Dec-1998

The Novelist as Historian

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol17/iss2/7
Much of the best recent American fiction turns its back on the present moment and goes in search of lost time, a search more in imitation of Faulkner than of Proust, the Faulkner whose characters are described by Sartre as sitting on trains with their backs to the engine, watching the past recede at a rate that makes its accurate representation a questionable enterprise. But if accuracy is what we are looking for, then perhaps we would be better served to restrict our browsing to the history section. But if what we think about the past is at least as important as what actually happened, then novelistic thinking about history might offer special insights, passionate reversals of habitual readings. If Faulkner and John Dos Passos seem to be the major American novelists of the first half of the century, it may be in part because the most interesting novelists of the second half have chosen to continue their project—to write novels that above all need to be read as meditations on history.

In the final decade of the century Susan Sontag, Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo have all written such meditations that contest both prior interpretations of the past and, perhaps at least as significantly, the formal conventions of historical writing as adhered to by professional historians. Such conventions are derived from a realist theory of representation that purports to give us a picture of the world rather than a way of looking at it. In addition, this picture should not look like one but like the world itself. The medium of fiction should be as transparent as glass. If the historian chooses to represent the past in narrative form, questions of perspective, or point-of-view, will need to be answered, such questions as: who is speaking and with what authority? when is the story told? to whom is the narrative addressed? how are the episodes of the narrative arranged? what "voice," as constructed by language, is employed? Traditional historical narrative would seem to give uniform answers to these questions: Third-person, self-effaced narrators are preferred, with the use of the first-person in historical narratives usually restricted to introductions and conclusions. Authority is conferred by the rigorous focus on "objective facts" as uncovered by research. The time of the narrating act is largely unspecified, so one should check the copyright date and assume the work represents the current state of knowledge at that date. The audience may or may not be informed: histories for the general reader, like most historical fiction, assume very little prior knowledge. Events are presented as they occurred in real time, with any deviation from chronological order motivated by the desire to fill in the gaps in the reader's knowledge and clearly marked. The language may be described as what passes for the plain-style of the historian's own period, with language from the period represented clearly identified as quotation.

The novelists here discussed deviate from this model by creating narrators who, in one way or another, foreground the act of narration itself. By drawing attention to themselves and/or their methods of composition, they assert the provisional, constructed nature of all historical representation.

The title character in Susan Sontag's The Volcano Lover (1992) is Sir William Hamilton, British ambassador to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies during the period of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, but neither he nor his second wife, Emma, nor her lover, Lord Nelson, occupies centerstage in the novel. That position is usurped by the novelist-historian, whose twentieth century sensibility permeates every scene, controls every essayistic digression, and finally has as much to say about her own time and place as about eighteenth century Naples.

Calling her work "a Romance," Sontag partially grants herself a greater degree of poetic license than would be permitted in a historical novel and partially hides her true nature as a novelist of ideas. Unlike Tolstoy, who presents the ideological content of his narrative in epilogues, she freely interrupts her story to speculate on the nature of collecting, of celebrity, of the status of women, of jokes, of revolution—always working toward establishing parallels or contrasts between the Napoleonic era and her own.

This novel is perhaps the biggest surprise of the decade, coming as it does from a writer who is best known for her critical essays and her magnificent study On Photography (1977). Novelists often write criticism and critics occasionally produce a novel, but we seldom have much difficulty in identifying work of the left hand: There are critic-novelists like Henry James, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf, and there are novelist-critics like Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson, and David Lodge. With this one novel, Sontag performs a balancing act that is rare if not unprecedented. She, like her contemporaries John Berger and Milan Kundera, has developed strategies for interrupting her narrative that allow her to incorporate a critical perspective.
Her connection to these two European writers is further strengthened by the fact that all three, when writing fiction, deal directly with matters of history and historical consciousness. In matters of technique, too, all three writers adopt what I would call a compromised third-person perspective, compromised in the sense that their narrators openly acknowledge their personal involvement with the story they tell, existing as they do both inside and outside of the worlds they depict. The prologue of The Volcano Lover introduces the narrator as she pauses before entering a Manhattan flea market in 1992, desiring as she does to reclaim a piece of the past by purchasing it but suspecting all the time it is rubbish. And again, at the very end of the novel, this narrator is addressed by one of her characters, the revolutionary Eleonora de Fonseca Pimental, whom nearly overturns the “romantic” premise of the novel by questioning the “heroism” of Emma Hamilton, by speaking instead of the “nullity of women like her,” like the heroines of the historical romance. She tells us instead that she sometimes had “to forget that I was a woman to accomplish the best of which I was capable. Or I would lie to myself about how complicated it is to be a woman. Thus do all women, including the author of this book.” Where does this voice come from? Having remained in charge of the narrative throughout, Sontag’s narrator closes the book by absenting herself and giving the stage to a series of five of her characters. Why? Perhaps she is appropriating a line from John Berger’s novel G.: “Never again can a story be told as if it were the only one.” Thus at the last minute, she cancels the historian’s practice of presenting history from a single, “objective” perspective. In allowing these voices to speak for themselves, without interruption, she calls into question her own narrative omniscience.

Lenox Avenue, Harlem, 1926 is the scene of Toni Morrison’s Jazz (1992). More than the novel just discussed, Jazz “provokes or conveys by imaginative sympathy,” in the words of Avrom Fleishmann in his study of the English historical novel, “the sentiment de l’existence, the feeling how it was to be alive in another age.” Insofar as the narrator of The Volcano Lover is removed in time from the events she recounts, the immediacy of the past is lessened by her foreknowledge, her status as a citizen of another time. In addition, the scene in Jazz is presented at a much lower level of abstraction: The play of light on the buildings of Manhattan and the sounds of the new music drifting out of the open windows have a palpable presence that is never subordinated to the actions and thoughts of the individual characters. The sense of community, always strong in Morrison’s work, here dominates, and this is largely a result of the novel’s rather peculiar narrative stance.

The first-person narrator is an unidentified member of this community. We are at first perhaps tempted to find her among the actors in her story of “one of those deepdown spooky loves,” the story of a crime of passion involving Joe Trace, his wife Violet, and Joe’s murdered lover, Dorcas. Or among the group of finely drawn supporting roles—Dorcas’s Aunt Alice, her friend Felice, or Malvonne, the Trace’s neighbor, who contributes to the affair by making her apartment available to the lovers. Malvonne seems an especially likely candidate, since features of her life and personality seem to match those few facts we have concerning the narrator. But finally this narrator remains an anonymous listener and watcher, a lonely lover of the City and its people, most of whom were participants of the great migration of African-Americans from the South.

Like Faulkner, Morrison is unable or unwilling to tell a story straight, with one narrator following a single, chronological storyline. While the anonymous narrator arranges all the material presented to us, five different characters are given monologues. The main events of the story are presented in summary in the first three pages of the book—a trick. Morrison might also have learned from Faulkner—but from that point the events of 1925 and 1926 directly leading up to and following the murder are mixed with dazzling fluency. In addition, when the meaning of these events seems to lie in the more distant past, the narrator employs flashbacks that move progressively deeper into time and space, first showing us Joe and Violet’s migration to the City in 1906, but then going back to recount their school days in Virginia. Finally, she presents a story of the ante-bellum South that echoes aspects of Faulkner’s Light in August. While Morrison’s fiction is embedded in actual historical events, such as the East St. Louis race riots of 1919, none of her characters have historical doubles. (Sontag: “My Cavalieri is Sir William Hamilton’s double, a fictional character on whose behalf I have taken what liberties suited his nature, as I have with other historical personages given their proper names.”) In fact, at the end of the novel she confesses that these stories, if not her characters, are products of invention.

I ought to get out of this place. Avoid the window, leave the cut through the door to get in lives instead of having one of my own. It was loving the city that distracted me and gave me ideas. Made me think I could speak its voice and sound human. I missed the people altogether.

And yet, in a final reversal the narrator’s fantasy or dream, this cloudcastle made of words, does have a referent, a trace, as it were. The people really exist and have their revenge, living their lives just beyond the boundary of the page. “busy being original, complicated, changeable—human.” The narrator’s opening summary of the story had alluded to a second murder, a seemingly inevitable outcome of the personalities of the participants of the first. But she is wrong, about that and about her own Olympian detachment: “... when I was feeling most invisible, being tight-lipped, silent and unobservable, they [her characters] were whispering about me to each other.” The novel closes on a contemplation of the mysteries of other people, their resistance to any kind of fated existence the novelist (or the historian) might attempt to impose upon them.

Don DeLillo’s Underworld is thus far the most impressive novel of the decade, comparable in scope and interpretive ambition to Dos Passos’s U.S.A. trilogy, and like Dos Passos, DeLillo mixes real and fictional characters to create a composite portrait of America moving through a period of rapid transformation. Dos Passos tracks a cross-section of
American lives over the first three decades of the century, while DeLillo writes a personal history of the cold war from 1951, the year of the first Soviet nuclear test, to the early 1990s and the collapse of the Soviet Empire. In more contemporary terms, DeLillo has written something like a postmodern national epic along the lines of Gunther Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

All four novels are "handcuffed to history" (Rushdie's expression) and all four present revisionist or "underground" versions of the recent past. DeLillo surely intends to strengthen the ties to these earlier works by closing with a completely uncharacteristic foray into the mode of magical realism: Sister Edgar, a nun who functions as one of the central intelligences of the novel, witnesses a miracle—perhaps—in the Bronx, dies, and assumes an afterlife in cyberspace, where "everything is connected."

*Underworld* combines first- and third-person narration to suggest terrestrial connections in time and space. DeLillo's only first-person narrator, Nick Shay, serves as the central figure in the novel both by virtue of the fact that his life is connected in some way to that of all of the major characters and because his line of work—he is a waste management expert—serves as the central metaphor for the novel as a whole. The entire story cannot be told, however, from his perspective because he, like the other characters, is only intermittently aware of the links between characters and between past and present. For this kind of orchestration, an outside narrator, the dominant voice of the novel, is needed.

While this voice—like Sontag's—provides editorial commentary by establishing ties between private lives and public events, its main function is to arrange the material, to move adeptly between the inner and outer worlds of dozens of characters. The opening prologue, "The Triumph of Death," set at the Polo Grounds on October 3, 1951, gives an overview of the crowd assembled to witness Bobby Thompson hit the historic homerun that put the Giants into the World Series that year. By rapidly shifting perspective—from individual ballplayers to the tram 12-year-old who captures the winning baseball, to the celebrity foursome of Jackie Gleason, Frank Sinatra, Toots Shor, and J. Edgar Hoover, to Giants' radio announcer Russ Hodges—the narrator introduces most of the themes that will be played out through the remainder of the book. For example, Hoover's mind is not on the game but on the message he has just received that confirms that the Soviet Union has just successfully conducted its first nuclear bomb test. The bomb, like Thompson's baseball, which is its antithesis, will haunt the rest of the novel.

The unity of time and place in this opening, fragmented by the presentation of various subjectivities, gives way to a movement through the second half of the 20th century. If history is time passing and historical consciousness is time consciousness, DeLillo forces the reader to be aware of time through the ordering of events in the novel. If we imagine chronological order to be represented alphabetically, with the earliest time-unit (October, 1951) represented by an A and the most recent by an H (sometime after the summer of 1992), then the arrangement of events in the novel might be schematically represented as follows: A-G-A-F-E-A-D-C-A-B-H. This scheme roughly indicates that the story is told in reverse order, but this backward narrative is both less consistent and more complex than the similar structures of Harold Pinter's play *Betrayal*, Martin Amis's novel *Time's Arrow*, and that better-known if pointless episode from *Seinfeld*.

Consider, for example, Part 5 of the novel, "Better Things for Better Living through Chemistry: Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s." This part is divided into seven sections, each of which is further divided into three episodes, with each precisely dated. If we were then to diagram the arrangement of the resulting twenty-one episodes, it would look like this: a-i-c-f-j-h-d-i-e-l-m-i-g-n-b-o-k-i-k. Also consider that these twenty-one episodes enter the lives of ten separate characters, most of whom the reader has never met and several of whom are making their first and last appearance in the novel, and perhaps one receives a token awareness of the kind of work required of DeLillo's reader. It is work that involves fitting this with that, of recalling faintly suggested parallels, of going forward and backward in time to find connections. If the narrative structure is to be something more than a kind of channel-surfing, readers must act as their own historians, drawing together the rich assortment of lives and moments to arrive at some sense of the meaning of our times.

We all seem to agree that we need historical knowledge, but there have always been those who question whether or not we need fictions, especially those that play around with historical facts and established ways of presenting those facts. Why not simply read histories if we want to understand the past? Or, if we must consume historical novels, why not restrict ourselves to those that meet with the historian's approval, an approval that is conferred mainly on the basis of how well the novelist duplicates the work of the historian, both in form and content? The best historical novel, by this measure, is the one that is most redundant.

By contrast, the three novels discussed here seem to be engaged in undoing the work of the historian. By creating idiosyncratic narrators, these authors question the authority and unity of traditional historical narrative. By foregrounding the act of composition, they remind us that our knowledge of history always comes down to a knowledge of texts. By recomposing the order of events, they force us to see new patterns, new hierarchies of significance. They are performing, in some measure, the kind of work that a more critical, more self-conscious historiography might be doing for itself.

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