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Lire Margaret Atwood

Body/Language in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Reading Notes

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Full text

1 One of the most striking facets of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is how *interior* a book it is : throughout,

the silence enforced by Gilead's institutional misogyny masks Offred's eloquent sensitivity to the powers and limitations of language and narrative, and to the messages carried by other characters' gestures. The lack of dialogue, at least in the dystopian present tense of the novel, is one way the book explores the suppression of women's voices and the relationship between communication and community – the two greatest threats to Gilead's enforced order. Broadly speaking, the novel's treatment of discourse, politics, and community frame several related issues I wish to examine here : First, there is the capacity of "semaphore" – systems of signalling across distances (symbolic or otherwise) – and body language to suggest both the restrictive policies of Gilead *and* to provide moments of liberation. Also, there are the ways in which Gilead's patriarchal definition of the female body determines the politics of body language and problematizes women's bodies as sites of articulation and speaking subjects. Finally, I want to consider the relationship between identity and acts of language – specifically composition and revision – and, by extension, the function of Gileadean discourse to reduce identity to a set of roles or masks.

2 Like any totalitarian system or any fundamentalist philosophy, Gilead's authority, its attraction, and its injustice derive from a radical simplification of social possibility and human truth. For the subjects of Gilead, all answers are provided and unquestionable ; theirs is the luxury of not having to think, to explore alternatives, and theirs is the sacrifice of not speaking, not voicing contradictory perspectives and possibilities. In dialogue is the potential to build communities based on shared experience – pain, celebration, commiseration, complaint, empathy and hope – and in the written word is the ability to order, to narrate, to gesture toward truth, and – in another kind of dialogue – to ask for the faith of readers. For women, who comprise the most dispossessed of Gilead's subjects, these powers are strictly prohibited ; Gilead's rules of discourse, like the uniforms that reduce women to various functions and roles, exist to cancel out the possibilities of true exchange. Not even Gilead's most advantaged women,

the Wives, are exempt from this linguistic restriction. Writing of her own assigned Wife, Offred observes the contrast between the woman's present role and her life as Serena Joy, a once famous television evangelist who used her own career to endorse a return to traditional women's roles : "She doesn't make speeches any more. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (56). This brief passage demonstrates the pointed ironies of Atwood's prose throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*. Here and elsewhere, Offred plays with words to describe the suppression of language, and in Gilead, playing with words – on the page or the illicit Scrabble board – is a dangerous act of trespass. The fact that Serena makes no more public speeches becomes "speechless"-ness ; the fact that her life at home, the woman's life she formerly advocated, does not "agree" with her suggests the irrelevance of "agreement" in Gilead, and thus the impossibility of dialogue. The final irony is that Serena's dispossession of voice, of the power of words she can no longer use, is the result of having been "taken at her word". For the women of Gilead, Wives and Handmaids alike, "Pen is envy" (196), a Freudian pun that signals both the women's dispossession of the power of the Word and the connection of this injustice to the politics of sex.

3 For Offred, the most immediate effects of voicelessness within her determined role are isolation and loneliness. At one point, when she addresses her unknowable and maybe impossible reader, she notes the extent to which the lack of exchange is undermining her sense of identity :

> I feel very unreal, talking to you like this. I feel as if I'm talking to a wall. I wish
> You'd answer. I feel so alone.
> All alone by the telephone. Except I can't use the telephone. And if I could, who could I call ?
> Oh God. It's no joke. Oh God oh God. How can I keep on living ? (205)

4 To maintain the stability of self, the first person singular of her own narrative, Offred needs faith – the word mysteriously inscribed upon the pillow in her room – faith in

the second person of a distant reader ; as she says later in the story, “I tell, therefore you are” (268). In the postmodern exchange of this novel, the very existence of readers and writers is a cooperative and communal project.

5 But there are other moments of genuine exchange at work in Offred’s story, and while not all of them are between narrator and audience, most of the connections that Offred makes with others are qualified by risk, transgression, and distance. Even when the distances are not physical, the often-physical forms of punishment exacted by Gilead render direct discourse almost impossible, even when there is faith shared among the speakers. When Offred goes on her daily trip for food, she can speak to Ofglen, her peer and escort, only in a stilted idiom of dogmatic phrases : “Under His eye”, “May the Lord open”, “Blessed be the fruit”, “Praise be”. After one of their visits to the wall where the bodies of Gilead’s “criminals” are displayed, Offred comments on the metaphorical walls that restrict the possibilities of dialogue : “After this ritual viewing we continue on our way, heading as usual for some open place we can cross, so we can talk. If you can call it talking, these clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of our white wings. It’s more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech” (211). To converse as best they can, the Handmaid’s search for an “open place”, an act of crossing which signals the transgressive nature of their communication in a society closed to dialogue and, as the bodies on the wall remind us, a society not to be “crossed”. But even in moments of greatest freedom and openness, the walls of Gilead reduce dialogue to “amputated speech” and “verbal semaphore” : a language of danger and distance.

6 In spite of the risks, Offred is fascinated by the possibilities of dialogue, connection, and even argument throughout her narrative – and by the relief from Gilead’s absolutes offered in these moments of partial exchange. Indeed, exchange in many forms entices Offred : she is delighted to see evidence of the black market in the Commander’s house because it shows there is “always something that can be exchanged” (24) ; she is impatient to work out the “terms of exchange” that will define her illicit, Scrabble-playing relationship with

the Commander (163). On one of the rare occasions she is given the opportunity to watch television, she observes that she is “ravenous for news, any kind of news ; even if it’s false news, it must mean something” (29). Before she begins to tell the story of Moira’s escape from the Red Center, she explains how she heard the story as it passed along a kind of grape-vine, and she takes some solace in the kind of exchange necessary to participate in a shared story : “This is something you can depend on”, she tells us : “there will always be allegiances, of one kind or another” (139). Later, she imagines having Luke with her so that she could fight with him ; she wants to argue about “whose turn it is to sort the laundry, clean the toilet ; something daily and unimportant in the big scheme of things”, she tells us ; “We could even fight about that, about *unimportant, important*. What a luxury it would be” (210). Offred scripts fights in her head, luxuriating in the memory of having been able to participate in the dialogic establishment of priorities.

7 Outside of her head, in the difficult context of Gilead, exchange is possible almost exclusively through different kinds of semaphore, which themselves suggest a great deal about the kinds of communication and community Offred desires, and about the political realities that qualify and compromise these relative intimacies. In the early days at the Red Center, the Handmaids-in-training learn to communicate through their imposed silence :

> We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren’t looking, and touch each other’s hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other’s mouths. In this way, we exchanged names, from bed to bed… (14)

8 Without the “open space” for which Offred and Ofglen later search, conversation – such as it is – must be “turned sideways”. “stretch[ed] out”, “without sound”, “across space”. Here as elsewhere in the novel, Offred desires contact with other women, a sense of community that Gilead necessarily forbids. When the Commander takes her to Jezebel’s, for instance, Offred privately admits “What I’d really like to do is talk with the women”, but even here she

recognizes that there is “scant chance of that” (249). When Cora has to lie about spilling Offred’s breakfast on the floor, Offred is joyful at the conspiratorial partnership : “It pleased me”, she tells us, “that [Cora] was willing to lie for me, even in such a small thing, even for her own advantage. It was a link between us” (160). Offred suggests the necessity of such links to the women around her throughout the narrative, as in one scene where she imagines staying in the kitchen to talk with Cora and Rita, a possibility denied by her station :

> we would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get up to. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other’s voices, signalling that yes, we know all about it… *I know what you mean*, we’d say. Or, a quaint expression you sometimes hear, still, from older people : *I bear where you’re coming from*, as if the voice itself were a traveller, arriving from a distant place. Which it would be, which it is.
> How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts. (20-21)

9 Here, the women’s bodies are themselves the subjects of conversation and the basis for an intimate (and imaginary) exploration of shared experience, of community, but even here – perhaps because of Offred’s Gileadean experience and perhaps because of the novel’s sensitivity to the limitations of even the closest dialogue – the description of intimacy breaks down into images of semaphore : nods used as “signalling” gestures, and voices as travellers from afar. In any case, such a community of women is censured in Gilead ; Marthas and Handmaids are not permitted to “fraternize” – a word, which as Offred points out, signals the patriarchal biases of the language itself : “*Fraternize* means *to behave like a brother*. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant *to behave like a sister*. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin…. I used to tease him about being pedantic” (21). The word *pedantic*, which comes from a Greek word meaning *boy*, strengthens the text’s suggestion that the gender politics of Gilead find an antecedent in language and its inherent distribution of linguistic power ; language itself functions to

determine expectations about who speaks, who listens, who teaches, who gets taught, whose communities are of value. In English there is no verb for participation in a community of sisterhood ; in Gilead this linguistic absence (and the priorities it implies) is writ large in the institutional silences that segregate women.

10 Throughout the novel, the divisions between the powers of men's and of women's language are accentuated, as in one passage where Offred considers the grammatical distinction between *lie* and *lay* : "Lay is always passive", she tells us ; "Even men used to say, I'd like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I'd like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don't really know what men used to say. I had only their words for it" (47). In a field of possibility defined by *active* and *passive*, Offred's perspective on the discourse shared and unshared by women and men (even in the time *before* Gilead) reveals a gender-based community to whose language Offred has only limited access. She has to speculate about how men verbally constructed their sexual and political relationships to women because she "only had their words for it" : a *double entendre* that suggests both the function of one's "word" as a pledge of (dubious) truth and the extent to which Offred's own language is coloured by the pervasive gender politics inherent in her so-called "mother tongue". At other points, Atwood explores the possibility of co-opting or adopting language associated with male discourse as a gesture of women's resistance. The enigmatic inscription *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* that Offred finds hidden in the shadows of her cupboard, for instance, acts as a source of joy and strength, even before she knows its meaning :

> It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman.... It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me. Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy. When I imagine the woman who wrote them, I think of her as about my age, maybe a little younger..... Freckles, I think ; irreverent, resourceful. (62)

11 (Interestingly, when Offred carefully questions Rita about her mysterious precursor, Offred specifies her as “The lively one”, “The one with freckles” (63), and apparently gets the description right, suggesting the sensitivity and “accuracy” with which she has read this piece of semaphore, this metaphoric message in a bottle.) Later, Offred discovers the source and meaning of these words, during one of her secret encounters with the Commander ; when she questions him about the phrase, he opens a book for her to look at :

> What I first see is a picture : the Venus de Milo, in a black-and-white photo, with a moustache and a black brassiere and armpit hair clumsily drawn on her.... “There”, he says, pointing, and in the margin I see it, written in the same ink as the hair on the Venus. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum...*
>
> I force a smile, but it’s all before me now. I can see why she wrote that, on the wall of the cupboard, but I also see that she must have learned it, here, in this room. Where else ? She was never a schoolboy. With him, during some previous period of boyhood reminiscence, of confidences exchanged. I have not been the first then. To enter his silence, play children’s word games with him. (196-97)

12 In the same ink as the scrawled defacement of a famous (and man-made) image of idealized femininity, is another discovery of “boyish” etymology : a Latin phrase that is transformed by the Commander’s earlier Handmaid from a schoolboy’s jest into a potent gesture of connection between women, a transgressive “taboo message” of shared exploitation and resistance : *Don’t let the bastards grind you down.*

13 Generally speaking, the gender politics of discourse are further signified by the role of the body itself as the medium of other kinds of semaphore. In a context where speech is largely forbidden, Offred’s account is filled with images of bodies – men’s and women’s – as semantic transmitters, although often the messages they send are partial, difficult to “read”, and bound by gender-based poses which themselves suggest a kind of political “grammar” used to uphold the status quo. When she observes the “vastly pregnant” body of another Handmaid at the market, Offred notes that “She’s a

flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done : we too can be saved" (36). Later, interestingly, this same metaphoric (and semaphoric) image is used in a very different way, when Offred considers the insurgent force of obscenity, or "bawdy" language :

> There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There's something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. It's like a spell, of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with. In the paint of the washroom cubicle someone unknown had scratched : *Aunt Lydia sucks*. It was like a flag waved from a hilltop in rebellion. (234)

14 In juxtaposition, these images of flags on hilltops denote two very different possibilities for personal and collective salvation : acquiescence to the codes and expectations of Gilead's discourse in the first instance, rebellion against it in the second. It is significant, also, that some of Offred's most meaningful dialogues take place in the washroom, with her friend Moira, through a peephole in the wall ; here, what would usually provide only an avenue to voyeurism functions as a conduit for intimate (and sometimes "bawdy") communication, for a small rebellion and a momentary relief from the isolation imposed upon them.

15 But throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, such opportunities for true connection are rare, and Offred spends much of her time attempting to interpret the body language of those around her. She is frightened and unable to respond when Nick first winks at her (28), for she is unable to read the gesture's intent ; later, after the two have shared a secret embrace in Serena's sitting room and after Nick's role as the Commander's signalling device has been clarified, she continues to regard him as an object of desire and suspicion : "I haven't spoken to him since that one night, dreamscape in the moon-filled sitting room. He's only my flag, my semaphore. Body language… Right now his cap's on sideways. Therefore I am sent for…. What does he get for it, his role as page boy ?" (190-91). In a metatextual pun, Nick becomes a "page" that is still difficult to read, even if his significance as "semaphore" – the meaning of his sideways

cap – is clear. Similarly, Offred is unable to interpret the moment she discovers the Commander upstairs, lurking outside her room ; when he leaves without speaking she tells us “Something has been shown to me, but what is it ? Like the flag of an unknown country, seen for an instant above a curve of hill, it could mean attack, it could mean parley, it could mean the edge of something, a territory. The signals animals give one another : lowered eyelids, ears laid back, raised hackles” (59). The Commander’s illicit presence is both semaphore and body language, and Offred’s imagery suggests both her inability to understand this message from an “unknown country” and her sense of its implicit invasion, risk, and antagonism. Later, Offred notes that the Commander’s body language is composed of a vocabulary of self-conscious affectations :

> The Commander is standing in front of the fireless fireplace, back to it, one elbow on the carved wooden overmantel, other hand in his pocket. It’s such a studied pose, something of the country squire, some old come-on from a glossy men’s mag. He probably decided ahead of time that he’d be standing like that when I came in. When I knocked he probably rushed over to the fireplace and propped himself up. (147)

16 The Commander’s studied informality is artifice, not to be trusted. But Offred is not taken in by the Commander’s attempts to “act natural” ; indeed, she sees his every move as a kind of self-conscious semaphore, a role being played for manipulative ends. When the Commander announces his desire to play Scrabble, he looks calculatedly *sheepish*, “the way men used to look once. He’s old enough to remember how to look that way, and to remember how appealing women once found it. The young ones don’t know those tricks” (148). Later, at Jezebel’s the Commander signals his sexual impatience with “a stagy *ahem*” (266) while Offred is in the bathroom. Ultimately, Offred’s encounters with him are defined not by genuine conversation, but by word games and “a repertoire of gestures” (194), spectatorship and performance. Likewise, Offred is at first suspicious of Ofglen, in part because she can not read the other woman’s body ; when Ofglen bows her head in front of the church on

one of their shopping trips, Offred admits “I think of her as a woman for whom every act is done for show, is acting rather than a real act. She does such things to look good, I think. She’s out to make the best of it.... But that is what I must look like to her, as well. How can it be otherwise ?” (41). Significantly, Gilead works to suppress body language as well as speech ; in a context where women are not able to form communities, Offred does not know whom she can trust, and the white “wings” of the Handmaids’ hood make it difficult to read facial expressions, and to see who else may be watching. The semantic difficulty of discriminating “acting” from a “real act” illustrates the ways in which the political context of Gilead constrains “real” action and forces its subjects into static roles to be played.

17 Body language is, then, a slippery signifier : at times, a sort of disguise worn “for show”, to protect its user behind a series of personae and to thus *create* rather than close distances. Even, for instance, when Offred eventually begins to develop a personal relationship with Nick, and direct dialogue becomes possible, the two banter back and forth, “quoting lines from late movies, from the time before” :

> Possibly nobody ever talked like that in real life, it was all a fabrication from the beginning. Still, it’s amazing how easily it comes back to mind, this corny and falsely gay sexual banter. I can see now what it’s for, what it was always for : to keep the core of yourself out of reach, enclosed, protected.
> I’m sad now, the way we’re talking is infinitely sad : faded music, faded paper flowers, worn satin, an echo of an echo. (274)

18 Here, certain kinds of scripted gestures and play-acting are used to maintain distance and to evade the Gilead-specific and general emotional hazards of true intimacy.

19 For Offred, moreover, body language is always problematized by ways in which the dominant discourse of Gilead constructs women as objects and “natural resources”. The expressive purposes to which she can put her own body are already constrained by the misogynist definitions of the female body underlying Gilead’s social order. In Gilead – as in the society it satirizes – Offred can exercise the power of her body’s “language” only in an indirect acknowledgement

of her subjugated position in a field of political disparity. Early in the novel, for instance, Offred talks about her desire for contact with the male Angels who patrol the Red Center : “If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade-off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy” (14). Here, the body is imagined as an object to be traded ; significantly, this passage is immediately followed by the previously quoted description of how the women exchanged names through lip-reading, and the contrast of these two images of exchange suggests how the political imbalances between men and women make contact between them especially difficult. Further on, when Offred and Ofglen pass through a check-point, Offred shares momentary eye-contact with one of the young Guardians : “It’s an event, a small defiance of rule”, she tells us ; “Such moments are possibilities, tiny peepholes” (31). The image of the peephole suggests the intimacy of her earlier conversations with Moira, but in fact, the potential for such common ground is absent here. After imaginatively toying with the possibility of sexual contact with the young man, Offred walks away, moving her hips a little and realizing that hers is the “power of a dog bone, passive but there” (32).

20 Not surprisingly, then, the role of the female body in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is, at least in the manifestation of Gilead’s social vision, one of limitation, reduction and confinement. (We should not forget, of course, the sexist pun – “tail” for “tale” – inscribed by the male historians in the title, either.) Offred avoids looking down at her body in the bathtub, not wanting to see a nakedness that has become “strange” to her, not wanting to view “something that determines [her] so completely” (72-73). In the institutional vocabulary of Gilead, Offred’s body speaks for her, articulating only the most limited field of possibility, through the crimson symbolism of her Handmaid’s habit :

> We are for breeding purposes : we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary : everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts ; no special

> favours are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no toeholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that's all : sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices. (146)

21 The penalty for contradicting this definition – this reduction of identity to a single physical possibility – is "reclassification" ; if caught alone with the Commander, Offred tells us, "I could become an Unwoman" (146). Categories and classifications define Gileadean discourse and social roles like parts of speech, suggesting much about the role-playing that has qualified the communication of truth throughout Offred's life as a Handmaid and in pre-Gilead North America. In Atwood's satire, these two worlds are connected and disconnected in an exploration of the power of dominant discourse to define and revise personal perspectives, and in an acknowledgement of the authority of advertising discourse and other "real-life" discourses that define the roles of women. Gileadean women's roles – Handmaid, Wife, Econowife, Martha, Aunt, Jezebel, Unwoman – hold up the distorting (and clarifying) looking glass of Atwood's feminist satire to the lives of contemporary women ; ultimately, what the costume imagery of Gilead offers is a radical compartmentalizing of the same determined roles and functions that define and delimit the lives of women in North America : shopping, cooking, cleaning, childbirth, household administration, sexual service. The striped, multi-coloured dresses of the Econowives denote a combination of functions, while the Unwomen labour camps suggest a categorical intolerance of the discourse of feminism and its call for the revision of the patriarchal sociological grammar that underlies Gilead's definitions and divisions of women's value.

22 At one point, when Offred passes through the Commander's kitchen, she is taken aback at the familiarity of a dishtowel, at its ability to connect her to the world of her past life :

> Dishtowels are the same as they always were. Sometimes these flashes of normality come at me from the side, like ambushes. The ordinary, the usual, a reminder, like a kick. I see the dishtowel, out of context, and I catch my breath. For some, in some ways, things haven't changed that much. (58)

This image – and the moment of connection it evokes – suggests much about the interplay of Gileadean discourse and values with those of Offred's past life in Atwood's satire. As a link to the past, the dishtowel signifies that what has survived the transition of the Gileadean take-over are the very ways in which women's lives were configured by domestic roles writ large in the discourse of North American society. It is no coincidence that Offred's Commander – whom the historian at the end of the novel surmises may have been one of the ideological founders of Gilead – has a background in marketing, in the rhetoric of advertising. The historian identifies Gilead's strategy of using the "familiar and reassuring" "names derived from commercial products available to women in the immediate pre-Gilead period… the names of cosmetic lines, cake mixes, frozen desserts, and even medicinal remedies" (321) to ease the transition. But in Atwood's novel, the inclusion of advertising language and imagery functions satirically to show the interplay of Gilead's dystopian discourse with that at work in the lives of real women. Think of the description of Serena Joy's name as a parody of the name of a hair care product (45), or of the doorbell that rings "like the ghost of a cosmetics woman" when the black van finally comes to collect Offred (305). These images connect the values at work in Offred's old life and those which constrain women in Gilead ; "Context is all" (154), Offred reminds us, and in the dystopian context of her present life, the values of her remembered society are terribly magnified. Indeed, Offred's life in Gilead can be seen as a dark, and often specific, reflection of her previous life. In addition to her memories of general fears about men and violence, there is the passage in which she remembers her daughter being stolen at a supermarket ; "I thought it was an isolated incident, at the time", she tells us (73). Likewise, her relationship with Luke, who was at first a married man with a pedantic interest in etymology, is ironically rendered in her role as a Handmaid and her relationship to the Commander. Even Moira's school paper on date rape and her joking idea of hosting an "underwhore party" (47-48), darkly presage her eventual condemnation to Jezebel's. As the historian rightly points out, "there [is] little that [is] truly original or

indigenous to Gilead" (319), and it is in Gilead's lack of originality, its dependence on the patriarchal objectifications of its cultural precursor, that Atwood's novel realizes its satiric power, its abiding relevance to our place and time.

24 The novel also, finally, achieves a degree of qualified hope in the kinds of transgressive discourse we have seen. Through semaphore, Offred and other subjects of Gilead's reductivist absolutes work against the constraints on their ability to engage in self-determination, declaring an emotional life and an identity unacknowledged by the costume imagery forced upon them. Reality, in all its complexity, declares itself through peepholes and moving, silent lips, in the "open" spaces and dark corners unseen by the "Eyes" of Gilead's patriarchal elite. As Offred's narrative suggests, the unsanctioned powers of language – of narrative particularly – are crucial to the development of personal identity. "I compose myself", Offred tells us as she awaits the impregnation ceremony, "as one composes a speech" (76). Composition begets composure, here and elsewhere in the novel ; and while this "composing" of self allows Offred only to survive – to hold her self together – other moments of exchange signal a profound resistance to Gilead's authority and an abiding faith in the necessity of human connection. On the most general level, the telling of her own "tale" belies the dogma of Gilead at the same time as it betrays Offred's desire to trust in the presence of her distant, unknowable audience ; her entire story is thus an eloquent extension of the mysterious inscription in her cupboard : *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.*

25 Of course, to offer us this opportunity for connection, Offred must first escape the constraints of Gilead – of her definition as a Handmaid – which she does with the help of Nick. At the end (or beginning) of Offred's narration, of her own composition of self and her search for biographical truth, the van comes to take her away, and Nick, trying to assure her that she is safe, asks her to trust him. He gives her his word, which she can take or reject. Ultimately, however, it is not Nick's word alone that saves Offred ; it is her "word" as well, her offer of "Faith" – the message that adorns her embroidered pillow. It is her faith, in Nick as in her readers,

that frees her, that liberates her at last into a field of possibility and difficulty, where she can finally compose herself, in a story that is her own.

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