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Brno studies in English. 1997, vol. 23, iss. 1, pp. [151]-160

ISBN 80-210-1711-2

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104336>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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DON SPARLING

HISTORICAL FICTION AND DOUGLAS GLOVER'S *THE LIFE AND TIMES OF CAPTAIN N.*

The dynamic and protean development of prose fiction over the past three centuries has been one of the most remarkably intensive and sustained processes in the history of literature. Within this development, a particularly interesting period is that of Romanticism, which gave birth to two highly productive prose fiction forms. One was the historical novel. Launched, paradoxically enough, by the thoroughly Augustan Scott with his *Waverley* (1815), it met with an instant response from the public, was a major force in fiction both in Britain and abroad for decades, and has continued to be a highly popular genre down to the present time. The second important fictional form shaped by the Romantic movement, the *bildungsroman*, has an even more distinguished pedigree. Its roots go back to Goethe and Moritz; some of the greatest works in nineteenth and twentieth century fiction take this form. What is particularly illuminating is to compare the development of these two forms, and observe the peculiar symmetry they display.

The *bildungsroman*, the novel of education and development, deals in nuanced detail with the growth of a single individual; it is a personally focused form in which 'society becomes visible as the enabling field of operations for the individual, and the individual as the actualization of social possibility' (Connor, 6). The historical novel, on the other hand, is a socially focused form; here the nuanced detail is employed to recreate the contours of some vanished society, and the characters and events (in Lukács's famous definition) are presented in such a way as to give them typifying force. (Hence the frequent association of historical fiction, especially in the nineteenth century, with various degrees and forms of nationalism.) The *bildungsroman* tends towards realism, as well as towards the intellectual; the historical novel draws its strength from the romance and romance, and relies heavily on emotion and a heightening of everyday experience. These distinctions suggest the complementary fates of the two forms of fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *bildungsroman*, with its concern for the individual adapting and developing in a dynamically changing society, becomes, as Franco Moretti has claimed, 'the "symbolic

form'' of modernity' (5). And in perhaps its most refined, introspective and self-contained form, that of the *kunstlerroman*, it takes on much of the exclusivity and elitism of modernism itself, and is indeed the embodiment of many of its greatest achievements. Against this triumphal march forward of the *bildungsroman*, there is the steady drift of the historical novel in another direction. It has tended to appeal to much larger (often huge) audiences, and in the process has acquired an unenviable reputation, typified in V. S. Pritchett's criticism of the 'grotesque ... modern historical novels [that are] so out of touch that they bind their pictures of, say, the American Civil War with the thin *partout* of modern suburban morals and wishes' (ix). Despite the many distinguished historical novels, and the many failed examples of the *bildungsroman*, the relative prestige of the two forms among literary critics is clear, and could be summed up in the words 'lowbrow' and 'highbrow'.

How to account for the disdain directed at the historical novel? Certainly part of the problem has to do with a disparity often found in historical fiction, one pointed out by Pritchett – a gap between a modern code or set of values and that of the period the novel deals with. But that this need not in itself be a problem is a point I shall be returning to later. Another, more basic, difficulty is the affinity of historical fiction to the romance, and the reluctance among many readers and critics to accept this as a valid twentieth century form; the kinds of 'stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes' it tends to employ (Frye, 304), and the typically dramatic situations it exploits, go against the general trend of development of prose fiction over the past 150 years. There also seems to be a general undervaluing of the imaginative skills needed to recover historical detail and incorporate it convincingly into the narrative. As Robert Graves complained, in the preface to *Claudius the God*, a good many reviewers seemed to think that in *I, Claudius* he had 'merely consulted Tacitus's *Annals* and Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars*, run them together, and expanded the result with my own "vigorous fancy";' (7). At a more unconscious level, perhaps, there is a carryover from the whole myth of 'progress', so that where prose fiction is concerned, there is a valorization of the kind of complex treatment of lived, contemporary experience that the modern novelist has learned to do so well. This can be sensed, for example, in a comment made by the Canadian novelist Mordecai Richler, explaining why he was returning home after twenty years of living in London. He claims to have felt increasingly haunted by 'a recurring fear of running dry ... looking around ... it suddenly seemed to me that too many other expatriate Commonwealth writers, writers I had respected, had been driven in exile to forging fictions set in the distant past, the usually dreaded future, or, indeed, nowhere.' (4)

The prestige of the historical novel for most of the twentieth century, then, has not been high. And this despite the remarkable achievements of such writers as Robert Graves, Mary Renault and Gore Vidal (to mention only some authors writing in English). All three have produced a series of vivid recreations of the past, in which the settings and characters are powerful and convincing yet at the same time reflect L. P. Hartley's dictum that 'The past is another country; they

do things differently there.' What is more, Renault and Vidal have been consistently subversive in their fiction, the former quite deliberately using it to blow away gender stereotypes through her matter-of-fact treatment of homosexuality (most of her fiction is set in ancient Greece), the latter vigorously sapping the myths of the American past and puncturing with feline wit American pretensions to moral superiority. Nevertheless, work of this kind is consistently relegated to the second rank. This judgement seems ultimately to derive from a certain understanding of truth as well as an aesthetic attitude. To simplify, the writing of 'history' has been perceived as a form of reaching 'objective', 'revealed', 'discovered' truth, whereas the writing of literature has been felt to be the domain of 'subjective', 'created' truth. And the mixing of these two types of 'truth' has been regarded (consciously or unconsciously) as undesirable, tinged with a certain impurity, resulting in something not more, but less than its parts: the historical novel, then, is the literary equivalent of a bastard or half-breed, illegitimate, fatally marked by its 'mixed blood'.

The particular concept of historical truth I have just outlined dates to the nineteenth century with the emergence of the school of 'objective' history – Gibbon, for example, would simply have rejected such a distinction between literature and history as primitive – and its increasing acceptance was paralleled by the steady decline in prestige of the historical novel. In the last thirty years or so, however, there has been a fundamental change in the two components of this model. On the one hand, professional historians such as Pieter Geyl have shown just how deeply the historian and the historical imagination are shaped by the assumptions of the age and the bias and indeed needs of particular societies, while philosophers of history, in particular Hayden White, have increasingly called for a recognition that history is in fact an imaginative discourse like any other, employing rhetoric and narrative to make its point. On the other hand, more and more 'serious' ('academically respectable') works of historical fiction have been appearing. It is enough to think of John Fowles, William Golding and Peter Ackroyd in Britain, or of E. L. Doctorow and Toni Morrison in America. Yet their works are strikingly different from earlier historical novels. Certainly they attempt to recreate the physical actuality of the past, and succeed brilliantly at this, but at the same time many of them, as highly sophisticated works of self-reflective fiction, also explore and bring into question our understanding of the meaning of this past, and our ability to grasp and interpret it, in unusual and unconventional ways.

As an example of some of the features of this new 'historiographic metafiction' (to use Linda Hutcheon's term) or 'historicized fiction' (Steven Connor's label), I would like to look at one particularly impressive piece of recent Canadian historical fiction. This is *The Life and Times of Captain N.*, by Douglas Glover, published in 1993. Set at the time of the American Revolution, largely in what is now upper New York State, it deals with a world remote from the main centres of the war and its familiar figures. Here at the margins, the 'king's war' – the war of regular armies and set-piece battles – is unknown. Instead, we witness savage guerilla-style hit-and-run operations carried out by bands of

Loyalist Tories and their Indian allies, and the ruthless campaign of genocide waged by the Rebels/future Americans to destroy the communities of the Six Nations. The narrative, which covers the brief period from the summer of 1779 to the fall of 1781, follows the gradual defeat of the Loyalists, and focuses on three characters. His distrust, even hatred, of the Revolution has led Hendrick Nellis (the 'Captain N' of the title) to leave his family and community and become one of the leaders of a motley company of whites and Indians fighting on the side of the King. Oskar, his son, sides with the Rebels, but is kidnapped by his father and forced into service on the King's side, where he ends up a highly feared and reckless leader of his own small band of whites and Indians. Mary Hunsacker is a young girl from the frontier community who is captured by a group of Mississauga Indians fighting for the English and is adopted into their tribe, where she becomes a kind of medicine woman; later she is redeemed by Nellis, and is for some time the 'forest wife' of Oskar.

The multiple narrative voices of the novel reflect these characters and create a complex temporal framework. There are in fact four of these voices, occurring in regular succession throughout the novel. A standard omniscient narrative voice – rather unusually, always in the present tense – takes us through Oskar's story. His father, Nellis, speaks in the first person, but also in the present; this enables us to follow him, his inner thoughts and reactions, directly through the course of action presented in the novel, down to his madness and death in exile in what is now Canada. The first person is also used by Mary Hunsacker, but her narrative is in the past tense, as she looks back from some distant point in the future, after the action of the novel is over, recalling and commenting on her own experiences and those of all the other characters, both Native and white (her story is, in effect, an ironic variant of the captivity narrative). And finally there is Oskar himself, also speaking in the first person, but from a still more distant point, in his old age in the 1840's, after the accession of Queen Victoria, as he works on his 'Book of Indians', a collection of 'scribbled messages from the past' (21) that he has been assembling and working on for his whole life in an attempt to interpret the real nature and meaning of the Indian world and his absorption into it.

These different narrative voices succeed each other in short passages of three or four pages; with the exception of Oskar's Book of Indians, they present the events chronologically, yet at the same time we are constantly viewing actions and individuals from shifting viewpoints – external and internal, direct and mediated, temporally immediate and temporally distant – and, what is even more important, through different tones. For each of the narrative voices is distinct – the sober, detached clarity of the third-person narration, the rhetorical intensity of the tormented Nellis, as he sees his vision of the future vanishing, the colloquial, good-natured matter-of-factness of Mary recounting her miraculous survival of a trepanning operation and her move into a world of visions and dreams, and the intellectual questioning of Oskar, still trying to make sense of the experiences he underwent sixty years before and put them into some wider meaningful context.

The result of this rich complexity of narrative voice and tone is a constant fluidity, as time shifts and flows, as identities change and overlap, as the text itself recedes and is foregrounded. For this is very much a book about writing, with Oskar at its baffled and contested core, with Oskar as writer. The novel opens with him as a fifteen-year-old, goose quill in hand, scrawling one of the innumerable long letters to George Washington that will recur throughout the novel, mixtures of fact and fantasy, explanation and justification, longing and complaint, letters that he never actually sends; and it closes with him as a seventy-eight year old, imagining his fifteen-year-old self writing what are in fact his present, 'random Thoughts, [put down] in no particular Order, reflecting my State of Mind which is now chaotic & unformed as the Earth on the First Day' (185) – in essence a description of the post-modernist text that is the novel itself, in which, as Oskar says:

There came a time when everyone else was dead, but their words lived on in my book. ... There came a time when, all at once, I thought to myself, I am the book. I am the one who tells the story. I am the One Who Remembers [Mary] and the Redeemer [Hendrik], the boy Oskar, and General George. I wield the death maul, don the mask of another, and dance the dance, shooting arrows at the sun. My words are arrows. They fall short. (157)

This sense of incompleteness, this lack of order and stability, is not only embodied in the form of the book, but is one of its main themes. The action takes place at a time when 'the world is turned upside down', when political loyalties and personal friendships shift and buckle and individual identities change and become more complex. The metaphors that resonate throughout the novel are those of movement – the whirlwind, destroying everything in its path, the Indian dance, a ceremony linking the sacred and the secular – and the mask – the Indian False Face mask in which the visage is divided down the middle, painted half red and half black. This image of a split, of division, is fundamental to the novel. It exists at a personal level – in Nellis with his violent splitting headaches that come upon him with the force of a whirlwind, and that he can only relieve by gashing his flesh and letting blood; in Mary, whose head is literally split open by an Indian club, and who emerges from the delirium that follows 'as if Scattering Light's death maul had split me off from myself' (37), with dreams and visions that lead her to the heart of Indian mysteries; in Oskar, 'split and half-blind, caught between his mother's high-strung and extravagant melancholy and his father's stern and truculent principles ... between Tory and Rebel, between King George and General George... between colonist and Indian' (87). The split also exists in the society as a whole – within families, between neighbours, in figures like the Indians Tom Woppit and the halfbreed William Johnson, who dress in impeccable European fashion, and indeed Nellis himself, all of whom are split 'between peoples and know not who [they are]' (19). And at an even more general level, the war has 'ruptured the pristine surface of our

mental existence' (41), with the world split between two visions of society and history.

It is Oskar who expresses this most explicitly, when in his old age he writes 'I do not believe in God (old Europe, the King, loyalty, and authority) or reason (Locke's blank slate, history, atoms, laws, freedom, and democracy)' (158). This is a recognition arrived at over time. Earlier, while a teenager caught up in the war, he was still regretting the loss of his idealism, and had written in one of his innumerable notes to General Washington:

I wanted to be be a general of the New Republic, too. I wanted to listen only to the Voice of Reason. I wanted to lead Men in the Cause of Liberty. I wanted to believe that Providence is benign, that History tends toward Perfection, that Men can govern their Impulses & Emotions & live together in Peace & Prosperity. (176)

By now, however, he has come to realize that 'Despite everything, I think my father was a godly man, smitten with divinity; while George Washington broke himself and his honor on the altar of reason' (158). He has understood what Nellis meant when he said that he 'feared the future' (42). For the future, he saw, was that of impersonal, value-free technology, here embodied in the Revolutionary army, advancing slowly, ponderously, cautiously, moved by the ruthless logic of impersonal reason.

The five thousand Republicans seething up the trail behind us are the shape of a grand new idea, which I abhor. They destroy everything in their path, scorching the earth, the earth-colored savages, and their villages. They watch the forest itself with suspicion, measuring it with a cold, acquisitive eye. It is this measured, yet total, destructiveness which unnerves me. (41)

It is to save his son from becoming one with this vision of the world that Nellis kidnaps him – that, in his own terms, he redeems him, 'saved ... from mere reason and history' (155). But he is equally dismissive of the English and the kind of stultifying obsequiousness that they represent. For both of these systems are closed, the former subsuming all to the rule of reason, the latter to tradition, to form and precedence. Both are blind to whatever lies outside them, to what is different – and in this context this means in particular the natural world and the culture and lives of the Natives. Not that this is to be glorified as another absolute – Nellis is very strong in condemning all sorts of specific deficiencies of the Indian world. Yet he insists that the effort must be made to grasp the other, what is different: this is truly 'moving forward' – dangerous but worth the risk.

Once I said that becoming an Indian was like unto entering a swarming madness, but it might redeem you. I mean going out of yourself, aban-

doing the structure of mind which is peculiarly white, entering that area where, because it is neither one nor the other, you are nothing.

It is a strange adventure. But ... I am not unwilling to attempt it. (173)

This opening up to the other is a negation of self, an ultimate humility. And in what might be considered the moral core of the book, he goes on:

What I say is, We are all pilgrims, Pilgrim.
We are on a journey, I know not whence nor where.
Love difference. (173)

This 'love difference' is very precise – not 'become difference' or even 'imitate difference', but the simple and pure ethical injunction to love it. Partly as a result of having acted in accordance with this command, he has gone insane and blind and is dying in exile – a personal tragedy but not a life wasted. For Nellis, the disruption brought on by the war, the mingling of peoples, the abrupt need to share lives with different others, represents a unique opportunity. As Oskar recalls, 'My father said that briefly during the war, betwixt the English and the Americans we had a grand republic of races and languages, a flame, he said, of true freedom (and anger), or just a glimmer, between the King and the universality of reason' (173). The lives of all of the white characters are radically disrupted by their contact with the other, the Native world. They emerge as richer, more complex – though not 'happier' or 'more successful'. The contact with difference has both changed and fragmented their identities, and redeemed them from the unthinking lives they would otherwise have lived.

It is clear that the concerns of the book, words and phrases used by the characters, and many of the views expressed by Nellis and Oskar and Mary, could not possibly have been those of individuals living at the end of the eighteenth century. Analyses of 'difference' and 'the other', a reference like that to the 'one character fault' of a particular individual, language such as 'I have misplaced the current of my life' (She shrugs and says "There's a lot of that around")' (81), are not in any conceivable way 'believable' as historical recreations. Is the novel, then, nothing more than a clever vehicle for expressing certain currently fashionable ideas? Or, giving a more positive twist to the question, in what ways can one still speak of this as historical fiction?

Glover alerts us to the complex nature of his work right at the beginning. In his 'Author's Note', he states:

The Life and Times of Captain N. is a work of fiction. Some of the incidents described herein, however, are based loosely on events in the lives of the real Hendrick Ellis; his wife, Priscilla Ramsay; his sons, Robert and William; and Mary Sitts, a white girl Nellis redeemed from the

Mississauga in 1787. I have no doubt their descendants and relatives on both sides of the border will find much to complain of.

In other words, he is warning us that he has taken considerable liberties with historical 'fact'. Yet in the text itself, there is ample evidence that Glover has done what Umberto Eco insisted was the first step necessary in composing a piece of historical fiction, when he said: 'You must first of all construct a world, furnished as much as possible, down to the slightest detail' (23). And they are all there – the domestic details of households and cooking and sleeping arrangements, the anthropological details of Indian customs and beliefs and habits of thought, the anatomical details of scalping and torturing and the butchery of contemporary surgery, the historical details of events that actually happened at certain places and times. The squalid and at times terrifying physical world in which the novel is set is vividly present, as are the details of behaviour of those inhabiting it.

Another important aspect of the historical novel has been its relationship to the present, the way in which, in Lukács's words, the world it creates is 'one which would rouse the present, which contemporaries would experience as their own prehistory' (70). For Lukács this 'rousing' was complex: writing from a Marxist point of view, he felt it to be partly a socially critical analysis of past society, partly an affirmation of solidarity and triumph over persecution – a source of pride in the present and determination in the future. With Glover we are on more problematic ground. The dedication of the book reads 'For my son Jacob that he might know the people who went before.' This is a highly ambiguous wish. And the picture he gives of 'the people who went before' and their world is far from being the traditional one and far from being positive. It is significant that Glover chose precisely this subject to work with, for the Loyalists, as the first large body of English-speaking settlers in what is now Canada, are central to Anglophone Canada's mythology, where they play a very genteel role: through both word and image, we have come to 'know' the Loyalists as a group of socially respectable victims, forced into exile after suffering nobly the unjust persecution of their Rebel American neighbours, and heroically overcoming tremendous odds to start up anew in the inhospitable wilds of Canada. There could hardly be a more disturbing contrast to these honourable but slightly stuffy worthies than the riffraff of Glover's book: violent and passionate men and women, most of them semi-literate and semi-civilized, their 'loyalty' uncertain and often the product of chance, all of them from the margins of society – underclass whites, immigrants or the children of immigrants (Nellis's father has come from Germany), women, Indians and halfbreeds. And they have been well and truly defeated – a point that is brought brutally home by Nellis, when he asks 'What does it mean to live in a nation that finds its identity in its losses and twists them into victories?' (170). So for Glover, evidently, part of 'knowing' the people who went before is to contest, to critique, them and their role in the founding myth of Anglophone Canada – as if a novel on the Pilgrims revealed them to be pickpockets and prostitutes with a heavy veneer of religious

hypocrisy. Yet in the 'might have been' of Ellis's vision, Glover is, I think, suggesting that there is also a hidden side to Canadian history and reality – something expressed symbolically in Oskar, who, in his old age, keeps the tattoos on his body hidden, invisible under his conventional clothing. Yet they are there, as is the memory of the Indian dances implanted deep in his very flesh.

Glover has spoken in an interview about how the idea of being against the future and, consequently somehow outside history, is 'a powerful theme in the discourse of Canadianism' (Yanovsky, 15), part of the idea of Canada as provincial, as marginalized. Yet he sees this as positive, something akin to Keats's negative capability, marginality as a rhetorical position that is intellectually and artistically stimulating. In fact this identification with the losers, the irrelevant, coincides with one of the classic tropes of high modernism (or early postmodernism). And those who are in this position can see the comic and tragic possibilities of marginality, can view marginality as a metaphor for the self in the modern age – the self that everywhere feels somehow exterior and irrelevant to its own destiny. From this point of view, then, to 'know the people that went before' is to *value* the marginal, the irrelevant, the loser – and the different and diverse – to know our own late twentieth century selves, both as individuals and as Canadians.

Glover's work, then, does perform some of the functions of traditional historical fiction. But it is also, of course, very much a piece of 'historiographic metafiction'/'historicized fiction'. Having abandoned the critical realism of the great classics of the genre, this kind of work, in Hutcheon's words, 'does not mirror reality; nor does it reproduce it. It cannot. There is no pretense of simplistic mimesis in historiographic metafiction. Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality' (40).

Glover would, I think, agree with Hutcheon on this. He has said that for him the subject of the contemporary historical novel is history, the writing of history, our changing sense of the nature of time and history (Yanovsky, 14). Part of this, as he sees it, is the conflict between the Native (oral) view of history and the white (literate) view. Glover uses the American Revolution as a kind of paradigm for when 'the modern view of history' begins, with the separation of the individual from the past and community (history) and the present and the surrounding world (nature). This kind of history is discussed by Oskar, who sees it as 'a hypothesis about past events, cast in terms of cause and effect, based on evidence and stretching back further and further in time.' In contrast, there are the myths and legends of the Indians, which 'explain the world as if had formed just yesterday and, in retelling become the collective dreams of a people'. Oskar goes on: 'By writing history down, we try to extend the explanation of the present deep into the past. But the savage, in his dreams, seeks to extend the present laterally, as it were, across the axis of time' (83).

This extending the present laterally, across the axis of time, seems to me to be a major part of Glover's understanding of how contemporary historical fiction should work. This means viewing the past not so much as a cause, a precedent, of the present, but more as an analogy – to use Jacobson's terms, a me-

tonymic rather than a metaphoric approach. And it is precisely this that allows him to engage with contemporary concerns, and even to employ contemporary language ('the other', 'difference'), as part of the historical fiction genre. The result is a work that is equally as much about now as then. At the same time, however, by placing Oskar at its core, it is also very much a book about him, and his growth into an understanding of the complexity of reality. He has come to no final conclusions; he still has more questions than answers. But he has certainly come a long way from his dogmatic innocence at the beginning of the novel – has in fact come to know his own identity, been educated and developed. In other words, this fascinating work of post-modern historical fiction is also an impressive post-modern *bildungsroman*.

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