

## Neo-historical Fiction, Material Realism and the Poetics of the Inventory

Jean-Michel Ganteau, Université de Montpellier Paul-Valéry

My interest today is in novels that are not explicitly and consistently historical, but which import the historical dimension into their thematic palette and plots, as if it were contemporary fiction's role to accommodate the historical dimension, as a complement to what is still unambiguously considered as undiluted historical fiction (Hilary Mantel, Pat Barker, Adam Thorpe, and most recently Tom Crewe, among others). Many commentators have paid attention to this development: Jerome de Groot speaks of the "hybrid form—neither historical novel nor contemporary fiction—mixing precise accounts of moments in the past with historical specificity, melding past narratives to contemporary moments with little concern for 'genre' per se" (de Groot 170). Leigh Wilson gives a more radical account as she considers that "from the early 1990s and into the twenty-first century, it has not been so much that the historical novel infiltrated the world of mainstream literary fiction; more that the mainstream historical novel per se became historical" (Wilson 145–146). This sort of becoming-historical of the contemporary British novel is practised by such established authors as Ian McEwan or Jonathan Coe, among others, who leave the door open to the historical novel. This probably points to one of the ways in which neo-historical fiction, as defined by Elodie Rousselot, has been gaining literary ground, "answering the needs and preoccupations of the present", even though (partly) set in the past (Rousselot 5).

Now, neo-historical fiction, unlike the historiographic metafiction of the late twentieth century, does not mobilise distancing or ironising devices and does not so much "use[...] and abuse[...] the conventions of discourse" and the past (Hutcheon xiii) as rely on a seamless use of realism that it "smuggles [...] in by the back door" (Wilson 147). Wilson underlines the problematic use of the realistic idiom in the contemporary British historical novel—and, I would add, in contemporary British neo-historical fiction. For her, the fact that "the incongruity between the adherence to realism [...] and the simultaneous knowledge that such an adherence is problematic is most clearly demonstrated in the historical novel because it is in the historical novel that this incongruity is most powerfully denied." (Wilson 147). She goes on to suggest that contemporary historical fiction responds to this situation by "reveal[ing] in its techniques a profound discomfort" (Wilson 147). It is the modalities of such a discomfort that I want to address in the following pages by showing how realism helps "**historical material**" reassert itself (Boxall 41). What I have in mind is the way in which a spate of novels that I consider emblematic of the processes and forms that I have just described take on board some

conventions of the historical narrative and do so by using the idiom of realism. Still, it is a realism that is slightly out of joint and that, instead of seamlessly referring to the past, signifies that “writing pastness” (de Groot 170) comes high on its agenda. More precisely, my point is that a far cry from the distancing, ironising devices of yesteryear, these novels solicit realism to suggest that the writing of narrative, both fictional and historical, relies on the elementary gesture of gathering information, sources, and data. This is what I shall strive to demonstrate, attending to three poetic modalities of discomfort as I move on: disrupted linearity, the ubiquity of the inventory, the metaleptic drive at work in such neo-historical narratives.

### **Disrupting Linearity**

*Anatomy of a Soldier*, Harry Parker’s début novel, has been acclaimed as a war novel with a distinctly anti-military bias. Critics have commented on its inventiveness while noting its indebtedness to the tradition of the it-narrative or circulation narrative (Bernard 2017). Still, its affinities with the historical novel or even neo-historical fiction have generally passed unnoticed. This is not surprising as the text does not refer to the mists of the past but evokes a very recent period. Hardly more than a year separates the final scene of the novel, which is chronologically closest to the reader’s present, from the episodes narrated in the 52 chapters or, rather, fragments, relating the protagonist’s life as a captain in what looks like the war in Afghanistan, as he leads his men into battle, attends to minute daily operations, meets the locals, and then steps on an IED, is submitted to major surgery and then goes through rehab. Thus drafted, the narrative arc might give the impression that the novel’s plot espouses linearity, but this is far from being the case. Granted, the first fragment is devoted to the moment, just after the explosion, when a tourniquet is applied to the wounded captain’s leg, and the last one evokes his complete return to life as he is running in a park, using brand new running blades. But in between these extremities are thrown helter-skelter various episodes that can predate the *incipit* and that do not seem to obey any linear logic. The temporal apparatus on which the novel relies is of a radically relational nature, affording no stabilisation and requiring permanent attention and action on the readers’ parts. It is as a relational machinery that engages the readers’ experiences and attentional, connective gestures, providing what might be called an experiential knowledge.

The effect of this full-blown relationality is not so much to disorient as to provide a **concrete vision of the material of history being mobilised and experienced** even while it is being perceived and discovered, prior even to being gathered. What the narrative gives us to apprehend is “the matter of our entanglements” (Bernard 2018, 122; translation mine), i.e., the

chronological disarray provokes an affective, attentional connection with the material of history, the tourniquet and the blades, but also the night-vision devices, rifles, drones, etc. used by the British troops, and the insurgents' more elementary arsenal. The proximity to these arms of contemporary warfare is made all the more tactile and intrusive as, in its revisiting of the venerable convention of it-narratives, the novel uses prosopopeia as a mode of narration. Indeed, each chapter is narrated by an object, from the above-mentioned tourniquet and running blades to the bag of fertiliser used to produce the IED on which Captain Barnes steps. What the novel presents us with is a collection of narrators that is also an array of vibrant objects that may be seen as **the archival components** on which the discourse of the historian or, in the circumstances, of the novelist producing a piece of neo-historical fiction relies. By paying attention to things, it conforms to the traditional horizon of **exhaustiveness** that is one of the staples of realistic fiction, with its ability to create the illusion that it can describe the whole of the world. Through such a radical gesture of simplification, it displays the most elementary logics of realism that is to build up a verisimilar world based on the close observation of its agents. Since the agents, here, are objects that literally act as witnesses of history in the making, I would argue that Parker's novel contributes to producing a type of **material realism** that strives to mediate an experience of what is the stuff of history and what it is to be the stuff of history. In so doing, it manifests its discomfort even while refusing to take any distance from the discourse of realism.

### **Inventories**

With *Haweswater*, her first novel, Sarah Hall offers an evocation of the last days of the rural community of Mardale whose inhabitants have to say goodbye to their valley that is going to be flooded. The scene takes place during the interwar period, while the coming geopolitical and military storm can be heard, rumbling closer and closer. And, as demonstrated by Constance Pompié (Pompié), *Haweswater* can be considered a new pastoral. Still, embedded at the heart of the pastoral lies the narrative's historical drive, the conflation of the two generic forms bringing together two reputedly antagonistic temporal configurations. What the novel beautifully captures, through this means, is a transitional moment, chronicling precariousness and documenting a world teetering on the brink of disappearance.

*Haweswater*'s apparently seamless poetic prose and lyricism does not seem to leave room for any discomfort in its use of realism. Still, the novel is very much characterised by a poetics of the **inventory** that is at work throughout (Ganteau 2023, 75–78). I consider the inventory to be an elementary form of description that is instrumental in performing the above-mentioned

impression of exhaustiveness inherent in realism. Typically, an inventory may take the shape of a list of objects and beings, human and non-human, and its function is to provide a comprehensive view of the contents of the valley. In the earlier chapters of the novel, which correspond to its expository part, **descriptions** are rife and seem to colonize the text, as if all items of the local fauna and flora, every detail of the landscape and every member of the community had to be taken into consideration prior to its destruction, effacement or displacement. This device grants a great deal of local colour to this evocation of the Lake District but the realistic register may be seen to strain, as such a poetic choice slows down the reading and multiplies details so as to provide a densely woven tapestry that at times might be *perceived* as a tapestry.

My hunch is that the poetics of the inventory pokes at the limits of realistic discourse, making its weft show under the tapestry that it allows to display. More particularly, the inventory corresponds to **some zero degree of realism**, underlining not only its accumulative dimension, but also pointing at an operation that seems to **predate the elaboration** of any (historical) narrative, be it fictional or not. In other words, the inventory refers to the **initial gesture that consists in collecting facts**, in other terms the material proofs that something did happen.

One step further, I would argue that such a poetic inclination is consonant with the “realistic mind” that American philosopher Cora **Diamond** sees at work in literature: “habits, turns of speech turns of thought, styles of phrases as morally expressive of an individual or a people. The intelligent description of such things is an art of the intelligent, the sharp-eyed description of life, of what matters, makes differences, in human lives.” (Diamond 375). This quotation and the reference to the issue of importance (“what matters”) introduce the notion of **ethics**, i.e. of what counts and what we are accountable for. Precisely, describing, inventorying are considered as the most characteristic powers of literature by the defenders of Ordinary Language Philosophy, among whom Diamond, working in Wittgenstein’s wake. They imply a poetic and ethical gesture that relies on the collection of “facts” as opposed to “truths” (Murdoch 159; translation mine). And such a gesture implies the development of perceptual powers and of a perceptual utility: “ordinary language is envisaged not only as having a descriptive, or even agentive function, but as a perceptual instrument that allows for subtlety and adjustment in perceptions and actions.” (Laugier 2015, 232). Through the insistent poetics of the inventory, the novel asks readers to pace themselves and slow down so as to take care of the details of the disappearing world. In other terms, it gets them to pay attention to the ordinary world of the valley that it is ethically relevant to testify to. *Haweswater*’s yen for the inventory

allow for the emergence of an **ethics of the ordinary** that colours neo-historical discourse. Thanks to this ethics, the soon-to-be invisibilised are granted visibility as people, beings, landscapes, objects and practises that **matter** and that it is the **responsibility** of historical realism to display and transmit. In its neo-historical dimension, the novel **visits the past in the light of the ethical priorities of the present** and gives voice and visibility to submerged individuals and populations.

### A Metaleptic Drive

This last movement in my exploration leads me to address Jon McGregor's second novel, *So Many Ways to Begin* (2006). At the heart of his narrative lies the quest for the protagonist's biological mother. David Carter, born during the Blitz, discovers, as an adult, that he is an adopted child, which launches him on a quest for his lost mother. David holds a position as a curator in a museum in Coventry. The fact that Coventry is one of the British towns most affected by WW2 bombings is not fortuitous as David, as a child of the Blitz, is also a collector of many items (pieces of shrapnel, etc.) that act as tokens or material witnesses of the period. This is exemplified with indications signposted at the head of all chapters, referring to the exhibits collected by the protagonist. Each liminary inscription features in italics and its wording is evocative of a label accompanying an exhibit in a museum: "*b/w photograph, Albert Carter, defaced, c. 1943*" (McGregor 19), or else: "*Geologist's rock-hammer, in original case (wedding gift, unused), c. 1969*" (McGregor 164). Such recurrent indications, with their syntactic and typographical signature, help the readers "experience[e] the tangible past [as] the entrée to history" (Lowenthal 383). The tit bits and ordinary objects, arrayed at the beginning of each chapter, punctuate the reading of the novel while saturating its visual space.

The fact that the exhibits are in fact ordinary objects referring to ordinary, forgotten or submerged lives throws together the humbleness of the objects and of their owners, while metonymically pointing to the action of the collector, museum curator and protagonist. This has led Susana Onega to identify David as one of the basic figures of the historian evoked by Walter Benjamin, i.e., the **ragpicker**. In other words, the humble leftovers of the past call forth metaleptically the historical figure of the ragpicker: the figure of the ragpicker is solicited by displaying the bric-a-brac that is the reason or the *cause* of its existence (definition favoured by Katia Marcellin). The metalepsis thereby performs a trick on the readers by making them *collaborate* in the evocation of the ragpicker as the figure of the historian. At the same time, the specificities of the metalepsis reside in insisting on the *causes* of the action, hence on the materiality of the ordinary objects. In Frederic Le Roy's terms,

The ragpicker who roamed the streets to gather waste material embodies the writing of history as **performative practice** premised on gathering snippets of historical waste material and reassembling them in collage-like juxtapositions that have the potential to produce unseen and unforeseen “dialectical images”. (Le Roy 128).

For Benjamin and McGregor, the ragpicker is central to the presentation of history and, for the contemporary novelist, it is an essential figure in the elaboration of neo-historical fiction in which “the **historical material** reasserts itself” (Boxall 41). Besides, the dynamics of the metalepsis accentuates the concrete nature of the act of gathering information, facts and proofs of various types, making both history and the work of the historian a concrete, “**material force**” (Boxall 41).

In the end, and as was already the case with Parker and Hall, McGregor shows the seams of realism by presenting the readers with a literal inventory of exhibits, ordinary objects that have gained in preciousness on account of their connection to a lost world and its inhabitants. Yet, the narrative never bursts at the seams and the labels appearing at the head of each chapter lose much of their disruptive powers, being transformed into mere titles whose metafictional force remains largely residual. In all three novels, and most particularly in McGregor’s, the poetics of the inventory buttresses realism by displaying a proto-version of realistic and historical discourse: the gathering of facts and sources. By mobilising, at an infra-level, such a common denominator between two forms, the novel contributes its mite to the developing canon of neo-historical fiction, reasserting a vision of history as “material force” (Boxall 41) without losing sight of the ethical necessity to recall that history is not a stable truth that the novel can simply retrieve. This is pithily encapsulated in Peter Boxall’s evocation: “there is emerging in the novel now a new ethical relationship to history, **a new sense of a responsibility to material historical forces** that constrain or shape the fictional imagination.” (Boxall 41).

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