

Sep-1986

Book Review: Fictions Out of Season

Michael Boyd
Bridgewater State College

Recommended Citation

Boyd, Michael (1986). Book Review: Fictions Out of Season. *Bridgewater Review*, 4(2), 24-26.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol4/iss2/13

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Fictions Out of Season

The Fox In The Attic

by Richard Hughes
Chatto and Windus 1961

The Wooden Shepherdess

by Richard Hughes
Chatto and Windus 1973

The Singapore Grip

by J. G. Farrell
Alfred A. Knopf 1979

G.

by John Berger
Viking 1972

The White Hotel

by D.M. Thomas
Viking 1981

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

by Milan Kundera
Alfred A. Knopf 1980

The Unbearable Lightness of Being

by Milan Kundera
Harper and Row 1984

Difficult as it is to imagine, history has again become for some few but important novelists a field to frolic in. Of course, there has never been a shortage of nostalgia merchants willing to provide an escape into the past while at the same time gratifying our desire for truth -- historical truth made easy by virtue of its combination with invented melodramas given the texture of every day life. But while such writers continued to practice their trade, most serious novelists abandoned history to the historians, as if Stendhal's prediction, made upon reviewing the historical novels of his time, had come true: "I believe that in the end, the authorities will be constrained to order these novelists to choose: either write pure histories or pure fictions or, at least, to use crochet hooks to separate one from the other, truth from falsity."

I think it has become increasingly difficult for us to imagine what either a pure history or a pure novel might look like. A too rigorous notion of "historical truth" begins to seem to some a convention or fiction as likely to obscure the past as to reveal it.

While writing his study of witchcraft in New England, *Entertaining Satan*, the

historian John Putnam Demos found his first drafts to be "long on concepts, but distressingly short on human detail. The people were slipping through the scholarly cracks." His description of his method for filling in the gaps is worth considering:

Back to my research files. Days of confusion. Restless nights. Conversations with friends and colleagues. (I especially remember one with a novelist of long acquaintance, which helped me to recognize how close are the imaginative worlds of history and fiction.)

I began to write "stories" about witchcraft -- true stories of specific episodes for which my evidence was especially full. Stories of everyday experience in all its nettlesome particulars. Stories which put individual men and women right at center-stage. Stories with beginnings, middles, and ends.

Throughout this passage I saw -- I felt -- the historian's old dilemma: history as art versus history as science. If the barricades should ever go up, I know which way I'll jump. But better by far not to have to choose.

Demos wishes to employ devices of narration and characterization borrowed from the novelist's craft, as if to prove there can be no formal characteristics that distinguish history from fiction. What is left to differentiate between the two forms of discourse is the notion of truth: Did this event occur or is it the invention of the writer? But even here the historian may invent to fill in the gaps and thereby give the reader a sense, formerly obtained from novels, of lived experience.

Crossing over from the other side of the barricade, the novelists whose work I wish to consider take similar liberties -- although it is not "people" and "stories" which, of course, they have in abundance, that they want but concepts and all the discursive possibilities routinely available to the historian. They also wish to mix fact and fiction as freely as does the historian, but their efforts seldom meet with the latter's approval. Historians have been more willing to use novels, especially the classics of nineteenth century realism, to uncover truths about the time in which they were written than to take seriously the historical novelists' attempts to portray and interpret the past. Denying such a novelist an adequate historical consciousness, historians, using their own criteria, have usually seen such novels as simply bad history. I propose that the following set of novels offers a serious contribution

to the fields of historiography and the philosophy of history -- not by ceasing to be novels but by using the novel as an instrument of historical inquiry.

The Fox in the Attic (1961) and *The Wooden Shepherdess* (1973) are parts of *The Human Predicament*, what Richard Hughes described as "a long historical novel of my own times" (1923-1945), which remained unfinished at the time of the author's death in 1976. What distinguishes this project from most other fictional retrospectives of the period, however, is the author's open adoption of the role of researcher, as an acknowledgements page at the end of both volumes mentions major published sources consulted as well as new evidence uncovered by the author himself. The opening note to the first volume, repeated at the end of the second, attempts to apply Stendhal's crochet hooks to separate fact from fiction:

The fictitious characters in the foreground are wholly fictitious. The historical characters and events are as accurately historical as I can make them: I may have made mistakes but in no case have I deliberately falsified the record once I could worry it out.

Now this is disingenuous, as well as circular -- a regression to notions of pure fiction, pure history. What would a "wholly fictitious" character look like? Hughes has admitted that one of his "fictitious" characters, Dr. Brinley, was drawn from real life, and, on the other side, his portrait of Hitler as *The Man Who Loved Children* is just about as vividly imagined as anything in the book. One need only compare it to Tolstoy's treatment of Napoleon to realize that the foreground-fiction/background-history pairing has broken down, become blurred.

What does point back to Tolstoy, however, is the presence within the novel itself of that discursive voice first heard in Hughes's opening "Note." Three chapters of *The Fox in the Attic*, for example, are given over to this voice as it speculates that the causes of the First World War, "gurgling up hot lava on to the green grass," lie in the repression, throughout the nineteenth century, of both the sense of an alien other and a sense of self expanded to a "we." In other words, the War allowed feelings of both hate and love, long denied by "emergent Reason," to express themselves. For the space of these three chapters, the narrative comes to a standstill as Hughes mimics the essayistic mode of Tolstoy in the Second

Epilogue to *War and Peace*. Distinctly denying the modernist injunction "to show, not to tell," Hughes's postmodern fiction returns to nineteenth-century models, centering much of the "action" in the present historical consciousness of a narrator who, being both the author and his surrogate, exists, like this hybrid fiction itself, both in and out of real time.

The meager distance, measured in years, between the narrating present and the past depicted also introduces a new element in contemporary historical fiction. Hughes, like the other novelists to be mentioned here, writes of the recent past, the nightmare of history which is the twentieth century. And yet England and Germany in the twenties and thirties do seem to belong to an era both our own and not. We might invoke Henry Adams's notion of an acceleration of history or cite Kenneth Boulding's assertion that "the world of today...is as different from the world in which I was born as that world was from Julius Caesar's" if we wish to consider the problematics of a writing self that spans those different worlds -- not Matthew Arnold's "one world dead, the other powerless to be born," but worlds that come and go within the course of a single lifetime.

J.G. Farrell appears to smuggle ideas into *The Singapore Grip* in more acceptable modernist fashion, that is, by putting them into the mouths of his characters and thereby "dramatizing" them. But in fact the speeches within these dialogues are so ostentatiously overextended that the "background" detail they are intended to provide threatens to submerge the central characters in the foreground, even as it makes ludicrous any effort to construe the novel in scenic terms. The sheer bulk of information Farrell's naive and curious hero uncovers concerning the rubber industry and the political alignments in the Far East in the late 1930's and early 1940's makes it clear that the author -- who, like Hughes, acknowledges his written sources as well as those acquired through personal research -- wishes to load his novel with historical facts normally found only in academic monographs.

When Farrell died, in 1979, at the age of forty-four, he had completed three historical novels and was at work on a fourth. In *Troubles* (1970), *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), and *The Singapore Grip* (1977), he embarked upon a novelistic investigation of British imperialism on various fronts --

Ireland in the twenties during the "troubles," India during the mutiny of 1857, and finally the fall of Singapore to the Japanese during WW II, what one historian describes as "the single most humiliating disaster in British imperial history." Each successive novel is somewhat fatter than the last as more disparate material is introduced to complicate causal explanation and to render social, political, and economic forces tangible within the narrative. In the same manner Farrell's tone is purposefully discordant. Marx has said that history repeats itself -- what occurs first as tragedy repeats itself as farce. For Farrell, the dissolution of the Empire is both tragedy and farce at once as perspectives shift in an attempt to provide historical representation of a finally indefinable totality.

If Farrell's increasing attention to economic forces in his last novel suggests a movement in the trilogy toward a Marxist orientation, such a perspective is even more evident in John Berger's *G.* (1972). The major protagonist, named in the title, witnesses, without understanding, the massacre of striking workers in Milan in 1898, the first flight of an airplane over the Alps in 1910, and the suppression of a popular revolt in Trieste in 1916. If he does not understand these events, it is because his glance is directed elsewhere, his back turned to "history" as he attempts to live out his role as a modern Don Giovanni, attempts to reduce the world to a vast bourgeois bedroom to be plundered. Dedicated to "Anya and her sisters in Women's Liberation," *G.*, even as it details the limitations of the erotic life, attempts to place sexuality within the context of politics and revolution, to give a kind of historical weight to the relations between men and women. In this respect the novel perhaps most resembles Doris Lessing's monumental *Children of Violence* series and *The Golden Notebook* or the fiction of Milan Kundera. But actually it is the work's originality, both in narrative technique and in the variety of material it manages to incorporate within the novel form, that seems most striking.

Berger dreams of a rapprochement between modernism and Marxism through a revival of the unfulfilled promise of cubism and gives his dream to the protagonist of his first novel, *A Painter of Our Time*: "What eyes Cubism has given us: Never again can we make a painting of a single view. We now have a visual dialectic. How easy it

should be for Marxists to understand!" In *G.* this becomes "...never again will a single story be told as if it were the only one." In practice, Berger realizes this project by interrupting the narrative of his *bildungsroman* with essays on diverse topics -- on Garibaldi, on fox-hunting as theater, on the social psychology of mass demonstrations, on the Boers, on sexuality and time, on the situation of women, on "the Young Bosnians." We discover that the fiction is also secretly interrupted, when we read the acknowledgements page at the back, by a series of unattributed quotations scattered through the text. In addition to these multiple perspectives, the author also frequently pauses to meditate in his own voice upon the writing process itself.

G. is linked in its narrative practice aesthetically to cubism and epistemologically to the Marxist notion of totali-

**Historians have been more
willing to use novels ... to
uncover truths ... than to take
seriously the historical
novelists' attempts to portray
and interpret the past.**

ty, the Hegelian concept that asserts that the whole, always a dynamic shifting of relations, is greater than the sum of its parts, which can only be understood in relation to that historically determined whole. For Berger, this leads to a questioning of the adequacy of any individualist or subjective representation of experience. In his novel of the hero's education, what *G.* learns is that he is no hero, as he has aligned himself with the true hero of the novel, the crowd that both provides him with his first experience of injustice and finally gives meaning to his life.

In *The White Hotel* (1980), D.M. Thomas offers a similar critique of a too narrowly defined notion of the self, but he arrives at this point by taking a different route, the labyrinthine path provided by psychoanalysis. As I have read and reread this novel over the past five years, I am struck by the way it lends itself to multiple interpretations, but what is most marvelous is how it attempts to deal imaginatively with the Holocaust, the event of our time that most defies any attempt at assimilation by the imagination.

The story of Lisa Erdman, a fictional patient of a real doctor, Sigmund

Freud, is told seven times, and each version, which both corrects and complicates the last, is presented in a different form. The first, a prologue, is given as a series of letters between Freud and his colleagues. The second, "Don Giovanni," is a long erotic poem written by Lisa herself between the staves of a score of Mozart's opera. This is followed by a more explicit prose version of the same sexual fantasy, also written by Lisa and called "The Gastein Journal." The central section of the novel is a virtuoso impersonation of Freud, a case study of Lisa, complete with footnotes, called "Frau Anna G." Then comes "The Health Resort," a more or less conventional novelistic narrative. The next section, "The Sleeping Carriage," places Lisa within a historical narrative, written by Anatoli Kuznetsov and "stolen" by Thomas, depicting, from eyewitness accounts, the mass execution of Jews at Babi Yar. The final section, "The Camp," unfolds outside of historical time, bringing together the several strands of Lisa's life story, a story cut short in real time but allowed to work itself out in the imagined space created by the author, who, in the absence of an afterlife where the requirements of justice, mercy, and meaning are finally met, stands in for a God who has abandoned His people.

The essence of Thomas's critique of psychoanalysis lies in his perception of its failure to give adequate weight to historical and social forces, the futility of its endeavor when placed beside a quarter of a million lives destroyed and dumped into a ravine:

The soul of man is a far country, which cannot be approached or explored. Most of the dead were poor and illiterate. But every single one of them had dreamed dreams, seen visions, and had had amazing experiences.... Though most of them had never lived outside the Podal, their lives and histories were as rich and complex as Lisa Erdman-Berenstein's. If a Sigmund Freud had been listening and taking notes from the time of Adam, he would still not fully have explored even a single group, even a single person.

Faced with the fact of the Holocaust, a fact that our skeptical and relativistic age is curiously reluctant to qualify, the narrator can only say: "No one could have imagined the scene, because it was happening." Theodor Adorno has said that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," and here the poet can only agree. But since we don't seem to be able to banish poets and storytellers, it

may be important to value those most who have taken Adorno to heart and approached their art with some humility and some historical consciousness, which, after all, is composed primarily of the awareness that where you are depends most on where you have been.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), the Czechoslovakian emigre Milan Kundera invents for himself "a novel in the form of variations." After reading his subsequent and most recent work, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, one might assume that the author has found in this form the ideal means for exploring the recent past of Central Europe -- the years 1948-1975, the first date marking the beginning of communist rule in Czechoslovakia and the last denoting the year of the author's defection to the West, with all stories moving toward or falling away from the climactic events of the Prague Spring of 1968.

Several major themes of both of these novels are introduced early in the first, but they also express a view of history that might be subscribed to by all of the novelists I have mentioned:

The bloody massacre in Bangladesh quickly covered over the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the assassination of Allende drowned out the groans of Bangladesh, the war in the Sinai desert made people forget Allende, the Cambodian massacre made people forget Sinai, and so forth and so on until ultimately everyone lets everything be forgotten.

In times when history still moved slowly, events were few and far between and easily committed to memory. They formed a commonly accepted backdrop for thrilling scenes of adventure in private life. Nowadays, history moves at a brisk clip. A historical event, though soon forgotten, sparkles the morning after with the dew of novelty. No longer a backdrop, it is now the adventure itself, an adventure enacted before the backdrop of the commonly accepted banality of private life.

Since we can no longer assume any single historical event, no matter how recent, to be common knowledge, I must treat events dating back only a few years as if they were a thousand years old.

History experienced as a barrage of catastrophic events; the reversal of background and foreground, with its necessary diminishment of the significance of lived experience; the novelist as historian by necessity; the novel as an act of memory -- these and other concerns lie embedded in this passage.

No brief account of Kundera's work can begin to do justice to its subtlety and humanity. In trying to suggest rather than explain the patterns I see emerging in some of the most interesting novels written over the past twenty-five years, my short essay enacts its own version of the acceleration of history. Still, it is important to see this group of novelists as acting in concert to reject modernist ideals of formal purity and, while acknowledging the very real experience of isolation and alienation, to see that experience as a partial view, to be corrected only by providing a historical context and a historical explanation, for our escapes into the private life and their narrative equivalent, the single point of view. Kundera's novels are as "personal" as any now being written, but they also provide a space for a self that is purely social.

I began with a historian offering a justification of storytelling. Let me conclude with a similar apology, but from a novelist only pretending to write history. The passage is taken from Danilo Kis's novel, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, in which the narrator pauses to tell a story-within-the-story, freeing himself

for a moment of that awful burden of documents in which the story is buried, while referring the skeptical and curious reader to the appended bibliography where he will find the necessary proof. (Perhaps it would have been wiser if I had chosen some other form of expression -- an essay or a monograph -- where I could use all these documents in the usual way. Two things, however, prevent me: the inappropriateness of citing actual oral testimony of reliable people as documentation; and my inability to forgo the pleasure of narration, which allows the author the deceptive idea that he is creating the world and thereby, as they say, changing it.)

Novelists, like historians, do not create the world -- although a modernist might say they create a world insofar as their texts seem self-contained, but if this is so, that world is so pathetically small that the metaphor finally does not work and is presumptuous in a way that the postmodern novelist-historian is right to condemn. Nevertheless, change may be possible only if we are able to imagine different ways of looking at the past, different ways of telling and retelling our stories.

Michael Boyd
Assistant Professor of English