

Lucia Opreanu\*

**REMEMBRANCE VERSUS REINVENTION:  
MEMORY AS TOOL OF SURVIVAL AND ACT OF  
DEFIANCE IN DYSTOPIAN NARRATIVES**

**Keywords:** conditioning; dystopia; history; hypnopaedia; manipulation; recollection.

**Abstract:** *This paper will explore some of the most memorable dystopian narratives of the last century (from Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, George Orwell's 1984, Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale to Kurt Wimmer's Equilibrium) in order to establish the extent to which the obliteration and/ or rewriting of the past is employed as a tool of manipulation and control and its recovery becomes essential for those who strive to preserve their individuality and independence of thought and action. The features shared by protagonists such as Bernard Marx, Winston Smith, Guy Montag, Offred, and John Preston include an uncomfortable awareness of the discrepancies between actual historical events and the version accepted and delivered by the establishment and faith in the importance of individual and collective memory and the need to recover and protect the narratives of the past. Indeed, the most notable common coordinate of their various acts of rebellion against a regime whose principles they can no longer accept entails an obsessive fascination with books, the very items which the totalitarian societies envisaged by most authors of dystopian fiction regard as dangerous and consequently strive to ban and eradicate. Far from focusing exclusively on acts of defiance, the paper also aims to identify and discuss the instances in which certain protagonists employ memory manipulation strategies akin to the ones promoted by the establishment and thus become responsible for their own brainwashing. The ultimate aim of this analysis is to outline the various responses to more or less oppressive systems and to assess memory's potential in the preservation of identity and actual survival.*

The fascination with memory shared by all dystopian narratives is a clear indication of the important role played by the ability to manipulate the human capacity for recollection and rewrite the past in any totalitarian regime. This paper aims to focus on four twentieth-century novels that can be regarded as particularly relevant in terms of the complex interplay of "reality, virtuality, memory and subjectivity" (Mennel 140) that seems to characterize the contemporary dystopian vision and to explore the ways in which their protagonists deal with the awareness that the version of the past available to them has little correspondence in actual

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\* Ovidius University, Constanța, Romania

historical fact. Ranging from failed attempts to accept and internalize the ideas promoted by the establishment to tentative questioning of the facts available to them and downright defiance, their reactions confirm the extent to which human recollection can help preserve a sense of authentic identity but also hint at the difficulty of fighting manipulation in situations in which acceptance of the official version of the truth would guarantee a peaceful and in some cases even blissful existence.

Given the numerous ways in which careful use of genetic engineering, conditioning, hypnopaedia and recreational drugs seems to guarantee the happiness of every single member (and consequently its somewhat ambiguous status somewhere between utopia and dystopia), it is hardly surprising that of all the societies discussed in this paper the one described in Huxley's *Brave New World* seems the least inclined to question the accuracy of the data its inhabitants have access to or indeed require additional information on any given topic. Most of its citizens seem quite happy to conduct their lives according to a set of rules encoded in nursery-type rhymes, memorized in childhood and then repeated to all those who seem uncomfortable or inclined to act in an unconventional manner: "remember that a gramme is better than a damn" (Huxley 47), "Remember one cubic centimetre cures ten gloomy sentiments" (Huxley 77). The almost obsessive recurrence of the same verb, indicative of how ingrained these ideas are in their minds and implicitly of the power of culture to construct beliefs and feelings (Levey 42), is also to be noted in the case of all references to past history (yet another subject conveniently taught by means of hypnopaedia): "you must remember that in those days of gross viviparous reproduction, children were always brought up by their parents and not in State Conditioning Centres" (Huxley 19-20), "you all remember, I suppose, that beautiful and inspired saying of Our Ford's: History is bunk" (Huxley 29). As far as inappropriate thoughts and emotions are concerned, the opposite approach seems to be recommended, one of the main merits of *soma* being its amnesia-inducing potential: "take *soma* when you have these dreadful ideas of yours. You'd forget all about them. And instead of feeling miserable, you'd be jolly" (Huxley 79).

Whereas Bernard Marx is constantly at the receiving end of such pieces of advice, in the case of a protagonist such as Lenina conditioning has been so successful that not even her childhood awareness and vivid recollection years later of the hypnopaedic process can disrupt her blissful state and unquestioning acceptance of the ideas promoted by the establishment:

'Even an Epsilon...' Lenina suddenly remembered an occasion when, as a little girl at school, she had woken up in the middle of the night and become aware, for the first time, of the whispering that had haunted all her sleeps. [...] Lenina remembered her first shock of fear and surprise; her speculations through half a wakeful hour; and then, under the influence of those endless repetitions, the gradual soothing of her mind, the soothing, the smoothing, the stealthy creeping of sleep (Huxley 64).

However sinister her lack of concern for the truth behind the nocturnal whispers, Lenina is by no means the most representative character as far as the dangers of conditioning are concerned. John's discourse is characterized by an even

greater frequency of memory-related vocabulary than that of other characters, a suggestion of the fact that in his case repeated readings of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* had similar results to the sleep-learning all the other characters were subjected to in childhood: “Do you remember what Miranda says?” (Huxley 120), “Do you remember that bit in *King Lear*?” (Huxley 207), “Don’t you remember what Othello said?” (Huxley 210). Ultimately it is the incompatibility between his Shakespearean perspective and the completely alien values of his rescuers that causes his gradual descent into insanity and suicide.

Unlike his mother, who takes advantage of her return to civilisation to float away “out of the prison of her memories, her habits, her aged and bloated body” (Huxley 210-1) “among the transfigured memories and the strangely transposed sensations” (Huxley 180) of *soma* induced reveries, John attempts and fails to tamper with his memory so as to obtain some relief from his pain. One of the strategies he employs involves repeating the childish rhymes taught by Linda, the very same rhymes she had learned as a little girl through hypnopaedia, yet in his case they only serve to trigger unpleasant recollections: “‘A, B, C, vitamin D,’ he repeated to himself, as though the words were a spell that would restore the dead past to life. But the spell was ineffective. Obstinate the beautiful memories refused to rise; there was only a hateful resurrection of jealousies and uglinesses and miseries.” (Huxley 179) With nothing as powerful as hypnopaedia or even *soma* at his disposal, John is equally helpless in his endeavour to force Linda to “come back from this dream of ignoble pleasures, from these base and hateful memories – back into the present, back into reality” (Huxley 179) and in the attempt to control his own recollections:

He realized to his dismay that, absorbed in the whittling of his bow, he had forgotten what he had sworn to himself he would constantly remember – poor Linda, and his own murderous unkindness to her [...] He had sworn to remember, he had sworn unceasingly to make amends (Huxley 218).

Torn between guilt towards “poor Linda whom he had sworn to remember” and disgust towards “Lenina whom he had promised to forget” (Huxley 222) John loses every remnant of sanity, his mad outburst and subsequent death clearly indicating the hopelessness of attempting to manipulate memory in the absence of an adequate support system such as the one available to the establishment.

Perhaps the most sinister aspect of Orwell’s *1984*, another memorable dystopia, resides in Winston Smith’s realization that the government expects him to engage in just such an act of auto-brainwashing, to achieve by means of ‘reality control’, ‘Newspeak’ and ‘doublethink’ “an unending series of victories” (Orwell 37) over his own memory:

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again

at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again: and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself (Orwell 37-8).

The complexity of the mental processes Party members must perform in order to control others but above all to ensure that they do not unwittingly betray the system best emerges from Emmanuel Goldstein's *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*:

At all times the Party is in possession of absolute truth, and clearly the absolute can never have been different from what it is now. It will be seen that the control of the past depends above all on the training of memory. To make sure that all written records agree with the orthodoxy of the moment is merely a mechanical act. But it is also necessary to REMEMBER that events happened in the desired manner. And if it is necessary to rearrange one's memories or to tamper with written records, then it is necessary to FORGET that one has done so. The trick of doing this can be learned like any other mental technique. It is learned by the majority of Party members, and certainly by all who are intelligent as well as orthodox. In Oldspeak it is called, quite frankly, 'reality control'. In Newspeak it is called DOUBLETHINK, though DOUBLETHINK comprises much else as well (Orwell 222-3).

The underlying epistemological problem appears to reside in establishing "whether it is *possible* to control the past, to destroy or distort both record and memory" (Crick 156) up to the point of universal and unquestioning acceptance of whatever version of history the system wants to promote as true. Some of the most memorable instances of this ideology at work to be found in the text include the reference to the large oblong slits protected by wire gratings "nicknamed memory holes" through which documents due for destruction were sent to "the enormous furnaces [...] hidden somewhere in the recesses of the building" (Orwell 40) and the description of the process whereby party members rewrite not just historical accounts but also whole sections of the literary canon:

A good deal of the literature of the past was, indeed, already being transformed in this way. Considerations of prestige made it desirable to preserve the memory of certain historical figures, while at the same time bringing their achievements into line with the philosophy of Ingsoc. Various writers, such as Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Byron, Dickens, and some others were therefore in process of translation: when the task had been completed, their original writings, with all else that survived of the literature of the past, would be destroyed (Orwell 325).

It is not so much the fact that "all traces of the past that might yield an alternative view of the world are erased and forgotten" (Assman 131) that makes Winston's situation so difficult, as the knowledge that he is expected to perform the same act of deletion upon his own memory and above all the realization that this process seems to occur quite naturally in the case of others: "Although Winston strives to authenticate vague memories, what he finds among the proles is extremely disturbing: their memories are short, random, wandering and often ridiculous; it needs a trained mind to have a trained memory in oppressive circumstances" (Crick

156). Party intellectuals such as O'Brien appear to have successfully completed such training and to have mastered the power "of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them" (Orwell 223), a feat Winston cannot even begin to comprehend. Moreover, as his dialogues with O'Brien prior to his political re-education indicate, he firmly believes that his memory has the potential to withstand any manipulation:

'Then where does the past exist, if at all?'  
'In records. It is written down.'  
'In records. And ---?'  
'In the mind. In human memories.'  
'In memory. Very well, then. We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?'  
'But how can you stop people remembering things?' cried Winston again momentarily forgetting the dial. 'It is involuntary. It is outside oneself. How can you control memory? You have not controlled mine!' (Orwell 260-1).

Winston's outburst is one of the last crimes against the Party he is allowed to commit at the end of a long series of transgressions beginning with his spontaneous decision to keep a diary in an attempt to defend private memory against the official attempts to rewrite history (Crick 152). In the process of writing, the protagonist "feels compelled to reconstruct his past through memory, to return to his childhood with his mother, to remember a time when the distinction between private and public life was not yet eliminated" (Gottlieb 278), presumably feeling that "only by remembering a past that was more human than the world he is living in will he ever have a chance" (Gottlieb 278-9).

A similar phenomenon can be observed in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, one of the best-known examples of feminist dystopia, whose protagonist seems to share Winston's tendency to use the elusive past recaptured in dreams and brief memory flashes to retain some individual humanity (Feuer 97). Atwood's Offred remembers and narrates her own story in an attempt to preserve her sanity and identity in the oppressive theocracy of Gilead, a world in which women are either breeders or outcasts and no longer have the right to a personal discourse: "I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes. I have trouble remembering what I used to look like" (Atwood 143). Deprived of even the simplest freedoms, such as the right to see her own body or to employ her five senses to explore her surroundings, Offred clings to apparently trivial memories of her past life – "I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers" (Atwood 12), "I'm remembering my feet on these sidewalks, in the time before, and what I used to wear on them" (Atwood 24), "I can remember what I wore, each blouse, each scarf" (Atwood 51), "I try to remember what this place sold when it was a store" (Atwood 167) – and engages in frequent acts of defamiliarization which make her predicament even more tangible:

All those women having jobs: hard to imagine, now, but thousands of them had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing. Now it's like remembering the

paper money, when they still had that. My mother kept some of it, pasted into her scrapbook along with the early photos. It was obsolete by then, you couldn't buy anything with it. Pieces of paper, thickish, greasy to the touch, green-colored, with pictures on each side, some old man in a wig and on the other side a pyramid with an eye above it. It said *In God We Trust* (Atwood 173).

It is interesting to note that although she was an adult at the time the change of regime occurred and is therefore in possession of considerably more vivid memories than Winston, Offred finds it increasingly difficult to conjure up the images of her lost husband and daughter as well as numerous details of her past life: "It's my fault. I am forgetting too much. [...] I try to remember if the past was exactly like this. I'm not sure, now. I know it contained these things, but somehow the mix is different. A movie about the past is not the same as the past" (Atwood 235).

After spending most of his life reinforcing the law, confiscating and burning books and never questioning the validity of his actions or the nature of his existence, the protagonist of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* reaches a similar awareness of the importance of preserving the past both through printed narratives and personal memories. The illiterate and television obsessed society envisaged by Bradbury echoes the dramatic predictions whereby "the world is going to hell in a handbasket and has been since the invention of television" and Gutenberg's medium and the literature it has made possible must be saved from the "technologies that threaten to end more than 500 years of print dominance and drive it into obsolescence" (Fitzpatrick 1). Bradbury's protagonist takes it upon himself to save as much printed material as possible, an ambitious task in a society which has decided to do away not only with literature but with memory itself:

'Coloured people don't like Little Black Sambo. Burn it. White people don't feel good about Uncle Tom's Cabin. Burn it. Someone's written a book on tobacco and cancer of the lungs? The cigarette people are weeping? Bum the book. Serenity, Montag. Peace, Montag. Take your fight outside. Better yet, into the incinerator. Funerals are unhappy and pagan? Eliminate them, too. Five minutes after a person is dead he's on his way to the Big Flue, the Incinerators serviced by helicopters all over the country. Ten minutes after death a man's a speck of black dust. Let's not quibble over individuals with memoriams. Forget them. Burn them all, burn everything. Fire is bright and fire is clean' (Bradbury 78).

Whereas Bernard Marx, Winston Smith and Offred are presented from the very beginning as different from the rest of society and only engage in gradual and relatively discreet acts of transgression, Guy Montag shifts quite dramatically from unquestioning acceptance of hedonistic consumerism to a firm belief in the value of books and from a state of amnesia and disinterest to the fervent need to recover his own past: "It was suddenly more important than any other thing in a life-time that he knew where he had met Mildred" (Bradbury 58). The failed attempt to recover the lost details of his own life is followed by the apparently ridiculous compulsion to use his previously unexercised mnemonic capacity to rescue one of the texts he is expected to destroy:

There were people in the suction train but he held the book in his hands and the silly thought came to him, if you read fast and read all, maybe some of the sand will stay in the sieve. But he read and the words fell through, and he thought, in a few hours, there will be Beatty, and here will be me handing this over, so no phrase must escape me, each line must be memorized. I will myself to do it (Bradbury 102).

However Sisyphean such a project might initially seem, following his decision to abandon the “strange woman who would forget him tomorrow, who had gone and quite forgotten him already” (Bradbury 151) and to set fire to his own house Montag comes across a group of rebels committed to this very cause. They have not only memorized books but appear to have actually identified with the texts, which is precisely what Montag himself is expected to do: “Walk carefully. Guard your health. If anything should happen to Harris, you are the Book of Ecclesiastes. See how important you’ve become in the last minute!” (Bradbury 194) While one might argue that such an act entails a loss of personal identity, it is also possible that the protagonists in question are motivated by the realization that in order for any trace of individual identity to survive, the cultural heritage of the past needs to be preserved.

It is quite interesting to observe the way in which, far from being dismissed as obsolete and by now absurd worries, the main concerns of these classics of dystopian fiction resurface in more recent narratives. A particularly poignant example is Kurt Wimmer’s 2002 *Equilibrium*, whose marked intertextual reliance on *Brave New World*, *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451* has resulted in rather harsh reviews criticizing the film for its lack of originality, yet has also hinted at the possibility that the same set of anxieties troubling novelists decades ago might still have a correspondent in contemporary outlooks. Among the numerous elements borrowed from the narratives discussed above one can mention the presentation of the past in exclusively negative terms, the concentration of authority in the idealized figure of the Father (clearly modelled on Big Brother), the use of omnipresent television screens to propagate ideology, the prominent role played by Grammaton Clerics (law enforcers combining the features of the Party members in *1984* and the firefighters in *Fahrenheit 451*), the use of Prozium (a fictional equivalent of the equally fictional *soma*) to guarantee peace and safety by annihilating all human emotions, as well as the destruction of any traces of the past, be they books, works of art or personal items with emotional value. Like the post-Fordian *Brave New World* and post-war Oceania, post-Holocaust Libria has coined new concepts and invented new professions and titles of authority, yet there is also an interesting reference to the fact that notwithstanding its single-minded destruction of past texts, it has nevertheless retained emotion-related vocabulary that no longer has any real-life correspondent, such as the word ‘sorry’: “You don’t even know the meaning. It’s just a...vestigial word for a feeling you’ve never felt.” (Wimmer) Significantly enough, this observation is made by a character who considers it worthwhile to risk his life for the sake of rescuing and reading a work of literature. The survival of such words in the language of Libria can be regarded as a harbinger of hope and,

indeed, the one aspect in which *Equilibrium* departs from all of its prose models (with the possible exception of *Fahrenheit 451*) resides in the fact that after completely changing his allegiance and deciding to protect rather than destroy works of art, the protagonist succeeds in overthrowing the totalitarian government, an optimistic ending only to be expected in the case of a Hollywood dystopia.

Although the outcomes of most dystopian plots suggest that attempts to recapture personal or collective past are just as likely to end in disaster as they are to ensure sanity and survival, the struggles undertaken by their protagonists seem to confirm the view that “a society that is incapable of recollection, recognition, and remembrance is without hope for the future” (Baccolini 119) which, should one wish to discuss the contemporary relevance of such texts, might raise the question of whether present society is likely to face such hazards. If one is to accept the view that, far from representing mere ways of imagining the future or the past, utopia and dystopia “can also be understood as concrete practices through which historically situated actors seek to reimagine their present and transform it into a plausible future” (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash 2), there is no denying the danger of failing to cultivate and employ one’s power of remembrance, especially in the context of the “rhetoric of amnesia” surrounding current discussions of digital culture (Rabinovitz and Geil 3). In his analysis of *Fahrenheit 451*, Harold Bloom commends Bradbury’s foresight regarding the possibility that “the age of the Screen (movie, TV, computer) could destroy reading” (1-2) and hints at the importance of engaging learners in the kind of project undertaken by its protagonist: “Is there a higher enterprise now than stimulating coming generations to commit to memory the best that has been written?” (Bloom 2) Notwithstanding the amount of vilification rote learning has received in recent years (not to mention the somewhat unfortunate consequences of exclusive reliance on the memorization of texts outlined in *Brave New World*), the approach that Bloom is trying to promote relies less on memorization than on the ability to read and understand the texts of the past, as well as to remember essential data and use it in personal discourse: “If you cannot read Shakespeare and his peers, then you will forfeit memory, and if you cannot remember, then you will not be able to think.” (Bloom 1-2) Similar conclusions regarding the value of past narratives and the importance of memory in the preservation of one’s identity and capacity for independent thought can be drawn on the basis of all the dystopias discussed, however little similarity the contemporary world might bear to the various societies envisaged by their authors.

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