

Historiographic metafiction in George Bowering's *Burning Water*

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Abstract

This paper will explore history and facts interface in the novel *Burning Water* by George Bowering. Bowering portrays the history of Vancouver in this novel. Bowering's *Burning Water* is one of the best examples of historiographic metafiction. *Burning Water* shows the problem of narrativization of history. History as a discipline begins with the separation of facts from mythology. Bowering shows history in this novel to imagine the past. Thus, the novel interprets with past and present. Bowering uses both self-reflexivity and intertextuality in this novel. Thus, the aim of this paper is to present the concepts of historiographic metafiction in *Burning Water*.

Keywords: Historiographic Metafiction, Self – Reflexivity, Intertextuality, Parody, Pastiche

Introduction

Historiographic Metafiction

Hutcheon states that historiographic metafiction is one kind of postmodern novel which rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts the specificity and particularity of the individual past events. It also suggests a distinction between events and facts that is one shared by many historians. Since the documents become signs of events, which the historian transmutes into facts, as in historiographic metafiction, the lesson here is that the past once existed, but that our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted. Finally, historiographic metafiction often points to the fact by using the paratextual conventions of historiography to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations (Hutcheon 122-123).

History in *Burning Water*

Burning Water is a novel about the captain George Vancouver, the ship commander. The novel is derived from historical documents. Bowering allows readers to forget this is a fiction. Bowering provides a lot of evidence about the novel being self-reflective in nature. As he calls it a reflexive novel that reveals its making alongside its telling. At the end of the opening chapter we get introduced to the author, who is staying in Trieste, Italy.

In Trieste, it was raining most of the time, and he would bump other umbrellas with his own on his way down to the piazza, where he would look out at the fog that had drifted in across the northern end of the Adriatic. It was his idea, crazed in all likelihood that if he was going to write a book about that other coast as it was two hundred years ago, he would be advised to move away in space too (Bw-9).

Bowering seems to be preoccupied with the conventionality of our views of our views of the past and even of reality in general. The story of Vancouver is a pretext for an examination and exploration of the field of fiction itself. *Burning Water* concerns the problem of truth and the relationship between facts, fancy, and the imagination. Bowering uses both "historical" and literary intertexts, for

instance, stresses the fact that all sources from which we may learn historical facts are textual, and his descriptions of such historical figures as Vancouver and Menzies in the process of writing their logs and journals emphasize again that even "authentic" historical documents are products of a human mind and its language, not of reality itself.

Bowering argues implicitly that stories of the past, in spite of identical factual support vary with each individual speaker; the story which he tells in *Burning Water* is a very personal one. Bowering's literary works consist of an aggressive indictment of realist literature and paradoxical principles, which it relies on to provide some insight into this view of fiction. Another aspect of factual reality is highlighted in *Burning Water* in the episode in which Vancouver realizes that the Sandwich Islands may have been discovered by the Spanish, who referred to them as *los mojos*.

If *los mojos* are not there, then the Spaniards were visitors to the Sandwich Islands before James Cook landed there and that would not be an accepted fact in my view of history (Bw-202). For Bowering, as for post-modern metafiction writers in general, this means reinstating fiction as an overtly written art. The fact that *Burning Water* questions other fictional texts also emphasizes its own fictionality. *Burning Water* is very much concerned with the conventionalization of our views of the past and by extension of the present as well. History as a discipline begins with the separation of fact from mythology. The separation is inevitable and often useful but it creates at least as many problems as it solves, for history is not the facts but the attempt to understand them and the historians' approach to understanding inevitably involves inference, speculation, and imagination, the roots of that mythology which he has tried to ban.

The facts and the imagination both are essential but mixture is volatile and the possibilities of error are endless. Moreover, since historical hypotheses cannot be verified, the idea of historical knowledge is problematic of best in postmodern fiction, the presence of the author serves merely to draw attention to the artificiality of the work of art. By interrupting our willing suspension of disbelief, it makes an obvious point

and spoils the reader's fun, the traditional fun, at least of absorptions have become a cliché of post-modern fiction but Bowering's use of the device is engaging. His interruptions are usually funny, and more importantly they are thematically apt. Through them the reader becomes involved in a second drama of imaginative endeavour.

Vancouver's ship by contrast, sets sail on all fool's Day. But even when the omens are favourable. We are never allowed to forget the limitations of fiction.

It was all coming together in the way he loved this had happened other times and when it did he flew before the wind. He turned to the beginning of the sailing boat note Book and saw that he had landed in Trieste and began writing on all saints Day [BW 80-81]

Bowering faces many of the same problem in trying to create a work of art about a historical person. He wants it to be perfect-historically accurate and novelistically alive but is aware that his goals are contradictory, the attempt fiction, inevitably involves as much creation as re-creation, the subject. When Bowering is hungry, Vancouver's crew eats. The novelist is omnipotent and unaccountable, and therefore runs the risk of becoming as rigid, arbitrary and self-absorbed as Vancouver.

Work of art are imperfect but those that succeed come so close to perfection that the opposed elements in them are balanced and reconciled fact and fiction, past and present, Subject and object. What was a simple impossibility becomes an oxymoron or a paradox. Bowering is clearly more successful than Vancouver, but they share a triumph novel Vancouver, who has earlier been aware that.

He could quietly slip his legs over the side and let his body fall into retreating tide, and the world of affairs or the parlours of Albion would never notice the splash [BW-62].

Burning water actually forms the basis for Hutcheon original theories about the self-reflexivity of Canadian historical novels put forth in her seminal chapter in *The Canadian postmodern*. In choosing Vancouver specifically as subject for his novel, then Bowering implicates both past and present: the historical politics of imperialism that Vancouver, the person represents, the present day, post-colonial, globalized world that Vancouver the city represents, and all the time and social development that has passed in between.

Conclusion

Vancouver's voyage is understood as historical document or historical narrative rather than literature. *Burning water* is a met historical parody, and also known as a parody of Vancouver's a voyage, an exploration writing parody; which is re-exploration parody that treats of history. One must know instances that addresses the grand narratives from the entirety of the re-exploration sometimes addresses the grand narratives. One must also distinguish between the texts self-reflexivity and its parody, for while there are many signals indicating that Bowering's text is a construction of Vancouver text. There are but few indicating the construction of Vancouver's text one must also distinguish among deconstruction, parody and pastiche, as each plays a role in addressing either a voyage or the grand narratives. Finally Burning water is a parody that works through deconstruction, parody and pastiche.

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