

A Politics of Auto-Cannibalism:
Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

In 1986, Margaret Atwood described *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) as a tale that warns of the possible rise of totalitarianism in the United States through right-wing Christian fundamentalism.¹ Related to this claim is one of the key debates about the novel: the debate concerning the Bible's role in it. Though Atwood's description would seem to suggest that the Bible is portrayed negatively in that it enables the rise of totalitarianism, its function in the novel has been deemed to be more complex than this. According to Janet Larson, for instance, the Gilead regime's use of the Bible as a justification for the cruel oppression of the Handmaids is challenged within the novel; for Larson, Handmaid Offred's narration can be read (stylistically, rhetorically, and thematically) as a prophecy which allows for 'multiple interpretations' and thus subverts the regime's treatment 'of the Logos as totalitarian monologic'.² Dorota Filipczak also acknowledges such tensions, arguing that the regime's 'literaliz[ed] misreading [...] of the Bible' is a clear attempt to 'suppre[ss] the unbounded potential of the text' and, as such, raises our attention to this unbounded interpretative potential.³ In short, critics have suggested that the Bible features as a tool for *suppression* in *The Handmaid's Tale* whilst also pointing out its function as a tool for *subversion*, thus revealing its complex role in the novel.

The present essay seeks to re-open this debate, shifting its focus and contributing to it in two interrelated ways. Firstly, whilst the general link between Gilead's theocracy and its totalitarianism has been engaged with, a specific parallel between Gilead and Nazi Germany set up in the text remains underexplored in terms of its correlation with the novel's biblical allusions. Here, I attend to this specific parallel in these terms, flagging up – and this is my second contribution – what I read as a biblical intertext that still remains unexamined today, thirty years after the novel's publication: the story of the sacrificial lamb of the Passover

(Exodus 12: 1-14). The Passover sacrifice and Atwood's novel, I will argue, present us with a figurative self-consumption which points to a politics of 'auto-cannibalism' – a politics that illuminates the parallel between Gilead and Nazi Germany. The concept of auto-cannibalism designates a form of consumption *from* 'within' and *of* what is 'within'.⁴ As we will see, a close inspection of the diet of the Handmaids suggests that they are eating their 'within'; we will, moreover, see that the description of the Passover sacrifice in the book of Exodus suggests that the sacrificial lamb is a host body that is eaten from 'within'; and, of course, the Nazi rhetoric of hosts and parasites is meant to suggest that the 'Aryan state' is eaten up by the 'Jew within'. These connections invite an association between the Jewish people under Nazism and the Handmaids in Atwood's novel – an association which some critics, including Karen Stein, have indeed pointed out, albeit without attending to the significance of the metaphor of auto-cannibalism. It is, however, only by doing so that we can begin fleshing out the implications of the parallel between Gilead and Nazi Germany; it is the metaphor of auto-cannibalism which weaves the Passover sacrifice into this web of connections, and it is precisely this link with a biblical sacrifice that will reveal the deep moral ambivalence of the Gilead-Nazi Germany parallel.

The most explicit biblical reference in *The Handmaid's Tale* is, of course, to the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Bilhah (Genesis 30). As the extract from this story in one of the novel's epigraphs shows (Genesis 30: 1-3), Atwood is quoting from the King James Bible which will therefore be used throughout this analysis. The epigraph in question not only enables us to identify the specific version of the Bible that Atwood is quoting from but also suggests that the novel deals with this story through a *Christian* lens, something which will be reflected in my Christian exegesis of the Passover sacrifice, a sacrifice that is particularly resonant in Christianity as its reconfiguration through the sacrifice of Jesus – or, as St. Paul tellingly refers to him, 'our paschal lamb' (1 Corinthians 5: 7) – suggests.⁵

That it is the story from Genesis 30 which constitutes the novel's most explicit biblical reference is suggested not only in the epigraph but is also clear in the main text, where it features as the basis on which the Gilead regime classifies its inhabitants: middle-aged men, the 'Commanders', officially assume the role of Jacob whilst their wives, simply labelled 'Wives', are the Rachels of Atwood's Gilead, and fertile unmarried women, the 'Handmaids', are given the role of Bilhah. This is the regime's way of tackling, supposedly in accordance with God's will, the low birth-rate problem that plagues the country. A woman's God-given role, the state holds, is to bear children: 'she shall be saved by childbearing', one of the Commanders says, quoting St. Paul (1 Timothy 2: 15).⁶

The classification of the Gileadeans thus renders the regime's theocratic totalitarianism obvious. What it does not render obvious is that Gilead is also associated with two specific historical manifestations of totalitarianism: (Stalinist) communism and Nazism. Associations with communism are drawn through the fact that the Handmaids wear *red* uniforms, that their function is specifically to (go into) *labour*, and that they are indoctrinated at what is known as the 'Red Centre', where they repeatedly recite the sentence '*From each [...] according to her ability; to each according to his needs*' (p. 127), which, they are told, comes from the Bible but is in fact an altered version of a sentence taken from Marx.⁷ Through this ironic link between the *theocratic* Gilead and *nonreligious* totalitarian communism (specifically Stalinism, as we will see), Atwood seems to be suggesting that the horrors of Gilead do not necessarily or exclusively emanate from its interpretation of the Bible; what is more important, it is implied, is what is presented *as* the Bible, even if it is not. Indeed, the fact that Gilead is also associated with Nazi Germany suggests that the extent of its atrocities is such that Atwood's fictional regime can be paralleled to two of the most atrocious regimes of the twentieth century, whether religious or strictly nonreligious. As we will see, both of these historical associations are linked with the question of sacrifice in the

novel but in the latter – the association with Nazism, on which we will be focusing – sacrifice does have a strong religious dimension: it invites a connection with the sacrifice of the Passover and the auto-cannibalistic consumption it presents us with, a connection that will help us draw out the moral ambivalence which pervades the novel.

Links between Gilead's theocracy and Nazi Germany have already been drawn, albeit without much elaboration. Larson, for example, speaks, in passing, of Gilead as a 'Christofascist utopia',⁸ and – again in passing – makes reference to the portrayal of the 'nazification of the United States' in *The Handmaid's Tale*.⁹ Filipczak, on the other hand, gives a more specific example: the 'pseudo-religious aspects' of 'the fertility cult [...] in *The Handmaid's Tale*', she writes, 'are strongly reminiscent of Lebensborn in Nazi Germany'.¹⁰ In this essay I will delve a bit deeper, identifying a more fundamental link between Nazi Germany and Gilead – one that is not confined to the subject of the exploitation of women. This is a link between the auto-cannibalism underpinning the operations of Nazi Germany (discernible in Slavoj Žižek's comments on the construction of the Nazi subject) and the auto-cannibalism underpinning the operations of Gilead. Notably, Karen Stein has also sought to describe the politics of Gilead through an alimentary metaphor without, however, linking this metaphor to the novel's biblical allusions. There is, Stein argues, a figurative *cannibalism* at work in Gilead, and this cannibalism, she asserts, underpins the political operations of the Gilead regime and of Nazi Germany alike: just as the Jewish people were figuratively consumed in the concentration camp ovens, Stein maintains, so are the Handmaids in Gilead, their 'consumption' aiming to create 'a better life' for the 'ruling class'.¹¹ As already mentioned, however, we will here see that the operation of the Gilead regime is in fact underpinned by a figuratively *auto-cannibalistic* consumption and that it is this kind of consumption that enables an investigation of the Gilead-Nazi Germany analogy which attends to its ambivalent

implications, implications that come to the fore through the novel's implicit evocation of the Passover sacrifice.

Eating, Sacrifice, and Politics

Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and the story of the Passover are survival narratives with political significance; both are preoccupied with the question of sacrifice; and both present us with an auto-cannibalistic type of consumption. Before determining how exactly the interrelation between politics, sacrifice, and self-eating is played out in these two narratives, it is instructive to first examine its appearance in Atwood's much-cited definition of politics.¹² In her address on Amnesty International, published in a 1982 collection of essays, Atwood associates politics with the act of eating the other (rather than self-eating), and implicitly with the question of sacrifice. 'By "politics"', Atwood says, 'I mean who is entitled to do what to whom, with impunity; who profits by it; and who therefore eats what'.¹³ Politics is thus presented as a metonymy of eating, and vice versa: the one in power figuratively consumes the one who lacks, or has less, power – *without being punished* ('with impunity'). Jacques Derrida also associates eating with politics, similarly suggesting that they both entail violence which is non-punishable. For Derrida, this reveals what he refers to as a 'sacrificial structure';¹⁴ eating, he observes, involves killing 'the living', that is, animals and plants, and given that one must eat it follows that one's life necessarily depends upon the death of another. Eating thus draws our attention to the fact that there is 'a place left open', as Derrida phrases it, for 'a noncriminal putting to death'.¹⁵ The term 'sacrificial structure', then, expresses the non-punishable exercise of violence which is involved in eating and which, for Derrida and Atwood alike, characterises politics in general. Atwood's 1982 definition, however, does not explicitly mention sacrifice – and this is the main point here. As we will see, this absence points to an understanding of sacrifice as an *evaluative* rather than

descriptive term, something which is crucial for our investigation of the morally ambiguous Gilead-Nazi Germany analogy in *The Handmaid's Tale*.¹⁶

Note that sacrifice works as a *positive* evaluation in the following extract from Atwood's early novel *Surfacing* (1972), where the protagonist calls for an acknowledgement that,

animals die that we may live [...]. [W]e eat them, out of cans or otherwise; we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life. Canned Spam, Canned Jesus, even the plants must be Christ. But we refuse to worship [...] the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks.¹⁷

For Atwood's heroine, then, what is eaten – be it animal or plant – is Christ. She thus views eating as an act of sacrificial violence, which she presents as both necessary and necessarily unjust: necessary because one must eat in order to live and necessarily unjust because the life that eating grants to one depends upon the death of another.¹⁸ Precisely because she sees eating as *necessarily* unjust she does not seem to be criticising its injustice, for to do so would be to imply that eating itself could be done away with.¹⁹ Rather, what she finds objectionable is the failure to acknowledge the killing that eating involves as a case of *sacrificial* violence and thus the failure to see what is eaten as sacred. (Etymologically, to 'sacrifice', from *sacer* and *facere*, is to 'make sacred'). With this in mind, the absence of explicit reference to the question of sacrifice from Atwood's definition of politics can be read as a critique of the fact that the exercise of political power – which the analogy with the act of eating presents as something that is necessary – rests on violent acts which are *not* acknowledged as sacrificial.²⁰ The implication of this critique would be that (supposedly necessary) violent acts are not ethically condemnable if they *are* acknowledged as sacrificial, which, in turn, implies that sacrifice evaluates rather than describes an event – and it does so positively.

It is precisely its positive connotations, however, that make sacrifice politically dangerous. As we will see in more detail later, Giorgio Agamben makes this point in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999) where he argues that the labelling of an act of violence as

sacrificial amounts to justifying it as necessary or useful for the fulfilment of a sacred and thus ‘superior’ goal.²¹ Such transpositions to a ‘superior’ realm, Agamben warns, enable the deflection of responsibility from a realm in which one can be held accountable. In light of this, if, according to the reading above, Atwood’s definition of politics implicitly criticises the failure to view the exercise of political power as a case of *sacrificing* the other then such a critique entails a failure to recognise the potential dangers of employing this (ultimately evaluative) term in reference to politics.

The Handmaid’s Tale confronts us with a materialisation of such dangers, and thus with a rather different approach to the question of sacrifice. Indeed, the Gilead regime openly claims that its operation depends on sacrifice (pp. 127, 230, 232): the Handmaids are told that they must sacrifice themselves for the ‘common good’ (p. 232), ‘sacrifice’ here being shorthand for the deprivation of their freedom. Precisely because the regime presents this as a matter of sacrifice it is able to not only justify its oppressive rule (by feigning that it is necessary for the superior end of the nation’s ‘salvation’) but to also claim praise for it – they have made ‘things better’, one of the Commanders says (p. 222). In this respect, if Atwood’s 1982 definition of politics implicitly criticises the failure to associate politics with sacrifice, her 1985 novel comes to criticise such associations.

Also, we have seen that Atwood’s definition presents politics as a figurative cannibalization of those who lack power by those in power but *The Handmaid’s Tale* presents us with a scenario in which the politics of the Gilead regime is underpinned by a figuratively *auto-cannibalistic* consumption, the emphasis thus being on the self (with ‘auto’ deriving from the Greek *εαυτός*, ‘self’). This consumption of the self by the self ties in with the type of sacrifice that the Handmaids are asked to make – namely, self-sacrifice. They are supposed to have been given a choice, and in choosing to become Handmaids rather than going to the Colonies to clear up nuclear waste, which was the alternative, have supposedly chosen to

sacrifice themselves. In providing them with these two dire options, the regime effectively puts them in a position in which they act both as those who are sacrificed and as those who make the sacrifice, something which is, as we will move on to see, reflected in their auto-cannibalistic consumption where the eaten is also the eater.

Eat Thyself

Crucially, the diet imposed on the Handmaids mainly consists of eggs, chicken, milk, bread, and canned pears – foodstuffs which, as Stein observes, and as will be shown in more detail shortly, function as ‘analogues for their bodies’.²² This clearly suggests an *auto-cannibalistic* consumption but when Stein engages with the operations of the Gilead regime from an alimentary perspective she simplifies the situation by positing the politics of Gilead as a politics of cannibalism, according to which the Handmaids are figuratively cannibalized by the Commanders. Stein’s account of political figurative cannibalization, then, serves to express the exploitation of those who lack power by those in power, which Gilead justifies through appeals to sacrifice and, indeed, the necessity of eating: ‘You can’t make an omelette without breaking the eggs’, the Commander tells Handmaid Offred, the protagonist (p. 222). In order to ensure the nation’s survival, the Commander is saying, sacrifices must be made; the nation-sustaining ‘omelette’ can only be made by breaking the ‘eggs’. There is, however, more to it than this: the regime does not merely render the Handmaids ‘eggs which are broken and consumed [by the patriarchal ruling class] to create a better life’ for the latter, as Stein argues,²³ but, further, seeks to convince the Handmaids that this is also for their ‘own good’ (pp. 93, 124).

Indeed, the diet imposed on the Handmaids creates the impression that they too partake, as it were, in the ‘omelette’ that they are ‘broken’ to make. Observe how every morning the Handmaids are served eggs for breakfast, and on one such morning Offred

makes the association explicit: looking at the eggcup, she thinks of it as ‘a woman’s torso in a skirt’ under which one of the eggs is ‘being kept warm’ (p. 120). The hen’s egg that Offred is eating is thus conflated with a human ovary, which is precisely what she is thought to be in Gilead; as she says, the Handmaids are treated as ‘two-legged wombs’ (p. 146) with ‘viable ovaries’ (p. 153). Here, then, what is offered as a foodstuff is identified with its consumer, an identification that is sustained and extended in the scene that immediately follows. While Offred is eating her egg-ovary, she is called to attend a ceremony during which another Handmaid gives birth. As per standard Gileadean procedure, this birth occurs on a special chair with two seats: one for the Wife and the other for the Handmaid, the former sitting up and behind the latter. This seating arrangement, Glenn Deer observes, reflects the image of the eggcup in the breakfast scene, with one egg ‘sitting’ on top of the other.²⁴ This eggcup-resembling chair thus associates the women who are sat on it with the (edible) eggs of the previous scene. There is, moreover, an additional association with the (also edible) animal that lays the eggs, namely, the chicken – another staple in a Handmaid’s diet – for this is the setting in which the Handmaid gives birth or, in Deer’s words, ‘lays her egg’.²⁵ The Handmaids, then, are figuratively edible and, moreover, self-eating. The point is further reinforced by the Handmaids’ intake of canned pears, Gilead’s dessert, which is associated with another body part, the womb. Tellingly, when Offred talks about her womb she does not name this organ but, rather, refers to it as ‘a central object, [with] the shape of a pear’ (p. 84). The regime, we recall, treats the Handmaids as ‘two-legged wombs’ (p. 146), and in serving them this womb-shaped dessert it puts them in a position in which they are figuratively eating themselves.

It seems, then, that one of the fundamental yet unspoken commandments of the theocratic Gilead for the Handmaids is ‘Eat Thyself’, in what is an attempt to effect an almost ritualised internalisation of the roles assigned to them. Their consumption of chicken, for

instance, features as a symbolic incorporation of their role as egg-laying animals; their daily intake of milk as an incorporation of their function as infant nurturers (p. 137); their internalisation of womb-resembling pears as an internalisation of their status as ‘two-legged wombs’ (p. 146); and their consumption of eggs of their status as ‘ovaries’ (p. 153).²⁶ This diet, then, has a dual role in the regime’s indoctrinating programme: not only do the Handmaids symbolically incorporate their roles in consuming these foodstuffs but their figurative self-consumption also creates the impression that they too gain from this. The regime aims to render the ‘ovarian’ Handmaids eggs that break themselves in the process of making a nation-sustaining omelette, an omelette in the consumption of which they are led to believe that they themselves partake, that all this is also for their ‘own good’ (pp. 93, 124).

The rhetoric of the necessity of sacrifice for the ‘common good’ (p. 232) has, of course, been employed various times in history, and particularly important here is Walter Duranty’s attempt to justify the atrocities of Stalinism by saying: ‘*You can’t make an omelette without breaking the eggs. [...] If necessary, they’ll harness the peasants to the ploughs, but I tell you they’ll get the harvest in and feed the people that matter.*’²⁷ As we have seen, one of Atwood’s Commanders attempts to justify the Gilead regime’s exploitation of the Handmaids through this same phrase (p. 222), thus implicitly aligning Gilead’s red-clad labourers with Stalin’s peasants – the eggs that had to be broken to make an omelette for ‘the people that matter’.²⁸ We have, though, also seen that the Handmaids are not just ‘eaten’ by others but are also made to engage in a figuratively auto-cannibalistic consumption which points to a situation where the breaking of the eggs makes a self-eating omelette and, as will be demonstrated, this brings Gilead closer to a different historical manifestation of totalitarianism, namely, Nazi Germany.²⁹

Biblical holocausts and the Holocaust

To begin tracing the Gilead-Nazi Germany analogy, a closer look at Gilead's desserts, the canned pears, is firstly in order. Whilst desserts are traditionally sweet and insubstantial, lacking useful nutritional value, Gilead's dessert is not simply a sweet foodstuff consumed for pleasure but is also rich in 'vitamins and minerals'; its consumption thus assists the transformation of the Handmaids into 'worthy vessels', bodies that are healthy and, therefore, suitable to carry and deliver babies (p. 75). In this respect, the canned pear is not to be seen as *just* a dessert but also as part of Gilead's 'main course' in that it aids in the fulfilment of the regime's main goal, the 'salvation' of the nation through reproduction. Its dual role as both a dessert and a main implicitly links the Gileadean canned pear with the biblical holocausts which are, in the King James Bible, described as being of a 'sweet savour' unto the Lord.³⁰ Keeping in mind the Gilead regime's attentiveness to the language of the Bible and, indeed, its tendency to take it literally, this description of the burnt sacrifices can be read as an oxymoron which suggests that the holocausts are both a 'dessert' and a 'main', as it were – 'sweet' as well as 'savoury'. Far from being a mere linguistic play, the metaphorical sweetness and savouriness of the holocausts communicates that they are simultaneously 'insubstantial' and 'substantial'; the substance of the burnt sacrificial offering is, after all, totally 'consum[ed]' and 'vaporiz[ed]' by the fire but this is in view of something substantial, something that matters: the sacrifice is made for the redemption of sin, for example, and, therefore, the salvation of the soul.³¹

The link between Gilead's canned pears and the *biblical holocausts* brings to mind Offred's observation about *the Holocaust*, an observation that is, indeed, connected with another staple foodstuff in Gilead, the daily bread. When first told that the Nazis killed the Jews in 'ovens', Offred explains that she 'got some confused notion that these deaths had taken place in kitchens' (p. 155). Because '[o]vens mean cooking and cooking comes before

eating', Offred as a child 'thought that these people had been eaten' and, as an adult, she says that 'in a way' 'they had been' (*ibid.*). This striking image of human flesh being 'cooked' in ovens is strongly reminiscent of Offred's description of the bread dough – which, she says, 'feels so much like flesh' (p. 21) – baking in the oven in Gilead, an association which sets up an analogy between the Gilead regime and Nazi Germany. It is indeed this very association, along with the Commander's declaration that one cannot 'make an omelette without breaking the eggs' (p. 222), that leads Stein to the conclusion that the Handmaids are 'dehumaniz[ed] and cannibaliz[ed]' in Gilead, that they are the eggs which 'are broken and consumed' just as the Jewish people were consumed at the Holocaust.³²

Although Stein does not explore the novel's evocations of biblical sacrifices it is through these evocations that we can grasp the importance of the Gilead-Nazi Germany analogy. As we have seen, the Gilead regime demands the sacrifice of the Handmaids, something that is also alluded to by the narrator's patronymic; as critics have observed, 'Offred' (the Handmaid *of* the Commander *Fred*) sounds very much like 'offered',³³ suggesting that she is, in Larson's words, offered as a 'blood sacrifice for the nation'.³⁴ Offred-as-offered can thus be read as Gilead's version of the sacrificial lamb, and this inevitably raises troubling questions about the association of the Handmaids' situation with the situation of the Jewish people under Nazism. This association implies an inappropriate construction of the latter as *sacrificial* victims, a construction that is, as many have observed, already present in the very word 'Holocaust' and its evocation of the biblical holocausts.³⁵ As Agamben writes in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, to use the term 'Holocaust' is 'to establish a connection, however distant, [...] between death in the gas chamber and the "complete devotion to sacred and superior motives"', which is precisely the connection that Nazi propaganda sought to establish.³⁶ Though the controversial term 'Holocaust' is not used at any point in Atwood's novel, the implicit parallel between the Jewish people and the

Handmaids-as-sacrificial-offerings carries the same troubling connotations. At the same time, because of its problematic connotations the parallel constitutes a powerful critique of any employment of the rhetoric of sacrifice within politics and, as such, a crucial revision of Atwood's critique in her 1982 definition of politics.

The Passover Lamb

To elaborate more extensively on the Gilead-Nazi Germany analogy and its ambivalent implications some further observations regarding the novel's allusions to biblical sacrifices are in order. Stein's particular focus on the consumption of the flesh-like bread, for example, combined with her emphasis on cannibalism, calls for an association of the Handmaids with the *Agnus Dei* of the New Testament, the Lamb of God that is (cannibalistically) consumed at the Eucharist.³⁷ Following this implication through, a Handmaid would appear to function as Gilead's female version of the *Agnus Dei*, a sacrificial lamb of Gilead's God; indeed, in a memorable observation which reveals how revered the Handmaids' 'viable ovaries' are in Gilead (p. 153), Offred says that God 'must look like an egg', or ovary (p. 120). Gilead's sacrificial lambs-eggs, however, are not just 'cannibalized' by others but, as we have seen, are also made to engage in a figuratively auto-cannibalistic consumption through their daily diet. This kind of consumption invites an association with another biblical sacrificial lamb, that of the Passover.

In the book of Exodus, we read that God advises the Jewish people to kill 'the lamb' in preparation for the Passover; they are told to

take of [its] blood, and strike it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses, wherein they shall eat it. And they shall eat the flesh [...] not [...] raw [...] but roast with fire (Exodus 12: 7-9).

Substitution is an integral part of any sacrifice – animals may be sacrificed in the place of humans, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22: 13), or one may be sacrificed for

others, as in the case of Jesus, who is sacrificed ‘for the remission of [our] sins’ (Matthew 26: 28). The Passover sacrifice presents us with an additional type of substitution which resonates with the situation of the Handmaids: in the extract above, the lamb is referred to in the singular even though it is not just *one* lamb that is sacrificed, which suggests that one lamb stands for all the lambs that are sacrificed the night before the Passover and for all the lambs that will be sacrificed in remembrance of the event. The implication is that the sacrificed lambs are interchangeable, an interchangeability that is at the core of the economy of substitution at work in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where one Handmaid ‘offers’ her services to one household for a certain period of time and is then substituted by another. One Handmaid, then, explicitly stands for all Handmaids and, in this sense, ‘Offred’ is all the Handmaids of her generation and all those that come after her; they are all ‘offered’, sacrificial offerings that are interchangeable in a manner akin to that of the Passover lamb(s).

Alongside the particular economy of substitution which links the Passover lamb(s) with Gilead’s Offred(s), the above-quoted extract from Exodus suggests an auto-cannibalistic consumption which constitutes another point of association with *The Handmaid’s Tale*. God says that the blood of the Passover lamb must be thrown on outer walls and doors; the lamb’s blood, then, figuratively *houses* the Hebrews within it, protecting them by marking their racial identity and thus distinguishing them from the Egyptians, whose houses God will strike. The Passover lamb here appears to function as a *host* body, for, like a host, it provides not only shelter but also food: the lamb’s blood serves to figuratively house the Hebrews and its flesh to feed them. Crucially, the lamb’s flesh is eaten *within* the house that its blood metaphorically constructs in what therefore seems to be a figurative auto-cannibalism which takes the form of a consumption that occurs from within the host body.

The auto-cannibalistic consumption that is at work in Gilead and the Passover sacrifice suggests an intertextual entanglement in light of which we can further engage with

the Gilead-Nazi Germany analogy. As is well known, certain interpretations of the Passover sacrifice have, throughout history and in different countries, featured in numerous attempts to promote anti-Semitism,³⁸ with Julius Streicher's notorious May 1934 issue of *Der Stürmer* exemplifying one such attempt in Nazi Germany.³⁹ One of the articles in the issue relates a nineteenth-century murder of a girl who is conveniently named *Agnes Hruza* (*agnus* being Latin for 'lamb'), whose young age invites the reader to think of her as 'unblemished' (and thus associate her with the unblemished lambs sacrificed for the Passover), and whose murder is said to have occurred in late March/early April (which is when the Passover celebrations typically fall). This article is but one example of the misrepresentation of the Jews as a murderous people who supposedly kill non-Jews, particularly Christians, in order to obtain blood for their rituals ('blood libel'). It is not, however, only the blood rituals involved in the Passover sacrifice that have been exploited but also its portrayal of a consumption that occurs from within. If the book of Exodus presents the survival of the Jewish people as partly dependent on their consumption of the lamb which figuratively hosts them, the Hitlerian rhetoric comes to transform the Passover lamb into the 'Aryan state', presenting it as a host body on which the Jewish people parasitically feed to survive. As Felicity Rash summarises, in *Mein Kampf* Hitler argued that 'these "lower" beings', the Jewish people, 'develop[ed] a parasitic dependency' upon 'the "higher" Aryans'.⁴⁰

Clearly, the Nazi state could only construct itself as a host body by means of incorporating within it the group of people that it posited as parasites; the latter are therefore indispensable for the existence of the former. It is this point that Žižek makes when he says that the Nazi subject was constructed by incorporating the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew within it; 'take away the anti-Semitic fantasy', Žižek asserts, 'and the subject whose fantasy it is itself disintegrates'.⁴¹ Thus, in striving to get rid of the Jew-as-the-'parasite'-within the Nazis were inadvertently striving for their own abolition. At the core of the operations of

Nazi Germany, then, is not a consumption *from* 'within' (which the Nazis argued that they were fighting against) but a consumption *of* 'the within' (which the Nazis themselves conducted) – an ultimately suicidal consumption.⁴²

If, as this analysis suggests, Nazi Germany was underpinned by an auto-cannibalistic type of consumption then the Gilead-Nazi Germany analogy can be further substantiated and thought through the concept of auto-cannibalism. From Atwood's novel we can extrapolate not just a politics of cannibalism whereby the exercise of political power is analogous to one's eating of another but, ultimately, a situation in which the exercise of political power is analogous to a consumption that occurs 'within'. Indeed, Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids that 'Gilead is within you' (p. 33); in this sense, by forcing the Handmaids to figuratively consume themselves, their 'within', the Gilead regime figuratively consumes itself.

The metaphor of auto-cannibalism thus discloses the dynamics, and offers a distinct definition of the fascist politics of Gilead and Nazi Germany whilst also revealing the morally ambivalent implications of the novel's analogy between these two states. As we have seen, the auto-cannibalistic consumption of both of these states is in one way or another connected with the Passover sacrifice, which makes the Gilead-Nazi Germany analogy undoubtedly problematic: to implicitly associate the Handmaids-as-sacrificial-offerings with the Jewish people under Nazism implies an unacceptable construction of the latter as sacrificial victims. At the same time, precisely because it is so problematic, the analogy points up the dangers engendered in political appeals to sacrifice, understood as an evaluative, rather than descriptive term. Though the novel's implicit evocations of the Passover lamb have not merited critical attention in Atwood criticism, the present analysis has attempted to demonstrate its importance in grasping the complexities of *The Handmaid's Tale* and in identifying a reversal from Atwood's earlier representations of the interrelation between politics, sacrifice, and eating.

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< <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/03/specials/atwood-gilead.html>>

² J. Larson, 'Margaret Atwood and the Future of Prophecy', *Religion and Literature* 21. 1 (1989) 41, 35.

³ D. Filipczak, 'Is There No Balm in Gilead? – Biblical Intertext in *The Handmaid's Tale*', *Literature and Theology* 7. 2 (1993) 172.

⁴ In biology, *autophagy* refers to a type of 'consumption' of what is within the body and which occurs from within the body; it is broadly defined as a mechanism that involves the degradation of dysfunctional cells and is believed to be linked to lifespan expansion. Here, I use the term 'auto-cannibalism' to avoid the positive connotations of 'autophagy'.

⁵ See Matthew Boulton's analysis of the sacrifice of Jesus in relation to the Passover sacrifice, according to which Jesus revamps, as it were, and reconfigures the Passover lamb; for Boulton, Jesus' consumption at the Last Supper *reverses* 'the basic sacramental structure' of the Passover meal because Jesus 'portrays *himself* as the Passover lamb'. M. Boulton, *God Against Religion: Rethinking Christian Theology through Worship* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 223. In my analysis, the Passover lamb will be read as a 'host' that is eaten and, in this sense, the consumption of Jesus can be seen as a case of rendering explicit – rather than reversing – the structure of the Passover meal, whereby the one who hosts is the one who is eaten.

⁶ M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 233. All subsequent references (given in brackets in the main text) are from this edition.

⁷ Marx's sentence reads: 'From each according to his capacity, to each according to his need'. K. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1933), p. 31. Larson

reads the sentence that the Handmaids recite in reference to Acts 4: 35 ('distribution was made unto every man according as he had need') – Larson, 'Future of Prophecy', 48. It is, however, clear that the association with Marx's sentence is much stronger.

⁸ Larson, 'Future of Prophecy', 40.

⁹ J. Larson, 'Margaret Atwood's Testaments: Resisting the Gilead Within', *Christian Century* (20 May 1987). Available online at:

<<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1021>>

¹⁰ Filipczak, 176.

¹¹ K. Stein, 'Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal: *The Handmaid's Tale*', *Canadian Literature* 148 (1996) 67.

¹² The tripartite association of eating, sacrifice, and politics has a very long history. See, for example, M. Detienne and JP. Vernant (eds) *The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks*, trans. P. Wissing (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1989).

¹³ M. Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982), p. 392.

¹⁴ J. Derrida, "'Eating Well,'" or The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', interv. JL. Nancy, trans. P. Connor and A. Ronell, in E. Cadava et al. (eds) *Who Comes After the Subject?* (NY and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 112.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Carleen Mandolfo implicitly points to an understanding of sacrifice as an evaluative term in arguing that some of Lars von Trier's films portray sacrifice as *meaningful*. C. Mandolfo 'Women, Suffering and Redemption in Three Films of Lars von Trier', *Literature and Theology* 24. 3 (2010) 285-300. For an explicit elaboration on sacrifice as an evaluative rather than descriptive term, see J. Watts, 'The Rhetoric of Sacrifice' in C. A. Eberhart (ed.) *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical literature, 2011), pp. 3-16.

¹⁷ M. Atwood, *Surfacing* (NY: Popular Library, 1976), pp. 164-65.

¹⁸ The references to Christ in the extract from *Surfacing* suggest that Atwood's heroine does not view the death caused by eating negatively; it is not understood as the *final* death of what is eaten – as she says, the eaten is 'dead Christ-flesh *resurrecting* inside us'. In this respect, it is worth quoting Norman Wirzba's claim that the sacrifice and consumption of Jesus for the benefit of humankind suggests that 'it is a mistake to view all death as evil'; '[t]o speak theologically about death', Wirzba writes, 'we need to distinguish it from the "expiring" that is the mark of biological death'. Here, then, sacrifice and sacrificial consumption are seen in a positive light. N. Wirzba, *A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), pp. 111-12.

¹⁹ The question of authorial intention introduces complications here. Chloe Taylor, for example, argues that Atwood always chooses to assign such alimentary concerns to emotionally or mentally 'unstable' characters, in this way effectively dismissing those concerns; for Taylor, Atwood is basically suggesting that if you start thinking about animals as living beings that ought to be treated with respect you will then logically start thinking about plants in the same way and you will inevitably end up starving. Taylor's reading, however, does not represent a consensus; Carol J. Adams, for instance, extrapolates a defence of vegetarianism from Atwood's work. Since Atwood's stance on the matter is not clear, the analysis here – and throughout – focuses on giving a reading of her work rather than delving into the question of authorial intention, which cannot be sufficiently addressed in the given space. Chloe Taylor, 'Abnormal Appetites: Foucault, Atwood, and the Normalization of Animal-Based Diet', *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 10. 4 (2012), 130-148; Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (NY and London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 174-86, 236-38.

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben has also famously engaged with the question of politics and sacrifice in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998). ‘Bare life’, which remains Agamben’s most well-known concept, is defined as life that ‘*may be killed and yet not sacrificed*’ (p. 8); according to Agamben, politics depends on life whose murder is not considered to be sacrificial.

²¹ G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (NY: Zone, 1999).

²² Stein, 66.

²³ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁴ G. Deer, *Postmodern Canadian Fiction and the Rhetoric of Authority* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1994), p. 119.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁶ Focusing on different examples, Emma Parker has also elaborated on the regime’s use of food as an indoctrinating means, adding that it also engenders subversive power. E. Parker, ‘You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in Margaret Atwood’s Novels’, *Twentieth Century Literature* 41. 3 (1995) 349-68.

²⁷ S. J. Taylor, *Stalin’s Apologist: Walter Duranty, The New York Times’s Man in Moscow* (Oxford and NY: Oxford UP, 1990), p. 222 (emphasis added).

²⁸ Use of the phrase has been traced back to the French Revolution. Joseph Walker reports that, after being captured, François de Charette, one of the leaders of the counter-revolt movement during the French Revolution, said that ‘omlets [sic] are not made without breaking the eggs’, in this way seeking to justify the employment of violent means in view of the ‘higher’ end of restoring the previous status quo (*Walker’s Hibernian Magazine Or, Compendium of Entertaining Knowledge*, January 1796, p. 411). In light of this, the Commander’s use of the phrase in *The Handmaid’s Tale* traces Gilead’s lineage back to the

Royalist counter-revolt movement, Gilead itself seeking to counter a revolution – the women’s liberation movement – and restore the previous status quo, preferable to the patriarchal elite.

²⁹ It is useful to observe that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that fascism is not an extreme form of totalitarianism. What is important for present purposes is that they classify Stalinism as a totalitarian regime, arguing that it exercises power in a ‘structurally’ and thus fundamentally different way from Nazi Germany. Praising Paul Virilio’s description of ‘the fascist state’ as ‘the suicidal state’ (cited in a note further down), Deleuze and Guattari argue that, in fascism, the ‘war machine [...] appropriates the State’ rather than the other way round, ‘channel[ing] into it a flow of absolute war whose only possible outcome is *the suicide of the State itself*’. As will become clear in what follows, the politics of suicide that Deleuze and Guattari (following Virilio) posit as integral to the fascist state brings Gilead – and its self-consuming omelette, its politics of auto-cannibalism – closer to Nazi Germany than Stalinist Russia. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota UP, 2005), p. 231 (emphasis added).

³⁰ Exodus 29: 18, 25, 41; Leviticus 1: 9, 14, 17; 2: 2, 9, 12; 3: 5; 4: 31; 6: 15; 8: 21; 23: 18; Numbers 15: 3, 13-14, 24; 18: 17; 28: 2, 6, 13, 24, 27; 29: 2, 6, 13, 36. The term רֵיחַ (‘rêyach’) used in the Hebrew text translates as ‘odour’, ‘scent’, ‘aroma’, or ‘fragrance’; in the English Standard version, for example, burnt sacrifices are said to be of a ‘pleasing aroma’ unto the Lord. In the American Standard version and the King James version, however, the term is rendered as ‘savour’ and the burnt sacrifices are described as being of a ‘sweet savour’ unto the Lord. As mentioned earlier, I am here using the King James version since this is where Atwood is quoting from in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

³¹ R. Daly, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (London: Longman & Todd, 1978), p. 16.

³² Stein, 67.

³³ A. K. Kaler, “‘A Sister Dipped in Blood’: Satiric Inversion of the Formation Techniques of Women Religious in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, *Christianity and Religion* 38. 2 (1989) 47.

³⁴ Larson, ‘Future of Prophecy’, 394.

³⁵ Bruno Bettelheim stresses that ‘it was not the hapless victims of the Nazis who named their incomprehensible [...] fate “Holocaust”’ and Boria Sax highlights the term’s inappropriateness in pointing out that its use is ‘based on an identification between the Jewish people and the sacrificed animal. [...]. In a strange way, the term *Holocaust* equates the Nazis, as those who perform sacrifice, with the priests of ancient Israel’. B. Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays* (NY: Vintage), p. 1980; B. Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats and the Holocaust* (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 156.

³⁶ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 31.

³⁷ Larson examines the possibility of viewing the Handmaids as Gilead’s Christ(s) in ‘Future of Prophecy’, 46-48, 58.

³⁸ Tobias Nicklas refers to Melito of Sardis’ sermon ‘On the Passover’ as one example of a Christian engagement with the Passover sacrifice which promotes anti-Judaism. T. Nicklas, ‘The Bible and Anti-Semitism’, in M. Lieb et al. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), p. 267.

³⁹ Available in full online at: <<http://der-stuermer.org/ritualmurder.htm>>

⁴⁰ F. Rash, *The Language of Violence: Adolph Hitler’s Mein Kampf* (NY: Laing Publishing, 2006), p. 116 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ S. Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p. xi.

⁴² Paul Virilio posits self-destructiveness as integral to fascism. P. Virilio, 'The Suicidal State', in J. Derian (ed.) *The Virilio Reader* (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 29-45.