1994

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Recommended Citation

Howells, Coral Ann, Storm Glass: The Preservation and Transformation of History in The Diviners, Obasan, My Lovely Enemy, *Kunapipi*, 16(1), 1994.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/84>

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Abstract

Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, and Rudy Wiebe's *My Lovely Enemy* all offer fictive reconstructions of the history of vanished people on the prairies.¹ *The Diviners* is concerned with nineteenth-century Scottish settlers around the Red River and with the indigenous Metis; *Obasan* records the experiences of Japanese-Canadians who underwent a peculiarly traumatic form of enforced resettlement in the western provinces during World War II; and *My Lovely Enemy* is concerned with prairie Indians in the early nineteenth century pre-European colonisation and with Mennonite settlers. These are all regional and historical fictions but curiously, when taken together, they disperse notions of regionalism in the sense of identifiable community, emphasising instead multiplicity and separateness within the geographical space of the prairie. It is true that the historical events they record occupy different time slots over the past one hundred and fifty years, but there is something very odd about western Canada in the way that the prairies 'island people and events in large spaces without swallowing them or synthesising them'.²

CORAL ANN HOWELLS

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Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, and Rudy Wiebe's *My Lovely Enemy* all offer fictive reconstructions of the history of vanished people on the prairies.¹ *The Diviners* is concerned with nineteenth-century Scottish settlers around the Red River and with the indigenous Métis; *Obasan* records the experiences of Japanese-Canadians who underwent a peculiarly traumatic form of enforced resettlement in the western provinces during World War II; and *My Lovely Enemy* is concerned with prairie Indians in the early nineteenth century pre-European colonisation and with Mennonite settlers. These are all regional and historical fictions but curiously, when taken together, they disperse notions of regionalism in the sense of identifiable community, emphasising instead multiplicity and separateness within the geographical space of the prairie. It is true that the historical events they record occupy different time slots over the past one hundred and fifty years, but there is something very odd about western Canada in the way that the prairies 'island people and events in large spaces without swallowing them or synthesising them'.² These three narratives deal with mutually exclusive communities who are largely ignorant of the others who may previously have existed in the same places. Wiebe's narrator Professor James Dyck declares that 'the problem is, writing prairie Indian history' (p. 43); I suggest that the problem is, writing prairie history at all. It is a question of the difficulties of historical representation in a place of vast surfaces where there is very little sense of an accumulated stratified past (by contrast with e.g. Thomas Hardy's Wessex or Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*). Prairie historical fiction focuses on gaps and vanishings, and part of the fascination of these novels lies in the different ways in which the prairie is figured as textual space.

In this paper about the problematics of prairie historical fiction I begin with an image from Jane Urquhart's short story 'Storm Glass'. That story is set in Ontario not on the prairie, but its image of a piece of broken glass tossed about for years in a lake and so robbed of its ability to cut, beautifully encapsulates the idea of relics, their preservation and transformation:

What had once been a shattered dangerous substance now lay upon the beach, harmless, inert and beautiful after being tossed and rubbed by the real weather of the world. It had, with time, become a pastel memory of a useful vessel, to be carried, perhaps in a back pocket, and brought out and examined now and then. It was a relic of that special moment when the memory and the edge of the break softened and combined in order to allow preservation.³

This looks as if it might be a useful metaphor for historical facts and inheritance. Indeed, historical evidence occurs as *objets trouvés* in all these texts – talismans, letters, documents, photographs, a prehistoric Medicine Wheel – and because such evidence is always incomplete and fragmented, historical ‘truth’ is already blurred at the edges like the piece of glass. As Linda Hutcheon says in her excellent essay, ‘History and/as Intertext’, ‘The past *was* real, but it is lost or at least displaced, only to be reinstated as the referent of art, the relic or trace of the real.’⁴ Yet Hutcheon’s comment suggests that the storm glass image as analogy for historical facts raises problems, for these *objets trouvés* are not static like pieces of glass; they may be misted over and dulled by time, but precisely because of this process and the fragmentary nature of the evidence, historical representation always remains provisional and ‘susceptible to infinite revision’.⁵ It is at the point of engagement with historical fiction that the storm glass image breaks down/breaks apart. Interestingly both Kogawa and Wiebe emphasise the need to split open/to shatter received orthodox histories and conceptualisations of the past; it is only Laurence who seems to be able to accommodate the past without radical upsets, and she does this by creating a romance of origins which allows her narrator a ‘homecoming’.

Any historical novel insists on a combination of different kinds of textual evidence – documentary plus imaginative response and fictive invention – creating the multiple codes of a discontinuous text which has plural significances but no single meaning. *The Diviners* with its mixture of personal history, pioneer narratives and legends preserved by Scots and Métis oral tradition registers the pluralism of Canadian prairie history, with its sense of slippage from historical origins together with the urge to reinvent the past in order to feel at home. Yet the dominant image of the novel remains a very fluid one, that of the river which flows both ways. *My Lovely Enemy* presents powerful images of opposition between fragmentation and unity, while recognising that such a desire for unity is utopian. *Obasan* is a chronicle of fragmentation, where even remembered family unity is an illusion in a community where Japanese-Canadians were always under threat.⁶ It is a story of absences told in the absence of loved ones, and its central enigma is solved in the absence of the mother through the ‘slippery pages’ of a letter which has to be translated. And what is made here? Not unity, but an open mesh of language. And what is telling? Not wholeness, but a splitting open of the stone of silence. Edges that seemed softened by time have their ability to cut dangerously restored in all these

novels through their narrators' intense imaginative engagement with the 'facts' of the past. I believe that any historical novel is engaged in the process of 'figuratively speaking' (as Joseph Conrad described his writing of *Nostromo* in his Author's Note to that historical novel), where factuality is displaced into fiction at the same time as the relation between the present and the past is revitalised. This fiction-making effort is really the opposite process to that of the preservation of relics that may be 'brought out and examined now and then'.

The three novels I have chosen constitute very different kinds of historical fiction; through them one may consider both the formal properties of narrative and the appropriateness of particular narrative forms for historical exploration/explanation. My project is very much influenced by Hayden White's readings of 'the historical text as literary artefact' and his focus on the rhetorical strategies within historical narratives. The proposition that it is not possible to make a naïve binary opposition between historical fact and historical fiction because any historical record is already textualised/contextualised/interpreted when we inherit it, liberates historical representation into a condition of perpetual revision 'in the light of new evidence or more sophisticated conceptualisations of problems'.⁷ When White proceeds to show that histories follow identifiable fabular or mythic patterns like that of the Quest or the tragic plot of Decline and Fall, when he emphasises the fictive component of all historical narrative, we have arrived at the borderline between history and historical fiction. That borderline is blurred and almost dissolved by correspondences between the two kinds of narrative: 'Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events [those which can be assigned specific time locations and those which are invented] both the forms of their respective discourses and the aims in writing are often the same'.⁸ What White highlights about historical narrative is the point of view from which events are told, for it is this which conditions the kind of narrative configuration or plot structure which emerges. His remarks find a striking correspondence in Wiebe's description of his own fiction as 'looking at the actual stuff of history from a slightly different angle'.⁹ History is both ancestor worship and the demystifying of unfamiliar threatening events, and the rhetorical strategies of writing history have to do with the way that historical narratives may be made accessible to readers within a particular culture.

Historical fictions participate in this cultural process/processing, and they take questions of narrative configuration a stage further along the line of 'history from a different angle' as they move from the social function of history towards subjectivity and imaginative reconstruction. The question we need to ask is, What is the imperative encoded in the particular narrative forms of the three novels I have chosen? It is partly a subjective imperative (peculiar to the individual narrator) and it is partly an imperative inherent within the chosen language and literary conventions

employed in every novel. *My Lovely Enemy* registers the subjective imperative behind historical narratives in several ways. There is the characterisation of Professor James Dyck with his desire to 'see truly differently' (p. 63) i.e. to restructure perceptions of history by adopting a visionary mode; there is the description of Sir George Simpson's nineteenth-century exploration narrative as 'imperialist' (p. 37); there is also Gillian Overton's creative view of history as 'personality' (p. 88) in a world always 'under construction'. So, history in *My Lovely Enemy* is not only the unearthing of personality through Dyck's quest for the heroic figure of the vanished Cree chieftain Maskepetoon, but it also becomes the celebration of the historian's personality as Dyck establishes a shadowy parallel between himself and Maskepetoon, affirming their correspondence through the shared image of a body slowly turning in prairie space (p. 57 and p. 167). The vision of history in *My Lovely Enemy* is partly a personal religious vision designed to heal difference; but it is also impersonal, a product of the postmodernist fictional form which Wiebe has chosen with its shifts between realism and fantasy generating multiple ways of apprehending reality while paying attention to what is on the margins. Decentralisation, dissolution and through that 'unimagined discovery' hover as possibilities. A different combination of personal/impersonal imperatives operates in *The Diviners*, where the subjective imperative is enacted in Morag Gunn's imaginative effort to reinvent her lost ancestry and so come into her inheritance, 'convinced that fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction' (p. 25). And Morag does come home, though to a different place from where she started, returning to the house in Ontario, 'to write the remaining private and fictional words, and to set down her title' (p. 453). There is also an impersonal urge here inherent within the rather old-fashioned modernist narrative that Laurence has chosen, and this is the modernist urge towards moments of transcendence beyond fragmentation. These epiphanies are represented for Morag and Jules Tonnerre by 'objective correlatives', in relics like the Scottish plaid pin and the Métis hunting knife. It is in their exchange of talismans as much as through the living presence of their daughter Pique that Laurence's narrative effects the reconciliation between two cultures and so confirms her prairie history as a romance of origins.

Obasan combines personal and impersonal imperatives in yet another kind of negotiation with the past, which is intimately related to the point of view from which the narrative is told. Naomi Nakane is telling the story of the Japanese-Canadian experience of dispersal and dispossession during the second World War and she is telling it in 1972 while still living on the prairies, having never gone back to Vancouver from which she was banished in her childhood. Naomi is herself one of the dispossessed, and her quest is a coming to terms with loss and absence as she searches for a language to re-establish her own psychic wholeness out of the tragic history of the Japanese-Canadian community. This is an intensely sub-

jective quest narrative that works through strategies of silence and enigma towards revelation. There are also impersonal imperatives at work here urging connections across fragmentations of story and structure, and these are the imperatives of lyric poetry. The fragmented form of Naomi's first person narrative includes letters, diaries, newspaper clippings speaking in multiple voices, as it also contains shifts from place to place, and the crucial absence of her mother. Yet connections are made in this narrative through its being assimilated into the forms of lyric poetry. In an interview in which she described the writing of the novel Kogawa said,

The first draft was more like a very long poem than anything else – a lot of imagery, a lot less connectedness between things [i.e. the discursive connections of prose narrative]. Up till then all I'd done was write poetry, and everything else seemed boring to me... Yes, I was basically writing poetry at this point, even if it was very, very long.¹⁰

What remains in the finished novel are the urgent lyrical imperatives of metaphor, by which I mean that while recognising difference and separations there is also a mesh of images which invent likeness or connections between things and so shadow an imaginable coherence. I think this best describes Kogawa's way towards reconciliation of the present and the past, as Naomi recognises herself as an inheritor: she has to learn to listen to her mother's silence when her mother comes to her as a ghost in dreams. For Naomi, through all the gaps and contradictions in her experience, the one categorical assertion is that love cannot be doubted, and Kogawa's narrative like Wiebe's recognises the importance of the unconscious as a medium for the divine power, for love, for inspiration. Naomi learns to embrace the mystery of her mother's love in absence, accepting incompleteness within herself just as she accepts her dual inheritance from her aunts. In telling her story Naomi has been guided by Aunt Emily whose way has always been that of the Woman Warrior, and she tells it in the oblique manner of *Obasan*. As Kogawa said in the interview quoted previously, 'I think that the day of Aunt Emily is always today; *Obasan* has tomorrow and yesterday in her hands. I think we need them both' (p. 148). It would be simple-minded to see *Obasan* as a historical novel confirming optimistic Canadian social myths about multiculturalism and multiethnicity, for this is really an elegy for a lost community and the ending is not about integration though it is about forgiveness. Naomi has rehabilitated herself as a speaking subject and the story ends on fragile promise for the future, but Naomi is silent and alone in a secret place on the Alberta coulee.

The question remains of how the prairie is figured in *Obasan* and in the other two novels. One might begin by making the point that in *Obasan* the prairie is presented as alien space in what is a twentieth-century version of a nineteenth-century settlement narrative about wilderness. To Naomi

as a child, coming to Lethbridge Alberta is 'coming to the edge of the world, a place of angry air' (p. 191), and the beetfields provide a landscape of nightmare. Such space can only be robbed of its threat by metaphor and simile with their affirmations of resemblance to other known loved places. The novel told by the adult Naomi begins on the coulee with the sound of a fisherman's voice:

'Umi no yo,' Uncle says, pointing to the grass. 'It's like the sea.'

The hill surface, as if responding to a command from Uncle's outstretched hand, undulates suddenly in a breeze, with ripple after ripple of grass shadows, rhythmic as ocean waves. We wade through the dry surf, the flecks of grass hitting us like spray. (p. 1)

As Naomi remarks after her uncle's funeral, 'Perhaps some genealogist of the future will come across this patch of bones, and wonder why so many fishermen died on the prairies' (p. 225). Naomi's final reconciliation takes place on that coulee, which has become for her a secret wild garden, the place where the underground stream 'seeps' through the earth. Gaps between present and past are fused by the image of this underground stream, for it relates the topography of prairie place to Naomi's psychic landscape through which memories and dreams have seeped into waking life, making secret and restorative connections as 'soundless as breath' (p. 247).¹¹

In *The Diviners* prairie spaces are not as important as the prairie town, or rather its edges like the Nuisance Grounds or the wilderness beside the Manwaka River, for Morag's journey is from a condition of marginality towards a homecoming. It is a homecoming which does not however mean a return to the prairies but to McConnell's Landing in Ontario, her inheritance 'by adoption'. The romance of ancestral place hovers on the periphery for Morag and Jules's daughter Pique who is planning to go back to her Métis uncle's farm at Galloping Mountain in Manitoba, but hers is a different story from her mother's. Morag's own story is really about displacement and resettlement, a version of the pioneer homemaker's family romance, for which the Upper Canada settler Mrs Parr Traill, Morag's 'sainted Catherine', provides an irritating if very appropriate model.

My Lovely Enemy is the novel most intimately connected with prairie place, transformed by Wiebe's mythologising imagination into fictional space. For Wiebe the land is still the locus of power as it had been for nineteenth-century white settlers and for the indigenous Cree and Blackfoot. Wiebe is seeking 'to uninvent the grammar of history' which dispossessed the Indians and to restore through his fictions the Indian sense of the spiritual power of prairie places.¹² Working by a logic of the emotions, Wiebe takes his direction here from Jorge Luis Borges's story, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', for that fantasy of invented worlds offers

multiple possibilities for the reinterpretation of history.¹³ However, Borges's time fantasy lacks the very element which Wiebe's novel foregrounds – the element of place – for in *My Lovely Enemy* the prairie itself is the very ground of continuity, the place where transformations of history happen. As his narrator says, 'On the prairie the only graspable image for time is the movement of a body in space; consequently, the only image for a person's outlook on humanity is direction' (p. 156). In a novel like this, the gaps within history may be bridged when images of time are converted into images of place, and revisions of history take place on the prairie reimagined as textual space.

The innocuous image of storm glass smoothed by time has been shattered in this study of the multiplicities and discontinuities within prairie fiction. I would like to end with the suggestion that the efforts of fictive historical narrative, enmeshed as they are with the narrator's subjectivity, are directed less towards the preservation of history than towards creating what Hayden White calls 'a congenial imaginary relationship which the subject bears towards his/her own social and cultural situation'.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (1974); rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, New Canadian Library, 1978); Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (1981; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983); Rudy Wiebe, *My Lovely Enemy* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1983). All page references will be to these editions and included in the text.
2. J.J. Healy, 'Literature, Power and the Refusals of Big Bear: Reflections on the treatment of the Indian and of the Aborigine', in R. McDougall & G. Whitlock, ed., *Australian/Canadian Literatures in English: Comparative Perspectives* (Sydney: Methuen, 1987), p. 80.
3. Jane Urquhart, 'Storm Glass', in *Storm Glass* (Erin, Ontario: The Porcupine's Quill, 1987), p. 39.
4. L. Hutcheon, 'History and/as Intertext', in J. Moss, ed., *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1987), p. 173.
5. Hayden White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact', in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 82.
6. For a socio-historical account to supplement Kogawa's fiction, see Ann Gomer Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1981).
7. H. White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact', p. 82.
8. H. White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation', in *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 121.
9. S. Newman, 'Unearthing Language: An Interview with Rudy Wiebe and Robert Kroetsch', in W.J. Keith, ed., *A Voice in the Land* (Edmonton: NeWest, 1981), p. 230.
10. 'Joy Kogawa', in A. Garrod, ed., *Speaking for Myself: Canadian Writers in Interview* (St John's, Newfoundland: Breakwater, 1986), p. 150.
11. For a fuller discussion of the language of *Obasan*, see C.A. Howells, *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 80s* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 125-9.
12. See J.J. Healy, p. 80.

13. Jorge Luis Borges, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (1961; rpt. in *Labyrinths*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).
14. H. White's concluding essay in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). My reference is taken from S. Bann's review, 'Hayden White and History', *London Review of Books*, 17 September 1987, 17-18.