"Dancing the Old Enlightenment": the Historical Novel and the Postmodern Sublime

Abstract

The strategy that I wish to explore in this analysis of Gould’s Book of Fish is the postmodern experimental narrativisation of the colonial past applied to a political critique of the national present. More specifically, through interpreting the novel through Lyotard’s discussion of the postmodern sublime and a theory of bodily experience, it is possible to argue that Flanagan employs a postmodern aesthetic as a type of immanent critique in which the postmodern dialectic can be read as an extension of Enlightenment thinking. In the novel the past is shifting and, at least in a positivistic sense, ultimately irretrievable. This signals the notion of history as the postmodern sublime – a space of irretrievable loss and unfulfilled desire at the edges of the margins of history. While history and the colonial past shift and change in the novel, the representations of bodily experience anchor Flanagan’s novel in the recognition that real lives, often individual and collective suffering, often motivate postmodern critiques.

Keywords

Richard Flanagan; historical novel

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The interweaving of historical and literary sources of the Victorian era is characteristic of the novel. As metafiction, it is conscious of its own fictional status; on the level of historicity, it is conscious of the fact that much of what is passed on as history represents not only the state of affairs of a former era, but reflects also the preferences and prejudices of those who wrote those accounts. Such paradoxes of fictionality/reality and the present/past in the novel demonstrate Fowles’ breakthrough in the traditional literary narrative. The French Lieutenant’s Woman is a retrospective twentieth century examination of the Victorian novel of the nineteenth century. In the novel Fowles uses postmodern techniques and strategies to produce the parody of historical fiction. “Gould’s Book of Fish is a novel about fish the way Moby-Dick is a novel about whales, or Ulysses is a novel about the events of a single day. . . . a wondrous, phantasmagorical meditation on art and history and nature; a surreal examination of the parlous consequences of British colonialism and the ambivalent legacy of the French Enlightenment; a fantastic tale . . . a novel that weds the cacophonous digressions and philosophical asides of Tristram Shandy to the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez; a novel that welds a Joycean love of language to a billowing, Melvillian vision of the wor... For all that Flanagan questions everything from the truth of recorded history to the upshot of the French Enlightenment, he affirms the wonder of fiction. And life.”