that makes them outlaws. In other words, by winking at the law, or averting its controlling Gaze, the power elite creates the conditions for its own demise. The handmaids, so carefully conditioned at the Red Centre to act as though their bodies are single-function "chalices" (84, 172), can learn to use sexuality as a subversive activity, to make the "darkness" fertile with counterplots. In order to achieve this freedom, however, the handmaids need to learn that the Eye of God and his earthly "eyes" are not all-seeing. Since they have so thoroughly internalized the controlling Gaze, such risk-taking should be unthinkable. To demonstrate how one can become a conscious subversive in an apparently impenetrable political system, I introduce Michel Foucault's discussion of panopticism.

Internalizing the "Eye": Political Paralysis

The perfect control mechanism is one in which the person under surveillance has so interiorized the gaze of the oppressor that she polices herself according to his commands, fearing that he will know and punish any infraction. The only people who believe that such omniscience is possible are the very young, the very impressionable, or the ruthlessly oppressed. Interesting, then, to consider the occurrences of a symbol for such power: the Eye of God. This symbol appeared, for example, in my Grade 2 catechism with the warning that God sees even my most secret thoughts — a superb control mechanism for a seven-year-old child.[17] However, the symbol appears as well on the great seal of the United States and on its dollar bill, a point Offred recalls (182).

Gilead's commanders adopt this useful deification of secular power.[18] Thus, as a means of demonstrating submission to the theocracy, the hand-

maids are programmed to bid one another farewell with the phrase "Under His Eye" (54). Any deviation from this formula counts as blasphemy/treason.

In order for this threat of eternal surveillance to work, the handmaids, and all Gilead's other citizens, need to believe they are perpetually visible to the Eye. Since we do not stay seven forever, the threat of God's eye needs human management, or, as Foucault puts it, the gaze of power needs to be institutionalized, inscribed in social space. Atwood's psychopolitical system demonstrates admirably how this might work.

To begin with — and Atwood begins the novel with a description of this process in the Leah and Rachel Centre — the surveilled must be taught to believe, be rewarded for believing, and be punished for refusing to believe that "the Eyes of God run over all the earth" (181). Since this statement is patently untrue — even in Gilead, places of darkness and secrecy such as toilet cubicles and bedroom closets exist — the added threat of unnamed spies is necessary. Hence the "Eyes," a secret police force that has official status and its many secret agents among the population. This conflation of God's power, known authority figures, and unknown agents who may be a shopping partner, is so terrifying in its omnipresence that the watched person "will lose the power and even almost the idea of wrongdoing."[19] To make the surveillance effective, however, the surveilled need to feel themselves to be isolated and incarcerated. Hence the spotlit illumination of even private places like the commander's garden, and the rigidly established social roles, complete with an illuminating costume, by means of which even a tiny deviation is immediately visible. Asking my students to consider Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon as a "system of isolating visibility" helps focus Atwood's analysis:

> The principle was this. A perimeter building in the form of a ring. At the centre of this, a tower, pierced by large windows opening on to the inner face of the ring. The outer building is divided into cells each of which traverses the whole thickness of the building. These cells have two windows, one opening on to the inside, facing the windows of the central tower, the other, outer one, allowing daylight to pass through the whole cell. All that is then needed is to put an overseer in the tower and place in each of the cells a lunatic, a patient, a convict, a worker ... a schoolboy [or a handmaid]. In short, the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer's gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection. (147)

Offred's bedroom is an isolation cell always open to penetration and surveillance, just as her red habit is a cell she must wear everywhere. She is relentlessly exposed, caught by backlit illumination. At the end of her tale, when the Eyes come to take her, Atwood expresses Offred's absolute powerlessness as "My back's to the window" (305).

This version of her cell, however, needs collusion on her part. Not that she accepts Aunt Lydia's doctrine ("Where I am is not a prison but a privilege..."[18]), but she does accept that speech and action are too dangerous to risk. Having accepted a new version of "normal," she once again tries to live in the white spaces and gaps. Yet, at the beginning of her tale, the clue to resistance is present to her, she names it, then she averts her awareness.

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

She eventually learns that her predecessor in the room had used the chandelier, instrument of illumination, as suicide tool. Repeatedly, Offred thinks of suicide as a possible escape, "freedom from knowing." This she recognizes as the "greatest temptation" in her captivity (205). However, this Offred never consciously understands the further knowledge — that one can use darkness, irrationally motivated behaviour, dreams, random memory and sexuality as modes of subverting the enthralling Gaze, or removing the eye — even though she falls into the practice of using such zones of darkness and is saved by Nick, who does understand their political use in a resistance movement.

This plastered-over eye, which should oversee Offred but cannot, functions like the many winks in the tale that Offred tries to evade. In her first encounter with Nick when he looks at her and winks, she drops her head and scuttles away (28). Caught between her new fear of the Eyes and her old knowledge of sexual play, she fails to understand that a wink among lower caste people to whom speech is forbidden might signal some code, some new language of resistance that she can use for her benefit and for others'. The wink of the condemned handmaid at the salvaging (288) is another such signal, one I argue is a code of the Mayday resistance alliance, of which Nick is obviously a member. Under the Eye, one is meant to lower one's eyes. Thus any eye-to-eye connection is fraught with danger, signalling equality between the lookers and resistance to hierarchical power. I maintain that the most exciting moment of the tale occurs in front of the Soul Scrolls when Offred finally returns the gaze of Ofglen:

> There's a shock in this seeing ... risk, suddenly, in the air between us, where there was none before. Even this meeting of eyes holds danger.... Subversion, sedition, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one. (176-77)

In a similar moment of recognition, Offred and Nick connect:

> Down there on the lawn, someone emerges from the spill of darkness ... He stops, looks up at this window ... Nick. We look at each other. I have no rose to toss, he has no lute. But it's the same kind of hunger.
>
> Which I can't indulge. I pull the left-hand curtain so that it falls between us, across my face, and after a moment he walks on, into the invisibility around the corner. (201)

There is knowledge available here; however, the interpretation Offred constructs of this moment relies on the Commander's creed: "one and one and one and one doesn't equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together" (201-02).

Winking Out the Gaze: Political Praxis

With this statement, Offred is intellectually acquiescing to a theory of human knowledge and its concomitant social organization that supports the Gileadean system. This is what feminist philosopher Elisabeth Young-Bruehl calls, in another context, the hegemony of the philosophy of "selves ... first person singulars, solitaries, interiorities, mental machines."[20] The idea that the human mind is a thought control-tower duplicates itself in hierarchical, pyramidal social organizations, she says, and the hierarchical, dualistic method is justified by reference to the mental mode.

While this theory of knowledge and social organization has been questioned in recent decades, it is the one institutionalized by Gilead; in moments like the one quoted above, we see that this idea of mental and social isolation holds the imagination of Offred in thrall. I ask my students to consider the alternative model suggested by Young-Bruehl, one that would refuse the ideal of knowledge as isolating vision, the mind as control tower. She suggests that:

> the idea that our mental life with others and with ourselves is conversational — that it is a constant interconnecting of all sorts of representations of our experience and also potentially an extension of our experience as we hear ourselves and others and reflexively interpret ourselves in and through novel conjunctions or conversational moments. (216)

This idea of the mind, which Young-Bruehl owes to a combination of radical philosophy, feminism and psychoanalysis, refuses the violence of dualistic thought so characteristic of any political tyranny and certainly evident in Gilead, "in love with either/or" (18). More contentiously, this model of the mind refuses as well the urge toward "identity," a strong urge among women as our voices and our forms of knowledge (feeling, irrationality) have for so long been suppressed. While Young-Bruehl grants that the quest for identity is "in many ways

laudable in sociopolitical terms and is indeed necessary in those contexts," nevertheless, "it seems ... that it can run contrary to — or involve the suppression of — our internal conversations, and especially the unwelcome conflicts in them and the archaic voices in them that are kept ... in a state of uncommunication." If we can avoid such suppression, we can achieve a "more communicative form of life — the possibility of conversational reconciling, both in ourselves and others" (219).

This view of the mind has a sociopolitical corollary: a radical, anti-authoritarian form of democracy (217). Young-Bruehl claims that the model of mind as "conflictual conversation" (216) is:

> crucial to progressivism in political theory; it implies that mental and political democracies can be mutually supporting, in accord with the traditional constructing technique but not in accord with the traditional constructions.... And what this means is that the individual lives and the particularities of individual internal conversations of people will always defy political theoretical constructions, even democratic ones, that are prescriptive. (217)

In introducing Young-Bruehl's theory, I am presenting to my students a very heuristic reading of Offred as heroine; I am reconstructing the unsavoury story of "falling women" in a different politicized sense, one that recognizes the value of zones of darkness, including the erotic, in a political battle. Observing how carefully Atwood has constructed her novel into alternating sections of day and night, light and darkness, I argue that Atwood's most interesting achievement in this novel is her exploration of the ways in which the "non-heroic" can practice resistance and "compose" themselves as political actors.

At this point, I ask the students to examine various textual descriptions of Offred's attention to memory, her desire to construct stories in multiple versions in an effort toward greater honesty and flexibility, her insistent analyzing of "contexts," her constant refusals to submit mentally and emotionally despite her physical entrapment, her repetition of other voices and ideas, however unflattering to her they might be. These habits of mind, I assert, represent, however haltingly, the practice of personal freedom in a totalitarian State. The logjam of Offred's multiple captivities are broken by her leap into the dark zones beyond the isolating reach of the Eye. In this way, her eye-defying liaison with Nick can be seen as a natural development of her other practices. As Audre Lorde has famously remarked: "In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial."[21]

It is precisely here that students will confront my reading of Offred as putative hero. Taking Offred at her word (281-82), they insist that Offred's falling into lust with Nick is a repetition of her earlier "falling women" act, apolitical and self-indulgent. Furthermore, they admit to disappointment with Atwood, who allows Offred to be rescued by Nick, the shining knight in a black van. Even the movie, which they reject as a simplistic Hollywood love story, recognizes the need to make Offred less supine by giving her the opportunity to murder the Commander. Finally, they (and I) regret Atwood's dumping of the much more courageous and attractive Moira. Yet, Moira's behaviour is poor political strategy: she works alone and follows a predictable form of oppositional rebellion, easy for the Eyes to intercept.

Despite Offred's intermittent desire for safety in the white spaces, she does retain a willingness to let the conflicting voices talk in her mind and does, most of the time, want to know, even when she is afraid to act. When she learns, in the penultimate chapter, of Ofglen's disappearance and feels, for the first time, Gilead's true power, even here her internal conversation maintains its polyvocality. At one moment, she says, "They can do what they like with me. I am abject"; in the next, she carefully protects Nick from implication by proximity. Although she needs rescuing, it was her own previous behaviour that puts her in the position to be saved. Finally, Offred survives, as she determined she would (17); *her* tale is the one we read, the surviving historical narrative, the crucial cautionary tale.

By forcing the flawed narrator on us, Atwood confronts us with our own avoidances and camouflages. Despite the injunction to deny none of it ("Denay, Nunavit," 311), the society of the future resembles our own racist, classist, sexist, homophobic society and the professor can simultaneously exploit Offred's women's history for his own advantage while disparaging it as just another tale of "tail" (313).

For my purposes — politicizing the Women's Studies classroom — it is useful to be left with Atwood's piquant exit line: "Are there any questions?" (324). This amounts to a troubling injunction to construct our own political behaviour. It is also appropriate that we are denied Offred's "real" name and any firm interpretation of her "character." We cannot easily domesticate this tale, and the restoration of the self-consistent subject, the "real" woman, would be too comforting. Instead we are left with the continuing struggle to listen to the conflictual conversations, both internal and social, and to construct the "I" among the "one and one and one and one" as model for a more communicative and democratic form of life.

NOTES

1. Interview in Lucy Freibert, "Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood,* ed. Judith McCombs (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989) 281–91.
2. While at the University of Victoria (where I teach) we always have at least a small group of men in our classes, I shall refer in this essay to the student as "she" for the following reason: in a Women's Studies class, the men, too, need to learn to read as gendered subjects which, in an overwhelmingly female environment, gathered for the purpose of examining women's experience in a patriarchal society, requires that they at least attempt to read from the subject positions of women. In my experience, they come to the course because they wish to attempt this; some of them do it very well.
3. Moira Monteith. "Too Personal a Response? Women's Collaborative Reading," *Teaching Women: Feminist and English Studies,* eds. Ann Thompson and Helen Wilcox (New York: Manchester UP, 1989) 50.
4. Judith Fetterling. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978) xxii.
5. Barbara Godard. "Becoming My Hero, Becoming Myself: Notes Towards a Feminist Theory of Reading," *Language in Her Eye: Views on Writing and Gender by Canadian Women Writing in English,* eds. Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel (Toronto: Coach House, 1990) 115.
6. Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, quoting Minnie Bruce Pratt in "Feminist Politics: What's Home Gotto do with It?" *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies,* ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986) 197.
7. Margaret Atwood. "If You Can't Say Anything Nice, Don't Say Anything at All," eds. Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel (Toronto: Coach House, 1990) 21.
8. Godard in Scheier, Sheard and Wachtel, 120–21.
9. *The Globe and Mail,* Tuesday, July 18, 1989, 1; *Times-Colonist,* Tuesday, July 18, 1989, 1. Two days later, the continuing story still figured on the *Globe*'s front page, but had been buried on page 9 of the *Colonist.*
10. Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985) 49. All further citations noted parenthetically in text.
11. Although Atwood refuses us the name in the novel and allows Harold Pinter to name her Kate in his screenplay, in every class some student will suggest that the name is "June," as this is the only name unaccounted for in the list of "residents" at the Red Centre (14). This redolent possibility opens up a number of questions about fruitfulness, the erotic, and Atwood's reasons for denying us the name.
12. See Linda Hutcheon's treatment of this point and of Atwood's postmodernism in *The Canadian Postmodern* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988) 17–18, 138–59.
13. In one of the many ways the film version protects its American audience from too much reality, Harold Pinter had the chaplain claim that it was only the *Old* Testament that served as basis for the Gileadean constitution. Anti-Semitism is less dangerous than taking on fundamentalist Christianity.
14. For an examination of a contemporary Canadian version of this ideology, students read Margrit Eichler, "The Pro-Family Movement: Are They for or Against Families?" (Ottawa: CRIAW/ICREF, 1985).
15. Atwood's analysis of racism is subtle but important; students, initially stunned by the horror of reproductive slavery in handmaidery, may need to be prompted to notice that Cora is a black woman (dialect markers), and the brown-armed Rita probably an Hispanic-American (19–20).
16. Students are assigned discussions of reproductive technologies: Angela Davis's "Racism, Birth Control and Reproductive Rights," *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981) 202–221; Sunera Thobani, "More Than Sexism," *Kinesis,* November 1990; *Our Babies, Our Bodies: Women Look at the New Reproductive Technologies,* eds. Working Group on RT's (Ottawa: CRIAW/ICREF, 1989).
17. The actual words were these: "Where is God? God is everywhere. If God is everywhere, why can't we see Him? Because He is a pure spirit who cannot be seen with human eyes. Does God see us? God sees us and watches

over us. Does God know all things? God knows all things, our words, our actions, even our most secret thoughts." We were expected to memorize and to recite these questions and answers. (Quoted from the *Baltimore Catechism*, translated from *Catéchisme de la doctrine chrétienne* [New York: Benziger Brothers, 1886].)

18. I tell my class that God's eye also appears on the official coat-of-arms of the city of Victoria along with the "twin angels represent[ing] colonization and civilization." The "all-seeing eye suggests a constant dependence on God..." according to the explanation. Given the history of Native-white relations in our locality (and country), this coat-of-arms is not without political consequence — a point worth making lest one's students begin to indulge too quickly in smug anti-Americanism.
19. Michelle Perrot, quoted in "The Eye of Power," 155.
20. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12.2 (Winter 1987) 207-221.
21. Audre Lorde. "Uses of the Erotic," *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984) 58.