

NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL NOVEL

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HISTORY . . . IS A nightmare from which I am trying to awake," exclaims Stephen Daedalus in *Ulysses*, voicing a widespread concern that man, trapped inside history, has lost his deeper or primal identity.¹ The metaphor of entrapment in history's tunnel or labyrinth finds graphic expression as early as 1788 when James Hutton described his reactions to the geological strata present in the Salisbury crags outside Edinburgh. "We find no vestige of a beginning — no prospect of an end," he said, with a feeling of both awe and anxiety.² Hutton's new awareness of the dimensions of time calls into question a belief fundamental to the Christian religion: that man is part of a special creation with a definite beginning and end. While the abandonment of this belief in a special creation obviously has critical consequences for theology, it also raises serious problems about the grounds for any system of values. As Nietzsche remarks, once history becomes man's ultimate horizon then all values are relativized; they become mere products of man's will to impose form on chaos.³

Although the model of cause and effect rapidly replaced the idea of a special creation — with various metaphors such as mutation, class warfare, and even hydraulics being introduced to replace God's will — the crucial problem of value remains unsolved. How can a ground of value be found or introduced in a world dominated by history? Hegel's notion of a "life-idea" immanent in nature and moving ever upwards towards perfection received much acclaim in the early nineteenth century, and has since been reworked in a multitude of forms. Yet increasingly it has become apparent that the Hegelian "solution" of a final goal offers a hollow transformation of the religious attitude without any grounding. By making history something of value itself, all movement forwards, any process of transformation, becomes an end in itself, the result being that everything, even the individual, gains value only through what it can become, not through what it is.⁴

In Canada itself, as is the case with most of the "new world" countries, responses to history are often formulated at least in part on the experience implicit in being a new-world country, a phenomenon which lends itself (not without some irony) to a historic explanation. During the early European settle-

ment of North America, explorers, visitors, and settlers emphasized the “newness” of the country. Writers conceived of the new land as golden, believing it could supply a new source of values to replace the old world’s outworn texts of history. Yet the “gold” of the new world was not always metaphorical; the land was valued also because its “newness” permitted exploitation, allowed the immigrants to apply ideas of change and progress without the traditional checks of the old world. North America gave unfettered scope to those developing social forces which could transform its *tabula rasa* into a new book of history. Consequently, much Canadian thinking about history stumbles on a contradiction: the land holds value both for its virginity and as the locus for the transformation of culture into nature.

Throughout the nineteenth century, many Canadian literary works express these contradictory attitudes towards history. In poetry, Isabella Valancy Crawford’s *Malcolm’s Katie* celebrates both the settler’s axe which hews down the forests and the forests themselves, outside of history, and is therefore able to provide a mythopoeic grounding for the expansionist ideology of the axe.⁵ Not unexpectedly, the genre which most extensively explores the contradictory attitudes towards history is the novel, and in particular the historical novel. William Kirby’s *The Golden Dog* (1877), set in New France, presents a good early example of the paradigm. The character Philibert mediates through his trading company of the Golden Dog the opposite poles of the idyllic landed relationship between *habitant* and aristocrat.⁶ Kirby suggests that France itself was to blame for the loss of this balance between the land and commerce, and hints that the English empire with its “noble-minded” commerce will fare better. Yet Kirby’s novel, despite its success with both English and French readers, hardly qualifies as serious historical fictional explanation: he exaggerates his characterization and incorporates eccentric moralistic explanations in place of genuine historical determinants.

Not until after World War I does a tradition of genuine historical fiction begin to emerge in Canada, fiction which presents individuals caught up in the mesh of history but looking to build a humane and indigenous order grounded on something more substantial than the expansionist drive to uniformity and mastery. That Canada’s authentic historical fiction emerges after 1918 should come as no surprise: with the Great War, the ensuing Depression and the terrifying powers unleashed during World War II, Canadian authors not only felt the changes at work in the making of their history and culture, but saw the need to free the country of its colonial identity. Not only in Canadian literature, but in Commonwealth literature as a whole, this stage of development often sees writers turning to the land or the nation itself as a source of values to free the individual from the forces of history.⁷

For the novelists of this period after World War I, it seems clear that historical

verisimilitude can be gained only by abandoning the romance forms and offering an extended exploration of the conventions of realism. While these conventions give novelists like Martha Ostenso, Frederick Philip Grove, and Hugh MacLennan a superb vehicle for conveying an air of historical authenticity, they also postulate a historical past which, existing in its own right, follows its own laws. A novelist wishing to depict history within this framework begins by penetrating the mysteries of what appears as an objective past, and then replicates its patterns in his historical explanations. The past is viewed as an objective totality which offers the implicit possibility of exhaustive explanation. As a necessary corollary, the future becomes thought of as a great invisible book of history waiting to be written. The individual in all his subjectivity is left standing between an objective past and future which threaten to overwhelm him by their inexorable, autonomous forces. As Lukacs points out in *The Historical Novel*, the realist tradition portrays historical forces combining with individual actions to gain a determined end, a conjunction which means that history becomes imbued with an element of necessity.⁸ For Lukacs, the historical novelist should offer a sense of the forces transmitted through the individual so that the reader experiences the manner in which the past necessarily becomes the present.⁹

While it remains possible to introduce various methods of rebellion against the necessity implicit in the historicism of realist conventions, by the 1960's it was becoming apparent to historical novelists that different narrative techniques were required to reorient the individual to history. Much of the impetus for a new sense of narrative derives from non-European novelists, in particular the so-called "magic realists," such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Carlos Fuentes.¹⁰ Many writers of the "third world" seek non-linear modes of narrative in large part because their sense of history does not develop within a linear notion of timely "progress." For many such countries, the conventional western sense of history as a world drive towards what Hegel thought of as a "universal and homogeneous state" seems invalid.¹¹ In fact, recent historians credit the new fiction writers for leading the way in developing new historiographical methods.¹² Significantly, historians themselves show increasing dissatisfaction with many of the assumptions of historical narrative, Hayden White taking a leading position with his discussions of the role of value hidden in the narrative mode.¹³ Some theoreticians, concerned to free history from all connection to verifiably known past events, seem willing even to entertain the idea that history always contains an element of subjective arbitrariness.¹⁴

For recent Canadian historical novelists carrying on the search for narrative styles that would free them from the implicit determinism of realism, the sense of an arbitrary history holds little appeal. Instead, they look for different ways of presenting the past which leave intact a sense of a comprehensible movement forward in time, for narrative forms which force the reader to encounter that

movement as he becomes aware of the elements of narration and interpretation in all explanations of the past.

TO UNDERSTAND THE CANADIAN historical novel's development away from strict realism, the most promising starting point is Hugh MacLennan's first published novel *Barometer Rising* (1941), a work which accepts realist postulates only to rebel against them. Set in the Maritimes during World War I, *Barometer Rising* portrays the catastrophic Halifax explosion of 1917.¹⁵ From the outset, the novel declares history itself as one of its central concerns, the story unrolling chronologically, inevitably, the chapters headed by "o'clocks" ticking towards the explosion which flattens Halifax and its old social order: a classic exposition of man's condition within the temporal scheme of history. The reader must follow many different narrative lines, many different life histories, all of which intertwine within the governing envelope of a temporality largely invisible to the characters.

Most important, by using clock time as his narrative schema, MacLennan creates a mechanistic backdrop against which individuals and institutions emerge in a world of regularity without meaning, suggestive of the breakdown of values caused by the carnage of the war. The novel's atmosphere proves equally bleak and existentially void, resembling the worlds of those Hemingway characters who exist in moments of time unconnected to a community or some larger whole. Significantly, the novel opens with an unnamed man wandering through Halifax searching for an unnamed goal, musing that he inhabits a universe devoid of meaning. To be unnamed is to have no beginning, no genealogy, no history. In the beginning was the word, the name. As it turns out, the unnamed lost his name in Europe's war, where life seemed composed "of nothing but chance," and all meaning leaked away: "One chance must lead to another with no binding link." Such statements are borne out in the course of the novel as the large historical forces at work, symbolized by the two ships on their collision course, destroy Halifax.

In the beginning, MacLennan offers what appears to be a solution to the problem of value when Neil (the unnamed) discovers that Canada itself offers him a new vision. Europe he pronounces dead, but Canada, a *new* country, promises possibilities radically different from those of the Old Country. As Neil says: "Merely to have been born on the western side of the ocean gave a man something for which the traditions of the Old World could never compensate." Certainly MacLennan is historically accurate about this sentiment; many Canadian soldiers returning from World War I felt that Canada offered them a new beginning, one which could take a radically different direction from that of Europe.¹⁶

Yet such a visionary glorification of Canada smacks of simple nationalism. Had MacLennan seriously believed that Canada's "newness" alone offered an answer to the European impasse, then *Barometer Rising* would belong with historical romances like *The Golden Dog*. In fact, MacLennan imbues his novel with a strong dose of "realpolitik": he shows, mostly through Neil, that throughout Canada's short history it remained a colonial appendage which Great Britain used as a convenience. In wartime, Halifax assumes importance to England because of its harbour; in peacetime, the city lies forgotten, valueless. Thus *Barometer Rising* attempts through Neil to waken Canada from its long colonial slumber to its own individual destiny, for only then will Neil and others like him gain a future.

MacLennan depicts this somewhat abstract battle for new national goals through the highly personal struggle that Neil wages against Geoffrey Wain, his old commanding officer. Wain accused Neil of treason on the battlefields of Europe. We learn, however, that Neil was unable to carry out Wain's order because Wain was an incompetent officer who remained so far in the rear of the battle that he gave contradictory orders. The more we see of Wain, the more it becomes obvious that he, not Neil, deserves to be called traitor. Wain represents the Canadian colonial who cannot believe in Canada's worth; for him, everything of importance happens elsewhere, and he longs for the opportunity to live in a truly important setting. Indeed, he wants the war, the slaughter, to continue until he gains a staff posting overseas so that, at war's end, he will possess enough power to help govern the world-wide military industrial complex he sees developing.

Wain's belief in this kind of centralist government composed of businessmen and military leaders stems from his deep-seated belief that nothing local or regional possesses value beyond its potential for exploitation. Taken to its extreme, this attitude leads to the belief that only one centre of power can and should exist, an idea which obviously helped produce fascism. Indeed, Wain's role in the war shows the degree to which later fascist forces were already at work in the early part of the century. During a discussion of the novel some years later, MacLennan himself referred to Wain as a fascist.¹⁷ On the other side, Neil's nationalism, his feeling of *pro patria*, defends the individual and the new countries against a pan-national tendency to centralize all power in military-industrial structures which subsume all governments and all individuals. Neil stands for the efficacy of pluralistic individual action against Wain's identification with a monolithic force of history.

Although MacLennan portrays Canadian nationalism during and after World War I as a positive force which can possibly overcome centralist ideologies of the European stamp, he also sees that new economic forces in the structure of capitalism may undermine even the best intentioned of nationalist policies. In short,

MacLennan recognizes the paradox of the “new”: the impossibility of retaining the Eden-like qualities of the new land while allowing its commercial transformation. As the forces of industrial capitalism grow stronger, the unsullied land must suffer despoliation; as the new land loses its innocence, it no longer remains the main focus but becomes itself textualized, written on and across by its technological transformation. At numerous points MacLennan indicates that the rapid pace of commercial development forces the people of Cape Breton to change entirely their way of life. For example, Alec MacKenzie remembers the days when boats were built by hand, by shipbuilders with an innate sense for what made a boat beautiful, sea-worthy and a pleasure to sail. Neil himself learned his love of ships and developed his flair for shipbuilding by working alongside his Cape Breton relatives. All that changes with new methods, and the old shipbuilders become a part of the past. The effect of these changes on the values of the people is well represented by Geoffrey Wain’s secretary: she comes from Cape Breton but is “kept” by Wain and sells her body like any other marketable object.

Even more disastrous than the changes on the face of the new land are the changes which take place in man’s thinking. The mind becomes colonized, fragmented, a perfect instrument for mirroring the world of fragmented values. To portray this change, MacLennan introduces another narrative line which follows the character of Angus Murray. Angus finds this new way of thinking everywhere in Halifax. For example, as a crowd of Haligonians watch the *Olympic* set sail for England packed with Canadian soldiers, Angus’s friend Smith, an engineer, discusses the ship entirely in engineering terms, forgetting about the men on board and the role they must soon play in the war. Angus realizes that this brand of professionalism, specialization, defines modernism. The individual loses his ability to judge the whole, evaluating everything only with professional expertise. Especially appalling to Angus is that such people combine decency and ability with an almost overwhelming ignorance of the larger picture:

The unbelievable and blind stupidity of this man, coupled with his unquestioned ability and decency, seemed to Murray terrifying. His attitude toward the war was that of a well-brought-up and precocious child playing with a set of meccano. The only difference between Smith in war and Smith in peace was that now he had unlimited funds at his disposal.

The Frankfurt School of social philosophers calls such habits of thought the “instrumentalization” of reason: use defines everything.¹⁸ The conception of a larger moral picture disappears, and with it go the values implicit in life linked to a community.

Such a critique of positivism holds, naturally enough, the potential for sentimentality and a bathetic nostalgia for a preindustrial society. MacLennan avoids such simplifications by taking care to show that technological progress, even as it

opens possibilities for change in the social structure, does not solve the problems of value and well-being. For example, greater educational opportunities allow women to enter the professions, and Penny Wain, Geoffrey's daughter, becomes a marine architect. Yet Penny remains unhappy in her new situation, and while she enjoys her new-found independence and mobility, MacLennan suggests that she cannot find satisfaction in the job itself. She wants to design beautiful, seaworthy ships, but must forego such ideals to design ships, not for the comfort of the men but their practicality for war. She knows that her ship will wallow in the high seas and that the men will be seasick much of the time. Thus, even as the new technology gives her personal independence, it shackles her to its blind movements.

MacLennan's vision, however, never focuses for long on the purely negative. While the novel's form constructs a universe dominated by dark historical forces, MacLennan refuses to give any particular character a hegemonic narrative line, and consequently all his major characters — Neil, Angus, Wain, Penny — continue to offer plausible responses. For example, after the explosion which transforms Geoffrey Wain's house from a hostile fortress into a hospital, both Angus and Neil experience a moment when they see Canada poised between the old and the new. Both recognize that it might play the role of mediator between the United States and England, nation-states representing technology and tradition. Yet Angus, sceptical as ever, cannot bring himself to believe in an idea which exists only as a theory unrelated to his own lived experience. Neil, however, makes the leap of faith, and identifies "himself with the still-hidden forces which were doomed to shape humanity as certainly as the tiny states of Europe had shaped the past." Existentially, Neil's decision attracts Penny, offering the novel what appears to be a classic comedic solution in the formation of a new family. Yet in a manner reminiscent of Shakespeare's comedies, the happy ending cannot cancel entirely the effects of scepticism and doubt. Moreover, Neil's reference to "hidden forces" which are "doomed" to shape mankind does not bode well for the future, something of which MacLennan, writing the novel at the beginning of World War II, must have been aware. In the end, the novel presents the image of a family bravely stepping forward to attempt a new future, yet MacLennan, trained as he is as a classicist, appears to hold only the slenderest hope that mankind can prevail against the dark forces of historical destiny.

THE SENSE OF THE individual trapped and virtually destroyed by the forces of history reaches its furthest limit in Frederick Philip Grove's prairie novels. Grove portrays the development of the west from the time of the first immigrants in their sod houses to a period some time in the future

when technology assumes control of history. His early novels portray a heroic confrontation with the land which ends tragically because of the processes of change inherent in social evolution. In *The Master of the Mill* (1944), Grove extends his earlier ideas, exploring the implications of Canada's transformation from an agricultural country of small farmers and businessmen into one ruled through technology by a small elite.¹⁹ As a symbol for the technological forces which wholly subdue human logic, Grove imagines a gigantic grain mill, capable of producing enough grain for the entire world.

Although Grove researched the milling industry extensively as background for his novel, *The Master of the Mill* does not pretend to be a "realistic" historical account of Canada. Grove writes about the effects of technology on mankind everywhere, stripping away many Canadian details to emphasize the abstract logic governing technology. Nonetheless, because Grove does not describe the past becoming the present, but the future, the novel proves effective as "expressive history." In effect, *The Master of the Mill* works as a dystopian novel, envisioning the futuristic effects of technology on mankind.

The novel gains much of its effect from Grove's combining two types of fiction, the symbolic and the psychological. At the opening we enter the mind of Sam Clark, the mill's designer, following his thoughts as he tries desperately in the last days of his life to understand how he lost control of the mill. In effect, we discern the extraordinary complexity of an individual's mind as he attempts to understand the inadequacy of liberal ideals of compassion and virtue in dealing with the logic of mechanization. Sam's failure to control the mill, his inability even to understand it, makes the mill stand out all the more boldly as a force destined to make man even punier. Moreover, at about the halfway point of the novel, Grove allows the narrative to escape its autobiographical envelope by turning to other characters, in particular Sam's son Edmund. Edmund demonstrates the belief that the individual can escape the ineffectuality of the liberal compromise only by understanding the forces at work in society and by putting himself at their head. Just as Neil at the end of *Barometer Rising* identifies with the underground historical force, so Edmund becomes the spokesman for technology, but a spokesman unsoftened by humane values.

The strength with which Edmund speaks for the raw power of technological exploitation indicates that Grove felt that technology posed a real threat to liberal democracy. Indeed, he throws up the two new systems of the day—communism and fascism—as examples of ideologies expressing the same goals as technology. Yet Grove no more than MacLennan wants to endorse an ideology of change. At the point when Edmund creates a strike to make way for the mill's full automation, he dies by a bullet which comes mysteriously out of the night. Edmund's death, Grove suggests, "looked like an anticlimax." Occurring at the moment of complete industrialization, it illustrates the death inherent for man-

kind in such an undertaking, as well as the absurdity of any one person identifying himself and his destiny with the forces of history. His death also shows the impossibility of predicting the future with any sense of certainty, and points out that the more one rationalizes the world, the less remains for the individual.

The novel's ending, then, as in so many utopian and dystopian novels, refuses to provide the reader with a solution to the problems posed by technology, and Grove comes close to implying that no solutions may exist. Miss Dolittle, for example, suggests that it will be easy enough to "do nothing," to allow the mill to run of its own accord, the profits going into a fund for the unemployed (a "solution" accepted by many present-day politicians). Yet this option, she adds, will soon lead to the end of our civilization, since life without desire will smother the wish to live. After a brief period of barbarism, man could then begin the process of industrialization all over again. Yet Grove suddenly departs from the conventions of realism to propose something entirely new when Miss Dolittle affirms that she has come to "place a great confidence in the capacity of the collective human mind," that some unforeseen solution will be found. At first sight, this response seems hollow, a confused and simplistic groping for answers. How, one asks, can the "collective human mind" alter the path prescribed by the logic of technology?

While Miss Dolittle's resolution may be unsatisfactory, it points to an aspect of the novel's complex structure which, trapped by realist conventions, Grove has been unable to develop—the human forces. Besides portraying the relentless historical development of the mill, *The Master of the Mill* reveals recurring patterns in the lives of the people involved. Each person involved with the mill repeats the same patterns as those before him, and Grove clearly wants the reader to recognize the extent to which blind human will co-operates inadvertently with the forces of history to create the forms of civilization. Moreover, Grove's conclusion itself offers a new set of events; he leaves us, not with a single male narrator wrestling with the past, but a trinity of women discussing the future. The novel thus implies that man (or woman) must learn to approach time both synchronically and diachronically: we must do no less than change our sense of time as history. For Grove, however, the linear projection of history proves so much stronger than his synchronic sense that he remains incapable of rendering the latter with any credibility.

TO BREAK THE GRIP of time as an external force manipulating characters clearly requires a rethinking of the way in which narrative form structures man's sense of history. Rudy Wiebe's work with narrative puts him at the forefront of today's historical novelists. Wiebe's early novels offer only tenta-

tive experiments in adjusting the narrative focus to the interpretation of history, but the publication of *The Temptations of Big Bear* in 1973 is a turning point in his work, for here Wiebe eschews any sense of the past as knowable from a single point of view. By bombarding the reader with many different viewpoints about the expansion of the west during the 1870's and 1880's, he forces the reader to acknowledge contradictions about his sense of history even as it unfolds. Wiebe, of course, never attempts to deny the whiteman's success in defeating the Indians, but he makes us aware that their "progress" was wrought at the expense of other values, other peoples. In so doing he presents another angle on history which makes us re-evaluate our own perspective by appreciating that Indians could never understand the importance of change for its own sake.²⁰

The Indian has long been a popular figure for Canadian writers, but Wiebe is among the first to take the Indian's religion as a potential alternative to the whiteman's desire to assert his mastery of the land. The primary contrast lies not between technology and agriculture, as MacLennan and Grove sometimes suggest, but between a rationality which defines value as "use-value," and a mode of knowledge based in an attitude of reverence which sees all things as partaking of an original source of being. In his portrait of the meeting of the Indians with the whiteman, Wiebe brings out the great profundity of the Indian's view of the world. Here we see a people still "resting" in themselves, whose freedom from western instrumentalization provides an alternative to the notion of time as history.

Again Lukacs' theory about the structure of the historical novel proves instructive in highlighting certain presuppositions about the way history develops. Lukacs argues that the greatness of a realist novelist like Sir Walter Scott lies in his portrayal of the present (the present of the early nineteenth century) arising out of the pre-present, the Scotland of the eighteenth century. Lukacs applauds Scott in *Waverley* for portraying how the Scottish clan system, its feudalism, breaks down as a result of its own social weakness and eventually becomes part of the English commercial empire. Lukacs presupposes an objective historical force which leads inexorably from one level of culture to another, the development coming through a dialectic but always assuming a movement from "low to high."²¹ In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, however, Wiebe establishes that the Indian culture, richly sensuous and culturally sophisticated in its human relationships, did not lead into the white man's in any necessary historical evolution. Indian culture was not "low" culture. The settlers and the police simply imposed their culture, their views of "progress" on the Indians.

Although conventional history has largely ignored or invalidated Indian culture, Wiebe restores the Indian perspective, ending the novel, not as an analytic historian of factuality, but inside the mind of Big Bear as he lies dying in the prison hospital. There is no sadness in death, since Big Bear dies dreaming of his

return to his place of birth in the Sand Hills. At the moment of his death, he imagines himself turning to rock. Wiebe's graphic description here leads many readers to misread the passage and believe that Big Bear actually returns to his birthplace. Yet the symbol of "rock" in Indian mythology does not connote return and rebirth, but immortality. Wiebe here performs what George Grant calls "remembering" or restoring to validity an earlier archaic version of time.²² Wiebe calls to his readers to remember "the people" who continue from generation to generation as part of the land — not merely as conquerors or alienated consumers of that land. In other words, the novel's ending creates a visionary frame which establishes the permanence of life and denies the conventional narrative sense of endless repetition, thus bypassing Lukacs' sense of the inevitable in history.

While Wiebe firmly grounds his religious impulse in the realism of his many narrators, his sense of "eternity" poses a danger: to escape the loss of the sacred in everyday life, he is tempted always to push man back towards an original Eden. This attitude appears most markedly in his short story "The Naming of Albert Johnson," which retells the story of the Yukon's "mad trapper."²³ Here Wiebe finds that if he wants to elicit the story's meaning or epiphany, he must tell the story backwards. To tell the story forwards, in the conventional manner, entails ending with the trapper's death, and that conclusion, the death, explains nothing. By beginning with the trapper's death at the hands of the North West Mounted Police, Wiebe arrives at the beginning point which causes all the problems — the naming of the man. The police suspect the man of stealing from Indian trap lines, and although they know virtually nothing about him, arrive at his cabin and call to him by the name of Albert Johnson, assuming that to be his name. But we never know who this man is/was. He lived alone in the vastness of the north; the violence began in his "naming." The trail of violence develops out of a refusal to let the man live alone, unnamed. The forces of law and order demand that he respond to a name which twists his original authenticity into unnatural shapes. Carried to its logical extreme, Wiebe's interpretation entails a sense of authenticity which exists free of the constraints of language in a world of nature admitting no art or artifice. This, however, returns us to an Enlightenment view of man in which the individual begins as a monad, an authentic being, a difficult idea for most people today when man appears trailing not only clouds of nature, but clouds of culture.

IF RUDY WIEBE SHOWS where in the past to find values which counter the western sense of history and its emphasis on transformation, Mavis Gallant shows in her fiction how a different view of history can be applied to the

contemporary situation. Mavis Gallant has lived in Europe for many years, and her fiction often deals with expatriates, with their need to escape from a crippling conception of time, and all the cultural norms it drags in its wake. The difficult task in such fiction is the creation of a narrative line which gives credit to the twentieth-century sense of historical forces operating in nature and yet shows that history forms but one aspect of cultural identity. Once achieved, such a narrative line allows the individual at least partial freedom from history.

The Pegnitz Junction (1973) confronts the problem directly by employing a train as its central metaphor, the symbolic engine of technology dragging the helpless citizens in its wake.²⁴ The central character Christine represents a sort of modern-day version of Bunyan's Christiana on a journey. Returning from a holiday in Paris with her lover Herbert and his young son, little Bert, she desperately searches for new directions to her life; mostly she finds herself wondering whether she should marry Herbert and become the conventional mother to his son. She must choose while trapped aboard a train which seems virtually out of control as it winds its erratic course across Germany, continually rerouted because of fires and other dangers.

For the passengers, the train seems to be moving forward into an ever bleaker future. Gallant not only develops here the contemporary sense of life becoming ever more threatened by erratic acts of violence, but shows that society treats its citizens as passive passengers on a journey directed by magisterial political leaders. Germany of course experienced this vast gap between the leaders and the people during the Third Reich, but even France in the post-war years showed an alarming tendency towards dictatorial government. Indeed, de Gaulle actually used the term "passengers" in a broadcast of 5th February 1961, to describe the people of France.²⁵ Yet even as Gallant employs the convention of a journey into the future she offers a new twist, and it becomes apparent that the train travels not into the future, but the past, and that Christine, in the present, replicates past experiences.

The effect of the journey on both Christine and the reader proves disorienting, enough so that many people complain about the novella's seeming lack of form. Yet Gallant includes a supra-abundance of formal elements, especially in her presentation of well-known material from Germany's literary tradition, works such as Wilhelm Busch's "Julchen Knopf" and Kafka's *Castle*, as present-day events. Normally content to look *back* with the laudable intention of learning from the past, we are shocked to realize the extent to which the past continues to immerse the present, the extent to which our present-day observations arrive encoded in yesterday's narratives. Gallant achieves here what Grove had striven for in *The Master of the Mill* — the conjunction of a linear narrative line with repeating patterns in social and individual life. Consequently, Gallant's surreal voyage through Germany's cultural and political landscape captures brilliantly the sense of the individual riding a vast historical force over which he appears to

possess no control, while at the same time showing that the lack of control occurs because the individual allows these past patterns of thought to determine his *Lebensanschauung*, his concept of himself in history.

The crucial change in *The Pegnitz Junction* occurs when Christine breaks with the past, ceases to be a passenger, and moves into the present. When the train finally reaches Pegnitz Junction and everyone disembarks to wait for another train to take them the last leg of the journey home, Christine finds herself separated from Herbert and alone with the little boy. Suddenly a whistle blows. Although no one knows what will happen, the other travellers around Christine and little Bert respond like condemned refugees, and a mass exodus occurs. As Neil Besner points out, the scene in the "grey and wintry-looking freightyards" strongly resembles the many filmed versions of the arrivals at Auschwitz: "Lights blazed, voices bawled in dialect, a dog barked."²⁶ Christine's journey reproduces in modern form the train journeys taken by condemned refugees to the camps in the Third Reich. The same combination of historical force, dictatorial leadership and individual passivity prevails. Yet even as little Bert starts to answer the whistle's summons, Christine restrains him from following the herd. Left alone together, the pair might easily have become a symbol of deprivation, heroic sacrifice, but that is not Gallant's intention, for it would reproduce all too closely the cult of sacrifice prevailing in the Third Reich. Throughout the novella, little Bert has begged Christine to tell him a story; now as silence falls on their departing fellow passengers, she takes up the challenge and attempts a story.

Since so much of the novella has stressed the way information on the train "streamed" at Christine, her new role as storyteller is crucial. No longer a passive passenger on history's voyage into the future, she becomes the artist who creates new forms of expression. Before beginning, however, she looks into a book she has been carrying, Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. As the most famous example of individual rebellion in the Hitler period, Bonhoeffer would seem to offer Christine inspiration in her present moment of need. Certainly he has often been quoted in this inspirational way. Yet Christine immediately rejects Bonhoeffer's language of universal and metaphysical concepts. While they may have helped Bonhoeffer in the past, such abstractions do not belong to the kind of language that Christine needs, for they are in a sense ossified, part and parcel of past ideological clashes too often repeated.

Gallant could easily have fallen into the trap here of turning Christine into a kind of transcendental philosopher in the image of Schelling, with theories about the way language itself recreates the world. On the contrary, Gallant portrays Christine telling little Bert a "true" story which she has heard her father tell about people he had known. In so doing, Gallant chooses to stress not the power of language to create an alternative world, but the manner in which Christine breaks out of the sterility and isolation of her mind by giving herself to the child

in the act of narrating the word. Moreover, the story itself offers nothing of a sublime, otherworldly nature, and seems almost childish, involving as it does five brothers, all of whom are called Georg. Herbert scoffed at the story earlier, claiming that it would be impossible to tell the brothers apart, but as Christine begins the story by naming the different brothers, no confusion ensues because she pronounces each "Georg" in a different dialect. Again the emphasis falls not on conveying an abstract idea, but on the way language communicates once it is voiced in the act of speaking to someone. Hard-core "realists" like Herbert condemn the story because they believe it does not make sense for five brothers all to have the same name, yet as Christine begins the story the single name "Georg" becomes "the Goysh, the Yursh, the Shorsh. . . ." Here the word gains life through other words, bringing something new into being. Earlier Christine and the other passengers on the train relived the experience of the past, everything "new" in the present being mere repetition of past patterns. While such an experience seems to doom man to eternal repetition, Christine's story affirms that a single name can also be transformed through the active use of language into new and entirely separate realities.

The Pegnitz Junction concludes with no ending, but a beginning — the beginning of Christine's story. By defying the usual laws of narrative, Gallant extricates herself from MacLennan's realist dilemma. Unlike Neil, Christine does not move forward into the future under the cloud of historical necessity. By refusing to continue the journey, she creates a rift in time. Not only does she absent herself from the surface nihilism implicit in the continuous streaming of random information, but in so doing, she escapes as well from the journey to death which is the hidden destination of history's nihilistic surface. In fact, her story to little Bert enters history as the word always does, as an apocalyptic event. In her story of the brothers, one does not become three, but five, suggesting the possibility of a conception of mankind in which all men are seen as having the same name, the same essence. This is not to say that Christine and little Bert can remain within the story forever. Eventually they will have to do something, and that something will take them out of the world of the story and into history. Yet with this emphasis upon storytelling, history no longer seems something which exists over and against the individual, but something which he helps to create through narrative patterns.

BOTH WIEBE'S AND GALLANT'S narrative art demonstrate the importance that culture plays in developing our sense of history, a lesson which Timothy Findley develops in *The Wars* (1977) and *Famous Last Words* (1981). *The Wars* proves particularly telling in the way it forces the reader to view with

suspicion historical documents about World War I, and to engage, instead, in the actual making of history by witnessing the story of Robert Ross as he undergoes the experience of war.²⁷ *The Wars* does not ask the reader to observe history but to confront it. Continually the reader finds himself straining to hear Robert's voice, to see his picture, and thus to arrive at an understanding of the war which stems from experience and not someone else's narrative. Of course, the sense of authenticity gained from reading *The Wars* results in large part from Findley's technique, and is illusion, but the novel forces the reader to realize that history does not exist as something given. Just as history books are products of human industry and imagination, the past itself takes form through human invention and intervention, arranged in narrative form. No invisible book exists with the so-called "true facts." Consequently the past is something shaped in the present and in continual need of reshaping.

Moreover, as Tolstoy reminds us in *War and Peace*, the historical novel allows the reader to see that the connections between events in the world never really stop at any precise point.²⁸ Where the historian normally attempts to give explanations, to supply points along lines of cause and effect which leave an illusion of completion, the historical novelist continually widens the sense of connection until there seems no end. Something which first appears to be purely individual or economic or religious turns out to be part of a larger structure. Findley, for example, compels us to see the many different connections between private and public life — love becomes war and war turns to love — as well as those between human and animal life. At the beginning it looks as though Robert Ross may learn everything necessary to become a good officer and earn a commendation. Yet as we observe Robert with fellow soldiers, friends, family, lovers, and helpless animals, it becomes clear that he can become a good officer only by throwing in his lot with those who blindly follow history's "orders." Robert's position under Captain Leather contains obvious similarities to that of Neil with Wain in *Barometer Rising*. Findley's narrative mode, however, allows him to develop a sense of history unfolding in time and still show that an individual can refuse to follow the "forces of history" through the power of his moral judgement. Forced to choose between his commanding officer and a herd of horses in danger of being shelled to death, he shoots the officer and aligns himself with the horses. Because Findley juxtaposes different scraps of information, different reports, he sharpens the reader's awareness of the role of the individual in any chain of command, and teaches him to appreciate the complexity of Robert's action, to see that he acted compassionately and caringly. And at the same time, even heroically. After this, the reader must admit that Findley creates a character who embraces the traditionally opposed masculine and feminine virtues, thereby linking private, domestic virtues with public action.

Robert's plausibility derives in large part from Findley's inclusion of a re-

searcher-writer who actively combines the disconnected scraps of historical information into a whole, a technique which pushes even further Gallant's emphasis on the role of storytelling in the creation of history. Just as Robert must bridge a gap, a rift, moving from a passive participant in the war to one actively engaged in it, so the reader must also bridge a gap and actively put together the pieces of the novel to create a new picture of World War I. Findley's novel shows the extent to which narrative, once it deconstructs history to reveal the central point that description and interpretation always go hand in hand, can bring what is purported to be an objectively existing world of history within the sphere of human action. Since no "event" can exist outside some interpretative schema, the individual must recognize such interpretations for what they are, and not give himself over to supposedly objective forces. Such "forces," as Findley shows, always involve someone else's interpretation of the past as it becomes the present.

Even the idea of Canada's "newness" takes on a different dimension in Findley's reworking of realist conventions. While Robert's innocence and naturalness reflect his background in a nation largely unsullied by history, Findley does not attempt to posit such an origin as a means of escaping history. On the contrary, Findley shows that Robert's moral-existential being is grounded in relations with all living beings. Consequently, nature does not precede, but includes man. This means, however, that man cannot stand outside the natural world and exploit it as something completely separate. Time and again in *The Wars* the reader watches as characters leave the world of history to merge with the elements, earth, water, fire, and air. Yet Findley also resists the temptation to offer "life" or "being" as some sort of quasi-mystical force. Always the need remains for conscious deliberation, for an understanding of the values which guard and guide the world of nature. As a result, the novel foregrounds the uneasy relationship between nature and moral awareness in its historical dimension. For Findley the relationship between the two must always remain problematic, bridged only occasionally in rare moments of insight and action, moments which the artist can reproduce, not by transcribing events "realistically," but by creating narrative techniques through which the "new" enters history. At such moments the text does not merely convey information about people in the past, but unites us with them. Not surprisingly, this transformation of the object into subject has the effect of calling the reader to the same kind of involvement in his own time.

For a complete genealogy of the Canadian historical novel, it would be necessary to mention many other novelists. Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, while not historical fiction in the ordinary sense, offers a meditation on the meaning of history to the twentieth century, and leads the reader to rethink the implications of narrative form. Similarly, Joy Kogawa's recent novel *Obasan* offers a portrait of the Japanese Canadians interned during World War II, showing how such policies maim and cripple individuals. Yet Kogawa's sense of individual release

from that historical maiming develops along unusual lines, with the individual refusing to rebel against the past, recognizing the need to enter ever deeper into time. As well, George Bowering's *Burning Water* — with its portrait of the two Georges, George Bowering and George Vancouver — directs us to reflect on the way in which every historian becomes a part of his creation. Although not a historical novelist in the ordinary sense of the term, Robert Kroetsch must obviously be included as a novelist developing innovative ways to evoke the past and its relation to the present.

These attempts by novelists to remain faithful to the subjective experiences of man-in-history have placed such great demands on language that the distinction between prose and poetry often breaks down. In Canada, of course, the long documentary poem has enjoyed great popularity, and now many writers are adapting it to express their increasingly complex view of history. For example, in 1984 Lionel Kearns' *Convergences* described the various convergences of his own life and the eighteenth-century meeting at Nootka between Captain Cook and the British Columbia Indians. In the same year Raymond Souster's *Jubilee of Death* retold the story of the invasion of Dieppe from many different narrative points of view. Historical drama, it is perhaps needless to remark, forms a large and impressive genre in its own right.

The concern with new approaches to history does not stop with the "creative" writers. Many of Canada's most distinguished critics have developed new ways of thinking about history. Northrop Frye, George Grant, Harold Innos, and Marshall McLuhan all develop structures of interpretation which reject the notion of history as something objectively given, unfolding of its own accord in time.²⁹ History comes to be seen, not as an event or a series of events which one experiences, and perhaps masters, but as language which speaks to us anew in the present.

NOTES

- ¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922; rpt. London: Bodley Head, 1960), p. 42.
- ² James Hutton, "Theory of the Earth; or an Investigation of the Laws observable in the Composition, Dissolution and Restoration of Land upon the Globe," in *Royal Society of Edinburgh, Transactions*, I (1788), 304.
- ³ See Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Use and Disadvantage of History," in *Thoughts out of Season* (1874; rpt. New York: Gordon Press, 1974).
- ⁴ George Grant, *Time as History* (Toronto: CBC Publications, 1969), p. 19.
- ⁵ Isabella Valancy Crawford, *Collected Poems* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972), pp. 193-236. Similar oppositions can be found in Oliver Goldsmith's long poem *The Rising Village* and Thomas Chandler Haliburton's sketches of Sam Slick.
- ⁶ For Kirby's *The Golden Dog* it is essential to use the first edition of 1877, since most later editions are seriously bowdlerized.
- ⁷ Yasmine Gooneratne, *Diverse Inheritance: A Personal Perspective on Common-*

- wealth Literature* (Adelaide: Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1980), p. 3.
- ⁸ Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Markham, Ont.: Penguin, 1981), pp. 64-65.
- ⁹ Lukacs, p. 357.
- ¹⁰ Geoffrey Hancock discusses the significance of the term in his introduction to the anthology *Magic Realism* (Toronto: Aya Press, 1980), pp. 7-15.
- ¹¹ Quoted from George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), p. 86.
- ¹² Lionel Gossman, "History and Literature," in *The Writing of History*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p. 37.
- ¹³ Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1980), 18.
- ¹⁴ See Roger Seamon's discussion of the question in "Narrative Practice and the Theoretical Distinction between History and Fiction," in *Genre*, 16 (Fall 1983), 197-218.
- ¹⁵ Hugh MacLennan, *Barometer Rising* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969). All quotations are from this edition. Even in his latest novel, *Voices in Time* (1980), which takes place in the future, MacLennan continues to employ a deterministic sense of history.
- ¹⁶ Sandra Djwa " 'A New Soil and a Sharp Sun': the Landscape of a Modern Canadian Poetry," in *Modernist Studies*, 2, no. 2 (1977), 4.
- ¹⁷ Elspeth Cameron quotes MacLennan in her *Hugh MacLennan: A Writer's Life* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 139.
- ¹⁸ See in particular Max Horkheimer's *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).
- ¹⁹ Frederick Philip Grove, *The Master of the Mill* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1961). All quotations are from this edition.
- ²⁰ Rudy Wiebe, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973).
- ²¹ Lukacs, p. 208.
- ²² George Grant, *Time as History*, p. 49.
- ²³ Rudy Wiebe, "The Naming of Albert Johnson," in *The Angel of the Tar Sands and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982), pp. 88-99.
- ²⁴ Mavis Gallant, *The Pegnitz Junction* (New York: Random House, 1973).
- ²⁵ Dorothy Pickles, *The Fifth French Republic*, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 184.
- ²⁶ Neil Besner, "Mavis Gallant's Short Fiction: History and Memory in the Light of Imagination" (Ph.D., Univ. of British Columbia, 1983), pp. 167-68.
- ²⁷ Timothy Findley, *The Wars* (Markham, Ont.: Penguin, 1975).
- ²⁸ Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (III, i) trans. R. Edmunds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), vol. 2, p. 974.
- ²⁹ For the idealistic tendency in Canadian culture, see Leslie Armour, *The Idea of Canada* (Ottawa: Steel Rail, 1981).