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# THE USES OF HISTORY—SOME THOUGHTS ON HISTORICAL FICTION

Despite the sensational claim made following the collapse of Communism at the beginning of the nineties that we were entering an era marked by "an end to history", the exact reverse has in fact proved to be true. The "return of history" is only too evident, whether in the guise of resurgent nationalism, the growing general interest in historical issues as well as burgeoning numbers of histories and biographies, or—in more strictly literary terms—the sharp increase in good historical fiction and the literary rehabilitation of the genre as such. This is hardly surprising. Since the sixties at least there has been an observable turn to history that has affected a whole spectrum of concerns running from the heritage industry at one end, to culture and gender studies, poststructuralism and postmodernism, at the other. In fact, it could be argued that historicism, in the broadest sense of the word, has been the major cultural and intellectual phenomenon of the past fifty years[1].

One aspect of this change has been the new/renewed respectability accorded historical fiction. The number of leading writers, especially in the English-speaking world, who have written first-rate works in this genre in the past thirty years or so is remarkable. It is enough to recall Golding and Farrell, Ackroyd and Barker in England, Styron and Doctorow and Morrison in the United States, Atwood and Ondaatje in Canada, Malouf in Australia. Of particular interest to literary critics has been what many see as a "new", postmodern form of the genre. This is historical fiction of a self-reflexive kind, in which the presence of the author is strongly felt, shaping the fable or commenting on the text itself. Highlighting the difficulty of the task of historical reconstruction, these works implicitly and at times explicitly reveal the way in which every past is *our* past, our *present* past, as it were; history here is seen not as a process, a series of events moving forward in time, but rather as a construction, as another kind of

1 See Paul Hamilton, *Historicism*. London: Routledge 1996 for an extensive treatment of the subject.

narrative text, which means that it is discontinuous, that the potential exists for many kinds of differing histories. Linda Hutcheon terms these kinds of works "historiographic metafiction" (5, and *passim*), while Stephen Connor prefers the term "historicized fiction" (142-143). In both cases the distinction is being drawn between "fiction about history, and fiction about its own historically relative construction of history" (O'Connor 143).

There are, however, three main problems linked to this fascination with "historicized fiction". First, it is often naive in its belief that writers in earlier ages were unaware of just how constructed the past really is. Any competent medieval chronicler could offer sophisticated lessons in this field, and Malory, for example, actually foregrounds this awareness rather archly at several points in his narrative. Defoe was clearly playing with this concept, both concealing and revealing historical "truth", in his *Journal of the Plague Year*. Examples could easily be multiplied. Second, critics pushing the idea that this form of historical fiction is something new often suffer from, to quote Steven O'Connor, "the illusion that, prior to the emergence of [this kind of historical fiction], novel writing either numbly accepted its relegation as false and unserious or, more alarmingly, maintained its dignity by borrowing the implausible claims of history to represent the real" (131). It is easy to see how this idea arose as a kind of logical extension of the belief that the novel was ultimately about "realism", and that its focus on, in Auerbach's words, "everyday practical reality" represented the culmination of a millenium of concern for mimesis (489). Yet this positivistic belief in "progress" should be as irrelevant to literary criticism today as it is to other branches of intellectual endeavour. The third problem with most criticism focused on "historicized fiction" is that it privileges the formal level, showing *how* the authors achieve their effects, and perhaps *what* this tells us about the nature of history—or their view of the nature of history—but seldom asking *why* they are doing it, *what function* is served by works of this type. If the only point is to show us that history is a text like any other, why bother to write historical fiction at all? But if we ask what particular aims are being served by individual works of historical fiction, it quickly becomes evident that they cover a whole range, and that even within the category of "historicized fiction" its particular techniques are used for many purposes, purposes which it shares with other works of historical fiction written in more traditional ways. So it would seem that a different approach should be sought if one wants to understand what the writers are actually trying to achieve in their works.

Genres are commonly regarded as arbitrary conventions. But of course that is why they are so appropriate for the study of that other arbitrary convention, literature. Their great virtue, the reason why they have remained central to literary criticism for more than two millenia, is that they offer a convenient means of classification for the purposes of analysis and discussion. Some of the most sophisticated genre criticism in the past century has been that of Northrop Frye—though of course he himself would probably not agree that genres are completely arbitrary, for he preferred to view them as the reflection of a kind of "deep grammar" of the human imagination that is embodied in archetypes. One

of Frye's most stimulating uses of genre theory comes in *The Anatomy of Criticism* in his discussion of the specific forms of fiction (303-314). A major impulse for his analysis was a wish to break the equation so often made in readers' minds between "the novel" and "(prose) fiction", the assumption that all prose fiction should aspire to the condition of the novel, and accompanying this the assumption that, as such, all prose fiction should share the central feature of the novel, articulated so confidently by the French critic Cazamian as the requirement for "sober truth, an objective outlook upon things" (1022). Frye suggested a scheme in which there are four forms of prose fiction, in which what is important is not the subject matter of individual works, but the author's perspective on that subject matter. The focus—of the author and the work—may be outward or inward—what Frye terms extroverted or introverted; that is, it may produce "a record of the world, or a vision of reality transformed by the imagination" (Martin 34). At the same time, the subject may be apprehended in personal or intellectual terms. The combination of these factors then produces four basic forms of prose fiction, to which he gives the names novel, romance, anatomy and confession.

According to Frye, the novel is personal and extroverted, the record of the interplay between the individual and the world "out there", and in it the key role is played by realism, whether of a physical or psychological kind. This is fairly straightforward, and close to the traditional understanding of the novel. The romance is personal and introverted, not concerned with realistic credibility, but dealing in idealizations, in psychological archetypes. This is the world of *Wuthering Heights* and (looking at examples other than those of Frye's) *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Leatherstocking Tales,* of *The Lord of the Rings* and (in Czech literature) Božena Němcová's *Babička* (*Granny*). Again, this is close to the traditional understanding of the word "romance" in literary terminology—something that might with some exaggeration be termed a fairy-tale for adults. Then there is the anatomy, intellectual and extroverted, interested less in "real", "believable" people than in ideas and mental attitudes—as in Rabelais and the Swift of *Gulliver's Travels*, or Iris Murdoch and much of Milan Kundera. Finally there is the confession, intellectual and introverted, focused on some inner journey of an intellectual or spiritual nature—St Augustine, Rousseau, De Quincey and, to take another Czech example, the Hrabal of *Jak jsem sloužil anglickému králi* (*How I Served the King of England*). Frye's point in making his distinctions is simply that an understanding of how these different kinds of prose fiction function gives us a deeper insight into what the authors, and the texts themselves, are trying to say and do—and what is equally important, keeps us from criticizing them for what they aren't trying to say or do. If we adapt this scheme to historical fiction, much is illuminated, in particular the way in which the individual works operate—how they relate to history, how the author deals with history, to what ends history is put. This can be illustrated quite clearly by looking at a number of examples of Canadian historical fiction written in the past thirty years or so.

Corresponding to the novel, there is the kind of historical fiction in which

history is seen as narrative. That is, history speaks to us as a story, or set of stories, set in a recognizably "real" world, with more or less coherent beginnings and endings. Note that there may be a "story" or "stories". For in recent years, some of the aims of "historicized fiction" have frequently been served by this more "traditional" kind of historical fiction. In particular, the use of two or more parallel "stories" in the same text achieves the effect of presenting the reader with two differing and often incompatible versions of history. In *Black Robe*, for example, Brian Moore depicts the journey of a Jesuit missionary into the interior of Canada in the early seventeenth century. But the novel in fact comprises two quite discreet stories, one presented from the point of view of the Jesuit, the other from that of the Natives, in which everything is different—knowledge of the land, attitudes and beliefs, aims, even the individuals' names themselves. When the action is presented from the French point of view, for example, the text speaks of Jesuits and priests and Savages, of individuals named Daniel Davost and Father Laforgue, of making the sign of the cross; when viewed by one of the Natives, there are Blackrobes and wizards and people, the individuals are Iwanchou and Nicanis, and the latter engages in "sorcery". This creates in the reader a sense of a radical separation of two totally self-sufficient and incompatible worlds, and so of two totally different and incompatible narratives of history. A similar effect is attained in a work by Peter Such, *Riverrun*, which deals with the Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland, hunted to extinction in the early nineteenth century. Here again there are two stories, one in the form of internal monologues by the Beothuk themselves, the other in truncated and mutually incomprehensible dialogues when the last of the Beothuks are forcibly brought into White society as well as in the form of official records that almost invariably contradict what we have been shown as the inner experience and awareness of the Beothuk themselves. This effect is achieved through a modest employment of postmodern and self-reflexive techniques. And as a final example, a variation on this "double story" approach can be found in James Houston's *White Dawn*, in which an Eskimo eyewitness recounts the fate of a group of American whalers stranded in an Eskimo community sometime towards the end of the nineteenth century. Here, where the storyteller is the Eskimo, "our" story—the "White" story—can only be pieced together through the observations of this cultural "other" of ours. And in the course of his narrative, "our" behaviour, "our" cultural norms, increasingly come to be seen as dangerous and even pathological.

If we turn to the romance, the counterpart in historical fiction is works in which history is treated as myth—that is, the figures in the stories take on archetypal significance. The great practitioner of this form of historical fiction in Canada is Rudy Wiebe. In two related novels, *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *The Scorched-Wood People*, he deals with central figures in the history of the Canadian West, the Native chief Big Bear and Louis Riel, the leader of the half-Native, half white Métis. Based on extensive and meticulous research, the works are soaked in realistic detail, and anything presented as having happened historically is sure to have happened exactly when and where Wiebe depicts it

as happening. But the treatment of the main characters is such that they gradually assume larger than life proportions. Riel, traditionally viewed as a gifted but unfortunate individual whose mental delusions led him to treason and rebellion, takes on the stature of a Christ figure, led by the logic of his mystical insight to sacrifice himself for his people. And Big Bear, for his part, becomes the very embodiment of the Native of transcendent spirituality living in ultimate harmony with the world of nature and—again—suffering for his people. In a third novel, *A Discovery of Strangers*, Wiebe takes as his subject one of the Franklin expeditions in northern Canada in the early nineteenth century—themselves mythical events in Canadian history—and here gives to the land itself a mythic force. What is particularly interesting about Wiebe's works, in the context of this article, is that they are frequently singled out as among the best, most typical examples of postmodern, self-reflexive writing. Yet the purpose this writing serves is very different from that of the following group of works, which I would see as typically and genuinely "postmodern".

These are novels that correspond to Frye's category of the anatomy, marked by their intellectual energy and extrovert interest in the world out there. For their authors, history is text. That is, the actual events of the past, the details of life then and there, serve as little more than a starting point from which an "alternate" history is constructed, a "virtual" history that embodies more sharply what they, the authors, see as the core of its stories, "what it has to say to us". These books too are dense with authentic historical detail—often of an unusual or untraditional kind—but at the same time they toy with history in creative and exciting and playful ways, and far from trying to hide this manipulation, foreground it in startling fashion. So in *Burning Water*, George Bowering is a character in his own story about George Vancouver's eighteenth century mapping voyages up and down the west coast of North America; his actual movements to various haunts to write the book are described (in the third person) as a kind of counterpoint to his protagonist's journeys. So Douglas Glover in *The Life and Times of Captain N* draws on some of the techniques of Magic Realism, or has his eighteenth century characters speak at times in the jargon of the 1990s. So George Cartwright, the protagonist of John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, rewrites the account of his days in Labrador in the mid-eighteenth century, falsifying his experience to hide the failure of his enterprise—and this rewritten, falsified version is the book that was actually published to great acclaim in London in 1792. What all three authors want us, as readers, to understand, is the selective way history is written, the problematic relationship between what happened and what "history" says happened, the fact that no historical event "exists" unless it is written about, and unless it is read. History exists as text, in the eye of the beholder/reader. In this, they all come across as modern disciples of Bishop Berkeley.

Finally, there is the confession, not a form with an easy counterpart in historical fiction: the kind of personal focus on history that it demands is perhaps difficult to convey, or at least difficult to convey convincingly. But it has been done, in one of the boldest and most controversial works of Canadian fiction,

Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*. In fact this complex work is not a piece of historical fiction, but a breathtaking and puzzling and at times amusingly pornographic mosaic of a text in which one of the narrative strands takes the form of historical fiction. In the confession, according to Frye, the narrator's life focuses on "something larger than himself with which he has come to identify himself" (Frye 307), and this is true in *Beautiful Losers*, where the narrator is fixated on Catherine Tekakwitha, a seventeenth-century Iroquois convert to Christianity who was later sanctified by the Catholic Church. Through her, through his obsessional concern with her life, the narrator attempts to deal with his own chaotic late twentieth-century life. Here history—though treated in a fashion that is at times ironic and parodic—is icon, something to be contemplated and meditated on for the truth it contains, and something highly personal, with a meaning for the individual in question alone.

The techniques used in all of these works of fiction are shared, but the ends they serve, their functions, differ. To understand them better, I have suggested that it is useful to consider why their authors chose to write *historical* fiction—that is, the specific ways in which they viewed and employed history. I have suggested four—history as narrative, history as myth, history as text, and history as icon. In each of them, the link between the past and the present is treated in a different way, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we are given different reasons for seeking and trying to understand links between the past and the present. This question of the link between then and now is of course central to historical fiction, but in fact it is also the central illusion of all fiction, for time is at the heart of fiction. "Narrative" is simply a fancy term for the passing of time—and time as we perceive it in fiction is almost inevitably past time. This is true even when we read novels set in "the present", even when we read science fiction, ostensibly set in the future: when we read them, we read them *as if* they had already happened, narrated from some point in time after the event. It is no accident that perhaps the Western world's supreme fiction should be a novel that makes this search for the past explicit in its very title. Seen in this light, historical fiction is the ultimate embodiment of fiction, employing as it does a "real" past instead of a fictive one. However, in doing this, it introduces a countermovement. Proust's masterpiece draws us back to the past, but historical fiction works the other way round, drawing the past into the present. That razor-thin territory where the "real" meets the real, where the fictive past of literary fiction is grafted onto the real—or purportedly real—past of history in such a way that both "reals" merge, is no more than a curiosity, or a form of escapism, unless it is confronted with the real of now. And it is how the author manages this confrontation, what use he puts the past to, that defines the kind of historical fiction he writes.

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