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HISTORIES, TRUTHS, FICTIONS INTERDISCIPLINARY
RELATIONS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY AND PHILOSOPHY
IN THE CONTEXT OF RECENT WESTERN CANADIAN
FICTION

The problem of epistemological relativism is a major challenge for contemporary literature as well as for historiography and philosophy. In the following I am going to highlight this issue through investigating the relationship of historiography and historiographical meta-fiction. An examination of the ideas of some outstanding historians and the examples taken from recent Canadian literature might bring us closer to the understanding of their similar philosophical concerns. The literary texts that the investigations are based on are some novels by Rudy Wiebe, George Bowering, Robert Kroetsch and Jack Hodgins. A correlated aim is to provide a theoretical background to our readings; as well as it may illuminate the drives of some major characters, mostly historians, archaeologists, explorers, conquerors and settlers, who attempt to create myths of their own through univocal presentation / recording.

As for history, a basic problem historiographers have to face is the limitations of the scientific method and the debate over the role and aim of their investigation: whether the narration and/or explanation of past events within the fragmentary framework of any description should serve purely scientific purposes or should be regarded as just other fictions, different versions of various past experiences. The latter might mean the end of grand narratives, unifying myths, any totalitarian views in the relationship of man and human environment related to concepts about the past, too. As for literature, a similar

tendency to break with the limitations of previous ideas about the nature and function of the literary work of art can be observed. The distinction between *historie* and discourse is an important concern of contemporary literature, especially postmodern novels, though, as Linda Hutcheon argues, postmodern literature earlier was claimed to be ahistorical (*Poetics* 87). One of the main focuses of present-day literary criticism is the investigation of the difference between concepts that regard the mimetic functions of literature, the description and reflection of human environment, like Realism and Modernism in general, versus the contemporary (postmodern) interest in language as a creative power which can construct various worlds and which does not aim at reflecting anything directly, but suggests a different approach to our own many worlds instead.

Starting the investigation with the philosophy of history, it is well known that the question of the nature of historical writing goes back to the time of Quintilian, who treated history as a form of epic, while Heracleitus attempted to define the discourse of history. Cicero was the first to make a distinction between the mere chronicling of events and the literary production. Nietzsche viewed all products of thought ironically and reduced historical thinking "to the same fictional level as science and philosophy, grounding it in the poetic imagination along with these, and thereby releasing it from adherence to an impossible ideal of objectivity and disinterestedness" (White "Croce", 376). Another major step regarding this question was made by Benedetto Croce, who enunciated the notion of history as an art form. In the 20th century, a conservative trend of historiography seems to favor the idea that history writing is a monological system of explanation, while the more progressive trend tries to accept the findings of other fields of knowledge, such as philosophy and literature, and, to a different extent, accept the multiplicity of possible approaches and interpretations without questioning the seriousness of their scientific undertaking. Of course, the historian's confidence in his job is strong in the first case and some of the novels that belong to historiographic metafictional writing represent this state of mind. However, it is uncertain in the second case; interestingly enough this uncertainty factor is central for some characters and/or narrators in the novels, too.

Charles A. Beard, a historiographer of the so-called Progressive School of American history writing, was among the first historians who gave voice to their doubts concerning the univocal objectivity of the historian's job. In the 1930s he became interested in the question of historical (a philosophical sense: epistemological-) relativism. He advocated the fragmentary nature of historical knowledge and also investigated its nature and limitations, as he claimed: "no historian can arrive at more than a partial and biased version of the past. Each one is locked into a frame of reference" (Beard 480–1).

Similarly to historians' notion of the frame of reference, the contextuality of any texts—literary or scientific, especially the historical recordings of past events—is a central issue in historiographic metafictional novels, too. Central characters like Professor Pieixoto, director of the Twenty-first Century Archives in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the archaeologist William Dawe in Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands*, the narrator-historiographers of Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, George Bowering's *Burning Water* and Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World*, are all seekers of a new narrative version of previously established myths. However, rigid scientific data-collection and recording may lead to biased presentation. Howard Zinn, the famous New Left historian, gives a strong criticism of academic historiography that seems to forget about humanistic goals, being blinded by the historians' orthodox professional concern and gathering data and facts only (see for instance: Henry Butterfield's concept of the so called technical history).

In these novels researchers of the past, the archaeologist or the explorer for instance represent the unwillingness of many scientists to abdicate their obsessions since they are inclined to uphold a myth that excludes the existence of others' truths. Gossman claims that the privilege of the historian is that "he alone can translate the confusing messages of the Other into language, therefore, can be the instrument of an orderly reconstruction and harmonization of society" (282). It is interesting to keep in mind this extremely high professional self-esteem when examining fictional characters like Pieixoto and William Dawe, the literary parallels of some historians, as presented in the following. It is a fundamental assumption in these novels that history and attempts to know and record the past within *one* particular system

of thought often fail to work and other versions (e.g. oral narratives and personal perceptions) call for a generally more liberal attitude in our perceptions and judgements, whereas History is reduced to just another approach of human experience, as David Carroll claims: "The question asked of history in the novels in fact produces no valid, uncontradicted responses—history in its dispersive multiplicity is continually falling back into fiction, unable to establish itself against fiction as the form of true discourse" (*Subject* 128). In my view, academic preoccupation with methodology versus humanistic considerations of value sound oversimplifying, since the question of methodology in the research of the past must involve social, philosophical, moral and psychological aspects as well. As Zinn sees it, the basic question is how history can serve man today, and the answer one gives will define the method, whether it should be more narrative or more explanatory.

In the last decades contemporary philosophers of history like Paul Ricouer, Hayden White and Timothy Donovan have introduced radically new perspectives in the study of the relationship between historiography and fiction writing. Donovan in his *Historical Thought in America: Postwar Patterns* (1973) changes the tradition of valuing objectivism over a subjective presentation of the past, stressing the historian's intuition related to the discontinuities of existence and fragmentary experiences, memory traces, as the most needed qualities in written history. This emphasis on the humanistic side of historiography opposed the data-collecting and rationalistic so called factography of the positivist historiographer and philosopher, Ranke's followers. Furthermore, that humanistic scientific scope brings us to the common ground of historiography and fiction writing explored by Ricouer in his three-volume *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1985, 1988), a key work of special significance. He unveiled the fact that language is an element of primary relevance in both narrative versions, fiction and written history. He also called historians' attention to the recognition of their authority implied through the language of their narratives (just like in fiction), naturally involving the questions of power and ideology present in narratives. Ricouer focused on narratology and the problem of reference (fictional/imaginary worlds) in the comparison of these two fields. Hayden White's poetics of historiography

(*Metahistory* [1973], *Tropics of Discourse* [1978] and *Content of the Form* [1987]) are closely related to Ricouer's ideas. He explores the poetic construction nature of history writing and explains phenomena like encodation and emplotment, i.e., the conscious selection and arrangement of historical traces, extending Ricouer's notion of the utmost priority of language in historical discourse.

Carl F. Becker, another Progressive historian following Beard's relativism, tried to define the motivating factors and aim of history writing, a central issue in the novels associated with historiographic metafiction. He made a distinction between the so-called *actual* and *ideal* history, the first marking is absolute and unchanged, the second dwells in "the memory of things said and done" (Becker 22). Since the object and method of remembering are determined by the historian's idea of himself, of what he is doing in the world and of what he hopes to do (Becker 29), history writing is subject to presentism. "History is ... that pattern of remembered events, whether true or false, that enlarges and enriches the collective spacious present of Mr Everyman" (34). Becker pointed out the creative and individually determined nature of the historian's job and the "unstable pattern of remembered things" (35) that also gains relevance in current concepts of literature—examined later on.

In the 1970s the movement called New Social History gave a radically new definition of history and diverted the interest towards the experience of man in the street, consequently, towards new sources of data like private narratives, new methods like census research, new questions of power and authority, altogether: away from the conceptual monoliths other historians preferred to work with previously. An interesting parallel exists between the search for new, marginal resources in historiography and the similar tendency in historical fiction (especially historiographic metafiction) of turning to marginal issues and resources—a priority in nowadays Canadian culture, too.

A collection of articles published under the title *The Vital Past: Writings on the Uses of History* (1985) included manifestos in defense of history. Lester D. Stephens claims "history is one vital dimension of our reality, however, and it can aid us to appreciate our humanity, ... [can] provide us with a sense of being, ... [and can enable us] to

acquire a more realistic identity... and to satisfy our cravings for continuation as human beings" (100). H. J. Hanham emphasized the manifold nature of the historian's job, since he must be a natural story-teller, a poet, a philosopher, a biographer, a scientist and a politician, too (Hanham 65). The circumstances and the purposes of his writing will decide which one dominates his tone and method.

Having a look at Canadian historiography, it seems that the majority of earlier historiography in Canada was devoted to either the concept of achieving political nationhood, basically meaning the study of treaties and conferences that shaped the nation's fate in the face of White documents, or to the environmentalist approach represented by for instance Harold Innis, which meant the study of the East-West or the urban-rural axis, essentially the splits defining Canada. History writing before the 1920s about Western Canada, for instance, was devoted to the uniqueness, frontierism and the strong sense of regional identity of the West, whereas this vision was gradually altered with the harsh climatic image enforced during the 1930s. Later on the political and economic hinterland image became popular (e.g. D. Francis and J. M. S. Careless), a vision that westerners have to get rid of themselves. Regionalism in its contemporary interpretations establishes a closer interrelation of geography, history and literature, where the subjective inner mindscape of the observer comes into the foreground and creates more valid approaches than the previous ones.

Correlative ideas guide some major trends in literature today, too. Writers of the genre of historiographic metafiction explore much the same philosophical concerns, especially the epistemological question of How shall I interpret this world? In most texts the authors treat the past and the historical remembering of past events in an ironic way, which means that they present the different efforts to impose order on chaos—seemingly of past events and memories, but virtually of conceptualizing the world. In an ironic manner they suggest the writer's own uncertainties and counter-reactions against any authoritarian ways of thinking. Becker detected similar tendencies in history, too, as he writes: "Every generation, our own included, will, must inevitably, understand the past and anticipate the future in the light of its own restricted experience, must inevitably play on the dead whatever tricks it finds necessary for its own peace of mind" (35).

This 'play on the dead' is developed into a concept of a whole genre. In her thesis Laura E. Moss writes: "Historiographic metafiction differs from traditional historical texts on one hand by the emphasis placed on the metafictional process of reading, writing, and interpretation, and on the other hand, by the political agenda of rewriting an inclusive history in a fictionalized form" (3). Hutcheon gives a detailed analysis of the way writers attempt to create different approaches to the past in this genre. She claims that writing history (or historical fiction) has an equal status with fiction-writing due to their common methods of selection and interpretation ("Historiographical" 66). The latter methods bring together the two disciplines. According to White, history is accessible only in a textualized form and the job of both historians and novelists both need emplotment strategies of exclusion, the emphasis and subordination of the story-elements (*Metahistory*, 6). Another link between the two fields seems to be what Gossman defines as the Other, the primitive, alien, the historical particular.

As for novelists, the cult of seeking the discourse of the Other, and the distrust of monomyths i.e. Dialogism seems to be a major interest today. In the context of Canadian historiographic metafiction it has a special relevance, since it opens up the monologue of a limited perspective narrator to the endless versions of stories told and breaks the tyranny of one's narrative. The discourse of the text contrasts the different approaches and representations of the past. This Other might be interpreted as other voices within a text, including possible voices from the past, as well as the reader as the Other with whom the writer is creating the story in the course of a dialogue.

Recent Canadian fiction seems exemplary to present the special relationship between history and literature today, particularly because the Canadian national psyché seems sensitive to the search for a usable past. This kind of fiction provides a special way of rewriting and (re-)creating the past in a self-consciously auto-referential and intertextual fashion with the purpose of questioning certain authoritarian approaches to knowledge. Bowering describes the peculiar situation of Canadian fiction that is closely related to history writing in his essay entitled "A Great Northward Darkness: The Attach on History in Recent Canadian Fiction," where he calls the

general state of mind of Western Canadians Being West of History (13). In his view Canadians in general worry about being invisible for historic and political reasons. The result of their search for roots is different from that in the past. For instance Hugh MacLennan's one-dimensional, realistic way of describing the past for the creation of a national consciousness opposes Wiebe's and Atwood's efforts to involve orality and other narrative versions of past experience somehow in their fiction; moreover there are fundamental differences of historical presentation in Central (Easter) and Western Canada.

A basic subject, method and characteristic feature of these novels is the opposition of written history and orality, realist and modernist efforts (data-collection and reconstruction of events pretending there is only one possible truth) versus postmodern experiments to provide a multiplicity of perspectives that leave us certain questions unanswered and stories open-ended. Following J. Lyotard and the Post-structuralists in literature and philosophy, Kroetsch, Bowering and some other leading Canadian literary critics and writers tend to use the previously mentioned anti-closure strategies, i.e. multiple perspective narratives, dialogism, open-ended stories and the uncertainty of telling, along with the implied epistemological relativism. The overall aim is to dis-close the so called tyranny of narrative, to acquire freedom from the binds of unifying grand narratives given by the state, myth or religion, to create alternative histories through pushing the reader into epistemological and ontological doubts to show the necessity of a more tolerant way of thinking.

The philosophical state of being west of History denotes Canadians' different concept of life as opposed to the European imagination as well as their "need to come to terms with their roots or ancestors," as another critic, Dick Harrison sees (*Unnamed* 183) and rediscovers the past in the course of retrospective fiction, "because it has been somehow misinterpreted, ... [bound by the] domineering colonial constrictions" (*UC* 184). Harrison adds that "Canadians' particular kind of national schizophrenia stems from a disparity between the historical and the mythic shapes given to their experience" (210). As it is known, the European linear concept of History is rejected in contemporary Canadian imagination, fiction and

history writing included. Bowering's view falls in with Harrison's when saying:

Novelists who believe that history is a force or a law tend toward realism and naturalism—Zola, Dreiser, Hugh MacLennan. They believe that history speaks and teaches. Fiction writers who believe that history is someone's act of narrative tend toward myth and invention—Conrad, Borges, Robert Kroetsch. History comes from an old European word meaning possession of knowledge. Fiction comes from an old European word meaning the act of shaping. (Bowering "A Great Northward" 3)

This fictional act of shaping provides an opportunity to shape the past through retelling stories in the course of historiographic metafiction. The relationship between history and fiction must be explored as well, "fiction of the historians and other fictions" with an "ironic awareness of the storyteller's own creative tendency to shape the past" (*UC* 184). Obviously, here the concept of history is not that much affiliated with scientific fact gathering about the past or the univocal presentation of memory traces but rather with a multiple perspective by the retelling of myths and legends: the creation of histories, truths and fictions—all in the plural.

Other critics like Davidson, or writers Bowering and Kroetsch emphasize the distinctness of the Western Canadian notion of history present in literature that is accentuated powerfully by contemporary fiction, as opposed to that of other regions and previous periods of Canadian literature. This distinctness—according to Harrison—comes from the fact that "Westerners tend to have rather an apocalyptic sense of time, to situate [themselves] in relation to the gigantic movements of Christian history of the world—creation, the fall, redemption, the apocalypse" (*UC* 190). This sense of time is "cyclic, eternal in its periodic repetition of day, season, generation, but it also shows the encroachment of the linear time of the new industrial society" (*UC* 191). Kroetsch explains the particular Western Canadian sense of time and concept of history as follows: "No, the West doesn't think historically. If the West accepted history, then its whole relationship to the country would have to change radically. I don't think that the West wants to move into a historical role, or to accept history. Myth is more exciting" (Neuman 134).

Another distinctive feature of recent Western Canadian writing is the special sense of space, the special relationship between sense of time and sense of place; as Bowering explains: the transformation of history (his-story) into her-story and his geography ("A Great" 9). It denotes providing other versions and interpretations of the past from gender and ethnic perspectives and presenting the typical white male quest for the layers of time in stories of un-layering the ground either as archaeological search, meaning a vertical quest, or as discovery / settlement / conquest of the land, denoting a horizontal one. In the West, as Bowering adds, "the layers are layers of earth rather than tiers of written records" ("Great" 19). This un-layering of time and space is located in new forms of the Canadian Western. In Margaret Laurence's fiction the central characters are victims trying to free themselves from the past. These novels present the need to examine the past critically but on its own terms, which means "a new awareness of traditional values rather than a radical rearrangement of them" (Harrison 204). However, a new step introduced by her in the development of Western Canadian historical novel is the discontinuity of memory as a post-realist tendency. Her characters, like Hagar Shipley and Stacey Cameron, keep telling their memories in a narrative that is frequently interrupted by either their own inner thoughts and feelings, or by impulses coming from their environments.

Contemporary novels are motivated by archaeology in the Foucault-ian sense of the layers of land (geography, region) and in the layers of time (history), both central ideas in these kind of novels. Archaeology in the literal sense of the word is the central motif in *Badlands*. William Dawe's journey, un-layering, digging down in layers of prehistoric time parallels his daughter's pursuit of archaeology to find the fragments of her father's past and self-created myth, her archaeology in the layers of time and stories in a more abstract sense. Journey on the land is a general motif in most writings referred to as historiographic metafiction, it denotes the dynamic version of the vertical-man-in-horizontal-world scheme (Ricou's term). Here the horizontal movement of man into the environment is un-layering space with different purposes such as exploration, discovery, mapping and/or conquest—different names for the same quest for something deeper located at the core of human identity and

understanding. Of course the journey theme always has an Odysseyan implication. In *Burning Water* the above mentioned exploration and mapping theme coexists with un-naming, i.e., erasing previous names for land objects and then renaming them as a means of putting claim for possession. Becker's contemporary interpretation of Vancouver's story un-tells the older version of history, just as Anna Dawe's act of un-telling in *Badlands*. In *The Invention of the World* Kenneally's establishment and proclamation of a settlement, foundation of a community and creation of a usable past based on unifying myths and legends for that community are counterparted by Becker's unlayering these communal myths and legends and investigating other versions of the same story. These fictions present various quests for the past as a typical way of, on the one hand (re-)creating identity, and, on the other hand, conceptualizing the world, i.e., imposing a new order on the chaos of reality: by extending the chaos and using imagination—fantasy, vision, myth and mystic elements.

Discontinuity introduced by Laurence, is accompanied by a new multiple voice technique in Wiebe's novels, mainly in *The Temptations of Big Bear*. The writer reveals the tension between the cultural awareness and discourses of the dominant culture and the politically and culturally intruded aboriginal culture. The previously voiceless as a possible alternative perspective here is the Indian who is treated with a kind of romantic primitivism, similarly to W. O. Mitchell's in *The Vanishing Point*, another book to appear in the same year (1973). The romantic primitivism of the Indian is present in Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*, too, but here he introduces irony as a central agent to "juxtapose mythical and historical realities of prairie experience" (Harrison 204). Kroetsch's novels are generally parodies of the myth of creation, quest for origins and un-naming fathers, where he "creates a prairie past by drawing its legendary or mythic forms closer to immediate, local experience" (Harrison 212). Multiple voice technique characterizes William Dawe's own heroic quest story noted down in his diary, challenged by his daughter's way of telling the same story as well as by another character, Anna Yellowbird, Dawe's Indian mistress. Kroetsch "replaces history's paradigm with that of archaeology" (Bowering "Great" 14). In the novels of Bowering and Hodgins novels the Vancouver and the Kenneally

legends are reshaped by a number of voices from both the past and the present. Here the treatment of historical recordings and the approach of the past is very similar to those in Kroetsch's fiction. Regarding this respect, important common features of the novels of Kroetsch, Wiebe, Hodgins and Bowering are the analogous attitudes of the central characters to the land and their psychologically resembling personalities.

As for the second, the personalities of the central characters denote a special reference to the different aspects of history as a science. As Kroetsch says: "Western has too readily served to universalize highly ambiguous and even morally reprehensible local events—conquest, imperialism, Manifest Destiny, destruction of the environment, particularly racism and other exercises in domination and control" (Davidson 82–3), i.e. different names for heroism. Seeking control over one's environment as well as over one's own self is embodied in various subtypes according to the motivations of the central characters in the dominant narratives and the reinvention of the original stories. These subtypes apparently seem to follow certain paternal patterns. In *Burning Water*, in *The Temptations of Big Bear* and even in *Beautiful Losers* a historical or mythic personality (founding father) is reinvented in the course of the novel, while *The Invention of the World* presents the reinvention and/or erasure of communal myth of origins (religious father). Other novels like *Badlands* or *The Diviners* reinvent personal past experiences and myths of those in parental relations (genetic father), whereas the image of the Other (natives, immigrants, exiles) is reinvented for example in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, in Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, in Kroetsch's *Collected Works of Billy the Kid* or in Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*.

Conclusion

A major theme of all novels related to historiographic metafiction in the special Western Canadian context is the de-centering of the so-called grand official narratives widely accepted and spread by the shapers of public opinion. Bakhtin's idea of resistance through literature (i.e., the decision of un-telling the grand narratives) brings this branch of arts back to its pre-modern function, and refuses modern claims for the non-referential concept of the novel that did not

acknowledge the role of contextual forces in shaping the literary texts. The mistrust of grand narratives is expressed and accomplished in these novels by certain anti-closure strategies, a general tendency working actively in the texts challenging the traditional beliefs in unity, totalization, origins and endings, consciousness and human nature, ideas of progress and fate, truth and representation, causality, linearity and temporal homogeneity of historical knowledge, following Hutcheon's list in her seminal essay entitled "Historicizing the Postmodern: The Problematizing of History" (*Poetics* 87–104). The term anti-closure strategies denotes fictional means like untelling, un-naming, de-mythifying what previously was interpreted as the only possible version of the past, History as such; and these strategies tend to include the descendant narrator's rejection to follow the chronological and univocal presentation of past events, too. Williams claims: "Freed into speech, narrative can now avoid the tyranny of temporal progression (story as history) and the rigid control of myth (story as universal pattern). It offers only itself in the act of telling, free of any other inheritance, resisting both determination and interpretation" ("After" 264-5).

However, the creation of alternative narrative versions of the past human experience, i.e., alternative histories, also questions the validity of grand narratives. The latter relies on the fact that since the "past is provisional, discursive, historicized" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 149), history, a narrated version of past events accepted as *facts*, is subject to textualization. As Julia Kristeva explains: "what this narrative fiction constructs as material truth, or as a deformation of 'historical truth', is the *plausible evolution*, not of an *event* of historical reality, but of a *process* that creates the ('historical') advent of logic: the process of separation" (Moi 223). The synchrony of equally valid textual traces of the past appears both in certain trends of contemporary history- and fiction writing. The closely related job of the novelist and the historian is based on their shared emplotting strategies, i.e. the selection of events being raised to the status of facts, exclusion, subordination and emplotting—techniques analyzed in detail by historians like White, Ricouer or by critics like Hutcheon. These strategies lead to the creation of histories, truths and fictions, all

in the plural, within the frame of the novel, consequently degenerating any claim for one unifying or totalizing version.

There is always a certain epistemological doubt involved in these texts. Narrative confidence is shaken and the reader may only rely on the narrator's assumptions regarding the subject of his/her story: whether it is reality, or at least, what s/he would like to believe. One always has to ask: who says that?, which indicates that the reader is expanded. He might even start wondering if he is an object or subject in/of telling the story (though in Canadian literature this doubt does not seem to lead up to panic or despair, rather to excitement); while the narrator's traditional omnipotence is restricted. The reader does not necessarily have to be told about details, for it is enough to remind him of what is in his memory. The discourse has a poliglossia nature, where the reader supplies the other side to language, creating his own version of alternative histories. The questions central to all participants of the discourse of the novel are: 1/ "Whose history survives?" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 120); 2/ to what extent are we influenced by the official canon; 3/ what kind of power-relations control telling and the selection of events made facts. The latter draws further ideological issues of freedom versus totalitarianism and fundamentalism of any kinds analyzed first by Foucault, as well as the mistrust of the scientific world view and judgement. An overall implication of these literary works is pluralism and tolerance in terms of ideology as well as narratology. The reader is made aware of the extent to which he is influenced by the existing official narratives determining his concept of present and past life. He is also made to realize the method of those trying to impose certain ideas on others, narrowing the control and choice of the individual. However, by the same token, it also opens up new possibilities of further interpretations, or, at least, the claim for them.

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