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The Interplay Between Historicism And Textuality: Postmodern Histories

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In view of the postmodernist challenges to the writing of history, representing the past has come to be a thorougly problematic issue both in historiographic and literary theory today. Since postmodernism has irrevocably discredited the conventional notion of representation as reference to empirical reality, recapturing the past as some extra-textual source of reality in historical narratives has become contestable. But, as John Zammito says, "everybody is talking historicism these days" (1997: 1). There is now a "historical" turn sweeping through the humanities in response to the "linguistic turn" that has been dominant over the past 20 years. These two "turns" have come to open up conflicting positions among the historiographers and literary theorists alike. The problems of critical discourse mostly stem from these contending positions and their corresponding dilemmas, namely the textualist position, which favors textualist analysis of history on formalist principles, and the contextualist one which privileges the historicity of texts, placing them in relation to society, culture and politics. The implications of this debate can be seen in postmodernist fiction which relates to it in significant ways due to its problematic return to history. Labelled as historiographic metafiction by Linda Hutcheon, postmodernist fiction is "at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past" (1989: 3). The clash between the two turns manifests itself as an interplay between historicism and textuality in the discourses of such fictions.

Since the historic turn marks the self-reflexive narratives of these fictions, the interrelated matrix of textuality and historicity as conflicting terms renders the question of history to be intensely problematic. Historiographic metafictions

offer critiques of teleological history by foregrounding the theoretical problems of factual versus fictive representation. They incorporate the understanding of history both as poetics, a discursive practice, and as a discipline that investigates the relation of power to knowledge in the past -- in short as social and political construction. By reconstructing existing or conflictual histories, postmodern novels challenge the accounts of the past produced by consensus historians.

Postmodernist critique of history as Grand Narrative, however, has led to the New Historicist debate over how the contextualization of the past can be represented in histories written in the present. At the core of this debate is the premise that history is a verbal construct. In other words, the past can only be "known from its texts, its traces, be they literary or historical" (Hutcheon 1989:4). It is because, as Jonathan Culler notes, "history... manifests itself in narrative constructs, stories designed to yield meaning through narrative ordering" (1989:129). Yet, the one master problem around which the question of history revolves in contemporary theory is the historical nature of all discourses. Historical discourse too is produced in processes of contextualization, and thus all systems of meaning are historically determined. Historical narratives then are marked by what Culler calls, "the historicity of articulations" (1989:129). However, despite its claims to historicity, historicity itself alone cannot be the foundation of historical knowledge since its textual nature is unavoidable. Historical discourses cannot lay claims to the truth of what is being recorded. As Stephen Greenblatt claims: "The historical evidence is unreliable; even in the absence of social pressure, people lie readily about their most intimate beliefs" (1994: 474). Thus, evidence itself cannot serve as a possible determinant for historical truh. Moreover, historical narratives are constructed by historians whose representations of the past always remain discursive and subjective. Consequently, historical knowledge can only be attained through texts; and "extratextual considerations defy proof and, accordingly, relevance" (Genovese 1997:87). Hence the theoretical indeterminacy and uncertainty in the discourses of history.

The origins of this New Historicist argument stem from Hayden White's

influential theory of historical narratives. In White's view the writing of history is a poetic process, historical narratives are "verbal artifacts," and the nature of historical representation is "essentially provisional" (1978: 42). Thus History is always narrative: "Historians may not like to think of their work as translations of 'fact' into 'fiction;' but this is one of the effects of their works"(1978: 53). White's emphasis of the "fictive nature of historical narrative"(1978: 42) has resulted in the erasure of the distinction between fact and fiction, and has placed the linguistic nature of historical writing at the core of interpretive strategies. White's theory has now been carried into a web of textualism by a considerable number of postmodernist theorists of history. Their self-conscious investigations of what Louis Montrose calls, "historicity of texts and the textuality of history" have come to be the central focus of attention in critical theory today. Here is Montrose's chiastic formulation :

> By the *historicity of texts*, I mean to suggest the cultural specifty, the social embedment, of all modes of writing- also the texts in which we study them. By the *textuality of history*, I mean to suggest firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question- (1989:20)

In Montrose's view, history is a textual reconstruction of the past, and as such it can possess no authoritative materiality. Dominick LaCapra, too, attacking contextual historicism, has claimed that "the context itself is a text of sorts...It cannot become the occasion for a reductive reading of texts"(1983: 95). LaCapra's argument proposes "multiple interactive contexts" in historical writings (1983: 91). In *History and Criticism* he writes that "texts interact with one another and with contexts in complex ways, and the specific question for interpretation is precisely how a text comes to terms with its putative contexts" (1985:128). This is a revisionist notion of contextualization where the relationship between text and context is a question of interpretation. Contextualization, however, is central to historical practice. It is, as Berkhofer states, "the primary method of

historical understanding and practice" (Zammito 1993:791). But, contextualization alone cannot provide a full historical understanding, because the context (the historical milieu) itself is created via the historical documents which are texts themselves.

This debate centers on the textualist politics making the linguistic usage an object of historical inquiry. "To put it in a nutshell," as Ankersmit writes, "we no longer have any texts, any past, but just interpretations of them" (1997: 278). On the other hand, a mere contextualist approach in the old sense as the object of historical study can no longer suffice and is limiting. We need to consider both ends of this dichotomy between textualist and contextualist positions in interpreting the past. This is what historiographic metafiction purposefully undertakes to do.

The formal linking of history and fiction in historiographic metafictions produces an interactive use of texts and contexts, offering a richer perspective for historical interpretation. As such, postmodern novels point to the complexity of the historical contexts and their constructions. This is especially evident in Graham Swift's *Waterland* which locates the interplay of historicism and textuality in its thematization of the debate over the historicist crisis in theory. The narrator, Tom Crick, revisits the past in order to understand his present situation. He is about to lose his job as history teacher, and his students are rebelling against studying the French Revolution which, they believe, has no relevance to the present because they think we live under the threat of nuclear war which will end all history. Crick, then, departs from the objective narrative of the French Revolution to narrate the story of his life as history. He states that history is a form of story. Yet, he adds, "history was no invention but indeed existed"(1984: 53). He views history as "just story-telling"(1984: 133), as "Grand Narrative"(1984:53), as "fairy-tale"(1984: 6), and as "fact"(1984: 74). Accordingly what makes history so problematic is this uncertainty about its definition. History in *Waterland* reveals the intrusion of fiction upon fact, constantly challenging the realist strategies of representation as deceptive modes. It also helps pose questions about the

discursive way power is exercised in representing specific perspectives of historical discourses. The novel's questioning of history corresponds to the discussion on the interpretive indeterminacy of historical knowledge. In fact, *Waterland* thematizes what Hayden White writes in "Historical Text as Literary Artifact:" "There is something in a historical masterpiece that cannot be negated, and this non-negatable element is its form, the form which is its fiction"(1978: 43). Within this framework, *Waterland* exposes the radical confrontation of fiction with postmodernist theories of history as discourse without a reliable referent. As Tom Crick informs his students, "history is that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge...I taught you that by forever attempting to explain we may come, not to an Explanation, but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain"(94). Novels like *Waterland* accentuate the process of linguistic embodiment of the past in historicist inquiries where the role of language to shape history becomes undeniable.

Historiographic metafictions embody a postmodern recognition of the poetic nature of historiography where the self-reflexive medium, in which the past events are situated, becomes the ground over which history meets metafiction. The metafictional mode itself creates a certain opacity, drawing attention to the process of textualization as much as to the historical reality behind the text. Historiographic metafiction recontextualizes both the production and the reception processes of history and invites us to reconsider historical knowledge by showing the process of creating the product. In brief, historiographic metafictions construct interesting postmodern histories.

Federman's *To Whom It May Concern* and Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words* are two striking examples to such constructions. They are overt thematizations of the processes of historical representations offering literary contextualizations of the events during the Second World War. Both novels turn the traces of the past into a historicist investigation. They expose the process by which we represent the past in terms of a metafictional self-reflexivity that

is used to disrupt the entire concept of unproblematic documentation in the writing of history. The forms of representation "used and abused," to quote Linda Hutcheon's words, in this postmodern strategy range from formal rewriting of remembered events, as in Federman's novel, to the recontextualizing of the entire polical climate of the war in Findley's version. Both novels draw attention to how the documents of history turn into a fictional context in the writing process.

To Whom It May Concern is about the attempts of a writer to narrate the whole reality of the two cousins who were separated during the roundup of the Jews in Paris, and now, 50 years later, they are about to meet in Israel. The writer, in a series of letters addressed to whom it may concern, tries to find the exact narration to reveal the truth, but he can only communicate the painful past by an act of writing that keeps pointing to the indeterminacy of historical knowledge. History here turns out to be Federman's surfictional story created out of the fragmented historical events as he remembers them. In *Famous Last Words*, Ezra Pound's fictional character, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, plays a major role in the political intrigues between the Nazies and their supporters in England and among the allies. Here historical inquiry centers upon both the contextualist approach, exposing the relation between power and knowledge, and upon the textualist analysis investigating the relation between language and the world when von Ribbentrop, Rudolph Hess, the Duke and Dutchess of Windsor, Lindbergh, Sir Harry Oakes, Ezra Pound, and other famous historical figures get involved in an elaborate scheme to secure world domination. Mauberley is a famous writer and was a close witness to the development of the secret alliance among the famous figures of the times. The whole novel is based on Mauberley's words that he wrote on the walls of the hotel before he was murdered. Just like in Federman's novel, the events here no longer cohere, their unity is disrupted when Mauberley's "famous last words" function as what F.R. Ankersmit states in theory: "history always manifests itself in the form of text"(1995:225). Historical meaning in Mauberley's narrative then is relational and provisional, highlighting

the verbal construction of the discourses on power relations in critical times. Set aside from the entire writing is one epigraph on the ceiling, one sentence pointing to this notion. Mauberley has written: "All I have written here... is true; except the lies"(1988: 59). These lines indicate that the writing of history is always an account from a certain point of view which can never attain certainty in any objective sense. This type of fictive historical writing questions how the texts of history enter into fictional contexts while at the same time retaining their historical documentary value (Hutcheon 1991: 82).

Past events acquire meaning only through their representations, but narrative representation can not provide an authority to support any claim to historical credibility due to its discursive nature. Novels like this then move in two directions. They point to the fictionality of the writing of history, and also assert the historicity of their writing. *To Whom It May Concern*, for example, states that there is no way of knowing the past outside its narratives, whether they are fictional or historical. Federman wants to rewrite the past as a story in order to open it up to the present. What matters for him is the telling of the story of "a traumatic past"(1990: 17). In this way, he draws attention to the fact that understanding historical events requires giving of an account for them which can only be done in the form of stories: "But listen, historical facts are not important, you know that. Besides, they always fade into banality. What matters is the account and not the reality of events"(1990: 38). A page later he writes:

> What difference does it make when and where it happened, since none of it is verifiable. We're not dealing with credibility here, but with the truth. That's not the same. Certain truths do not need the specifics of time and place to be asserted. A war is a war, doesn't matter where and when it happened. And suffering is timeless. (1990: 39)

As *To Whom It May Concern* indicates, the ways of telling that story are the only means of coming to terms with history. Similarly, Mauberley's words filling 4 whole rooms, 16 walls of it, can be interpreted, not as documentary reality, but as a self-conscious way of approaching the documents. Mauberley's

account, too, points to the postmodern rewriting of the war contexts as one version among others. The issue that the textuality of history produces polysemic viewpoints and voices in history is the underlying thematics in both novels. Moreover, they focus, in a self-reflexive way, on how the historian invents the narrative form in giving a particular meaning to the past. And invention always involves some recourse to imagination. In Louise O. Mink's words: "so narrative form in history, as in fiction, is an artifice, the product of imagination" (1978:145), which is also Federman's underlying thesis in his text. As both Federman's and Findley's accounts indicate, historical texts refer to the past which they themselves bring into existence by means of language. In other words, reflexivity entails projecting the past through language. Sitting with Wallis, the Dutchess of Windsor, and von Ribbentrop at the Ritz in Madrid in June 1940, Mauberley realizes that the former King of England, the Duke of Windsor, has been chosen as the leader of the new world order by the Cabal. He writes:

> There we were, in the very room with the very leader who had been chosen. And his wife. So this is history as she's never writ, I thought. Some day far in the future, some dread academic, much too careful of his research, looking back through the biased glasses of a dozen other "historians," will set this moment down on paper. And will get it wrong. Because he will not acknowledge that history is made in the electric moment and its flowering is all in chance...There is more in history of impulse than we dare to know. Yes they will get it wrong. (1988: 180)

Famous Last Words contests the entire notion of self-evident truths or identities in historical constructions. Just like Federman's novel, it questions the possibility of representing reality in language, and underlines the significance of historical imagining in reinventing the past .

A similar postmodern awareness pervades the narratives of other historiographic metafictions, like Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower*, Derek Beaven's *Newton's Niece*, and John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*. The epigraph by Novalis in *The Blue Flower* summarizes this awareness: "Novels

arise out of the shortcomings of history." This novel reconstructs the early life of Fritz von Hardenberg before he came to be known as the famous German Romantic poet Novalis. Here he is deeply concerned with "the problem of universal language"(1996: 61) that would be capable of having a direct reference to reality. But as the story unfolds, Novalis comes to realize that "Language refers only to itself, it is not the key to anything higher"(1996: 75), echoing a postmodern critical awareness. The novel is about von Hardenberg's love affair with the 12-year- old Sophie von Kuhn, who is his "heart's heart"(1996: 74), his "true Philosophy." Friedrich Schlegel, Goethe and Schiller make brief appearances in the novel which is based on diaries, letters, public and private documents that were only published in 1988. In short, the novel recreates a historic past based on documentary evidence. The chapters are sometimes straight extracts from Hardenberg papers. But how much of this story is true? The answer to this question is in Novalis's clever remark: "If a story begins with finding, it must end with searching"(1996: 112). What is important, then, is the fact that *The Blue Flower* is one among other readings of that lost, transcendental, German world. It effectively emphasizes the notion that "documents...do not transparently reflect reality, but only other texts," and as such, the "past" "dissolves into literature" (Spiegel 1997:262).

Historical textualization both draws from and creates the contexts in question as *The Blue Flower* posits. There is no truth to be found, but only stories that go on searching it. In John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* we encounter this search. In their postmodern biographies, Copernicus and Kepler present a religious conviction of their scientific discoveries. "To enquire into nature," says Kepler, "is to trace geometrical relationships."(1990: 145). In their search for the ultimate truths, however, Kepler and Copernicus encounter only the limits of empiricist and positivist epistemologies. They realize that even the scientific knowledge cannot lay claims to self-evident truths. In the final pages of *Doctor Copernicus*, the failure of science to grasp ultimate knowledge as such becomes clear to the dying Copernicus who is visited by the ghost of his brother

Andreas. "It is the manner of knowing that is important"(1990: 239) says Andreas to the disillusioned Copernicus: "We know the meaning of the singular thing only so long as we content ourselves with knowing it in the midst of other meanings: isolate it, and all meaning drains away. It is not the thing that counts, you see, only the interaction of things; and of course, the names..."(1990: 239). It is precisely this idea of interaction, in terms of contexts and texts, that postmodern novels investigate echoing LaCapra's notion of "multiple interactive contexts" in historical writings.

In Derek Beaven's *Newton's Niece*, this interaction becomes more emphatic where the past enters a dialogic relationship with the present. Here, a polymorphous sense of context is installed in a number of ways. For example, we witness the reconstruction of a dominant mode of discourse as representing the specific historic past, but it is immediately challenged by an intrusion of the presence of other discourses within that historical past. For example, Newton engages himself with the esoteric sciences the discourse of which paralled the dominant rational discourse of his time. We also encounter a specific historical context fully fictionalized in detail as a reminder of the conventions of historical novel, but intertextual references to present theoretical concerns over language and ideology, representation and narrative, subvert the effect of that context as a unified field in itself. Both can be seen in *Newton's Niece* which juxtaposes past and present in a fictive contextualization. Beaven links the 17th and the 20th centuries by the presence of Newton's niece, Kit, in each. Kit, says, "We write our own story on the walls of our world; we project ourselves on to our account of the past- and the future"(1995:7), speaking from within both centuries which she inhabits "as a fragment." In this way the novel contests unproblematic truths associated with certain historical discourses. The reality of Kit's presence in both the 17th and the 20th centuries posits the operations of interactive contexts in exploring the traces, texts and intertexts of Newton's time. The historicity of the text is also reinforced by detailed references to cultural life in England shaped by the presences of such figures as Jonathan Swift, Aphra Behn, Joseph Addison,

and Charles Halifax who becomes Kit's long time lover. The novel shows that these identities are constructed by discursive systems of power at the time.

At the beginning of the novel, Newton's niece, Kit, appears as half-animal, a wolf boy who gets transformed into a beautiful young girl during the testing of what she refers to as Newton's "Elixir." As she narrates her story, she reveals the process by which Newton sought "the secrets of power and control"(1995:35). Historical recontextualization is manifest in this version of Newton's life, operating at the level of scientific discourse associated with the historical Newton. This, however, is an ironic rewriting of Newton's identity, since his Elixir is "never made public. Of course not. It was never sent up to the Annals of the Royal Society..."(1995: 22), Kit says problematizing the whole historical reference behind the text. Therefore, by raising such a question of whether Newton really discovered the philosopher's stone, the novel challenges the certainty of our knowledge of Newton's historic identity. At the end, Kit leaps into the 20th century as a result of removing the philosopher's stone from her forehead that Newton had secured during her transformation in the first place. *Newton's Niece* is a legitimate example of how historicism is embodied in textuality. It shows that our knowledge of Newton can only be textual. As Hayden White argues, narrative accounts of historical events only give a certain version of the specific past events: "stories are not true or false, but rather more or less intelligible, coherent, consistent, persuasive and so on. And this is true of historical, no less than fictional stories" (1986:492). In this respect, *Newton's Niece* presents an equally intelligible account of the past as persuasively as any other historical narrative.

Postmodern histories as such, with more or less overt metafictional strategies, aim at a demystification of the viewpoint basic to traditional history. Their emphasis on the role of language and discourse in the creation of historical contexts calls into question definitive answers, complacencies and certainties of traditional history. Their blend of textualist and contextualist theoretical concerns

always point to the narrative nature of history. By revealing the dialogic relationship between the past and the present, historiographic metafictions challenge our set perceptions about historical truths; moreover they posit that history always lies in writing, and functions as writing. But, above all, they raise our curiosity. Newton's discovery of the philosopher's stone, the secret Cabal among the Nazi leaders and the Duke of Windsor, Copernicus and Kepler's awareness of linguistic structures in scientific discourse, and Novalis's post-structuralist concept of language, raise several questions. Did these events occur or not ? What really happened in the past? Tom Crick's words in *Waterland* may in fact provide a satisfactory answer: "...all the stories were once real. And all the events of history, the battles and costume-pieces once really happened"(1984:257). After all what can be more truth-revealing than fiction in the guise of history ?

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ABSTRACT :

This essay deals with the interrelated matrix of textuality and historicity in the problematic representations of history in various postmodern novels which came to be known as historiographic metafictions. It explicates the formal linking of history and fiction in the metafictional discourses of such novels. Arguing that these novels highlight the narrative nature of historiography, the essay draws attention to the dialogic relationship between the past and the present as the postmodern novel subverts and challenges the traditional understanding of history as Grand Narrative. References to the plots of several novels, such as *Waterland, Famous Last Words, To Whom It May Concern, The Blue Flower,* and *Newton's Niece,* provide examples to the process of textualization of history and to the interesting postmodern version of the past which raise the reader's curiosity about what really happened in the past. The essay ends with the question of whether we can ever have a satisfactory answer to such a question, except for the reminder that fiction in the guise of history can be more truth revealing than history itself as narrative.

Key Terms: Historiographic metafiction, textuality, historicity, postmodern novel, representations of the past.

ÖZET :

Bu makale tarihyazımcı üst-kurmaca olarak adlandırılan postmodern romanların tarihin metinselliği ve metinlerin tarihselliği arasındaki yakın ilişkiyi kullanarak tarihin yansıtımını nasıl sorunsallaştırdıklarını incelemektedir. Bu romanlarda görülen tarih ve kurmacanın biçimsel anlamda benzerliğini tartışmaktadır. Postmodern romanın tarihyazımını bir anlatı olarak ele alışını irdeleyen makale, bu tür romanlarda geleneksel tarih anlayışının nasıl alaşağı edildiğini bu romanların sergilediği geçmiş ve şimdiki zamanın yakın ilişkisini gözönüne alarak incelemektedir. Böylece Tarih Büyük-Anlatı olmaktan çıkarılarak kurmaca özellikleri sergilenmiş olmaktadır. *Waterland, Famous Last Words, To Whom It May Concern, The Blue Flower*, ve *Newton's Niece* gibi romanların olay örgülerine yapılan göndermeler, tarihin metinselleşme sürecine, ve okura geçmişte gerçekte neler olduğu sorusunu sorduran tarihin ilginç postmodern anlatımlarını sergileyen postmodern romana da örnek oluşturmaktadır. Makale böyle bir soruya verilebilecek herhangi bir geçerli yanıt olup olmadığı sorusuyla sonuçlanır. Ancak, tarih görünümüne bürünmüş kurmacanın bir anlatı olarak tarihten daha çok doğruya yaklaştığının da altını çizer.

Anahtar Terimler: Tarihyazımcı üst-kurmaca, tarihsellik, metinsellik, postmodern roman, geçmişin yansıtımları.