Noémie Jequier
noemie.jequier@unine.ch
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Prof. Patrick Vincent

"We lived, as usual, by ignoring": Complicity in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* are often read as powerful critiques of authoritarian governments. However, rather than focusing only on overt acts of physical violence, these novels expose the more subtle, everyday forms of complicity that enable such regimes to exist. In both Atwood's Gilead and Coetzee's unnamed Empire, power is maintained not only through repression, physical torture, and overt coercion, but through the willing passivity of individuals who choose disregard, thoughtlessness, and inaction. Offred's statement that "we lived, as usual, by ignoring" (Atwood, 62) illustrates the dynamic of both texts, in which denial becomes the routine and inaction a form of complicity. In this essay, I will argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* illustrate how authoritarian systems rely on the complicity of ordinary individuals who, in the name of survival, comfort, or to preserve a sense of moral innocence, come to internalize and reproduce oppressive structures. They reveal how disregard, passivity, and self-preserving actions transform individuals into participants in their own domination. First, I will show that Offred and the magistrate recognize injustice yet choose to ignore it to preserve their comfort and stability. Secondly, I will examine how this passivity develops into a deeper form of complicity, as both characters internalize and reproduce the logic of the oppressive political systems they inhabit. Finally, I will analyze how their first-person narratives construct self-justifying accounts that conceal or minimize their responsibility and present them as reluctant participants or moral exceptions. Looking at the process from passive ignorance to internalization and finally to self-justification, I will demonstrate that complicity in both novels is not unusual but becomes the norm under authoritarian rule. These novels ultimately suggest that such regimes depend less on tyrants than on the willingness of ordinary people to accommodate, normalize, and perpetuate injustice in everyday life.

Noémie Jequier
noemie.jequier@unine.ch
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Complicity begins with the desire to preserve private comfort, which leads people to ignore political violence. Both Offred and the magistrate witness violence and injustice, yet choose inaction, supporting oppressive systems through their deliberate disregard and their desire to preserve personal comfort. Offred and the magistrate initially represent ordinary citizens whose positions of relative privilege allow them to remain detached from the violence around them. Their desire for stability and tranquility leads them to ignore injustice, even when they acknowledge it. In this sense, their behavior aligns with Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil", according to which moral failure does not arise from fanaticism but from thoughtlessness and disengagement. Before the establishment of Gilead, Offred exemplifies this passive complicity. Indeed, she recalls that "[w]e lived, as usual, by ignoring" (Atwood, 62), insisting that "[i]gnoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (62). This distinction is crucial because it shows that Offred was never unaware of the violence surrounding her but actively chose to dismiss it. She perceives the reports of murdered and mutilated women as distant and irrelevant: "There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with as they used to say, but they were about *other women*, and the men who did such things were *other men*. None of them were the men we knew" (62, emphasis added). To Offred, these crimes were like "bad dreams dreamt by others" (62), affecting "other women" and committed by "other men". By insisting that "none of them were the men we knew" and that "[w]e were the people who were not in the papers" (62), Offred constructs a reassuring boundary between herself and the victims of violence. This psychological distancing allows her to perceive oppression as exceptional rather than systemic. She also believes that she will never be persecuted and, as a result, she does not think that she needs to act against political violence and domination. As Stillman and Johnson note, "Offred exemplifies what not to do before Gilead consolidated its

power. Offred ignored, romanticized, and accommodated. She was complacent about her own status and rights" (Stillman & Johnson, 81).

Although she is only one of many individuals who ignore political violence, Offred's complacency ultimately facilitates Gilead's rise to power. Her attitude illustrates what Arendt describes as thoughtlessness, meaning a refusal to question the moral implications of political changes. Instead of questioning authority, the gradual loss of rights for women and the rise of misogyny, Offred normalizes oppression and injustice until they become a part of everyday life. Moreover, even after Gilead's regime is established, she continues to prioritize her own survival and comfort over collective resistance. In fact, Offred "rejects the anti-Gilead illegalities proposed by Ofglen" (74), who tries to involve Offred in the Mayday network. She remains "self-absorbed, focused on her own happiness or survival, and unconcerned with women as a group, with society at large" (81). Her complicity therefore persists through a conscious decision to avoid risk and responsibility. When Ofglen understands Offred's lack of desire to engage in collective sites of resistance, she gives up on her: "Ofglen is giving up on me. She whispers less, talks more about the weather", and Offred does not feel regret about this but relief (Atwood, 279) because she can avoid responsibility and risking her life for the bigger cause.

In contrast, figures such as Moira and Offred's mother actively resist oppression, demonstrating that resistance is possible and alternatives to passivity do exist even under totalitarian domination. For example, Offred's mother participates in street demonstrations before Gilead's establishment, acting "with other feminists to try to maintain or expand women's freedom" (Stillman & Johnson, 81). As for Offred's best friend, Moira, she attempts to escape Gilead and successfully runs away from the Red Centre. Moira is a powerful woman who "refuses to succumb to the despairing sense of security that complacency offers" (80), and

she represents a “persistent striving for freedom, a resistance to accept control and definition by others” (80). Figures such as Offred’s mother and Moira further emphasize Offred’s inaction and complicity with Gilead’s regime.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, one can observe a similar dynamic in the magistrate’s behavior. Just like Offred, the magistrate values comfort and stability above all else, presenting himself as a man who has “not asked for more than a quiet life in quiet times” (Coetzee, 8). He lives a privileged life, without worrying about anything: “I am a country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the Empire, serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire […] For the rest I watch the sun rise and set, eat and sleep and am content” (8). The magistrate is fully aware of the torture inflicted on the barbarian prisoners. Nevertheless, he repeatedly chooses not to intervene: “If I unlock the gate in the dead of night, I wonder, will the fisherfolk sneak away? But I do nothing” (21). His inaction is not the result of ignorance but of deliberate avoidance. When he is confronted with the death of a child in the prisoners’ camp, he rejects the responsibility for this tragedy onto Colonel Joll, although he had multiple opportunities to prevent it: “I curse Colonel Joll for all the trouble he has brought *me*, and for the shame too” (21, emphasis added), lamenting the “trouble” and “shame” brought upon him rather than expressing genuine sympathy for the grieving mother of the child. The magistrate’s reaction reveals his complete indifference to the suffering of others. His perspective is self-centred; to him, personal discomfort outweighs moral responsibility. Moreover, the magistrate actively distances himself from the violence he witnesses. Indeed, he tries “to pay no attention” (23) to the prisoners in the yard and withdraws to his private quarters, shuts the windows of his room and tries to read, “straining [his] ears to hear or not to hear sounds of violence” (23-24).

This oscillation between awareness of what is going on and denial highlights the deliberate nature of his inaction. He knows what is happening; he guesses “the fear, the

bewilderment, the abasement" (23) when the innocent prisoners are being questioned and tortured, yet he still decides not to act. The magistrate's primary concern remains his own comfort. In fact, he regrets having chosen to live "in the rambling apartment over the storerooms and kitchen" (22) rather than "in the attractive villa with geraniums in the windows which falls to the lot of the civil magistrate" (Coetzee, 22) because of the noise he hears coming from the barbarians in the prison yard. He also thinks it is unfortunate "that all the doors of the barracks block as well as the stairway leading up to [his] apartment open on to the yard" (23) because he can hear the prisoners' bad treatment. He does not like the intrusion of suffering into his domestic space and wants to "sleep" because he feels "old and tired" (22), he would like to shut himself from the reality around him.

Hannah Arendt's analysis of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* can further illuminate the magistrate's inaction. In this trial report, she shows how individuals in oppressive systems detach themselves from the moral consequences of their actions by pretexting that it was a matter of duty. For example, Adolf Eichmann famously claimed that "he had lived his whole life according to Kant's moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty"[1] (Arendt, chapter VIII, 89), presenting himself as a law-abiding citizen. However, as Arendt underlines, Kant's philosophy precisely depends on an individual's faculty of moral judgment, "which rules out blind obedience" (chapter VIII, 89). Eichmann's declaration reveals a form of thoughtlessness, since rather than exercising his judgement, he executes orders. Eichmann also declared that he was no longer "master of his own deeds" and "unable to change anything" (chapter VIII, 89-90), framing his actions as inevitable and minimizing his agency within the system. The magistrate similarly illustrates this type of bureaucratic complicity and

[1] Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Pinguin Books, 1977. Chapter VIII: "Duties of a Law-Abiding Citizen". This is an eBook and the page numbering varies, therefore I give the name of the chapter where the quotes can be found.

moral disengagement. Although he does not explicitly appeal to duty, he portrays himself as a minor official, a mere civil servant who "never wished to be drawn into this" (Coetzee, 8) or "did not mean to be embroiled in this" (8), having "not asked for more than a quiet life in quiet times" (8), therefore diminishing his responsibility in the Empire's violent domination of the barbarians. Just like Eichmann, the magistrate positions himself as someone carried along by a system that he does not control. However, this perception masks the extent of his involvement. He is completely aware of the violence inflicted on the barbarian prisoners in his yard and even acknowledges that he could act, yet he chooses not to. Instead, he provides the space and silence that allows this torture to continue. In Eichmann's and the magistrate's cases, their withdrawal from critical judgment and moral engagement allows them to participate in violence while maintaining a sense of personal detachment.

Thus, Offred and the magistrate are not ignorant of the injustices and political violence surrounding them. However, both consciously avoid confronting it. Their complicity emerges from a desire to maintain personal stability and avoid disruption. They prioritize comfort over moral responsibility, contributing to the normalization of violence and supporting authoritarian rule. Therefore, both novels suggest that the first stage of complicity lies in the deliberate choice to ignore oppression.

As both narratives unfold, passive ignorance gives way to more insidious and complex forms of complicity. Both characters not only witness oppression but also gradually internalize the logic of the regimes they inhabit and begin to reproduce its structure through their actions, relationships, and ways of thinking. Offred and the magistrate become entangled in the systems they seem to resist. In Gilead, this internalization is facilitated by the regime's isolation of individuals and its systematic destruction of identity and solidarity, leading individuals to "become unindicted co-conspirators in their own oppression" (Stillman & Johnson, 75) as the

regime's structures of power reshape their sense of self. Offred's apparent acts of resistance, for instance her illicit meetings with the Commander and her relationship with Nick, seem at first to challenge Gilead's order. Yet, these acts ultimately reinforce the system they appear to subvert and inscribe Offred in the gendered power structures of Gilead. Indeed, as Stillman and Johnson note, these secret meetings with the Commander and Nick "directly enmesh her into the system of sex, power, and corruption that characterizes the actual workings of Gilead and powerfully construct her as a being who defines herself by her body" (Stillman & Johnson, 75-76). In defining herself through desire and sexual relationships, Offred reproduces the identity that Gilead imposes on women, and participates in the reduction of women to objects subjected to male control. Her provocative gestures, for example moving her hips to tease the guards when passing in front of them (Atwood, 28), trap her within this logic and reduce her identity and value to her body (Stillman & Johnson, 76). What appears as resistance is therefore shaped and limited by Gilead's structures.

This process of internalization is linked to the necessity to adopt strategic identities in oppressive regimes. As Elisabeth Hansot argues, Offred survives because she performs the role that is required of her by Gilead's regime and constructs a self that conforms to the Commander's expectations. Such a performance is essential, argues Hansot: "without masks there is no long-term survival" (Hansot, 63), but this strategy is dangerous. In fact, the longer Offred inhabits this imposed identity, the more difficult it becomes for her to maintain a distinction between this performance and her true self. Knowing "how to enact just such an impoverished self as she fantasizes for the Commander without being captured by it" (62) and maintaining this balance is an exhausting task. The effort to "enact" the required identity may lead to "lethargy and acquiescence" (62). Not surprisingly, we observe that Offred breaks from within. When she encounters Japanese tourists, for instance, she is "fascinated" but also

"repelled" (Atwood, 34) and immediately perceives them as "undressed" and inappropriate (34). Here, "[t]he necessity of correctly inhabiting the public persona […] merges with the risk of inhabiting it too fully" (Hansot, 63). Offred even reflects that "[i]t has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this" (Atwood, 34), illustrating the extent to which Gilead's norms have reshaped her perception and sense of self, rendering acts of resistance difficult.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, imperial discourse constructs the barbarians as inferior, diseased, and subhuman to legitimize their domination. Although the magistrate insists that he is morally distinct from Colonel Joll and the Empire's torturers, he reproduces the same structures of domination in his treatment of the barbarian girl: "I feed her, shelter her, *use her body*" (Coetzee, 32, emphasis added) states the magistrate, revealing that his taking "care" of the girl is based on her submission. He does not restore her humanity; instead, he reduces the girl to an object of use, imitating the logic of exploitation he claims to reject. Moreover, he rapes her: "There used to be moments when *she stiffened* at certain intimacies; but now *her body yields* when I nuzzle my face into her belly or clasp her feet between my thighs. *She yields to everything*" (32, emphasis added). This example demonstrates that he feels entitled to impose his desires on a figure he does not recognize as a subject with a conscience and feelings. Imperial discourse shapes the magistrate's perception of the girl. Indeed, he reduces the girl's identity to her severed body. He portrays her in terms of her "incomplete body" (50) towards which he feels revulsion, and he perceives her as "a dummy of straw and leather" (50), thereby adopting the imperial language and gaze that defines the barbarian girl as an alien "other". When the magistrate says that he accepts her mutilated body, he nevertheless declares that it has become to him a "new deficient body, feeling no more deformed than a cat feels deformed for having claws instead of fingers" (61). This animalistic comparison – one of many in the novel – reveals a process of dehumanization. The magistrate indeed repeatedly fails to perceive

the girl as a human being. As a result, like the other barbarian prisoners, the girl is thus reduced to what philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life", a life "which may be killed but not sacrificed" (Agamben, 82), meaning a form of existence that is stripped of legal and political protection, exposed to violence without consequence. In fact, the girl acknowledges her lack of alternatives: the magistrate does not permit her to beg in the streets, which was her way to make a living, and because she is blind, she has no way to travel through the desert alone and return to her people. Therefore, her staying with the magistrate is her only option to survive. When he asks her why she stays with him, she answers: "Because there is nowhere else to go" (Coetzee, 46), highlighting the structural coercion underlying her apparent compliance. The magistrate's sense of power stems from this condition of vulnerability: because she exists outside the law's protection, he can do whatever he pleases to her with complete impunity. He even imagines himself tying her to a chair and beating her (46), and further says that "[i]t seems all one whether I lie down beside her and fall asleep or fold her in a sheet and bury her in the snow" (47), knowing that if he kills the girl, there will be no consequences for him. A profound ambivalence thus marks his "relationship" with the girl, and he never ceases to oscillate between gestures of "care" and fantasies of violence. This ambiguity shows the extent to which the same logic of imperial domination and violence shapes his actions. Although he momentarily recognizes his complicity, saying that "[t]he distance between [himself] and her torturers […] is negligible" (29), he does not change his behavior. Even his attempt to bring the girl back to her people in the desert remains untangled in the structures of domination he claims to oppose. Indeed, the magistrate first offers the girl the choice of either leaving with the other barbarians or returning to the city with him, and says he will not force her (77). However, immediately after he aggressively tells the girl that he wants her to come back to town with him: "'I wish to ask you very clearly to return to the town with me. Of your own choice.' I grip her arm. 'Do you

understand me? That is what I want'" (77). This example reveals his inability to relinquish control and overcome his desire to possess the girl, as well as the limits of his moral transformation.

Therefore, in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, complicity evolves from inaction into a deeper form of participation through internalization. Offred and the magistrate reproduce systems of domination in their own behavior. As a result, the boundary between resistance and complicity is obscured, preventing them from fully grasping their involvement. The way in which Offred and the magistrate recount their experiences reinforces this ambiguity.

Through first-person narration, both characters reshape their actions and construct self-serving narratives that conceal their implication and responsibility, ultimately reinforcing their complicity. Because both novels are narrated in the first-person, the events are filtered through the subjective perspectives of Offred and the magistrate, allowing the protagonists to present themselves in a favorable light and reshape their experiences as they see fit. Instead of confronting their involvement in Gilead's regime or the Empire's domination, Offred and the magistrate portray themselves as reluctant participants, victims of circumstances or even moral exceptions, inventing personal narratives and fantasies to withdraw from reality and hide their responsibility and complicity. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred replaces political engagement with romanticization, especially through her relationship with Nick. This emotional refuge allows her to withdraw from the oppressive reality and renounce control over her destiny. However, her romantic fantasies are dangerous because they ultimately "paralyz[e] her and delivers control of her destiny into the hands of others" (Stillman & Johnson, 78). Offred even admits that she no longer wishes to leave: "The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him" (Atwood,

279). Thus, Offred's relationship with Nick, which initially appears as a private act of resistance, becomes a mechanism of passivity and inaction, enclosing her within Gilead's system. In contrast, other characters such as Moira remain "engaged fully in the world surrounding [them], not mired in romantic fantasies" (Stillman & Johnson, 79), highlighting Offred's retreat into subjectivity. Her retrospective and self-conscious narration strengthens this tendency. She repeatedly acknowledges that her account is a reconstruction, admitting for instance: "I made that up. It didn't happen this way" (Atwood, 269) or "There wasn't any thunder though, I added that in. To cover up the sounds, which I am ashamed of making" (271), and again "It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is *a reconstruction*" (271, emphasis added). These examples reveal that her narrative is not a veracious record of events but a carefully shaped version of them. Offred explicitly wishes that the story was different and "showed [her] in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia" (275), suggesting an awareness of her own passivity, as well as a desire to hide or minimize her responsibility by reshaping events. Therefore, her storytelling and self-deceptive narratives serve to manage guilt and allow her to reinterpret her inaction while maintaining a coherent sense of self.

Similarly, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate constructs a narrative that emphasizes his moral distinction from the Empire's agents of violence, particularly from Colonel Joll. He presents himself as the barbarian girl's protector, claiming that he has given her "protection" and "relieved her of the shame of begging" (Coetzee, 34). Yet this narrative conceals the coercive nature of their relationship. By forbidding her to beg on the town streets, which was her way to make a living, the magistrate leaves her with no other viable alternative but to depend on him. The girl could either work for him as a scullery maid or go back to the desert alone and die. His insistence that "[t]here is nothing to link me with torturers, people

who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars" (48) further illustrates his attempt to distance himself from imperial violence, even if he reproduces it in a more private and insidious form. In fact, the magistrate fails to recognize that domination not only describes overt brutality but also control, coercion, and objectification. Moreover, he frames his actions as morally motivated, presenting them as attempts of reparation: "I wanted to do what was right, I wanted to make reparation […] there must always be a place for penance and reparation" (Coetzee, 88). Thus, he constructs an image of himself as a morally exceptional figure – a protector, a reformer, and even a martyr who suffers for other people's crimes, declaring: "I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not *suffer for his crimes*!" (48, emphasis added). Colonel Joll explicitly challenges this carefully self-constructed image, accusing the magistrate of aspiring to the role of "the One Just Man, the man who is prepared to sacrifice his freedom to his principles" (124), and of imagining himself as a "martyr" (125). Colonel Joll's remarks expose the way the magistrate's narrative functions as a form of self-deception that allows him to avoid recognizing his deeper complicity with the Empire's regime. This process echoes Hannah Arendt's analysis in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where Adolf Eichmann repeatedly portrays himself as a victim of circumstances, insisting that "[h]is guilt came from obedience, and that obedience is praised as a virtue" and declaring that this virtue "had been abused by the Nazi leaders", that "he was not one of the ruling clique" but the "victim of a fallacy", condemned to "suffer for the acts of others"[2] (Arendt, chapter XV, 160). By presenting himself as an obedient citizen and the scapegoat of the Nazi regime, Eichmann constructs a narrative that shifts responsibility away from himself. The magistrate's self-portrayal follows a strikingly similar pattern. Indeed, he simultaneously portrays himself as a protector, a victim, and a moral exception, a person who has always "believed in civilized behaviour" (Coetzee, 25). Offred's narrative, although less

[2] Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Chapter XV: "Judgment, Appeal, and Execution".

overt, similarly reveals a tendency to reshape events to make them seem more bearable and morally understandable. Eventually, both narrators illustrate how individuals in oppressive systems tend to conceal their implication and complicity, reshaping their actions to be able to live with them. The protagonists' control over the narrative allows them to minimize their responsibility and present themselves in a more sympathetic light. The magistrate ultimately recognizes that he was not "the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel" but another side of imperial rule: "I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy" (Coetzee, 148-9). This realization exposes the gap between self-perception and reality. Therefore, in both novels, storytelling serves to mask complicity while preserving the illusion of innocence. Narration becomes a subtle yet powerful form of self-defence.

In conclusion, in both Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, complicity develops gradually and becomes a part of everyday life. I have first demonstrated that while Offred and the magistrate acknowledge injustices, they choose to ignore them to preserve their comfort and stability. Secondly, I showed that this initial passivity and lack of critical thinking develop into a deeper form of complicity, as both protagonists internalize and reproduce the logic of the oppressive regimes they inhabit. Then, I analyzed how their first-person narratives construct biased accounts that obscure their responsibility and present them as constrained or morally flawless. Finally, both novels exemplify Arendt's concept of "the banality of evil" (Arendt, chapter XV, 163): the idea that evil does not arise from fanaticism, but from ordinary individuals who fail to think critically and choose self-preservation over moral responsibility. Therefore, authoritarian systems are maintained not only through overt violence but also through the willingness of individuals to accommodate and normalize injustice.

Noémie Jequier
noemie.jequier@unine.ch
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