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“First as Tragedy, Then as Farce”: J.G. Farrell’s Retelling of History

A writer’s decision to locate his or her fictions in the past can have a range of social and historical causations. During the nineteenth century, for example, it is a decision frequently taken by British novelists: in addition to such obvious instances of the “historical novel” as *Henry Esmond*, *Romola*, and the works of Sir Walter Scott, we find an extraordinary number of novels set in a period anywhere between forty and eighty years anterior to the date of composition, *Wuthering Heights*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Middlemarch*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* being merely a few cases in point. Of course, during a period of quite literally unprecedented social, economic, and technological change, it is perhaps unsurprising that writers should so often turn to the past — whether for an explanation of, or as a refuge from the complexities of the present. In such fictions it is possible to detect, often at one and the same time, both a nostalgia for the simplicity of a vanished past and an urge to confront and come to terms with what Lukács calls “the objective prehistory of the present.”¹ From the study and representation of the past, in other words, it becomes possible for the writer to gain a perspective on society and the nature of its processes which might be more difficult to intuit from a study of the contemporary alone.

In this light, it is interesting to examine the more recent resurgence of historical fiction in Britain during the past two decades, its writers including such figures as John Fowles, John Banville, Paul Scott, Timothy Mo, Salman Rushdie, and J.G. Farrell. Of course, given Mrs Thatcher’s frequent proclamations of the need for a return to Victorian values, to say nothing of economic policies apparently designed to reinstitute the “two nations” which proved so fertile a source of inspiration for the fictions of that earlier Tory prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, it is clear that a preoccupation with the past is not the

province of novelists alone. In the case of the writers just mentioned, however, it would seem that their concern is less with the recreation of the past than with using it as a means of understanding the present. While the focus of their fictions varies enormously — from Fowles's meditations on the impossibility of recovering what he seems to see as the narrative certainty of the great practitioners of nineteenth-century realism, to the demythologizing of Empire encountered in the works of expatriate writers such as Rushdie and Mo — it is interesting that one common feature is a relative absence of nostalgia. In contrast to writers such as Emily Bronte or Thomas Hardy, in whose evocations of the past one detects a perceptible sense of loss, modern British historical novelists seem to turn on the past a more disillusioned eye — almost as though blaming it, in some cases, for the problems of the present.

In addition, we find that nearly all the writers mentioned would appear to feel that the complexity of the past, and the still greater complexity of its relationship to the present, can only be captured by means of narrative experiments of considerable sophistication. These range from the self-conscious and open-ended narration of Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, through the multiple narrative perspectives of Scott's *Raj Quartet*, the blending of fiction with documentary material found in the work of Mo and Farrell, to the wild exuberance of Rushdie's experiments, which clearly owe much to the examples of Marquez and Günter Grass. Empire, or rather the decline of Empire, is the preoccupation of Mo, Scott, Rushdie, and Farrell, while the latter three also exemplify the modern tendency, remarked on by both Lukács and Feuchtwanger, to historicize the increasingly recent past² — as though the complexity and rapidity of social change causes writers to draw the dividing line between the contemporary and the historical ever closer behind them.

It is in this context that I propose to examine the work of one of the most interesting recent British historical novelists, J.G. Farrell. Farrell himself began his career as a writer with the composition of three novels in contemporary settings which, while giving some indications of a certain comic gift, are scarcely of any great lasting literary interest.³ It was only when he turned to the past that the true nature of his talent began to become apparent: in three novels, *Troubles*, set in post-World War I Ireland, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, whose action takes place during the Indian Mutiny, and *The Singapore Grip*, which details the events leading up to the Japanese conquest, Farrell set out to explore the nature of what he himself described as "the really

interesting thing that's happened in my lifetime" — namely, "the decline of the British Empire."⁴ Prior to his untimely death by drowning in 1979 he was engaged in the composition of a fourth historical fiction, *The Hill Station*, set in India following the mutiny, and including two characters from the earlier *Siege of Krishnapur*.

Farrell gave as one of the reasons for his interest in the past the fact that "as a rule, people have already made up their minds what they think about the present. About the past they are more susceptible to clarity of vision." (1) Yet it is clear that Farrell demythologizes and deconstructs the past not simply because he feels that the reader might find this more acceptable than an equivalent assault on contemporary society, but rather because in the process of defamiliarizing Britain's imperial past he is able to undermine the foundations of many of the reader's assumptions with regard both to the present and to its fictional representation. On the appearance of *The Siege of Krishnapur*, more than one reviewer perceived the novel as being as much concerned with the present as the past, and Farrell was described as using India "unabashedly, as a backcloth against which to view the British, and 1857 as a mirror to 1957."⁵ And while, at first sight, the narrative strategy which Farrell adopts in this novel seems conventional enough, it becomes clear on closer examination that this too has its distinctively contemporary aspects.

The apparent conventionality of Farrell's narrative approach in *The Siege of Krishnapur* is twofold, embracing both the telling and the tale. Whereas in *Troubles* and *The Singapore Grip* Farrell juxtaposes fictional and documentary texts, in much the same manner as does Timothy Mo in *An Insular Possession*, *The Siege of Krishnapur* employs what seems on the surface an almost anachronistic authorial omniscience, whose apparent magisterial confidence in the possibility of an objective account of reality only gradually betrays itself as illusory. In addition, the story itself is almost embarrassingly conventional in outline. Against a background of mounting unrest, the hero, George Fleury, arrives in India and falls in love with the heroine, Louise Dunstaple. There are sundry obstacles in the path of true love: Fleury's vaguely Shelleyan criticisms of the Victorian belief in progress are poorly received by the various representatives of the Anglo-Indian establishment, and there are rivals for Louise's hand — but in the face of the dangers and hardships of the siege Fleury proves himself to be as capable of heroism as any soldier. The natives are repulsed, the garrison is relieved, and Fleury finally wins the hand of the beautiful, blonde Louise. In synopsis, it sounds like a companion piece to M.M.

Kaye's *The Far Pavilions*. But this conventionality of narrative approach is progressively undermined as the story develops. Far from representing a facile equation of a Victorian-style narrative approach with a Victorian theme, Farrell's authorial omniscience is used to subvert itself, to enact his undercutting of virtually all the ideological and social norms and conventions which constitute the underpinning of Empire, an enactment which simultaneously calls into question the apparent objectivity of the narrative voice.

Like all Farrell's historical novels, *The Siege of Krishnapur* is the product of exhaustive research⁶—even though in this respect it does not go quite so far as *The Singapore Grip*, which must be one of the few novels ever written to include a bibliography. Among the authentic period details embedded in the text are excerpts from the catalogue of the Great Exhibition, extracts from contemporary manuals on siege warfare, disquisitions on the technology of the daguerreotype and current treatments for cholera, as well as extensive evidence of the author's acquaintance with the theological controversies of the period. The Padre, indeed, one of Farrell's finest comic creations, appears to view the mutinous sepoys as posing less of a threat to the garrison than do the onslaughts of German rationalism.

But this preoccupation with period detail is far from amounting to the "decorative pedantry" or mere "archaeological exactness" which Lukacs criticizes in works such as Flaubert's *Salâmmbo*.⁷ Farrell's amassing of the minutiae of the cultural and intellectual life of the period is part of an essentially subversive enterprise, parodying and calling into question the British imperial passion for order. The Collector of Krishnapur, for example, is portrayed as a firm believer in the value of statistics, which he sees as an essential tool in the imposition of the imperial order on the barbarism and ignorance of a more primitive civilization:

For what were statistics but the ordering of a chaotic universe? Statistics were the leg-irons to be clapped on the *thugs* of ignorance and superstition which strangled Truth in lonely by-ways. (192)

But, as Roland Barthes points out in his discussion of that ultimate cataloguer of facts and statistics, the French utopian theorist Charles Fourier, the enterprise of the statistician can, if only pursued far enough, end up by undermining its initial premises.⁸ Instead of imposing order on the chaos of reality, it can end up by establishing relations and connections so obscure and arbitrary that the very notion of order and relation is called into question. And indeed, Farrell's purpose in so

faithfully cataloguing the facts and details of the period is primarily to bring them into new and unexpected relationships which reveal hidden aspects of the assumptions of Empire.

There is an irony, for example, in the Collector's enthusiasm for European Art and Science. He has, we are told, "devoted a substantial part of his fortune to bringing out to India examples of European art and science in the belief that he was doing as once the Romans had done in Britain." (37) Yet the specimens he brings out — electroplated replicas of Benvenuto Cellini cups, ingenious inventions such as the gorse-bruiser designed to render gorse edible by cattle, or allegorical artworks such as a bas-relief entitled "The Spirit of Science Conquers Ignorance and Prejudice" — prove of little help in acquainting the native populace with the values of Western Civilization. Rather the reverse, in fact, since in the later stages of the siege most of them end up as, quite literally, a barrier between the British and the rebellious natives. The most useful object which the Collector brings from the Great Exhibition, for example, proves to be an early American velocipede — useful however, not because of its value as an economical form of transportation, but rather because its design inspires the Collector's system of defence when the garrison is forced to retreat from its original line of fortifications:

One large wheel, to include the Residency and the churchyard... and a smaller wheel around the banqueting hall. All that was needed was a double sap to join the two wheels. (224)

Repeatedly, Farrell creates contexts where the achievements of Western science are rendered faintly ludicrous by the new relations which the context establishes. Fleury, for example, while being badgered by the Padre with proofs of the existence of God as supreme designer, briefly intuits the principles of the theory of evolution, but is unable to develop this insight due to the unfortunate distraction of a sepoy attack. And in a still more surreal scene, where one of the women at the Residency is attacked by a swarm of insects, Fleury again trembles on the brink of a revolutionary discovery:

...as the weight grew too much for the insects underneath to cling to her smooth skin, great black cakes of them flaked away and fell fizzing to the ground... But hardly had a white part been exposed before blackness covered it again. This coming and going of black and white was just fast enough to give a faint, flickering image of Lucy's delightful nakedness and all of a sudden gave Fleury an idea. Could one have a series of daguerreotypes which would give the impression of movement? "I must

invent the "moving daguerrotype" later on when I have a moment to spare," he told himself, but an instant later this important idea had gone out of his mind, for this was an emergency. (255)

This displacement of things from their familiar context, an almost surrealist insistence on the defamiliarization of the everyday, is one of the basic devices of Farrell's representation of the past. At the very outset, for instance, the impending trouble is foreshadowed by, of all things, the somewhat prosaic discovery by the Collector of a pile of chapatis in his despatch box. They are part of a mysterious nationwide distribution of chapatis, and the Collector rightly interprets them as a sign of trouble. What is interesting, however, is *why* something so mundane as a chapati, a mere piece of bread, should suddenly take on such sinister overtones, transforming itself from a simple everyday object into a threatening coded message, a signifier with unknown referents. It is, of course, again a function of context. Seen on the steps in proximity to a native floorsweeper, a pile of chapatis can be interpreted simply as the man's lunch; in a despatch box, they herald the disruption of the whole pattern of ordered assumptions, hierarchies, and relationships on which the British rule in India depends.

Chapatis are not the only form of food which takes on added significance during the course of the novel. Fleury's anxiety to make a good impression on Louise, for example, is superseded by his gluttony when confronted by the customary excess of an Anglo-Indian banquet. But the normal pattern of conspicuous consumption which helps to differentiate rulers from ruled is later reversed, as crowds of onlookers assemble on the nearby hills to watch the assaults on the by now famished garrison, and while away the intervals in the fighting by the consumption of spicy curries and enticing sweetmeats. Ironically, the last bastion of the defence of Krishnapur turns out to be the banqueting hall, from where the starving defenders gaze longingly at the diners on the hillside:

... perhaps it was just as well that ... none of the plump fish or chickens being toasted on skewers, none of the creamy breads, chapatis, nan, and parathas, none of the richly bubbling curries and glistening mounds of rice, which the skeletons' scarlet rimmed eyes could see in their lenses and at which they glared for hour after hour ... that none of these things were available, for in their starved and debilitated condition it was very likely that a heavy curry would have killed them as dead as a cannon ball. (306)

Food becomes, metaphorically, a weapon; conversely, warfare is often described in terms derived from eating. The final sepooy assault on the

Residency is compared to a "ravening monster" (320), while the garrison's earthen ramparts are described as "gulping down" cannon balls. (270) But then, in the context of the siege, the customary categories rapidly become blurred: under the exigencies of war, the unlikeliest objects prove to have military potential. Chloe, the odious lap dog brought to Krishnapur by Fleury with the idea of using it to woo Louise, is later instrumental in flushing a sepoy sniper out of hiding, and then, after the sepoy is shot, steps out of its customary role as cuddly pet by eating his face.

Indeed, in the course of the struggle between rulers and ruled, Empire and subjects, East and West, virtually all manifestations of Western civilization are conscripted into the fray. The overstuffed Victorian furniture, the masses of bric-a-brac and possessions which at first seriously hamper the garrison's efforts to defend itself, later become quite literal bulwarks against the assault of an alien foe, with everything from bookcases to stuffed owls being used to shore up the ramparts. Short of ammunition, all manner of Victorian kitchen utensils and ornaments are pressed into service. One of the most horrific scenes in the book details the effects of a blast of improvised grapeshot on the attacking sepoys, who sustain ghastly injuries inflicted by forks, fish knives, and silver sugar tongs — quite literal victims of Victorian civilization. More spectacularly still, when the cannon balls are exhausted, the defenders start using the electroplated heads of the poets brought out by the Collector as examples of the glories of Western civilization:

And of the heads, perhaps not surprisingly, the most effective of all had been Shakespeare's; it had scythed its way through a whole astonished platoon of sepoys advancing in single file through the jungle. The Collector suspected that the Bard's success in this respect might have a great deal to do with the ballistic advantages stemming from his baldness. The head of Keats, for example, wildly festooned with metal locks which it had proved impossible to file smooth had flown very erratically indeed, killing only a fat money-lender and a camel standing at some distance from the action. (335)

Such improvisations serve to expose the essential nature of an imperialism which is both military and cultural — yet they are also effective, more so, indeed, than much of the conventional military wisdom of the period. At the outset of the siege, the Collector complacently considers the advantages conferred by his civilization's accumulated military knowledge:

What an advantage that knowledge can be stored in books!... Surely what the Collector was doing as he pored over his military manuals was proving the superiority of the European way of doing things, of European culture itself. This was a culture so flexible that whatever he needed was there in a book at his elbow. An ordinary sort of man, he could, with the help of an oil-lamp, turn himself into a great military engineer... if the fancy took him. As the Collector pored over his manuals... he knew he was using science and progress to help him out of his difficulties and he was pleased. (188-9)

The only drawback is that the garrison lacks nearly all the resources required to conduct a conventional defence — which is probably just as well, given that the consensus of the military experts is that the outcome of a siege is a foregone conclusion. *Place assiégée, place prise*, is the dictum of Vauban, while the French military engineer, Cormontaigne, concludes his *Journal of the Attack of a Fortress* on day 35, with the words, “It is now time to surrender.”(190)

The relevance of such advice, however, is rendered minimal by the sepoys’ utter disregard of the rules of conventional warfare. In defiance of the received conventions of siege warfare, the sepoys attack even the most apparently defensible positions — and to fight back, the defenders are obliged to make equivalent modifications of conventional practice. Perhaps the most telling example of this is where the garrison’s lone surviving artillery officer contrives to destroy the sepoys’ ammunition dump, but only by ignoring the conventional rules of artillery fire, which dictate that it is too dangerous to fire cannon at any elevation beyond five degrees. Of course, under the circumstances, the concept represented by the words “too dangerous” has become virtually meaningless — and in order to bring the dump in range, it becomes necessary to depart from the rule book:

... his heart was thumping as he turned the elevating screw past five degrees. Until he reached five degrees he had found that it turned easily, through long use ... but now it became stiff and awkward. Yet Harry continued to turn. (328)

And in that image, of the stiff, reluctant turning of the screw as the cannon’s range is extended, we see perhaps the most vivid metaphor of what happens to a whole culture and society under siege.

Yet what is most remarkable is not so much the improvisations undertaken by the defenders as they fight desperately for their lives, as the number of customs that remain unchanged. Faced with imminent death (and no doubt dishonour) Louise seems more concerned about the possibility of her brother making an unsuitable match. The Padre,

as we have seen, is more worried about heresy than about the sepoys, while Lucy Hughes, having recovered from her brush with the insects, continues to hold tea parties even after the tea has run out, and there is only hot water to drink. And it is this concern with the conventional proprieties, with etiquette and the maintenance of social norms that has prompted several critics to remark that it sometimes seems almost as if Blandings Castle and its household had been transported to the plains of India.⁹ As the Collector remarks, after his recovery from a nearly fatal illness, during which Fleury's sister Miriam has nursed him, bathed him, and assisted him with his bodily functions: "Now that I've recovered we must think of your reputation, Mrs Lang." Miriam's response — a not unreasonable one under the circumstances — is to question whether, given the situation, reputations still matter. But the Collector is adamant: "If they don't matter, then nothing does. We must obey the rules." (251)

Yet, comical though this may be, there is little doubt that the preservation of values, however questionable they may be in themselves, is also one of the keys to the defenders' ability to survive. As with the titles of Farrell's other historical fictions, *The Siege of Krishnapur* turns out to have multiple significations. Where *Troubles* referred, not just to the political situation in post-war Ireland, but to a broader range of problems, both economic and personal, and *The Singapore Grip* both to the firm hold of British capitalism on South-East Asia and to one of the distinctive dexterities of the local prostitutes, *The Siege of Krishnapur* refers to more than just the plight of the beleaguered garrison: what is under siege is in fact an ideology, a culture, a whole system of values. Sheltered by the giant marble busts of Plato and Socrates, which protect one of the gun emplacements, the individual defenders show both courage and resourcefulness — but the values of the civilization they are defending fare less well. The few glimpses we are given of Indian culture (about as many as the British allow themselves) serve mainly to highlight the limitations of the culture which purports to offer them enlightenment. Native superstition, sacrificing black goats to avert a flood, for example, seems only mildly irrational when compared to the ravings of the Padre, or to the blind stupidity of one of the garrison's doctors, who is so incensed by a rival medic's claim that cholera is caused by polluted water, rather than bad air as conventionally supposed, that he actually goes so far as to drink a phial of a cholera patient's secretions to prove the truth of the orthodox position, and dies as a result.

Where Western culture *has* an impact, its effects are less than impressive: Hari, son of the local Maharajah, has received the dubious benefits of an English-style education, which serves only to alienate him from his own culture, without providing anything better to replace it than an enthusiasm for the pseudo-science of phrenology, which is the principal obsession of the British Magistrate — a man who prides himself on his belief in Reason. What emerges, therefore, while it remains a plausible and often sympathetic account of the human experiences of the defenders, and one which does full justice to the heroism they display while fighting for their lives, is a deeply damaging critique of the civilization whose values they defend. The effect of Farrell's omniscient narration is ultimately to provide something akin, not so much to high Victorian realism, as to surrealism, revealing the fundamental absurdity of much of the ideology of the day.

At the end, we are left with two final images. The first is of an almost blank screen, as the remnants of the garrison make their way across the empty plains to the railhead and "civilization," and begin to realize just how little difference the siege and its outcome has made to anyone else. At the outset Farrell had depicted, in an uncertain present conditional, two men with bullocks drawing water from a well; at the end, now in the past tense of the main body of the novel, we see them again, and realize they have been there all the time, unaffected by the main drama. The events described have been pointless, not even serving the purpose of allowing the participants to learn from experience — indeed, most of them seem only too eager to forget what has happened:

Only sometimes in dreams the terrible days of the siege, which were like the dark foundation of the civilized life they had returned to, would return years later to visit them: then they would awake, terrified and sweating, to find themselves in white starched linen, in a comfortable bed, in peaceful England. (343)

Finally, in an epilogue set some twenty years later, the Collector, now thoroughly disillusioned, encounters Fleury, only to find that the former romantic critic of the values of industrial capitalism has become a spokesman for all the beliefs the Collector has disavowed. An opinionated father, and faithless husband, Fleury is last seen extolling the virtues of Victorian culture as he makes his way to an assignation with "a young lady of passionate disposition." (345) Nothing has been learned, nothing gained — and as Farrell shows in his other fictions dealing with more recent imperial history, those who fail to learn from the past are condemned to repeat it. In *Troubles* and

The Singapore Grip we see at work much the same conventions, much the same ignorance and prejudice —and much the same disastrous consequences. While Farrell did not live to witness the Falklands War, and the ludicrous hysteria surrounding it, one can only assume that it would have served to confirm his belief in the truth of Marx's dictum that when history does repeat itself, it does so first as tragedy, then as farce.

NOTES

1. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Boston: Beacon, 1963), 231.
2. Lukács, 236.
3. *A Man From Elsewhere* (1961), *The Lung* (1964), *A Girl in the Head* (1967).
4. Quoted in J.G. Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 1. All subsequent references to this edition are contained in the text.
5. "Down to the Bone," *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 September 1973, 1074.
6. See "Afterword" in *The Siege of Krishnapur*. 346. Farrell also undertook extensive travels in India prior to writing the book.
7. Lukács, 60, 189.
8. Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976), 93.
9. E.g. John Spurling, "As Does the Bishop," in J.G. Farrell, *The Hill Station*, ed. John Spurling (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1981), 149.