Dancing the Old Enlightenment: Gould’s Book of Fish, 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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Refbacks

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Not all historical novels written during the postmodern era are postmodern. The historical novel as a genre occupies a problematic, yet significant space in Cold War literary currents, torn between claims of authenticity and the impossibility of accessing the past. Historical novels from England, America, Germany, and France are compared and contrasted with historical novels from Sweden, testing a variety of theoretical perspectives in the process. This pitting of a center against a periphery serves to highlight traits that historical novels from the West have in common, but also how they differ. List of the best postmodern novels from popular postmodern authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo that are reactions against Enlightenment and Modernist literature. Postmodern novels use techniques like fragmentation, paradox and questionable narrators in their writing to be experimental in literature. The purpose of postmodern novels is to take serious subjects from a distance and disconnect and be able to depict the stories with irony and humor.