

NATIONAL PAST / PERSONAL PAST: RECENT EXAMPLES OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL BY UMBERTO ECO AND ANTANAS SILEIKA

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With specialists on postmodern literature now declaring that this literary movement is, for all intents and purposes, over it seems reasonable to ask what has happened to one of postmodernism's favourite genres, the historical novel. This article looks at two works of historical fiction published in 2004, the Italian writer Umberto Eco's *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, and the Lithuanian–Canadian writer Antanas Sileika's *Woman in Bronze*, to explore the notion of a “post postmodern historical novel”, one that has some features in common with both traditional and postmodern historical novels, yet which also differs in significant ways from both of these.

Although examples of historical fiction can be found before the Romantic period, most literary historians (for example, Baldick, 99–100; Cuddon, 411) credit the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) with the establishment of a genre that has distinct formal and thematic characteristics. Scott's extremely successful first novel, *Waverley* (1814), created a narrative formula for combining historical events with purely fictional ones that was widely imitated throughout the rest of the 19th century. Aspects of this formula are analysed

by George Lukacs in his seminal study *The Historical Novel*. Here he demonstrates how historical figures, especially those who were of major political significance in their time, are almost always secondary characters in these novels, while fictional characters, though not depicted as politically important, assume primary roles (Lukacs, 38–39). However, at the same time, as Lukacs shows, the fictional protagonists are caught up in major political events that disrupt the normal progression of their lives, often in irreversible ways (*ibid.*, 41). In this way it is possible to speak of a decentralization of both historical and fictional narratives. In addition, Lukacs identifies a major thematic approach to the historical past in 19th-century historical novels: texts like Charles Dickens' *The Tale of Two Cities* (1859) or Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865–1869) choose to focus on major conflicts from the national past, ones that permit both historical and fictional characters to perform what Lukacs calls “human greatness” (*ibid.*, 51).

By the twentieth century both this thematic approach to history and the narrative formula used to express it had largely lost their appeal for writers of literature. The awarding of the

Nobel Prize for Literature in 1905 to the Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz, the author of *Quo vadis?* (1895) can be seen as marking the end of a literary era for historical fiction. The classical formula still appears in popular novels and has crossed over into cinematic form.

Although there are some modernist novels like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) or John Dos Passos' trilogy *USA* (1930–1936) that can be called proto-postmodernist, it is only after the second world war and the rise of postmodernism that the historical novel again attracts the attention of major writers. Thematically, the most important difference between these novels and the earlier ones lies in what Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Post-modern Condition* (1979) has called the rejection of the grand narratives. By this term Lyotard refers to philosophies, religions and political ideologies that, in David Macey's words, "claim to have a universal status, and to be able to explain all other narratives" (Macey, p.167). Stylistically, postmodern historical novels, like postmodern fiction in general, employ a repertoire of formal devices to express their notion of history. Among these are a dislike of closure, with a strong preference for the ambiguous or the open ending, the use of pastiche and parody, and an ironic use of intertextuality (Hutcheon 53, 69). Far from producing narratives that celebrate human greatness, postmodern historical fiction is not nostalgic about the national past and aims to undermine the accepted images of national heroes.

If these two different models of historical fiction are used, then at first reading Sileika's *Woman in Bronze* and Eco's *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* seem to belong, respectively, to the traditional 19th-century genre and the postmodern one. Certainly the basic narrative line of Sileika's novel has many

similarities to the formula that was developed by Scott. Tomas Stumbras, a young Lithuanian from a poor farm family, grows up in the first decades of the 20th century conscious of his desire to become a sculptor. Through a series of accidents he is forced to leave his home, after which his life becomes linked to that of a number of real historical figures, including the Polish general Josef Pilsudski and, in Paris, the Jewish–Lithuanian artist Jacques Lipchitz. Eco's novel, on the contrary, seems like an obvious example of postmodernism, with its rich kaleidoscope of intertexts and illustrations and strongly ironic tone.

However, categorizing these two texts in this way does not take us very far in their analysis, as a closer reading suggests that they do not really fit these generic attributions. Thus, though *Woman in Bronze* does contain a number of historical characters, it is even more striking that Sileika passes up the opportunity to have his protagonists Tomas take part in the major Lithuanian historical event of the period, the War of Independence. Instead of Tomas, it is a minor character in the novel, a farm hand, who goes off to fight in this war: Tomas is not caught up in Lithuanian nationalism and does not participate at all in these events.

In like manner, labelling Eco's work a postmodern historical novel is not plausible, as it lacks a good number of the major formal characteristics associated with this genre. Far from being open-ended, it concludes with the main character's death once he has succeeded in finding answers to all his questions about his past. Nor is Eco's abundant use of intertextuality particularly postmodern. Indeed, recent literary critics of Eco's novels like Rocco Capozzi and Remo Ceserani place his fiction in the context of his philosophical and semiotic works in general, preferring to connect

his intertextuality to that of the medieval writers on whom he has written; they call Eco's use of quotations and allusions encyclopedic or referring to his novels as novel-essays (Capozzi, 129; Ceserani, 153–156).

Indeed, it is necessary to consider more closely the attitude to what we call history in these two novels. This is a fundamental issue for the historical novel, since it is a cross-over of two genres, literary and historical, and is influenced by movements in both. The novels of Sir Walter Scott and his followers were shaped by the grand narratives of nationalism and political ideologies that were also the basis of historical writing in the 19th century: these give priority to the interests of the ruling class and construct narratives centred on the development of the nation-state. Postmodern historical fiction, on the other hand, appeared in the context of a major debate on the way that traditional history has been written. As Haydon White states, the traditional use of narrative in historiography has allowed historians to shape their material according to their ideological purpose: "it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endows them with meaning" (White, 244). Writing after two world wars and the Holocaust had shaken belief in the grand narrative of progress, postmodern writers did their best to disrupt their historical narratives.

Yet at the same time that postmodernists were attacking the certainty implied by narrative order, another kind of criticism of the writing of history was also gaining ground in the 1960s and 1970s, one that can be seen as more pertinent to the kind of historical fiction that Eco and Sileika are now writing. Representatives of long-marginalized social groups, from the working class to women and ethnic minorities, have demanded a new kind of historical research and writing, ones in which the central figures

are not members of the governing classes but are ordinary men and women. In a very illuminating study of popular history in postwar Britain, Ralph Samuel argues that, while "history, in the hands of the professional historians [...] fetishizes archive-based research" (Samuel, 3), what he calls "popular" or "unofficial memory" finds expression in the new postwar interest in family history or societies that collect the everyday material culture of the recent past (*ibid.*, 148, 152–160).

It is popular or unofficial memory that provides the historical intertexts in both Sileika's and Eco's novels, and which allows us to speak of a new kind of historical fiction. In both novels this memory can first be called a personal one, especially in Eco's case, as he has explained in an interview on *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*:

Since I tell about the thirties and the forties of the last century, I am remembering the period of my childhood and adolescence. It is obvious that the majority of the memories of those times are my personal memories, and that all the images of magazines, disks and comic books are the images of my personal memorabilia. But I did not want to write my own autobiography, but rather the biography of a generation. (Interview with Umberto Eco.)

Eco's novel describes the popular culture of the Italian fascist period, analysing its internal contradictions.

Antanas Sileika also places popular culture and unofficial memory at the heart of his narrative. This too is a personal historical past, though not as literally as in the case of Eco. Sileika, who was born in Canada in 1953 of parents who left Lithuania in 1944 and refused to return when the homeland remained under Soviet rule, has long struggled to come to terms with the country of his origins. In a presentation of his latest novel in Kaunas on

May 18, 2006, he has explained that his childhood vision of Lithuania was derived from the storytelling he heard from his parents. These stories described a rural world that seemed mythical and archaic, one which he compared to the grotesque fairy tales of the German Romantic writer Ernst Teodor Hoffmann. In writing *Woman in Bronze* he has also deliberately echoed passages describing the changes in the seasons and daily weather from the works of the classical Lithuanian writers Kristijonas Donelaitis and Žemaitė.

In the Lithuanian section of *Woman in Bronze*, Sileika has apparently gratuitous details about peasant culture take centre stage in this popular history of Lithuania, replacing more traditional narratives connected with the War of Independence. Political events do occur in this section of the novel, but they take place either far away from the protagonist's home or are passing phenomena, like the pillaging soldiers from the Bermondts army who kill the local German baron and are themselves killed by the peasants, their naked bodies pushed beneath the ice of the frozen river.

Instead of what would be considered primary historical events, major episodes in the Lithuanian section of the novel centre around the large bake-ovens that were the heart of a farmer's house. Thus the novel opens with a version of a story passed down in Sileika's mother's family, of a small devil poking his head out of the bake-oven and trying to lure family members to destruction:

He pointed at her and laughed silently, covering his mouth, childlike, to hide his pointed teeth. He was no bigger than a newborn. This was not Satan himself, but one of the many minor imps who populated the land. Their diminutive size made them seem harmless, even playful.

Kotryna had been tempted to smile along with him, as if he had just told some kind of

joke, but she stopped herself in time. The imp was holding the bake-oven open with one hand making faces, his red-black visage split by a grin. The imp stuck his finger up his nose, and then sucked his thumb. [...] He smelled nothing of brimstone, as she might have expected, but more like a farmhand farting in the morning after a night spent drinking beer. (Sileika, 8–9)

Later in the text there is an elaborate description of the building of a new bake-oven by Tomas' family:

Leo directed the brothers to dig up great heaps of clay from the riverside to fashion the oven. The clay needed to be washed clean of sand and grit, and then beaten and kneaded like dough. Augustina, Vida and Janina took willow branches and wove them into a dome inside the foundations of the new house. The elongated twig dome had a hole in the top at one end. Then Janina and Vida worked the wet clay into the willow branches and built it up to a thickness of almost three feet, closing off one end, but leaving the other open. The women made a flat place on top to rest food that needed to be kept warm during the day and to provide a place to sleep on particularly cold winter nights. (*ibid.*, 113)

As in Ralph Samuel's descriptions of new British museums created to preserve the everyday artifacts of the recent past, Sileika celebrates the popular technology of the Lithuanian countryside before major industrialization took place in the 20th century. His description of the building of the bake-oven emphasizes the communal effort of construction as well as the important role played by women in this process. Furthermore, he also highlights the ritualistic character of Lithuanian rural society at this time:

They had embedded a small iron cross deep within the clay for good luck, and, to be doubly sure, had the priest sprinkle the bake-oven with holy water. [...] Leo kept a hot fire going inside

the clay for three days, and by the time the fire cooled, the willow branches had all burned out and the clay of the new bake-oven was hard. Edvard [...] returned with a wagon-load of blue ceramic tiles with which to cover the exterior, as well as new hinges and a bake-oven door with a copy of the holy image of the Virgin of the Dawn Gate cast in iron. The oven would span two rooms in the new house [...]. (*ibid.*, 113)

Christianity is present in the cross, the priest's holy water and the icon of the Virgin Mary from the Vilnius Dawn Gate shrine, yet the religious belief that animates these rituals is still deeply pagan.

Sileika shows how unofficial memory preserves layers of the past in the consciousness of these Lithuanian farm folk.

Similarly, when Sileika sends his protagonist Tomas to Paris in the 1920s, it is the Paris of unsuccessful artists that intrigues him. Indeed, his novel is dedicated to them, "For the score of thousands," an elliptical phrase illuminated by a longer citation from Henri Murger's writings on Paris Bohemians (the longer passage is provided at the beginning of Sileika's book):

The Battle of art is very much like war. All fame goes to the leaders, while [...] the soldiers who die in the field are buried where they lie – one epitaph must do duty for a score of thousands. (*ibid.*, v)

Tomas struggles to learn his art in a Paris in which he never meets Picasso or Matisse, and in which such literary figures as Gertude Stein or Ernest Hemingway play no part.

Here Sileika's choice of a historical subject seems at first to be close to what Linda Hutcheon finds characteristic of postmodern historical fiction, which, as she states, centres on "the non-combattants or the losers" (Hutcheon, p.51). Yet the irony that Hutcheon associates with this shift from major political

players to minor ones and, indeed, the whole idea of winners and losers, a binary opposition that is essentially class-based, is not present in Sileika's novel. Instead, the principal historical figure who becomes the inspiration for Tomas' sculpture, the "woman in bronze" of the title, is the African-American jazz dancer Josephine Baker whose strange performances in Parisian music halls were half parodic and half ritualistic. Appearing almost nude, with costumes like her famous skirt of bananas, she called up myths of the primitive that simultaneously made fun of European colonialism. Coincidentally, for both Tomas and Eco's main character Yambo bare-breasted Josephine Baker, mugging shamelessly at her audiences, becomes the embodiment of what was liberating about popular culture in interwar Paris.

For Paris, despite his failure to become a recognized artist, does transform something within Tomas, very much as Antanas Sileika himself has attested his coming to Paris as a young man from what was then a very provincial Toronto shaped him. In the final episode of the novel, Tomas emigrates to Canada and finds work on an Albertan ranch. Now he acts as an artistic mentor to the rancher, who is himself an amateur carver. This circular movement of plot (at the beginning of the novel the Jewish-Lithuanian artist Jacques Lipchitz plays the same role with Tomas) gives the novel a sense of completion, of a task brought to fruition, something which goes against the whole spirit of postmodern historical fiction.

In *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* Eco goes further than Sileika in giving a central position to popular culture. His subject is the ideological battle for the Italian mind waged by Mussolini's regime in the 1930s and early 1940s. As such, his novel is part of current

revisions of Italian history, in which the long-propagated view of Italians as victims of fascism is being questioned. To what extent, does Eco asks, were ordinary Italians collaborators in fascism, not in the direct sense of having carried out atrocities, but as people who emotionally supported Mussolini and were seduced by his version of a heroic Italy that would compel lesser peoples to submission?

As historians show, the government of Benito Mussolini, after coming to power in 1922, progressively secured control of the mass media and education. So thorough was this campaign that, as Lino Pertile explains, “by 1930 or so, almost all the younger generation at school or university was completely aware of any opposition either in Italy or abroad” (Pertile, 173). It was precisely at this time that Eco and his protagonist Yambo were born and went to school.

The main character in the novel, Giambattista Bodoni, known as Yambo, a man in his sixties, has suffered a major stroke that has taken away all his memories of his personal past except for what he has read. Trying to re-activate this part of his brain, he returns to his grandfather’s house and goes through the rich treasure trove of phonographs, newspapers, magazines, books and comics that he finds there. In this popular culture, Yambo discerns a contradictory set of fascist and non-fascist culture messages with which he and his generation were bombarded in the 1930s and 1940s. It was, he says, “as if life were running on two different tracks” (Eco, 201). In the end he concludes that, tainted though it was by fascism, popular culture still encouraged a form of resistance against the dominant official ideology. For example, Benito Mussolini is present in Eco’s novel, both in the text and in photographs, but he remains simply an image among hundreds of others that the young

Yambo was exposed to. Nor is he a favorite hero, for he is displaced in the boy’s imagination by the superheroes of comics and popular fiction.

The primary influence played by popular culture is well illustrated by an episode in which the elderly servant Amalia remembers how excited the boy was by the revenge his grandfather took at the end of the war on a local fascist:

“And you, Signorino Yambo, I remember it like it was yesterday, clapped your hands and yelled Hooray, Grandpa, you’re better than gudon.” [...] It was not gudon, but Gordon. I was celebrating in my grandfather’s act the revolt of Gordon against Ming, tyrant of Mongo. (*ibid.*, 271)

Gordon is Flash Gordon, the American superhero of comic books that, in Italian translation, were avidly read by the boy. From him, Yambo argues, he acquired an alternative sense of values to the fascist ones that he was taught through popular propaganda as well as at school:

Gordon was different, he fought for liberty against a despot, and though at the time I may have thought that Ming resembled the terrible Stalin, the red ogre of the Kremlin, I could not have helped but recognize in him certain traits of our own house dictator, who held unquestionable power of life and death over his faithful. (*ibid.*, 236)

Moral knowledge, the novel suggests, can come from popular culture, even from comic-book narratives that seem to have no depth or literary merit, but whose profound effect on a child’s imagination leads to ethical judgements.

In an even more daring celebration of the comic book as sacred text, Yambo examines his old collection of Mickey Mouse comics in translation:

The issue I had read most often, judging by the perilous state of my copy, was *Mickey Mouse Runs His Own Newspaper*: it was unthinkable that the regime would have allowed an article about freedom of the press, but clearly the state censors did not consider animal stories to be realistic or dangerous. [...] In any case, with scant resources Mickey Mouse manages to set up his newspaper [...] and continues fearlessly to publish *all the news that's fit to print*, despite unscrupulous gangsters and corrupt politicians who want to stop him by any means necessary. Who had ever spoken to me, before that time, of a free press, capable of resisting all censorship? (*ibid.*, 241–242)

Yambo comes to the conclusion that it was through popular culture that the child in a fascist society was able to “laboriously [construct] a social conscience” (*ibid.*, 242).

Thus readings of these two recent historical novels suggest that although it is still too early to speak with any confidence of this literary genre as “post postmodern”, it is possible to construct a preliminary list of characteristics

of a new kind of historical fiction. Different as Eco’s and Sileika’s novels are, they have what can be called a family resemblance. First, the new historical novel does not celebrate the national myths or the national heroes as did the 19th century novel, but, at the same time, it does not parody the past in postmodern fashion. Instead, it prioritizes unofficial memory and celebrates popular culture in the broad sense. Furthermore, unlike the traditional historical novel, in which the fictional heroes are helpless to oppose great political events or their masters, or the postmodern historical novel, in which the ideology of the past, though presented with irony, dominates the characters, in these post postmodern historical novels, the protagonists find an alternative set of values in popular culture. Finally, in this revisionist form of history, the author’s personal past has real significance. In this respect the new kind of historical fiction has ties to new versions of history and autobiography which also bring together the national past and the personal past.

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