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A METAFICTIONAL REFLECTION ON HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE INCLUSIVENESS OF TRUTH IN GRAEME MACRAE BURNET'S *HIS BLOODY PROJECT*

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Abstract: This article analyses Graeme Macrae Burnet's novel *His Bloody Project* (2015) as a metafictional exemplification of the problem of truth in historical accounts. Spuriously claiming that his novel contains authentic material related to a nineteenth-century crime, Burnet recounts the case in the form of a collection of miscellaneous texts. The novel may be read in the light of the stance upheld in postmodern historiography that there is no ultimate truth to be reached at the end of a historical enquiry. This analysis of *His Bloody Project* aims to demonstrate that the obscure, multifaceted truth about the murder case is constituted by all the diverse – even if incongruous and contradictory – perspectives presented in the book.

***His Bloody Project* – a tricky experiment with fact and fiction**

In 2016 *His Bloody Project* (2015) by the little-known Scottish author Graeme Macrae Burnet, with just one previous novel to his name,¹ was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Subsequently, it attracted reviews which praised its realistic portrayal of a Scottish crofting community [Jordan 2016],

¹ In 2014 Burnet published a psychological thriller, *The Disappearance of Adèle Bedeau*, later followed by the sequel *The Accident on the A35* (2017).

its “feel for authentic-seeming time and geography” [Myers 2016] as well as its “tricksy literary experiment” [Forshaw 2016] and “tricksy form” [Kerridge 2016].

The novel recounts a triple murder committed by seventeen-year old Roderick Macrae, a resident of a remote Highland village, in 1869, and the ensuing trial during which the accused was found guilty and sentenced to death. However, this is not a typical crime novel, and not even a typical novel – as was consistently underlined by reviewers. *His Bloody Project* takes the form of a dossier of the case, including Roderick’s memoir written during his imprisonment, witness statements, records of court proceedings, contemporary newspaper reports and medical opinions. The fictive discourse successfully masquerades as factual. The writer resorts to the well-known device of giving an aura of authenticity to his material by presenting it as found rather than invented; accordingly, he poses in the Preface as the editor of the multiple texts which comprise *His Bloody Project*. Indeed, the book harks back to what Barbara Foley calls “the pseudofactual novel” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which “simulates or imitates the authentic testimony of a ‘real life’ person; its documentary effect derives from the assertion of veracity” [1986, 25] and the promise of offering access to the extratextual world [1986, 67]. The practice was familiar to nineteenth-century writers as well. James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), a classic of Scottish literature, passes itself off as document rather than fiction, and has been invoked as a possible hypotext² of *His Bloody Project*.³ Another canonical story by a Scottish writer, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), is conveyed in the form of a collection of texts by several authors, including the transgressor’s own confession.⁴ Yet, the recourse to this time-worn strategy of authentication by a contemporary writer must be regarded as an act of literary self-consciousness, and is indeed quite common in historiographic metafiction. The term, as formulated by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, applies to novels which “are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” [Hutcheon 1991, 5]. Historiographic metafiction, according to Hutcheon, is grounded in the “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs” [1991, 5]; hence, one of its distinguishing features is the blurring of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction [1991, 10]. Both historiographic metafiction and history-writing reveal scepticism towards “empiricist and positivist epistemologies.” By foregrounding the conventions of genre and “their identity

² Gérard Genette defines the hypotext as a preexistent text upon which a later text is “grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” [1997, 5].

³ A list of novels which employ a mode of composition comparable to Burnet’s and combine authentic or pseudo-authentic materials with invention may be found in Petr Chalupský [2019].

⁴ Crime is a popular preoccupation of modern Scottish fiction as well. In her article *Concepts of Corruption: Crime Fiction and the Scottish ‘State’*, Gill Plain references numerous examples of contemporary Scottish crime novels and argues that “[c]rime writing has been a vibrant dimension of Scottish literary culture since the 1980s” [2007, 132].

as textuality,” metafictional historical novels problematise “the very possibility of historical knowledge” [1991, 106].

The “editor” of *His Bloody Project* declares that he came across the documents while pursuing research on his grandfather who was born near the site of the crime in 1890. The fact that Graeme Macrae Burnet does have a family connection with the area – as he explained in a BBC programme [Brocklehurst 2017] – seems to legitimise such assertions. In that same programme Burnet admitted that he wanted his readers to believe in the authenticity of the documents and took it as a compliment to his writing when they did.⁵ In the Preface the novelist plays games with his readers by spuriously sharing with them his concerns over the genuineness of Roderick’s memoir (but not the other texts). At the time it was supposedly published, i.e. immediately after the trial, many doubted that a poorly educated peasant boy might have authored it, and cited the case of the *Ossian* scandal as a warning against a gullible reception. By quoting, or, rather, inventing these voices, Burnet, paradoxically, lends credibility to his own fabrication: Roderick’s authorship of the manuscript may be in question, but the fact of its existence apparently is not. Nevertheless, the game of veracity and pretence that the writer plays is only tangentially related to the main controversy at the heart of his story, namely the question of the murderer’s culpability. Among the numerous incarnations of the neo-Victorian crime novel, *His Bloody Project* is representative of the “psychologisation of criminality” [Kohlke 2008/2009, ii]⁶ – insofar as his perpetration of the crime is beyond any doubt, Roderick’s mental condition is the principal question that the court (and, indirectly, the reader of the novel) faces. Roderick cannot be deemed legally accountable for the crime if his mental capacities are deficient; hence, his state of mind and motivation are the truth that the court tries to ascertain.

In his discussion of Burnet’s novel, Petr Chalupský contends that its artful composition is ultimately overshadowed by the plausible representation of a certain segment of Scottish history in the late nineteenth century, in particular the geographical and social milieu of a crofting community [2019, 79]. This article, however, foregrounds the issue of form, which clearly links *His Bloody Project* with the self-reflexive type of contemporary historical fiction that is usually termed, after Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction

⁵ By creating an illusion of authenticity, Burnet projects his book as “an intentionally defined [mimetic] contract,” to use Foley’s formulation [1986, 42]. Foley champions the view of “the fictional work as a contract designed by an intending author who invites his or her audience to adopt certain paradigms for understanding reality” [43]. Ironically, however, what seems here to be an instance of straightforward mimesis turns out to be its opposite, thus making the book a deliberately fraudulent contract on the writer’s part.

⁶ Other trends distinguished by Kohlke include “re-visions of real-life crimes,” “the afterlife of literary detectives; and the creation of new kinds of sleuths or sleuthing partnerships.” Another development consists in inventing criminal episodes in the lives of well-known nineteenth-century figures [2008/2009, ii].

[cf. Johnston and Wiegandt 2017, 11]. Referring to chosen contemporary historiographic theories, the article argues that, notwithstanding the author's invitation in the Preface for the reader to reach his or her own conclusions, there is no ultimate truth to be found beyond what the archive contains, or to be extracted by examining and comparing the testimonies. It is more adequate to treat the truth of the case as inclusive, dispersed and inherent in the disparate accounts of Roderick Macrae's "bloody project." All the materials throw some light on the case and, despite their fragmentariness, gaps, contradictions and deficiencies, should be taken collectively as a comprehensive, multifaceted and ultimately indeterminate account of what happened. Since it implicitly draws attention to the strategies of historical enquiry, Burnet's novel may be regarded as a literary reflection on historical scholarship.

Postmodern historiography: many correct views of the past

The prominent metafictional tendency in the British historical novel dates back to the 1980s and is strongly indebted to the conceptual changes in contemporary historiography, especially the work of Hayden White [Robinson 2011, 26-27]. In *History Meets Fiction* Beverley Southgate observes that although the relationship between history and fiction has always been close, over the centuries of their coexistence it has been marked by contradictory tendencies: attempts to draw a distinction between them or, conversely, to emphasise their affinities [2014, 1-7]. Postmodern historiography has come a long way from Leopold von Ranke's positivist ideal of striving to reveal the past "how it essentially was."⁷ During the past few decades, historical theorists have challenged "historians' own claims to be able to represent the 'truth' about the past; and at their most extreme, these critics have likened histories to fictions" [Southgate 2014, 6]. Today, it is a cliché to assert that, the past being an absent object of inquiry, historians never access it "as such"; therefore, the traditional epistemological problem of how they can know the past accurately has been displaced by "what can be derived and constructed from the *historicised* record or archive" [Tony Bennett in Jenkins 1995, 16]. Records and archives ought to be seen as "highly volatile and mutable products of complex historical processes," hence they should not be treated by historians as referents belonging to the non-discursive reality [Jenkins 1995, 17]. Voicing such views, postmodern historians feel compelled to assert the obvious: that the actual existence of the past is never in question. At the same time, however,

⁷ The original formulation, "wie es eigentlich gewesen," appeared in the Preface to Ranke's *History of the Latin and Teutonic Peoples* (1824) and is thought to capture the German historian's belief in the empiricism and objectivity of historical studies [cf. Boldt 2014, 463].

they stress that the past enters historiography “only rhetorically” [Jenkins 1995, 18]. In *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (2003), Keith Jenkins, one of the chief proponents of postmodern history, insists that the past must be read, studied and understood as if it were a text. Drawing on Derrida’s famous dictum that there is nothing outside the text, Jenkins contends that a historical event presents itself as an object of inquiry “only textually – as a piece of writing or another form of representation” [2003, 25]. Postmodernists problematise primarily the form of history – the multifarious ways in which the past leaves its textual traces and the ways in which these traces are subsequently “emplotted” (as Hayden White argued in *Metahistory* (1973)) and converted into explanatory narratives [cf. Jenkins 2003, 15].

Since historical narratives aim at cogency and persuasiveness, discrepancies and incongruities in the available evidence tend to be suppressed; in the words of Stephan Jaeger, “The more the subjective voice of the narrator and the reflexive voice of the academic historian disappear, the more historiographic narration conceals any possible mistrust and creates the illusion of a reliable representation of historical reality” [2015, 381]. This is achieved by “closing gaps” between diverse witnesses and sources, “synthesizing subjectivities” [2015, 382] as well as streamlining multiple voices “in a closed perspectival structure, so that they all work towards the historical reality controlled by the narrator” [Jaeger 2015, 386].

In his seminal volume *Tropics of Discourse* Hayden White observes that “Histories (...) are not only about events but also about the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure. These sets of relationships are not, however, immanent in the events themselves; they exist only in the mind of the historian reflecting on them” [1985, 94]. The premise of White’s influential philosophy of history concerns the proximity of history and fiction: the process of combining events into “a comprehensible totality” in fiction and history alike is a “poetic” process. As he points out, there is a crucial distinction between historical records and the historical narrative constructed from them: “In the unprocessed historical record and in the chronicle of events which the historian extracts from the record, the facts exist only as a congeries of contiguously related fragments” [1985, 125].

Such far-reaching re-evaluations of the methods and aims of historiography have provoked criticism on the part of its more traditionally-minded practitioners. The well-known American conservative historian and cultural critic Gertrude Himmelfarb accused the advocates of postmodernist concepts of absolute relativism, “a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past” [1997, 158]. The foregrounding of the textuality of the past supposedly results in what Himmelfarb most strongly objects to: “The disdain for truth (...) as a practical, guiding rule of historical scholarship” [1997, 163].

In his response to Himmelfarb's polemic, Hayden White concurs with her recognition of the "textualist' bias" at the core of postmodernism [1999, 36] but draws different implications from this feature of postmodern history. In his view, the idea of "objectivism" is yet another ideological position, while postmodernism's scepticism does not amount to an opposition to truth and a commitment to "lie, delusion, fantasy, and fiction" [1999, 37-38]. On the contrary, by virtue of being self-referential, postmodernist discourse exposes the constructed nature of representations of reality and the figurativeness of language [1999, 39-40]. Postmodernism, he claims, "is more interested in reality than it is in truth as an end in itself" [1999, 38]. In this reasoning, "any version of the truth is itself another text" [1999, 39]. White's contention is that "comprehensive objectivity" is an unattainable goal, based on a naïve view that statements about the past correspond to a body of raw facts [1985, 47]. Abandoning history's scientific aspirations does not lead to relativism but enables historians to offer a more complex image of the past, whose validity is not diminished by the adoption of an individual style and perspective, as long as this perspective is not championed as the only true and correct one. This claim reiterates a foundational idea of postmodern historiography, as expressed by White in *Tropics of Discourse*: "there is no such thing as a *single* correct view of any object under study but (...) there are *many* correct views, each requiring its own style of representation" [1985, 47].

The multiple truths about the protagonist's "bloody project"

Generically, Burnet's book gives the impression of being a set of (unprocessed) historical records rather than historical fiction. By assuming the position of editor and refraining from converting the diverse materials into a continuous narrative, the writer implicitly acknowledges the supremacy of original evidence, however flawed or incomplete it may be, over authoritative, or authorial, interpretations. Although the jurors reach a verdict in Roderick's case and the judge duly passes a sentence, the legal ending is by no means epistemologically conclusive. The verdict is not unanimous, and some of the witnesses and observers have their doubts as to the adequacy of the ruling. Consequently, the contemporary reader of the faux Victorian archive has to confront – however, belatedly and only textually – the same dilemma as the nineteenth-century judge once did, and is expected by the writer to deduce for himself or herself what truth emerges from the collection of individual accounts [2015, 4].

The historian Robin Winks once drew an analogy between crime fiction and historiography, and compared the historian to the detective: "The historian

must collect, interpret, and then explain his evidence by methods which are not greatly different from those techniques employed by the detective, or at least the detective in fiction [...]. Obviously the author of such fiction does not construct his work as the historian does, for to one the outcome is known and to the other that outcome is at best guessed. But the reasoning processes are similar enough to be intriguing" [in Browne and Kreiser 2000, 2]. Burnet's novel, however, represents the "transgressor-centred" type of crime fiction, which lacks "the reassuring presence of a detective" [Horsley 2005, 3]. Since the crucial element of a conclusive explanation is missing from *His Bloody Project*, it is fair to say that the double role of the detective-historian has been implicitly assigned to the reader.

His Bloody Project may be read as an illustration of White's contention that multiple perspectives and diverse styles collectively convey the truth about events of the past in a more adequate way than a potential unitary perspective would, although this mode of presentation lacks the compelling explanatory power of a unified narrative. The book offers an array of accounts which differ greatly in terms of their scope, the characters' complexity of thought and depth of knowledge as well as their relations with Roderick, but the ungraspable truth of the case is the sum total of the individual contributions, each of which conveys a slightly different portrait of the protagonist.

While building an argument to uphold the notion of truth in history after the narrativist turn – of which he is himself a major proponent – Frank Ankersmit draws an analogy between historical narratives and paintings as modes of representations. If there were a direct correspondence between a portrait of Napoleon and the man himself, then it would logically follow that different pictorial representations of him would refer to different Napoleons. The conundrum may be resolved, suggests Ankersmit, if we accept that "what a representation represents (e.g., Napoleon) must strictly be distinguished from a representation's represented (e.g., some aspect of Napoleon)" [2010, 40]. "[T]he represented," claims Ankersmit, "does not refer to or denote an individual thing: it is (...) an *aspect* of a thing" [2010, 41]. Applied to historical narrative, these insights allow the historian to circumvent both the correspondence and coherence theories of truth and settle for "representationalist historical truth." Notwithstanding its limitations, a historical narrative may still be regarded as possessing cognitive value [2010, 41], despite the fact that the inherently shapeless and meaningless reality has been subject to narrative-making strategies.

The portrait of Roderick Macrae is a composite of his multifarious "aspects," stemming from different points of view. Split into multiple texts and perspectives, Burnet's novel overtly demonstrates that "a narrative text projects a range of subjective private world-models" [Nünning 2001, 212]. Ansgar Nünning asserts that "a character's or a narrator's subjective world-view" is conditioned by "the individual's knowledge, mental traits, attitudes, and

system of values” [2001, 207-208]. Pointing out that a character-perspective is constituted by “subjective judgements, opinions, emotions, and beliefs,” some of which may be erroneous, Nünning stresses that “the world of fictional facts need not be accurately reflected in the mental representations constructed by a character” [2001, 212].

In Burnet’s fictional world, discrepancies emerge at numerous intersections between the individual perspectives and, hence, the individual texts. Most importantly, the disjunction between the murderer’s account of his crime and the evidence compiled by the doctors who examined the bodies leads to speculation and the formulation of alternative explanations. In his memoirs, which constitute the core of the book and which are cited in their entirety, Roderick Macrae sets out his aim to adhere to facts while denying any intention to shape his narrative with a view to influencing the reader’s judgement or the court’s ruling. Indeed, the author of the account pre-empts any such suspicions by immediately admitting to the triple murder: “I have no wish to absolve myself of responsibility for the deeds which I have lately committed” [15]. Roderick’s apparent indifference to his fate (“My life has been short and of little consequence” [15]) corresponds to his strikingly unemotional, dry narration. Factual and straightforward, it avoids self-analysis or self-justification. The flat tone of the narration is sustained also in the section in which he describes in methodical detail how he murdered Lachlan Mackenzie, Mackenzie’s daughter Flora and his little son. The medical reports concerning the injuries found on the bodies of Roderick’s three victims confirm his version, except for one significant divergence: wounds were also found on the girl’s private parts. The fact that no mention is made of it in Roderick’s account is never satisfactorily accounted for: this may be a deliberate omission, in which case his professed intent to tell the plain truth may be questioned, or perhaps at the time of the crime he was not aware that he inflicted those injuries, or even that he has wilfully suppressed those memories and so genuinely does not remember this part of his bloody deed. It is also likely that in his mind there exist no clear-cut boundaries between these options.

This and other indeterminacies and inconsistencies, in turn, give rise to conflicting speculations as to the murderer’s motive. The version that he himself puts forward appears plausible enough: the murder of Lachlan Mackenzie was “in repayment for the suffering he had caused my father” [150]. Indeed, Mackenzie, an influential inhabitant of the same village, later promoted to the position of constable, led a campaign of harassment against the Macrae family. Sufficient evidence of it emerges during the trial, but other evidence precludes such a straightforward explanation. The bond between father and son has never been strong; indeed, according to the neighbours’ testimonies, the father’s attitude to his son oscillated between indifference and cruelty. It is therefore an open question to what extent Roderick’s deed was prompted by a sense of solidarity with his father, and to what extent he acted out

of his own motives. Roderick never admits to being driven by a personal need for revenge, but his account contains several episodes when he himself was the object of Mackenzie's viciousness. Roderick's account also appears to underrate the role that his sister's tragedy played in his decision to kill the hated neighbour. He saw but at the time did not seem to understand fully that Mackenzie sexually abused Jetta. Their father's brutal punishment of Jetta was the immediate cause of her suicide. Although Roderick clearly perceives the murder he committed as an act of justice (which is why during the trial he pleads not guilty, making a distinction between responsibility and guilt), the content of his memoirs belies such a simplistic justification.

Roderick's account reveals another possible incentive for the crime, which, although not featuring in the court proceedings, seems to be uppermost in his mind, taking precedence over the retribution motive. Just before her suicide, his sister shared with him her premonition of Mackenzie's imminent death. On hearing this, Roderick, not unlike Shakespeare's Macbeth, began to consider himself an instrument of some superior power: "The knowledge that Lachlan Broad [the villagers' nickname for Mackenzie] was soon to die loosened the ordinary provisos. If providence had decreed that he was not long for this world, of what importance was the method of his leaving?" [143]. The idea took hold of him, with the result that the necessity to kill Mackenzie presented itself to him with absolute clarity, leaving only the problem of how to do the deed. Ironically, although the local Presbyterian minister has no doubt that Roderick is thoroughly wicked, in his own account the murderer invokes a twisted religious motivation for his crime, elevating himself to the position of "the redeemer that Reverend Galbraith had spoken of at my mother's funeral" [143].

Thus, Roderick's publicly proclaimed objective to achieve justice for his father by killing the malicious neighbour appears to be merely one thread in the tangled and opaque fabric of his thoughts. The other two murders he committed before killing Mackenzie further cast doubt on what one of the court experts calls his "quasi-noble desire to protect his father" [259]. According to Roderick, he killed Flora and her little brother only because he met them first and wanted to stop them warning their father. Doctor Thomson, however, constructs an entirely different narrative out of the available evidence, suggesting that Roderick misrepresents his real motive by belittling his murder of the girl. According to Thomson, Flora was not only the first, but also the prime target of the attack, which was in fact sexually motivated. Thomson's construct opens up an entirely new perspective on the case while simplifying and reducing the nature of Roderick's feelings towards Flora to violent sexual urges. The boy's account reveals that his desire for her was coloured by genuine affection, to the point where he fancied himself in love with the girl and even once made her a veiled offer of marriage. Roderick's lawyer points out flaws in Thomson's version, asking him to acknowledge that "another interpretation of the prisoner's actions is possible." Thomson's reply that "Other interpretations

may be possible, but they do not properly account for the facts of the case” [260-261] can be applied to his own explanation, too. In fact, no single account, including the one eventually presented by the judge, can comprehensively and convincingly amalgamate all that is known about the case.

The conventional “who” and “whydunnit” of crime fiction are effectively displaced by the question concerning the condition of the criminal’s mind. The image of Roderick that emerges from all the testimonies, including his own account, remains indistinct and multiperspectival. The individual views neither fully converge nor do they completely exclude one another. Each person knows Roderick in a certain capacity and also is guided in their judgement by their own mindset. His next-door neighbour Mrs Murchison thinks of him as a nice, well-behaved teenager in whom she has never observed any criminal proclivities. Apart from the habit of talking to himself, she has not noticed anything out of the ordinary. She refuses to judge him, instead remarking that Roderick’s mother’s recent death threw his family’s life off balance. She calls the murder “tragic” rather than “evil” [177]. His former schoolmaster describes him as a boy of exceptional intelligence who never gave cause to be disciplined. The teacher did not notice anything unusual in Roderick’s character, apart from his reluctance to socialise with his fellows, which Mr Gillies ascribed to his “academic superiority” [10]. The local minister of the Church of Scotland regards Roderick’s crime as the strongest confirmation of the prejudices he holds against the inhabitants of his parish, who, in his view, continue to exist in a state of “savagism,” which the strict teaching of the Church has not yet succeeded in suppressing [9]. From this perspective, Roderick represents an extreme example of natural human wickedness. The outsider Doctor Thomson,⁸ for whom Roderick is an interesting medical case, produces the most elaborate analysis of his character. Aspiring to the status of expert in the emergent science of “criminal anthropology,” Thomson treats Roderick as a specimen to be studied. He detects both hereditary and environmental factors that have shaped the criminal. Deciding that Roderick’s intellect is sound but his affections deficient, Thomson invents the concept of “moral insanity” to classify him.

There are not sufficient grounds for claiming that any of the witnesses deliberately paints a false image of the perpetrator, but their reliability in terms of the interpretation and judgement of his character and the degree to which they actually know and understand him appear questionable (not least because of the discrepancies between their opinions). James Phelan points out that, as a rule, narrators perform three main roles – reporting, interpreting and evaluating [2017, 95], and unreliability may occur across this spectrum. In *His*

⁸This particular character is based on a historical persona – James Bruce Thomson, who was appointed resident surgeon at the General Prison for Scotland in Perth. He wrote articles for medical journals which contributed to the growth of criminology [*Thomson*].

Bloody Project, Roderick as well as all the witnesses are effectively multiple narrators of the case, and a comparison of their accounts hints at unreliability within all the three roles. Nonetheless, the overlaps and contradictions emerge in their interaction rather than from any objective verification.

Conclusion

The multiperspectivity of Burnet's novel serves the usual purposes of such a mode of storytelling, which Marcus Hartner summarises as: to "highlight the perceptually, epistemologically or ideologically restricted nature of individual perspectives and/or draw attention to various kinds of differences and similarities between the points of view presented therein." Multiperspectivity helps to "portray the relative character of personal viewpoints" [Hartner 2014, par. 1]. Despite their limited trustworthiness and notwithstanding their mutual incompatibility, none of the accounts in Burnet's book can be dismissed since each contributes something unique and illuminating to the case. In view of the absence of a dominant, authoritative perspective, *His Bloody Project* may be said to represent what Manfred Pfister termed "open" (as opposed to "closed") multiperspectivity: partial and dissonant views are allowed to co-exist and interact without cohering into a conclusive, explanatory narrative [in Hartner 2014, par. 4].

As Alan Robinson observes in *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory and the Contemporary Novel*, "history's truth-claims depend on its referentiality to the actual world" [2011, 28]. *His Bloody Project* may be read as a novelistic response to the constructivist theories of history which foreground the problem of the reliability of accounts and witness statements by exposing gaps and inconsistencies in historical sources. Since the textual records which constitute Burnet's "pseudofactual" book cannot be verified against empirical reality, no truth can be discovered besides the inclusive truth that is diffused among all the individual accounts. But *His Bloody Project* does more than state the obvious, namely the unreachability of the past. The novel demonstrates that it is not only the temporal gap and the inevitable reduction of real life to texts that prevents the reader as historian-detective from arriving at a uniform, conclusive version of events. As the experience of the nineteenth-century characters shows, participation in the spatiotemporal reality does not make it much easier to recount the present "as it essentially is" – to paraphrase von Ranke's formulation. The writer's refusal to make the individual accounts cohere for the sake of an explanatory narrative results in the apparently unprocessed condition of the historical records, at a stage prior to the procedures of historians. Hence, the form of *His Bloody Project* serves as an implicit reflection of the fundamental problem of truth inherent in historiography.

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