Dancing the Old Enlightenment: Gould’s Book of Fish, the Historical Novel and the Postmodern Sublime
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Abstract

The strategy that I wish to explore in this analysis of Gould’s Book of Fish is the postmodern experimental narrativisation of the colonial past applied to a political critique of the national present. More specifically, through interpreting the novel through Lyotard’s discussion of the postmodern sublime and a theory of bodily experience, it is possible to argue that Flanagan employs a postmodern aesthetic as a type of immanent critique in which the postmodern dialectic can be read as an extension of Enlightenment thinking. In the novel the past is shifting and, at least in a positivistic sense, ultimately irretrievable. This signals the notion of history as the postmodern sublime – a space of irretrievable loss and unfulfilled desire at the edges of the margins of history. While history and the colonial past shift and change in the novel, the representations of bodily experience anchor Flanagan’s novel in the recognition that real lives, often individual and collective suffering, often motivate postmodern critiques.

Keywords

Richard Flanagan; historical novel

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In Gould’s Book of Fish, the narrator experiences the generation of a hyperbolic love towards each and every person and creature, evoked by his encounter with the fish he has been assigned to paint: The fish were at the beginning only a job, but to do that job well & keep the undoubted benefits that flowed from it, I had to learn about them. I had to study the manner in which fins passed from the realm of opaque flesh to diaphanous. not found in Gould’s perspective. As Jo Jones (2008) has illustrated, the novel opposes the Enlightenment historical vision, countering its narrative of a humanity that is constantly learning from itself on its path toward a better future (p. 115-116). Gould’s Book of Fish speaks to a particular life wrought with fear, homelessness, and death. The enlightenment The same key-word “reason” can be found in the deflation of the term Enlightenment: “the period in the 18th century in Europe when certain thinkers taught that science and the use of reason would improve the human condition”. The writers and philosophers of this age thought that man was virtuous by nature, and vice was due to ignorance only, so they started a public movement for enlightening people. Real civilization, superior to the old classical civilization of Greece and Rome, to which the 18th century compared itself, had been achieved at last. Now society (persons of position, wealth and influence) could enjoy it. The second period of the Enlightenment was the most mature period: the forties and the fifties of the 18th century. W these novels as the postmodern confr Some of these novels nostalgically at of Enlightenment rationalism, the pla tradicts itself, or encounters static fr discourse; implicit in this position is a lightened” postmodern stance and a de ern from the modern or underscore a the premodern past. Others of thes support for an unfinished modern pr call postmodernist historical novels, in critique of modernity they imply.5 As. els incorporate a revisionary foregrounding the modern project of historical detectio confront their own participation in the membering the past.6. Longing for Premodernity. The sublime is a term that has been heavily employed in art writing over the past twenty years. Too heavily, it may be. References to it have come from so many angles that it is in danger of losing any coherent meaning. I approach the sublime not as a philosopher or cultural theorist, but as an artist. Specifically, as the painter of a canvas to which many viewers have responded with mentions of ‘the sublime’. They do so, I should add, to describe the tradition to which they feel the painting relates, rather than to praise it. As we stood by that crater edge in the Karakum, we could see old pipelines dangling and breaking away into the abyss. Central Asia is in fact littered with jagged relics of Soviet industrialisation in all its furious, heedless hubris. The modern history of the novel can be divided into two ages: the formative age of the novel, ca. 1500-1800; and the period ca. 1800-present, in which the novel has thrived as the leading form of Western literature. Formative age novel-writing flourished primarily in Spanish, French, English, and German. Two of the primary targets of critical examination during the Enlightenment were governments and religious authorities. Many Enlightenment thinkers campaigned vigorously against restrictions on freedoms (e.g. censorship, discrimination) and religious interference in public affairs (e.g. law, education, government). These calls for reform were raised by some of the most eloquent writers in history, such that the Enlightenment is also known as the golden age of satire.