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**REVISIONS OF THE PAST AND PRESENT:
EDITING REALITY AND FICTION IN
CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY DYSTOPIAS**

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Abstract: *Rather than merely dwell on the strategies employed by the totalitarian regimes envisaged by Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Ray Bradbury and Margaret Atwood to erase, censor or modify the various narratives of the past and present, this paper also aims to explore the recurrence of their familiar tropes and the addition of more topical ones in a number of contemporary texts, particularly those aimed at a younger readership. The analysis will revisit key concepts and interactions from Brave New World, Nineteen Eighty-Four, Fahrenheit 451 and The Handmaid's Tale in the light of recent political events and media practices but also focus on the role played by lies, censorship and manipulation in the dystopian scenarios delineated in novel series such as Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games, Veronica Roth's Divergent and Lauren Oliver's Delirium, in an attempt to establish the extent to which such texts, while lacking the originality and complexity of their obvious sources of inspiration, can help instil in their young readers critical thinking strategies and a general incredulity towards the narratives promoted or imposed by the establishment. It will pay a certain degree of attention to the treatment of public and personal history and the different ways in which dystopian subjects position themselves in relation to sources of authority, ostensibly resisting manipulation but more often than not perpetuating the same practices for their own ends, but will focus above all on the status of literary texts in dystopian scenarios and the relative threat posed by responses ranging from total obliteration to careful adulteration of the volatile truth of fiction.*

While dystopian literature provides a practically inexhaustible reservoir of alternative facts and similar violations of the truth, the extensive critical attention paid to its central texts might have doomed further such endeavours to redundancy had it not been for the new impetus provided by a number of political developments amongst which the Brexit campaign and Donald Trump's election stand out as "rhetorical watershed" (McComiskey 3) moments in terms of both the use of unethical rhetoric for electoral purposes and the consumption of said rhetoric by public audiences. In addition to dramatically altering the parameters of everyday life, the technological developments of the last few decades have provided ample evidence of the prophetic potential of dystopian literature: it is indeed equally easy to "recognize Orwell's telescreens" and Bradbury's parlour walls in "our smart phones and flat screen televisions" (MacKay Demerjian 1), Forster's almighty

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Machine in our almost pathological reliance on the Internet, Huxley's 'feelies' in the 4DX cinematic experience and Big Brother's watchful eye in a wide range of discreetly ubiquitous cameras and invasive digital applications. What is considerably more disquieting to observe however is the increasing frequency of 'doublethink' reverberations in the contemporary public sphere and the corresponding awareness that whereas lies have always represented an intrinsic aspect of politics and "the concept of *truth itself*" has a long history as the classic "totalitarian victim" (Stock 122), a number of present-day governments "tend to operate . . . through a cynical acceptance" and often deliberate perpetuation of equivocation, cultivating truth as a "potential weapon of subversion" (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 83) rather than a straightforward instrument of official power.

Perhaps the most recognizable element of dystopian fiction consists in the conspiratorial efforts made by a "small ruling elite" to mislead the general population by means of a "powerfully deceptive state religion" (Gottlieb 267) and, while the barely convincing excuse of "necessary lies" is often invoked to justify "controlling the individual" (Olander 103) for the sake of social stability, such regimes more often than not "attempt to manipulate language (and perceptions of reality)" (Booker, *Dystopian Literature* 36) for quite inexcusable and "reprehensible goals" (Sisk 121). Thus, whereas *Brave New World's* Controller seems to genuinely regard truth as a menace and the shift in emphasis "from truth and beauty to comfort and happiness" (Huxley 201) as a necessary step towards "the stablest equilibrium in history" (Huxley 200), *Fahrenheit 451's* Captain Beatty endorses the use of flamethrowers against books and people alike so as to prevent the "torrent of melancholy and drear philosophy" (Bradbury 81) from drowning an otherwise happy world and Jeanine Matthews, the leader of the Erudite faction in post-apocalyptic Chicago, is "willing to enslave minds and murder people" to keep the rest of the population "ignorant and safe and *inside the fence*" (Roth 667), *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* O'Brien expects Winston Smith to engage in "an act of self-destruction, an effort of the will" (Orwell 261) in order to internalize the Party's version of the truth for no better reason than to help build "a world of fear and treachery and torment" (Orwell 279).

However, far from being confined to real or fictional totalitarian regimes, the current levels reached by the cynical "manipulation of language" and implicitly of thought (Mohr 228) would appear to signal the emergence of a "post-truth" age in which language has become a "purely strategic medium" (McComiskey 6) lacking any reference to facts. It is therefore hardly surprising that dystopian references abounded among the social media reactions posted within hours of the 'alternative facts' debacle, and the printed press took no longer than three days to plot out the renewed interest in one of the central texts of dystopian literature – "1984 sales soar as 'alternative facts' and Trump claims echo Orwell's dystopian world" (*The Daily Telegraph*) – and to comment on a wider range of parallels between contemporary politics and fictional totalitarian regimes than immediately noticeable in analyses such as "Welcome to dystopia – George Orwell experts on Donald Trump" (*The Guardian*). While some later articles on the clearly popular topic – for instance Brian Wheeler's "The Trump era's top-selling dystopian novels" and Sophie's Gilbert's "1984 Isn't the Only Book Enjoying a Revival" – merely pointed out the

similarly escalating demand for a variety of narratives belonging to the same category, others actually endeavoured to boost the trend by suggesting alternative bibliographies. Thus, instead of further elaborating on the extent to which contemporary life appeared to imitate art, Alex Hern's "Forget *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These five dystopias better reflect Trump's US", Brian Bethune's "A dystopian reading list for the Donald Trump era", Marie Myung-Ok Lee's "Here are the books you need to read if you're going to resist Donald Trump" and Alec Banks' "5 Dystopian Novels to Read If Donald Trump Has You Scared Shitless" seem to work on the premise that carefully selected prose might provide its readers with the necessary instruments to make better sense of their reality, withstand manipulation and potentially fight back.

Fictional ploys such as the casual reduction of millennia of civilization to a handful of "beautiful and inspired" sayings attributed to "Our Ford" (Huxley 29), the incessant "doctoring" of "the documents of the past in order to make them agree with the ever-changing pronouncements of Big Brother in the present" (Gottlieb 81), the reformulation of United States history as far back as the establishment in 1790 of the "Firemen of America" by "First Fireman" Benjamin Franklin "to burn English-influenced books in the Colonies" (Bradbury 48) and the ruthless attempts to "efface all memory of the recent past in which women enjoyed a more liberated existence" entailed by "one of the central strategies of the Republic of Gilead for stabilizing its power" (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 167) evoke the perhaps less ingenious but equally abusive mechanisms employed by real totalitarian states to "play with" past and present alike "by rewriting or repressing it in order to manipulate and control their populations" (Sisk 93), not only eradicating "any reference to personal heritage or history" (Barton 9) but also incessantly "repurposing . . . the historical archive" (Snyder 189) and editing key moments in accordance with current needs. Perhaps the most sobering realization accompanying Winston's musings on his own contribution to the "process of continuous alteration . . . applied not only to newspapers, but to books, periodicals, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, films, soundtracks, cartoons, photographs" (Orwell 42) to rectify alleged "slips, errors, misprints, or misquotations" (Orwell 43) is based on the lucid recognition of the fact that access to the past relies exclusively on its various "traces – its documents, the testimony of witnesses, and other archival materials" (Hutcheon 58) and that the constant revision of reality so as to make it "match shifting political expediencies" that the Party is engaged in does not entail "replacing truth with fiction" but rather the replacement of "one fiction with another" (Booker, *Dystopian Impulse* 82). Whereas harbouring anxieties over an eventual suppression of the past and a concerted reduction of the present to the "empirica of daily life" (Moylan, *Untainted Sky* 149) might seem excessively paranoid in an age of apparently infinite storage possibilities, information overload and general disinterest in anything beyond one's immediate sphere can be just as conducive to loss of truth as its actual obliteration, as illustrated by Winston's failure to keep accurate track of either personal memories or the fictional narratives he had contributed to Ministry of Truth propaganda.

Winston's ultimate inability to win his belated and unequal battle against the Party can be attributed to his perception of "truth as something that exists in a complete and exteriorised form" rather than "the culmination of a dynamic process

(deeply steeped in contingency)” (Sampaio 143), yet it seems somewhat unfair to condemn his “perfidious and recalcitrant insistence on personal truth and insight” (Pordzik 123) given that the Party requires him to accept “mutable . . . dogma as immutable truth” (Horan 196). Indeed, while “the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously” (Orwell 223) might be commanded by a reasonably flexible and open-minded individual, the Party’s determination to impose the principles of doublethink whilst stifling all traces of subjectivity appears to condemn such an endeavour to failure. It is quite interesting to note that although Atwood’s Offred experiences the same need to tell her story “as a way of escape from the time trap of the present” and the same conflict between personal memories and the “lies of official history” (Howells 166), she not only accepts “the extent to which meaning is mediated by individual and historical context” (Snyder 189) but even goes as far as to admit that “her entire narrative is a reconstruction from memory” and, like any other retelling, is bound to be selective, possibly amounting to a mere “reduction and a distortion of what really happened” (Vevaina 88).

In its emphasis on its own “problematic relationship with the concept of a single reality, one identity, a truthful history” (LeBihan 104), *The Handmaid’s Tale* departs from the Orwellian model by pointing out the “occasional necessity” and possible merits of doublethink: far from inevitably subverting “the ability to reason clearly and logically,” Atwood’s version of doublethink helps “strengthen her protagonist’s resolve” and thus functions as a veritable “enabler of truth and hope” (Horan 196). It is nevertheless important to observe that Atwood’s decision to leave the narrative “open to various possibilities” (Horan 196) does not automatically validate Professor Pieixoto’s cavalier attitude toward historical ‘facts’ in his reconstruction of Offred’s story and instead reinforces the idea that “any amount of conscious or unconscious manipulation is possible” once the dead end up “in the hands of the living” (Vevaina 87). A not particularly surprising response, given its status as a man’s attempt “to reconstruct a woman’s discourse about the abuses of the male world” (Kuźnicki 33), Pieixoto’s version ultimately threatens to erase the significance of Offred’s account “as thoroughly as Gilead had tried to erase her identity” (Howells 169), depriving it of truth (Kuźnicki 33) and ensuring that the debasement she was subjected to while alive continues posthumously.

As far as the rather different predicaments of the female protagonists of recent young adult dystopias are concerned, while some of them are relatively successful in their efforts to not merely preserve “the past in the form of group memory” (Winter 229) but actually draw on its “alternative truths” and thus “‘speak back’ to hegemonic power” (Moylan, *Untainted Sky* 149), it is at least equally interesting to note the frequency with which they engage in the very practices that have contributed to their persecution. In her endeavour to expose governmental duplicity and abuse of power, Tris Prior is forced to acknowledge how easily her ancestors let go of their own past, severing all ties with a landscape of trauma and destruction but unwittingly condemning subsequent generations to a life of artifice and manipulation:

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‘The information in this video is to be restricted to those in government only,’ Amanda says. ‘You are to be a clean slate. But do not forget us.’ . . . ‘I am about to join your number,’ she says. ‘Like the rest of you, I will voluntarily forget my name, my family, and my home. I will take on a new identity, with false memories and a false history. . . . ‘My name will be Edith Prior,’ she says. ‘And there is much I am happy to forget.’ (Roth 669)

Similarly grim epiphanies, such as the fact that the faction experiment was allowed to continue in spite of its leaders’ abuses or that District 13 escaped obliteration and withdrew underground, leaving the remaining twelve to be punished for the rebellion it had started, represent important turning points in the protagonists’ attempts to bring down the various establishments oppressing them, yet in so doing both Tris and Katniss need to master deception, the former to sacrifice herself undeterred, the latter to beguile an entire country and thus ensure her own survival. Initially persuaded to “make something up” merely to prevent the establishment already depriving her of a future from “having the things that mattered” (Collins 118) to her in the past, Katniss eventually acknowledges the power of the screen and the fact that “perception is more important in the context of the Games than reality” (Brost 95) and reluctantly agrees to take part in the star-crossed lovers farce launched by Peeta. A surprisingly effective way of manipulating the “audience’s emotions to ensure its continued engagement” with the pair, the romance plot interwoven with the ruthless fight for survival and the publicized courtship that follows the conclusion of the Games force Katniss “to keep acting out” (Broad 120) feelings that are proving to be alarmingly genuine; while both the “fictionalization of her life and the narrative of her love for Peeta” are elaborated without her consent, the subsequent tension between her skilful use of “the conventions of romance for political leverage against the Capitol” and the extent to which “the act becomes real to her” (Broad 120) renders her virtually incapable of distinguishing genuine desire from prescribed displays of affection.

The responses to the equally ambiguous alternative truths of literature outlined in fictional dystopias constitute a perhaps even more sensitive topic, not only because even spaces with no direct experience of political totalitarianism such as Great Britain and the United States of America have had a relatively eventful history as far as literary censorship is concerned, but also because while official attempts to ban works of fiction are quite difficult to envisage in the democracies of the present, the same cannot be said about the general public’s own involvement in undermining literature, not to mention the fact that straightforward prohibition might actually constitute a lesser type of danger than gradual adulteration. Indeed, not only are school curricula and library stacks targeted by anxious parents and other concerned citizens determined to restrict access to works of fiction whose content they find objectionable, ostensibly to safeguard young readers’ innocence but more often than not in the pursuit of a less noble agenda, but the widespread disinclination to face the various challenges entailed by reading ensures that for a large percentage of the public exposure to canonical texts is confined to film adaptations or questionable Wikipedia summaries, singling out *Fahrenheit 451* as doubly prophetic in this respect. Indeed, while most readers’ abiding memory of Bradbury’s

dystopia resides in the unforgiving flames deployed with equal violence against illicit texts and the transgressors hiding them, Captain Beatty's condensed account of the stages leading up to the current climate contains uncomfortable echoes of real life phenomena ranging from radical abridgement to accusations of political incorrectness directed at a sizeable percentage of high literature and fairy tale lore:

Classics cut to fit fifteen-minute radio shows, then cut again to fill a two-minute book column . . . many were those whose sole knowledge of *Hamlet* . . . was a one-page digest in a book that claimed: 'now at least you can read all the classics; keep up with your neighbours.' . . . It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. Today, thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time. . . . Coloured people don't like *Little Black Sambo*. Burn it. White people don't feel good about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Burn it . . . Serenity, Montag. Peace, Montag. (Bradbury 72-8)

Whereas the leaders of Bradbury's hedonistic dystopia appear at least initially content to stand back and allow "the most dangerous enemy of truth and freedom, the solid unmoving cattle of the majority" (Bradbury 140) to slowly but inexorably condemn an increasing number of books to the pyre, Oceania's Newspeak project entails a considerably more insidious process of transformation, whereby various canonical writers are "rendered ideologically orthodox" (Booker, *Dystopian Literature* 212) by means of the same linguistic manipulation meant to control the minds of the citizens: "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)

As far as Atwood's fundamentalist theocracy is concerned, while the unexpected and tantalizing wealth of books hidden behind the closed door of the Commander's study would suggest that, much like Huxley's World Controller, the legislators of Gilead can break the rules with impunity, the realization that the Bible is "kept locked up" (Atwood 98) is likely to strike most readers as odd given that the new regime's rules and practices are validated by Old Testament precedents. The protagonist's prompt explanation – "It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read." (Atwood 98) – and the silent commentary punctuating the Commander's solemn reading make it perfectly clear that even this most patriarchal of texts needs to be subjected to a careful process of selection and occasionally amended by means of subtle modifications to perfectly fit the agenda of the government employing it: "*Blessed are the silent*. I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking." (Atwood 100)

In Lauren Oliver's *Delirium*, the fictional president and Consortium of the United States have "identified love as a disease" (3) to be cured and are trying to maintain a state of balance by means of surgical alteration of the brain, much in the same way in which the Librian government of *Equilibrium* uses Prozium to "eradicate the true source of man's inhumanity to man – his ability to feel" and thus

ensure that people's "own volatile natures" (Wimmer) would not lead to an inevitable fourth World War. One might therefore expect the ubiquitous and relentless regulators to subject most literary texts and works of art to the same unforgiving scrutiny, rating all the cultural products "that might tempt us to feel again" for "emotional content" (Wimmer) and destroying them, yet the actual state of affairs is somewhat less radical and correspondingly more sinister. The first mention of a familiar literary work therefore entails a certain element of surprise, triggered not so much by Lena's inclusion of *Romeo and Juliet* among her favourite books but by the play's position in the curriculum: "*Romeo and Juliet* is required reading in every freshman-year health class." (Oliver 55) Whereas Lena's narrative status, the relatively formulaic nature of most dystopian narratives and the prominence of Shakespearean references in the "intertextual matrix of the classical dystopian mode" (Moylan, *State, Agency* 136) renders her choice quite predictable, the survival of such a volatile remnant of "the dark days" when "people didn't realize how deadly a disease love was" (Oliver 5) might initially strike readers as an inexplicable oversight on the part of an otherwise alert censorship apparatus. However, it soon becomes disturbingly clear that the establishment has chosen to appropriate the text for its own ideological ends in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the British policy employing compulsory readings from the Shakespearean canon as a means of turning colonial subjects into "surrogate" Englishmen (Trivedi 264): "It's frightening: That's what I'm supposed to say. It's a cautionary tale, a warning about the dangers of the old world, before the cure." (Oliver 55)

Although Lena does not provide any further glimpses of her academic encounters with literary works, the subsequent revelation that poetry was banned "years ago, right after they discovered a cure" (Oliver 478) and the isolated line quoted at the beginning of Chapter 25 – "'I must be gone and live, or stay and die.' From the cautionary tale *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, reprinted in *100 Quotes to Know for the Boards*, by The Princeton Review" (Oliver 640) – would indicate that the public's knowledge of *Romeo and Juliet* and similar texts was confined to carefully selected excerpts meant to reinforce the official agenda. The chapter epigraphs are in fact particularly illustrative in this respect, occasioning quite detailed insights into the complex system of censorship, abridgement and rewriting employed by the state, its processes ranging from the almost total obliteration of love lyrics – "'i carry your heart with me (i carry it in my heart),' a poem by e. e. cummings, banned, listed in the *Comprehensive Compilation of Dangerous Words and Ideas*, www.ccdwi.gov.org (Oliver 663) – to the cynical rewording of Biblical texts in accordance with the political agenda:

The devil stole into the Garden of Eden. He carried with him the disease – amor deliria nervosa – in the form of a seed. It grew and flowered into a magnificent apple tree, which bore apples as bright as blood. (From *Genesis: A Complete History of the World and the Known Universe*, by Steven Horace, PhD, Harvard University. (Oliver 40)

Whereas most adult dystopias appear to be devised as "bleak, cautionary tales" in an endeavour to heighten by means of immediacy and dread the message

that the “terrible future” they envisage “must be prevented before it is too late” (Childs 187), the rapidly growing corpus of young adult dystopian fiction is pervaded by an undeniable thread of optimism, resulting to a large extent from the fact that most of its protagonists are sufficiently “awakened to reality” to “seek out the truth for themselves” (McDonough and Wagner 158) rather than passively accept the official versions imposed on them. Resistance to “collective manipulation” is particularly noticeable in Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* trilogy, whose main female character displays actual immunity to lies as well as to the various “serums and inoculations used to control the population of her world” (Barton 15). In other cases, awareness of governmental and media manipulation is acute enough to preclude all confidence in one’s own ability to deliver an unadulterated message; thus, notwithstanding the fact that her impact on the audience is particularly noticeable “when she is ‘being herself’” (Brost 95), Katniss casually dismisses her ability first to win the Games and then to shift public opinion as the Mockingjay, assuming the citizens of Panem are responding to a version of her constructed by the Capitol (Green-Barteet 39) and later by the Resistance rather than to her real identity. Difficult though it may be to attribute positive nuances to Katniss’s grim view of the world and low level of confidence in her personal charisma and abilities, it is important to note that the protagonist’s extreme scepticism ultimately enables her to correctly assess the threat posed by two ruthlessly manipulative megalomaniacs and to eradicate the greater danger.

Although most readers of dystopian narratives are likely to be in agreement on the extent to which their “recent popularity and scope” signals “something about our society” (MacKay Demerjian 2), it seems somewhat more difficult to decide whether to dismiss this state of affairs as a momentarily escalating but more likely than not short-lived trend, deplore it as “a sad commentary on our age” (Atwood, *Writing Utopia* 95) or continue to take comfort in the belief that by allowing their audience to experience “anxiety and fear in the safe confines of a book” the most “negative, downbeat, dystopian futures” (Slaughter xxii) may be of greater use than immediately apparent. Whereas the attempt to place us “in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now” (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash 2) might fail in its endeavour to instil fear in the minds of readers inured in equal measure to fictional apocalyptic scenarios and gloomy realities, dystopia’s somewhat less ambitious endeavour to encourage us “to confront our roles in relation to current social ills” (Sisk 179) might actually yield more concrete results, if not necessarily prompting revolutionary reactions at least cultivating a more inquisitive and cautious frame of mind in one’s consumption of information and various interactions with the world.

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