
WORKING PAPER SERIES

1984 AND *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*:
HISTORICIZING THE PRESENT

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In the process of describing what is foreign to us, we describe ourselves. In “The New Historicism and *Heart of Darkness*” Ross C. Murfin wrote:

A work of literature, it [*Heart of Darkness*] is at the same time a kind of historical document. It undoubtedly presents as accurate a picture of colonized Africa as many other supposedly non-fictional accounts written during the same period. And it is of anthropological interest as well. It tells us little, perhaps, about Congolese peoples, but a great deal about Europeans of the period: about their behavior, social organization, rituals, prejudices, taboos, and symbols. (226)

A similar point can be made in the case of some of George Orwell's essays, “Shooting an Elephant” for example, or maybe “A Hanging,” which are both set in India and deal, ostensibly, with the author's experiences as a colonial police officer, but in fact serve as vehicles for Orwell's critique of Western imperialism. In “Shooting an Elephant” Orwell wrote “I perceived in this moment [the moment he shot a berserk elephant] that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom he destroys” (449). The point of Orwell's essay then is made about European colonialism. But the larger point is that the experience of a foreign culture shed light on European culture for both Conrad and Orwell.

That in itself doesn't seem odd. It's a commonplace that travel, visiting foreign places and people, is supposed to broaden one's perspective. It's interesting that the work Orwell is probably best known for is his dystopia, *1984*, which is set in a future time and deals with places, people, and events that aren't ‘real’ in the way the setting, places, and people of the essays were ‘real.’ One reason for setting the novel in the future is that such a setting might, just as the foreign setting in the essays did, ‘shed light’ on European culture as it was when Orwell was writing. Furthermore, one might be prompted to ask why Orwell chose to make his critique of post-industrial society in the form of a novel and not nonfiction—for some would no doubt argue that his essays such as “Politics and the English Language” are better than his fiction. One answer to that question is that the fictional mode might be a more rhetorical, a more persuasive mode of expression than the non-fictional mode. That this is so might be argued on various grounds, but I want to focus on the view that if the novel is really about the present, not the future (and I think there is agreement on that point), then setting the story in the future in effect historicizes the present moment, lets us view ourselves as though we are history. This is a powerful way of giving us perspective on ourselves, of giving us distance on ourselves in much the way setting the essays amid a foreign culture provided perspective.

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published *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1986, just two years after Orwell's novel received another reading in the year 1984. There are many parallels between the two books. One might wonder whether Atwood

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herself didn't re-read Orwell, and, if she did, how much, intentionally or not, she was influenced. Certainly the method of Orwell's book, historicizing the present by setting the events of the story in the future, is a method Atwood uses. And certainly the object of both writers is to question their own cultures.

If the purpose of projecting the present into the future in these novels is to give us a way of seeing the present more clearly, then some questions about

Atwood's novel might be answered. One problem that is interesting to me is the concluding *Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale*, which is a 'partial transcript' of a 22nd century academic conference on the Gileadean era which is the era of Offred's taped narrative. Why did Atwood choose to end the novel in this way? Why not stop with the conclusion of Offred's narrative? One result of ending with the *Historical Notes* is to underscore the historicizing of the present moment; the conference participants talk about our culture, our near future, as though they are footnotes to world history. One side effect, then, might be a deflation, or 'decentering' in post-modernist terms, of our culture. It seems fairly clear to me that Atwood intends for us to see our own smug complacency with the *status quo* in the *Historical Notes*. For example, Crescent Moon's comment that "this period [the Gileadean era] well repays further study, responsible as it ulti-

mately was for re-drawing the map of the world" (299) has the same tone of self-confident 'flat world' finality, the tone that this is the way the world is and was meant to be, that has in the past characterized the Western attitude toward the foreign both inside and outside our culture. Or again in Professor Pieixoto's understated warning that "certain periods of history quickly become ... the stuff of not especially edifying legend and the occasion for a good deal of hypocritical self-congratulation ... [and that] surely we have learned by now that such [moral] judgments are of necessity culture-specific" (302), which I read as lip service, where I hear again the supercilious tone of the power elite. The sexist jokes—"you ... will understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats. (Laughter, applause.)" (301). Or 'The Underground Female Road' ... since dubbed by some of our historical wags 'The Underground Frailroad' (Laughter, groans.)" (301) suggest that attitudes in the 22nd century are not much different from our own time. Atwood means for us to see ourselves in the parody.

The entire closing section brings to mind the criticisms leveled at historiography by the post-moderns in books such as *Writing Culture* by Clifford and Marcus, specifically that history is not just, as Ross C. Murfin suggests, "a mere chronicle of facts and events but, rather, a ... 'thick description' of human reality, one that raises questions of interest to anthropologists and sociologists, as well as those posed by traditional historians" (226). The questions and hypotheses discussed by Professor Pieixoto in Atwood's book are those of the traditional historian: "If we could establish an identity for the narrator" (303); or "The reasons for this decline [in the Caucasian birthrates] are not altogether clear to us" (304); or "If we could iden-

tify the elusive ‘Commander,’ we felt at least some progress would have been made” (306); or Professor Pieixoto’s regret over the ‘gaps’ that remain in the picture because “our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind ...could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy” (310). This questioning of Offred’s account is framed in a style and from within a cultural background that is familiar to Atwood’s reader, that history is knowing ‘who,’ ‘what,’ ‘when,’ ‘where,’ and ‘why,’ and that the historian is an unbiased, objective ‘reporter’ or a ‘spy’ who brings secret information back from the alien camp; but from the post-modernist perspective this line of questioning would at least in part miss the point that Offred’s diary itself is the history, the ‘thick description’ referred to by Murfin.

1984 has its protagonist, Winston Smith, like Offred, keeping a diary. As he makes his first entry, he begins to wonder why he is writing at all:

For whom, it suddenly occurred to him to wonder, was he writing this diary? For the future, for the unborn ... [But] how could you communicate with the future? It was of its nature impossible. Either the future would resemble the present in which case it would not listen to him, or it would be different from it, and his predicament would be meaningless. (10)

Smith touches on the problem of perspective—if the future resembles the present, ‘it would not listen to him;’ in fact, of course, he is communicating with the ‘past,’ which is historicized by setting the novel in the future as I’ve already suggested.