

B R I A N M C H A L E

History Itself? or, The Romance of Postmodernism

Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xxviii + 320 pp. \$42.50.

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my J. Elias's *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* comes with a jacket blurb by Linda Hutcheon. "I can honestly say," runs Hutcheon's endorsement, "that this book has made me seriously rethink my most cherished conceptions" about history, postmodernism, and fiction. This is generous, but also circumspect; note that Hutcheon says "rethink," not "relinquish." While there is much in *Sublime Desire* that might have moved Hutcheon to *revisit* her theory of postmodernist fiction, first aired a dozen years ago in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) and its sequel, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), and to *think again* about it, there is nothing here, as far as I can see, that is incompatible or irreconcilable with Hutcheon's approach. Quite the reverse: Elias has updated, extended, and complicated Hutcheon's version of postmodernism, giving it new "legs" and, not incidentally, a new name.

Hutcheon's great contribution was to identify and describe a characteristic genre of postmodernist fiction—perhaps *the* characteristic genre—and to coin a name for it: "historiographic metafiction." Elias's name for what amounts to the same genre is meta-historical romance. There's not much to choose between the two as far as euphony is concerned—they're both mouthfuls—and not even that much to choose between them with respect to meaning or implication. The *meta* prefix has been shifted from the noun to

the adjective, and “historiographic” has become “historical” (a distinction with a difference, to which I’ll return shortly); but the main difference, obviously, is the substitution of “romance” for “fiction.” This change reflects the influence of Elias’s other major source, Diane Elam’s *Romancing the Postmodern* (1992). Where Hutcheon conceived of historiographic metafiction as the postmodern answer to the historical *novel*, Elam traced postmodernist fiction’s genealogy back to the novel’s rival and opposite number, *romance*. More than that, she associated postmodernism with romance whenever and wherever the latter is found, at least as far back as Walter Scott, arguing, very much in the spirit of Jean-François Lyotard, that postmodernism should be understood as the unassimilable residue at the heart of modernity, modernism in its “nascent state,” which, as Lyotard notoriously put it, “is constant.”¹ Like Elam, Elias, too, is a Lyotardian with respect to postmodernist romance.² Add to Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction and Elam’s Lyotardian romance Fredric Jameson’s “spatial turn” of postmodernism, which is a crucial to Elias’s poetics of metahistorical romance, and you have the conceptual foundations on which her approach mainly rests.

Elias updates Hutcheon, first of all, by drawing most of her examples from novels (or romances) that postdate Hutcheon’s books of 1988 and 1989: Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* (1997), Charles Johnson’s *Dreamer* (1999), Jim Crace’s *Quarantine* (1998), Steve Erickson’s *Arc d’X* (1993), Barry Unsworth’s *Sacred Hunger* (1992), Simon Schama’s *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (1991), Eric Zencey’s *Panama* (1995), John Steffler’s *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (1994), Frances Sherwood’s *Vindication* (1993), Lawrence Norfolk’s *Lemprière’s Dictionary* (1991), Allen Kurzweil’s *A Case of Curiosities* (1992), Brian O’Doherty’s *The Strange Case of Mademoiselle P.* (1992), Susan Sontag’s *The Volcano Lover* (1992), William T. Vollman’s *The Rifles* (1995), Madison Smartt Bell’s *All Souls’ Rising* (1996), Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997). Long as this list is, it in-

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 79.

2. However, Elias favors a different if no less paradoxical aphorism of the master’s: “Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity” (Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1994) 25; qtd. in Elias 162.

cludes only texts from the nineties that receive a more or less substantial analysis here, and could easily have been longer. This says something about the breadth and richness of Elias's book, of course, but it says something even more interesting about Hutcheon's prescience. For she seems to have been right after all about the centrality of historiographic metafiction to postmodernism, as witness "her" genre's continued vitality down to the turn of the millennium and beyond.

Elias also updates the theoretical repertoire upon which Hutcheon's approach draws. Writing at the end of the eighties, Hutcheon was especially concerned to document the continuities between the postmodernist practice of fiction and major post-structuralist theories, so that her books read now a little like a roundup of the usual suspects: Lacan, Althusser, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard, French feminism, the gang's all here. Thanks in part to the success with which Hutcheon argued these connections, Elias doesn't need to do so all over again, but she does need to take into account a variety of theory that had as yet barely registered on Hutcheon's radar screen, and that really only came fully into its own in the nineties, namely postcolonial theory. Consequently, we get in chapter 5 here a provocative comparison/contrast of postmodernist and postcolonial variants of metahistorical romance, as well as a survey of recent reconsiderations of the undisputed father of historical fiction, Walter Scott—was he a colonialist? anticolonialist? postcolonialist?—much of which was simply unavailable to Hutcheon.

Elias not only updates but also complicates Hutcheon's approach. She complicates it, for one thing, by multiplying distinctions among types and varieties of historiographic metafiction (or matahistorical romance). Hutcheon's genre was somewhat monolithic, in practice if not in theory, as I complained at the time.³ Crowding a staggering multiformity of texts under the big tent of historiographic metafiction, she tended to flatten out all that rich diversity into a single, one-size-fits-all reading. All historiographic metafiction, by her account, inevitably "problematized" (one of

3. Brian McHale, "Postmodernism, or The Anxiety of Master Narratives," *Diacritics* 22.1 (1992): 17–33.

Hutcheon's favorite words) issues of reference, subjectivity, gender, power, and so on, without ever resolving them, and they all exhibited Lyotardian incredulity toward master narratives. Elias works hard at dissolving this monolithic genre into a multiplicity of subcategories, finding gradations of difference where Hutcheon saw only uniformity. Thus in a particularly successful chapter about postmodernist narratives of the Enlightenment (an earlier version of which was originally published in the present journal in 1996),⁴ she distinguishes among three categories: postmodernist novels that distance themselves from a "failed" modernity and identify instead with premodernity (for example, Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*); those that endorse the unfinished project of modernity (Kurzweil's *A Case of Curiosities*, Norfolk's *Lempriere's Dictionary*); and those that self-reflexively implicate themselves in their own critique of the modern (Erickson's *Arc d'X*, J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton*, John Fowles's *A Maggot*). Elsewhere she proposes a continuum of possible stances toward history in metahistorical romances, ranging from "ironic, even nihilistic, deconstruction" at one extreme to "a reconstructed 'secular-sacred' belief" at the other (143; see also 190). Postmodernist novels by "first world" novelists tend to collect at the ironic, deconstructive end of the spectrum, while postcolonial novels are likelier to occur near the reconstructive end, so this continuum serves in clarifying the differences between postmodernism and postcolonialism.⁵

Elias further complicates Hutcheon's postmodernism by looking more closely than Hutcheon did into the actual poetics of historiographic metafiction. Especially valuable is Elias's account of postmodernist strategies for "spatializing" time (here's where Jame-

4. Amy J. Elias, "The Postmodern Turn on the Enlightenment," *Contemporary Literature* 37 (1996): 533–58.

5. Not all of Elias's distinctions are equally successful. Thus she operates throughout *Sublime Desire* with a distinction between "avant-gardist" metahistorical romance and more conventional or realist varieties (see, for example, 23, 70, 103). The distinction evidently admits of gradations, since she also speaks of the "most avant-gardist" instances, as distinct, presumably, from *less* avant-gardist but still not realist examples of the genre. Nowhere does she offer a definition of this avant-garde variety or mention any identifying marks by which we might recognize it.

son's spatial turn comes in), including one she calls "paratactic history," and a closely related strategy called "simultaneous history." Paratactic history employs "juxtaposition, linear disjunction, deperspectivized space" (123) to force different temporal planes into textual proximity with each other but *without* producing any synthesis among them, while simultaneous history (if I understand this distinction correctly) precipitates different historical times onto a single plane of reality, collapsing them into a Foucauldian heterotopia. Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* and T. C. Boyle's *World's End* exemplify paratactic history, while Ackroyd's *Chatterton* and N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* exemplify simultaneous history. History, Elias marvelously writes, "becomes narratologically terraced" in such texts (117). The two strategies often merge, and they obviously share much in common; they both "release images from the repressed (the culturally repressed as well as the libidinal and mythic unconscious) into the world, to walk among real people, creating a mythical world where different kinds of reality and time interact with one another or exist simultaneously on the same plane, the same historical moment" (147–48).⁶

Finally, Elias complicates Hutcheon's approach by taking more seriously than the latter did the relationship that both she and Hutcheon presuppose between postmodernist historical fiction and the theory and practice of historiography. Not that Hutcheon didn't reflect on historiography proper; she did, of course, as witness her discussions of Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, and others. But Elias gives us a much more extensive and nuanced account of "new history" (that is, the *Annales* school) and what came after it, and she draws out much more fully the implications of antifoundationalist historiography for the practice of historical fiction. Here as elsewhere she has the

6. Elias's paratactic and simultaneous strategies also bear an obvious family resemblance to Hutcheon's promising "multi-term model" of reference (or, as I would prefer to say, ontological heterogeneity) in historiographic metafiction—a model which, once she had proposed it, Hutcheon unfortunately made almost no further use of. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 154–56. For my objection to Hutcheon's multi-term model of reference, or rather her failure to put it to use, see, again, "Postmodernism" 26.

advantage of access to texts that postdate Hutcheon's books, such as LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust* (1994) and White's *Figural Realism* (1999).

So Elias updates and complicates Hutcheon's postmodernism; but apart from renaming "her" genre, does she dissent from her precursor to any substantial extent? Does she stake out any positions at odds with Hutcheon's, or at a distance from hers? Well, yes and no. The one position from which Elias explicitly dissents is Hutcheon's characterization of historiographic metafiction as "complicitous critique" (51, 146, 203). By this Hutcheon meant that, however vigorously it might problematize reference, subjectivity, gender, power, and the like, however incredulous it might be toward master narratives, historiographic metafiction could never fully extricate or exculpate itself from the bad politics that was the object of its critique. If postmodernism could sometimes be dissident (to use Paul Maltby's term), it was also always complicit, always compromised. Elias seeks to distance herself from this view, first of all by arguing that, though some metahistorical romances are undoubtedly compromised in just the way Hutcheon says, not all of them are, or not all the way through. *Chatterton* is, but maybe *House Made of Dawn* isn't; Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* is, but maybe *Mason & Dixon* isn't; Vollman's *The Rifles* might not be, up to a certain point, but then abruptly it collapses into complicity after all. Secondly, she argues that even complicitous critique, particularly when practiced by first world postmodernists, might ultimately serve to erode the epistemologically privileged position—Jameson calls it "the view from the top" (qtd. in Elias 195)—which first-worlders enjoy and in which they are caged: "The 'compromised politics' of postmodernism may in fact be a necessary first move for a First World consciousness wanting to break out of the solipsism of the master" (203). So does Elias succeed in redeeming the compromised politics of postmodernism? Maybe; in some cases; with reservations.

Hutcheon's approach does enjoy one indubitable advantage over Elias's, it seems to me. By naming her genre "historiographic metafiction," Hutcheon foregrounds the written-ness of history—*historio-graphy*—its quality of being always already (as they say) textualized or mediated. Historiographic metafiction, as its name

suggests and Hutcheon's entire approach confirms, reflects on the textuality, the mediateness of history. Now, thanks to the ambiguity of the term "history" in English, which can refer either to the *events* of history or to their written or other *representations*, the "historical" in Elias's "metahistorical romance" might be construed as meaning much the same thing as Hutcheon's "historiographic," and maybe it does in some places in *Sublime Desire*. More often, though, it means the *events* of history: what really happened. Or at any rate that's what I'm forced to conclude in view of the fact that, for Elias, history functions as the Lyotardian sublime of meta-historical romance, the unrepresentable that can only be evoked through its absence, never made present. By "history," then, she must mean not something textual, not the *writing* of history, but something *extra-textual*, indeed *untextualizable*.

Metahistorical romance both desires and defers this historical sublime. It manifests what Elias memorably calls "a desire for the Truth that is Out There" (xviii) while at the same time fending off the encounter with that Truth. It approaches and avoids—understandably, since history in the twentieth century (perhaps history in general) has been nothing if not traumatic, and to reflect on history in our time, to think metahistorically, is inevitably to possess or occupy a post-traumatic consciousness or post-traumatic imaginary (xii). "As a result," Elias writes, "the metahistorical romance reaches out its hand to History but seems terrified that it might actually grasp it" (203).

"Historical sublime" and "post-traumatic imaginary" are powerful and provocative concepts, and well worth thinking about. But I can't help but hesitate a little over the personification in that sentence about reaching out a hand to History, as I can't help but balk at that capital *H*. Indeed, "upper-case *H* History" is a phrase Elias actually applies to the historical sublime (55). More typical, however, is the phrase "History itself" (59) or, shedding the initial capital, "history itself," as in "postmodern romance is about history itself" (19). In one stretch of a dozen pages (117–29), I counted no fewer than six occurrences of "history itself," and I might have missed some. Thus, for example: "history itself becomes spatialized" (117); "their plots concern the workings of history itself" (122); "since [the story's] ending has now become multiple and

arbitrary, the implication is that history itself is likewise" (124); "paratactic metahistorical romances use parataxis to comment about history itself" (129). And so on. The more often I see the phrase, the less I understand it: what *is* "history itself"? Surely I can't be alone in detecting in Elias's insistence on "history itself" a reification of history, indeed the transfiguration of history into a *metaphysical* concept—just the sort of reification and metaphysics that Hutcheon forestalls through her emphasis on history as text, on "historio-graphy" instead of "history itself."

Ultimately, it remains unclear to me whether Elias is *describing* a view of sublime history that she attributes to writers of metahistorical romance, or whether she is *endorsing* this view—whether, in other words, this metaphysics of history (if that's what it is) is hers or someone else's. I find myself in the same quandary with respect to other moments when *Sublime Desire* appears to slip into the metaphysical. When Elias writes about metahistorical romance recovering "mythic time" through strategies of spatialization (118, 139), or when, as in one of the passages I quoted a few paragraphs back, she speaks in terms of the reconstruction of "secular-sacred belief," do the metaphysical attitudes implied by such expressions belong to her, or is she ventriloquizing the attitudes of others? And if these attitudes really are hers, should I infer a religious sensibility on her part, or is this an instance of the sort of critical blindness on which insight is said to depend?

If "history itself" and other comparable moments of metaphysical slippage do indeed conform to the blindness-as-insight paradigm, they are not the only blind spots in *Sublime Desire*, though they may be the most crucial ones. As a sometime narratologist myself, I can't forgo commenting on what appears to be a blind spot with respect to a narratological term of art, namely *fabula*. Several times over, Elias reiterates the phrase "the humanist value of *fabula*" (xi, 69, 71, 76, 77, 79). The context hardly varies: metahistorical romance, we are told, both "desires" (or sometimes "asserts") and "distrusts" this "humanist value of *fabula*." Frankly, I can't make out what Elias means by this, and she never explains herself. If she is using this term in the sense given to it by the Russian formalists (and I have no reason to suppose otherwise), then I don't see how *fabula* can be a "humanist value" at all. It is strictly speak-

ing a relational concept: the reconstructed, “normalized” order of events, relative to the unchronological or “gappy” or otherwise disturbed order given by the *syuzhet*. The *fabula* has no ontological priority or superiority relative to the *syuzhet* (which I suppose is what might be meant by ascribing to it a “humanist value”)—certainly not in fiction, where both *fabula* and *syuzhet* are equally fictitious, and arguably not even in the writing of history, where *fabula* should not be regarded as identical with “real events.” Elias does use the phrase “the humanist value of *fabula*” in the context of a discussion about whether historical reality is intrinsically narrative or not (78), so perhaps this is the source of her error.⁷

This is a minor blind spot, and not particularly productive of insight. More interesting, because more pervasive and systematic, is Elias’s blindness with respect to the popular. Almost her first move in the book is to dismiss “the ahistorical postmodernism of the streets—‘reality’ TV, Disneyland, and the tribalist, consumerist, presentist mall culture of global capitalism” (xvii) in favor of historicist high-art forms of postmodernism. She repeats the move at the beginning of her discussion of historical romance, “which excludes,” she writes, “the bodice-rippers and Fabio-illustrated paperback thrillers of the kind sold in supermarkets” (16). But can supermarket romances really be excluded so easily, by fiat, from the historical romance genre? I would say not. Bodice-rippers are kin, if disreputable kin, to the highest forms of metahistorical romance. They may be the trailer-trash of romance, but they ultimately descend, just as surely as metahistorical romances do, from Walter Scott and other historical romancers, perhaps with an admixture of Brontë genetic material, and they tell us as much as metahistorical romances do about the fate of the romance genre in postmodernism.

7. While I’m niggling over terms of art, let me mention another, even more minor, narratological slip. In the context of her exposition of paratactic strategies, which I summarized above, Elias writes that metahistorical romance favors “syntagmatic over paradigmatic modes” (127). This should be the other way around, surely: paradigmatic over syntagmatic. Granted, parataxis is a form of syntax, and as such operates on the syntagmatic axis of language; but compared to hypotactic forms, it is much more readily associated with “paradigmatic modes.” Think of that most paratactic of forms, the catalog: what is it but the paradigm distributed along the syntagmatic axis?

Elias would not find it so easy to exclude bodice-rippers from consideration if she had not also evacuated all the middle ground *between* postmodernist high-art romance and the supermarket kind. She speaks of the “once popular genre of the historical novel” (95) as though its popularity were a thing of the past, dating back perhaps to the nineteenth century. But middlebrow historical fiction has persisted in popularity right down to the second half of the twentieth century. Think of such postwar best-sellers as Kenneth Roberts, Mika Waltari, and Mary Renault, or more recently Dorothy Dunnett or Arthur Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha*. For that matter, what explains the otherwise implausible popular success of certain metahistorical romances—in Europe, Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume*, and *The Name of the Rose* everywhere—if not the reading public’s familiarity with and taste for the genre of historical fiction that these metafictional exploits?

It’s not such an easy matter, then, even in theory, to throw a *cordon sanitaire* around the high-art romance, isolating it from its middle- and lowbrow cousins on the supermarket shelves and best-seller lists.⁸ How difficult it is to do so in practice is demonstrated by the way popular romance keeps seeping back into Elias’s discussions of metahistorical romance, despite all her best efforts to exclude it. Thus one is startled to find her mentioning Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (11, 94) in the context of the romance tradition. In one sense, how could she avoid doing so? *Gone with the Wind* is nothing, after all, if not a historical romance in the classic Walter Scott mode. But it is also the model and direct precursor of all the bodice-rippers in the supermarkets.

Moreover, in its cinematic form, *Gone with the Wind* represents something like the high-water mark of the Hollywood historical romance, or “costume drama,” another genre that Elias tries unsuccessfully to exclude from the consideration. In her chapter on postmodern revisitings of the Enlightenment, she lists a number of re-

8. Ironically, Elias herself is well aware of the way animus toward “low” culture has fueled some critics’ resistance to postmodernism: “How many times . . . was early postmodernist fiction lambasted for its disintegration of high art/low art distinctions? And while some of these critiques justifiably saw this eradication of boundaries as part of postmodernism’s collusion with capital, others simply blasted postmodernism for being low” (121–22).

cent movies set in the eighteenth century, including *Dangerous Liaisons*, *Orlando*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *Rob Roy*, only to dismiss the entire genre as unreflexively implicated in the modernity it purports to critique (150).⁹ But this is also the case, as she admits, of some of the metahistorical romance novels she discusses—for instance, Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* and Sherwood's *Vindication*. Hollywood just can't be kept out of the picture in a movie-saturated culture such as ours, as Elias finds when she discusses the "cinematic" qualities of Bell's *All Souls' Rising* (206–7). Throughout her book, Elias speaks of the resurgence of history (history itself?) in metahistorical romance as the return of the repressed. That may well be a productive way to think about the matter, but the repressed that keeps returning in *Sublime Desire* is not so much history as popular culture.

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9. Elias could have listed a good many more movies, particularly if by "eighteenth century" she intends (as I suppose she does) the historians' "long eighteenth century." Think of *Amadeus*, *The Adventures of Baron Munchhausen*, *Jefferson in Paris*, *Immortal Beloved*, *Quills*.