Historicity in Historical Fiction: *Burning Water* and *The Temptations of Big Bear*

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About the strange fancy that history is given and the strange fact that history is taken . . . .
—George Bowering, *Burning Water*

I

In the last few decades, historiographers and fiction writers alike have shown an increasing awareness of the problems surrounding the narrativization of history. Very often, this awareness parallels a larger philosophical questioning of the power of discourse to shape our perceptions of reality. This is hardly a new concept, but the way in which modern storytellers try to deal with it is, as the emergence of the term "post-moderism" suggests.

In his article "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,"[1] Hayden White, author of various probes into the nature of historiography and the historical imagination, discusses both the advantages and the disadvantages of the narrativization of history. The value of narrative—and this is true not only for historiography but for all instances of storytelling—resides in its capacity for communication, for expressing our interpretations of reality to one another. In order to be effective, then, narrative has to obey certain conventions that make understanding possible; in other words, it has to appeal to what we like to call "common sense"—which, as White points out, is actually common only to a certain society in a specific historical situation. The "truths" that storytellers—historians as well as fiction writers—implicitly rely on to make communication and comprehension possible must be considered conventions, evolved within and accepted by the members of a particular group. Since narrative constitutes the most effective and perhaps the only means of expressing and communicating our views of the world—especially where the past is

[1] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 5-28.

concerned—the use of these conventions is not only inevitable but also valuable.

At the same time, however, their unquestioned acceptance threatens to obscure their conventional nature and to cast them, instead, as objective, self-evident truths. Accordingly, narrative is often seen as an objective account of reality rather than a culturally conditioned interpretation of it, and historians in particular seem to do little to prevent this, in spite of the fact that the "telling" of past reality poses additional problems in this regard. In the first place, readers of stories about historical events cannot counterbalance the information and interpretation given in the story with personal first-hand experience, since the only knowledge they can have of these events is provided by textual sources. Historians, therefore, should be especially careful to establish that they are not presenting readers with objective truth about past events. Second, much of the evidence available to historians themselves consists of stories told by other, earlier interpreters, so that the problems of narrativization gain an extra dimension: writers have to be aware not only of their own role as interpreters and their own cultural context, but of the cultural circumstances of the "authentic" documents as well. For White, the answer to these problems seems obvious: rather than claiming objectivity, rather even than aspiring to objectivity, historiographers should make it clear, to their readers, that events do not and cannot "tell themselves."

In modern Canadian literature, this "prescription" parallels the way in which two historical novels, Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* and George Bowering's *Burning Water* deal with the problems of historical fiction. In spite of obvious differences, these two novels share many underlying preoccupations, the most important of which is undoubtedly their awareness of the historical and cultural conditioning of discourse and their desire to make the reader also aware of this. How exactly they achieve this and what this suggests regarding their view of historical fiction will be the subject of the following discussion.

II

In both *Burning Water* and *The Temptations of Big Bear*, the unconventional narrative structure, as well as the thematization of certain relevant notions, calls attention to the problem posed by the impossibility of objectivity in narrating the past. While the frequent references to different voices and different languages in *The Temptations of Big Bear* make the reader realize

how one-sided our view of Canadian history is, *Burning Water*'s focus on the relationship between the factual and the imaginary emphasizes this novel's attempt at a critique of fiction as such, and of historical narrative in general. Since Wiebe's novel is the least adamant in its rejection of "realist" traditions and its exploration of new techniques, I shall start with a discussion of the thematic of "voice" in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, in order to establish a framework for further comparison.

The importance of "voice" and "language" as recurrent *leitmotive* in this novel is hard to ignore, since they manifest themselves in many ways. To begin with, very many expressions are used that somehow refer to words and speech, where Wiebe could just as well have used other expressions. For example, Big Bear pleads for "one voice"[2] when asking for an Indian representative in Ottawa; Sitting Bull, to express the idea that someone else will have to take over his leadership, says: "someone else must finish my words" (147); when the chiefs leave Big Bear's lodge, they thank him not for his hospitality but for his words (66); and to express his confidence in John McDougall, Sweetgrass explains: "when you speak I hear my own voice" (45).

The correspondences which are established between the speaker and his voice have the same "foregrounding" effect: Wiebe contrasts the "harder, wilder depth" (21) of Big Bear's voice with the "soft clear voice" (22) of Sweetgrass, and makes Big Bear wonder about the strangeness of the judge's voice, "thinly hard like steel . . . from so thick a body" (399), and the voice of the court-clerk, "the little dry man shouting aloud as if his voice were intended for open prairie" (394). Big Bear's own voice is, of course, very closely tied in with his life and his power. When he meets Lieutenant-Governor Morris, his voice is strong, "echoing over the valley" (23); but at Frog Creek, "his great voice was lost in the immense lake and creek valley" (258), signalling his loss of authority.

Still another way in which the problem of language is emphasized is by pointing out the difficulties of translation. The best example here is Peter Erasmus' translation of "treason" into Cree; he explains that it is like throwing sticks at the Queen's hat (387), but all through the novel, and in particular in the courtroom scenes, the problem is reiterated. At one point, Big Bear refers to White notions "for which no one could shape sound or any combination of sound leave alone a recognizable sign,"

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[2] Rudy Wiebe, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (Toronto: McClelland, 1976) 104. Further references in this paper will be to this edition.

which, he believes, is so "because there [is] no order in the White world" (62).

What this really means, of course, is that the White world —or rather, world view—has its own kind of order, and the different voices and languages can be considered metaphors for the different perceptions of reality that govern two distinct cultures. The different uses of the land, for example, provide a basis for many of the recurrent themes. Morris, in the first chapter, admits that he cannot see the land otherwise than in miles, or in the form of a map (10)—and Captain William Butler, in 1870, finds it "humiliating to an Englishman that so fine a country should be totally neglected" (40); but, for the Indians, the White man's plans for the land seem destructive: "As if just under the edge of [Big Bear's] vision a giant blade was slicing through the earth, cutting off everything with roots, warping everything into something Whiteskin clean and straight" (91). It is not surprising, then, that while for Dewdney the railroad will "humanize . . . , structure and package" the land (114), to the Indians the railroad "splits it open" (201), "strangles" it (204). Similarly, for the Whites, a square seems to be the ideal form, but Big Bear wishes that he could "see their round beautiful world coming nearer again" (106), and in council he worries that the sun "is starting to look as if it had four corners" (93). At the very end of the novel, of course, the squareness is triumphant, and Big Bear is glad to escape it by dying (409).

The thematization of these differences between White and Indian words, and White and Indian views, makes the reader more and more aware of the importance of the historical and cultural context in which stories of reality are told—or rather, to use one of Wiebe's favourite expressions, in which they are made.[3]

Hayden White's assessment of the value of narrativity as dependent on "common sense" is taken up by Wiebe in his suggestion that communication between members of different social groups is extremely difficult. At the same time, however, *The Temptations of Big Bear* is an obvious attempt to show that such communication is not impossible, as long as the different interlocutors are aware of each other's historical and cultural backgrounds; in this case, of course, it is mainly the *reader's* awareness which is required. *The Temptations of Big Bear*, then, is, above all, an effort to come to terms with a clash between two

[3] Cf. the collection of short stories edited by Wiebe and entitled *The Story-Makers* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1970).

cultures and to remedy the one-sidedness of the account of this clash in Canadian historiography.

At this point, it is important to remember that the Indian culture was essentially an oral culture. For the benefit of forgetful readers (whose very role in this enterprise indicates that they belong to a "written" culture), this is emphasized time and again, through, for example, the theme of "voice" and Big Bear's mistrust of written words, but it becomes especially clear and important in the last chapter, where the White preference for the written word makes the judge refuse Big Bear's spoken words as evidence. And when the lawyer responds by asking "Are we to pretend in this court that Indians habitually communicate by written orders, by letters of intention!" (377), he is essentially ignored. When Big Bear is finally allowed to speak for himself (which is after the verdict has been reached), he concludes by saying: "I ask the court to print my words and scatter them among White people" (400)—thus acknowledging, not necessarily the superiority of the written word, but the White people's tendency to regard as "true" only what is written, and preferably printed.

The oral character of Indian culture, combined with the Whites' veneration of the written document, means that the history of western Canada is a "White" history; that is, it has been seen through White eyes and told in a White voice. In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Wiebe partly makes up for this; in a sense, he has printed Big Bear's words and scattered them among White people.[4] But he also points out that neither side can tell the whole truth; no single story can tell it all. *The Temptations of Big Bear* contains both White and Indian voices. It seems to say that, since every story is told from a specific viewpoint, each story contains its own, partial and subjective, but nonetheless real, truth. Poundmaker, who was present at the events described here, later says that "it was sometimes hard to say what the truth was" (404). This statement is diametrically opposed to the Crown Prosecutor's assertion: "It is not necessary for me to mention any of the circumstances . . . because the whole matter . . . is now almost a matter of history" (357-58); in other words, it is known, defined, and unchangeable. In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Wiebe refuses this conception of history as something closed and fully known, even as something that can be fully known.

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[4] Of course, the words printed here by Wiebe are, in fact, *his* "White" and written words; they appropriate Big Bear's spoken words rather than present them.

This insistence on the impossibility of one true story is further reinforced by the narrative structure of the novel. Rather than telling one story, from one point of view, Wiebe calls upon a whole series of "storytellers." First-person narrators, whose names usually appear in italics above their "stories," alternate with characters whose thoughts and actions are presented in the third person, but all of them "speak" their own kind of language, in their own distinctly personal voices. The "efficiency" and lack of imagination of Morris's language in the first chapter, for example, are in total contrast to the first words spoken by Sweetgrass: "My heart rises like a bird to see you once more" (17).

It soon becomes clear that this initial difference between the voices of Morris and Sweetgrass is only the first indication of a much larger issue, namely the opposition between White and Indian discourse—which, as was suggested above, is itself a sign of the confrontation between two totally different ways of interpreting reality. The contrast between, for instance, a story told by Colonel Irvine and another story told by Wandering Spirit is startlingly suggestive of the underlying differences in perception. Irvine begins his story as follows:

> In 1878, Big Bear, the Cree chief who figured so prominently in the 1885 troubles, had stopped the Government surveyors from carrying on their work. Complaints of this were brought to me. I selected twenty-six men and we proceeded to the scene of the trouble, taking our Winchester rifles with which we had just been equipped. (86)

The dates, the facts, the actions are all very efficiently stated—perfectly understandable to the White reader. Wandering Spirit's story, on the other hand, is likely to disorient that same reader because of the "unusual" way in which it presents itself:

> I am very young then, . . . and I go with Bare Earth of the West People. It is in the Eagle Moon and I run a lot over the snow, ahead scouting. I am thin and hard from running all the time. (166)

Through Wiebe's use of such very different styles, readers are shown the existence, and the importance, of presuppositions and "moral meanings"[5] inherent in language itself (since Wandering Spirit's words must be considered, here, as a translation from

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[5] Hayden White, "Critical Response: The Narrativization of Real Events," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1981): 797.

Cree), as well as in the speaker's whole culture. Although the stories told by the many characters in this novel may well be based on reality, they are never created solely from "objective"—nor, for that matter, purely "subjective"—material. A very obvious thematization of this idea in the text is the incident with the surveyors described by Irvine in the above quotation, and the very different accounts given of it by the other parties involved, who all claim their victory (86-7, 89, 115). A second, and perhaps more powerful, effect of this narrative structure is that it forces readers to be aware of the historical and cultural context of the different stories—if only to follow and understand the storyline. In his monologue early on in the novel, John McDougall points out the necessity of knowing "where the voice is coming from":[6] "when I hear words about the Indian treaties, I take a long look at where they come from" (36), and that is what Wiebe seems to want the reader to do: always to remember who is speaking.

However, even if the reader is constantly alert to the conditions in which the speakers "make" their stories, the often intentionally confusing language and points of view which mark in particular the "Indian" stories sometimes make it extremely hard to understand what is "happening." Just as Big Bear has trouble understanding the "order" of the White world, we, as White readers, find it difficult to see the logic of the Indian perspective, and, consequently, of the Indian way of telling stories. Usually, but not always, the reader will understand the White voices quite easily, in spite of their nineteenth-century origin, and in spite of the fact that they are not always complete; but as soon as the narrator focuses on the Indians, it is likely that readers will be somewhat bewildered. Instead of dates, we have seasons, or phases of the moon such as "the Start to Fly Moon" (196) or "the Frozen-over Moon" (215); place names, too, become less recognizable: "Where-The-Bones-Lie" (315) and "The Place-where-Bullhead-lives" (42) replace our, now conventional, designations. Similarly, the description of Little Bear's Sundance, which marks his entry into manhood, does not refer to anything in the White readers' world, so that, in spite of the clear words and the obvious violence of that paragraph (164), we cannot distill a picture, in our mind, of what is happening there and what it means to the Indians. Still, Wiebe refuses to give readers even so much as the word "Sundance" itself, denying us even the slipperiest footing in this particular part of "reality." In other words, by not "translating" the Indian—nor, for that matter, the nineteenth-century—perspective into stories compatible with our

[6] Rudy Wiebe, *Where Is the Voice Coming From?* (Toronto: McClelland, 1974).

twentieth-century "common sense," Wiebe makes readers themselves experience the culture gap and the problems of communication which *The Temptations of Big Bear* explores. Thus, readers have to recognize the "conventionality" and the historical conditioning not only of these stories, but also of our own discourse and perceptions.

Ironically, the one participant in this communication whose voice is not identified—and whose historical and cultural background is, thus, not acknowledged—is the actual, ultimate maker of all the stories told here: namely, Wiebe, as the author of *The Temptations of Big Bear.*

In this respect *Burning Water* is even more self-conscious, for it is conscious of the historicity of its own production. As in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, the concept of the omniscient narrator, with its pretense to objectivity, of a clear and unified vision, has been replaced by another, more explicitly "subjective," mode of storytelling. But in contrast to the nineteenth-century, Indian perspective which Wiebe tries to evoke, Bowering constantly reminds the reader of the fact that this novel was written by a twentieth-century writer, in spite of its eighteenth-century subject. The Prologue introduces not only the subject of the novel, but also the voice of the author. At the risk of being accused of succumbing to the "intentional fallacy," I would even go so far as to call it the voice of George Bowering:

> When I was a boy I was the only person I knew who was named George, but I did have the same first name as the king. . . . When I came to live in Vancouver, I thought of Vancouver, and so now geography involved my name too, George Vancouver. . . . What could I do but write a book filled with history and myself, about these people and this place?[7]

Toward the end of the Prologue, however, this "I" proposes the following change in terminology:

> We cannot tell a story that leaves us outside, and when I say we, I include you. But in order to include you, I feel that I cannot spend these pages saying I to a second person. Therefore let us stand together looking at them. We are making a story, after all, as we have always been, stand-

[7] George Bowering, *Burning Water* (Toronto: New P, 1983) 9. Further references in this paper will be to this edition.

> ing and speaking together to make up a history, a real historical fiction. (10)

The confusion created by this "explanation" seems to be an essential part of Bowering's attempt to redefine fiction, in that it makes readers aware of the strange conventions that regulate our perceptions of the fictional reality created by storytellers. Still, the decision to call the writer in the book "he" rather than "I" has many other implications as well. Whereas Wiebe emphasizes the "making" of stories by his *characters*, Bowering draws attention to the fact that he, as author, is "making" a story here. By casting the storyteller as a character in his own fiction, he makes the process of production part of the product itself, splitting the novel into two equally important (and closely intertwined) strands. Rather than efface himself and his act of writing from the novel's "reality," for the sake of apparent objectivity, he suggests that his presence and his "voice" (with all of its "Wiebean" implications) are part of its truth.

In addition, the juxtaposition of the two stories forces readers to realize that it is the author who dictates what will "happen" next, and not, as traditional "realist" fiction would often have us believe, reality itself. In several places in the text, this power of the writer is made very explicit. In chapter 44, the writer "got as far south as he was going to go that winter . . . before Vancouver did, or before he allowed him to" (192). And as the author says in the Prologue, "Without a storyteller, George Vancouver is just another dead sailor" (9).

Bowering's refusal to ignore the historical conditioning of his own text also accounts for the explicitly modern language and perspective which govern this novel. Used to "realist" literature, readers may at first be disconcerted by, for instance, the generation conflict between two Indians as it is portrayed in the first chapter. It resembles so closely the conflicts that we are used to in our own reality that it seems inappropriate in an eighteenth-century setting. The same holds true for Captain Quadra's "Freudian" assessment of the act of waging war as "repeating the games you played in childhood" (28), and the Indian's analysis of his friend's feeling of guilt in these "psychoanalytical" terms:

> I think you *want* to be punished. I think you enjoy your private sins so much that you desire some confirmation of them, and so you walk around all the time with your shoulders hunched and your eyes looking up guiltily, waiting for Koaxkoaxa-nuxiwae to poke his beak into the top of your head. (92)

In the same way, our sense of realism is shaken by the description of the Hawaiian evening sun as "falling into the edge of the ocean like a polychrome postcard" (68)—notwithstanding the fact that this is probably the most realistic image of a sunset shared by this author and his readers. Whereas, to a certain extent, traditional historical fiction has engrained in our reading habits the necessity to forget our own context (but not, paradoxically enough, the context created by other novels), Bowering very overtly offers his modern world as a context for his story (and for history).

This use of the writer's circumstances—rather than those of the characters—as frame of reference separates *Burning Water* from *The Temptations of Big Bear*, in which the writer's context remains unidentified. By letting so many voices speak, each in its own particular way and out of its own background, and by overtly thematizing the problems of "voice," Wiebe calls attention to the historical conditions of the stories told by his characters, that is, to the impossibility of objectivity *within* the fiction he creates. Bowering, on the other hand, emphasizes the historicity *of* the fiction he creates, through the modern language, the presence of the writer and his writing, and the "non-fictional" Prologue.

However, it is important to note here that *Burning Water* clearly focuses on a different "solution" to the problems posed by the narrativization of history. Rather than concentrate on one particular historiographic subject, as Wiebe does, Bowering seems to be preoccupied with the conventionality of our view of the past, and even of reality, in general. Consequently, and as the overt presence of the storyteller suggests, his fiction is much more self-critical and anti-mimetic than Wiebe's is. In a sense, one could consider Vancouver's story a pretext for an examination and exploration of the field of *fiction* itself; Vancouver's rather conspicuous absence from several entire chapters cannot really be explained otherwise.

The main themes in *Burning Water* concern the problem of truth and the relationship between facts, fancy, and the imagination, as opposed to Wiebe's themes of voice and vision. *Burning Water* abounds with expressions such as "in fact," "as a matter of fact," and "if the truth be known," which we use every day, but which, in this context and by the frequency of their appearance, signal the importance of these notions not only in *Burning Water* but as an integral part of language itself (our language in any case, I should say, remembering Wiebe).

"Fact" and "fancy" also provide the basis for many explicit—though, like the "explanations" in the Prologue, not particularly enlightening—discussions of the value of fiction and the imagination. The first chapter is largely an exercise in distinguishing fact from vision, perception from conventional beliefs. The first Indian believes that he will see what is real by comparing what he sees to the stories he has heard (14), the second thinks that facts are there, independent of stories, and that one needs to look closely to find them (15). The importance of fact as a basis for the imagination is "explained" several times after that—for instance, in Vancouver's response to the accusation that he is too unimaginative:

> You speak of [the imagination] as if it were the opposite of facts, as if it were perhaps the enemy of facts. That is not true in the least, my two young friends. The imagination depends upon facts, it feeds on them in order to produce beauty or invention, or discovery. . . . The true enemy of the imagination is laziness, habit, leisure. The enemy of imagination is the idleness that provides fancy. (155)

This corresponds to the writer's meditation on the imagination's difficulty "to find footing where the fancy has sent it sailing" (26), and to his own voyages in search of facts.

Although this suggests a certain valorization of imagination over fancy, Bowering does his best to emphasize the flexibility and undecidability of these concepts, and of the related notion of "truth," of which he says,

> of course we are in a position to know it, or whatever purchase one makes on the truth in a work of imagination, if that is what we are engaged in, that being the entire issue we test here. (84)

And indeed, the book is certainly testing readers' belief in their ability to recognize "reality." Bowering's use of 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.

The generally accepted boundaries between reality and fiction, between facts and fancy, are also questioned. In chapter 30, Bowering has Vancouver and his men, ships and all, fly over the Rocky Mountains and the prairies, to land in Hudson's Bay:

they have found the magic North-west Passage. Readers, however, will probably conclude that we have read about a "flight of fancy." This conclusion is not a logical result of any inherent deficiencies in the story or in its language, but of a comparison between the image created by that language and the image readers have of their own world—and even that image will, to a certain degree, be the product of linguistic and cultural conventions rather than of reality itself. In the same way, readers will consider the last chapter to be pure "fiction" only if they have accepted from other, more conventional and more reliable, but necessarily textual, sources that Vancouver died in 1798, in his home near London, and not, as *Burning Water* suggests, in 1796, murdered by his on-board scientist Menzies.[8]

The many references to folly further complicate the relationship between reality, fiction and truth. Vancouver's ship is said to have left England on April 1, All Fools' Day, and is called by the writer "a ship of fools . . . set upon the purpose of knowledge" (81). It is suggested all through the novel that Vancouver's search for facts was "a fool's errand" (80), perhaps an inhuman approach to life, characterized by a desire to surpass all of the limits which others seemed to have reached. Vancouver, the "lover of facts" (196), is an ambiguous hero from this point of view: "no one had the superstitious or logical drive to be as thorough as he was" (153). Although fancy, to a certain extent, can be considered folly because it is not rooted in reality, the obsession with pure fact is folly of another kind.

At stake, then, is the stability, and even the possibility, of the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, and the decidability of (objective) truth. Although in many ways this preoccupation is similar to Wiebe's concern in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, the differences in focus and emphasis between these two novels point to rather dissimilar underlying views of history and of historical fiction.

III

It is clear that both Bowering and Wiebe have researched a certain amount of historiographical material on the subjects of their novels. The acknowledgements in *Burning Water* (7), the quotations, and some of the descriptions of historical figures and events, all indicate this (in spite of the sometimes disrespectful

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[8] W. Kaye Lamb, "Vancouver, George," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, IV; B. Anderson, *The Life and Voyage of Captain George Vancouver, Surveyor of the Sea* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1966) 226.

use that Bowering makes of the "facts"), as do the precision of the dates and the place names, and the incorporation of "authentic" documents in *The Temptations of Big Bear.* As a matter of fact, Rudy Wiebe wrote the biography of Big Bear for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*,[9] supposedly on the basis of his knowledge of the historical evidence rather than on his talent as a novelist. In a somewhat different vein, in 1970 Bowering published a collection of poems entitled *George Vancouver.*[10]

It is just as clear, however, that these two novels do not show the same degree of respect for the conventionally accepted facts. In "On the Trail of Big Bear," Wiebe expresses both the inevitability and the danger of facts as a basis for fiction when he says that,

> unless they are very carefully handled, facts are the invariable tyrants of story. They are as inhibiting as fences and railroads, whereas the story teller would prefer, like Big Bear, 'to walk where his feet can walk.'[11]

This view of facts is echoed in the short preface to the first edition of *The Temptations of Big Bear*, which, perhaps not surprisingly, was not reprinted in the subsequent editions:

> No name of any person, place or thing, insofar as names are still discoverable, in this novel has been invented. Despite that, and despite the historicity of dates and events, all characters in this meditation upon the past are the products of a particular imagination; their resemblance and relation, therefore, to living or once living persons must be resisted."[12]

If no names, dates, or events are invented—not by Wiebe, in any case—this leaves only the interpretation of historically accepted evidence, as well as the sketching in of details (which is, in fact, another aspect of interpretation), as the domain of the "particular imagination" that Wiebe refers to. It seems, then, that for Wiebe the ideal (or perhaps, the only) domain of the storyteller—more precisely, the teller of historical fiction—is that of "possibility." If one compares his biography of Big Bear in the *Dictionary of*

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[9] Rudy Wiebe, "Mistahimaskwa," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, XI.

[10] George Bowering, *George Vancouver: A Discovery Poem* (Toronto: Weed/Flower P, 1970)

[11] Rudy Wiebe, "On the Trail of Big Bear," *A Voice in the Land* ed. W.J. Keith (Edmonton: NeWest P, 1981) 132-33.

[12] As quoted by W.J. Keith in *Epic Fiction* (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 1981) 134.

Canadian Biography with the "reality" which Wiebe creates in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, it becomes clear what this means in practice. Mostly, it means making the past more "real" by adding details of daily life and by evoking events which, given the historical evidence, may have happened even if they cannot be documented or otherwise proven. In accordance with White's notion of the "moral meaning" of narrative, then, although *The Temptations of Big Bear* respects the facts found by Wiebe, in narrating them he inevitably shows us a "possible" interpretation of those facts, an interpretation that is consistent with them.

Bowering, too, implicitly recommends that the facts be handled carefully, but his technique bears witness to a very different perspective on the relation between facts and fiction. His portrait of Vancouver is, above all, a warning against an overvalorization of facts and "absolute" truth—in spite of Vancouver's defence of the imagination quoted above. Vancouver's loneliness is a direct result of his belief that he will find the ultimate truth by "watching to see what limits of endurance and bravery and service the older men pushed themselves to, and stepping beyond them" (59). And then, "After learning and seeing the ways of performing better than anyone else, came the chance of touching limits. His boats and his eyes would move to the limits and measure them until there were none remaining unencountered" (100-01). His "absolute eye and heart" (125) do not allow him much human communication; as Menzies points out, Vancouver can talk to the natives and, in a way, control them by his command of the language, but he cannot communicate with them in any true sense (150). He dislikes Menzies because the latter "could look at the outside of his soul's vessel and make an estimation of the events transpiring inside" (73). Only with Quadra (who can also "read" him) can he let go of his obsession with the absolute and with factual reality, and experience more human values: "James Cook had showed him how to behave and when to act. Quadra was teaching him to be" (73). When Quadra leaves, Vancouver becomes "the central figure in his own faith" (180), his search for the absolute having become, by then, a result, rather than a cause, of his loneliness. One of his sailors puts it thus: "I know that Vancouver aches for perfection out of loneliness. He is unbending" (227). The early reference to Rilke's poem (71) referred to early on predicts his inescapable destiny: "These people are all crazy, thought Vancouver. He turned and said farewell to something but he was too worn out to imagine what it was" (211). His refusal to look beyond facts, to step out of his rigid frame of mind and discover what else the world has to offer, has finally made him lose any chance of real contact and human happiness. That Vancouver's "greatest discovery" (74),

his relationship with Quadra, was never recorded in his log—that is, it was never turned into fact—seems, for Bowering, symptomatic.

Another aspect of "factual reality" is highlighted in *Burning Water* in the episode in which Vancouver realizes that the Sandwich Islands may, in fact, 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 acceptable fact in my view of history. (202)

Readers are forced to recognize that even "facts" can be manipulated in the interests of ideology and, thus, that even "facts," to a certain extent, are accepted rather than proven, belonging to the realm of convention rather than of reality.

For Bowering, the main problem with facts is their overvalorization: for Wiebe, the problem actually concerns, not the facts themselves, but their interpretation and narration. From these two attitudes stem the two, at once very different and yet similar, approaches to historical fiction which underly *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *Burning Water.*

One of the main "points" of *The Temptations of Big Bear*, as suggested above, is the idea that, although facts do exist and events have happened, the ways these are seen and the stories that are told about them can (and do) vary from speaker to speaker. Accordingly, Wiebe's strategy of telling very many stories from different perspectives may be considered an attempt to approach the whole truth about these events more closely than would be possible when telling only one story. This in turn suggests that Wiebe believes in the ultimate possibility of truth and of knowledge of the past—although we may never reach it, since there are always more stories to be told. From this point of view, the role of historical fiction would be to tell those untold stories, to provide glimpses of the "other side" of already narrated events, to recreate possible perspectives and events, in order to come to a fuller comprehension of the truth. For Wiebe,

> The stories we tell of our past are by no means merely words: they are meaning and life to us as people, as a particular people; the stories are there, and if we do not know of them we are sim-

> ply, like animals, memory ignorant, and the less are we people.[13]

Like Wiebe, 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, as he makes clear in the Prologue. But, unlike *The Temptations of Big Bear*, *Burning Water* can hardly be seen as an effort to approach the truth, ultimate and absolute, about its central character. Rather, it questions the possibility of such knowledge of the past, and it claims another kind of truth for this "subjective," personal, incomplete story—since that is the only kind of story that can be told. Part of the "truth" of this story, then, consists in the awareness, on the part of both the writer and the reader, of its textuality and fictionality. In other words, while *The Temptations of Big Bear* expresses the impossibility of one "true" story, *Burning Water* suggests that no story can be objectively and absolutely "true."

Bowering's essays on post-modernist literature in *The Mask in Place*,[14] many of which consist of an agressive indictment of realist literature and the paradoxical principles which it relies on, provide some insight into this view of fiction. The realist author, in Bowering's words, "writes a book & then tries to make the reader agree that he is not reading a book" (20). Moreover, the reader is asked to accept that real life also consists of plots with marked beginnings and ends, heroes and villains, and logical explanations for everyone's behaviour. By force of habit, readers have learned to see as realistic that fiction which is told according to the conventions of realism. As a result, realism has become a paradoxical but self-perpetuating system, deriving its legitimacy from satisfying readers' expectations which, of course, it has created. Bowering, therefore, sees the "unlearning" of these expectations, by the writer, and even more by the reader, as one of the most important "goals" of post-modern fiction. For Bowering, as for post-modern "metafiction" writers in general, this means reinstating fiction as an overtly written art: instead of being a transparent "window on the world," fiction can be compared to "stained glass windows or cut-glass windows that divert light waves & restructure the world outside."[15]

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[13] Rudy Wiebe, "On the Trail of Big Bear," *A Voice in the Land* 134.

[14] *The Mask in Place. Essays on Fiction in North America* (Winnipeg: Turnstone P, 1982).

[15] *The Mask in Place* 25.

The constant reminders in *Burning Water* of its textuality and fictionality stress the idea that the things told here are "happening" now, namely as they are created by the author and read by the reader—unlike Wiebe's way of telling which suggests that the events may have happened as they are described in *The Temptations of Big Bear.* In Bowering's words, "writing is continuous invention . . . Places and characters don't seem like the real—they are what they are, beings fashioned of words."[16]

Accordingly, the conventional unities of time and character development are shattered, the story fragmented, for a double reason: not only because, as White says, "real events do not offer themselves as stories,"[17] but also because the fiction created by Bowering has its own logic which does not have to be of the same kind that we (as "realist" readers) are used to. In other words, the writer refuses to provide readers with any guidance other than their own, and the text's, progress, forcing us to recognize that we are reading a book, not witnessing a reality, and leaving us the task of reorganizing the fragments into a (for us) coherent unit. Consequently, as Bowering says, "If you are to identify with anyone it is likely to be the author."[18]

The emphasis on the writer's, rather than the characters', reality is evident not only in the juxtaposition of the two "strands" of the novel, but also in other instances as well. One example is provided by the different meetings between Vancouver and Quadra. The first time readers "meet" Quadra is in chapter 4, but it is quite obvious that Vancouver knows him well by then. This means that since the arrival of Vancouver's ships at Nootka in 1792, as it is told in chapter 1, there have been several meetings which readers have "missed." Readers witness their first meeting in chaper 36—although it is referred to in chapter 13—but by that time readers know about their love affair, and indeed, the author does not pretend that this is the first time readers have met Quadra. Similarly, the fact that chapter 52 is missing can be interpreted as an example of the author's overt manipulation of and final control over the story.

Burning Water, then, lacks "closure" in the sense of a unified, complete universe, not only because the author's explicit presence provides openings into another world, but also because of the fragmentation which, like Wiebe's use of many sto-

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[16] *The Mask in Place* 116.

[17] "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 8.

[18] Bowering, *The Mask in Place* 30.

ries and storytellers, indicates unwillingness to pretend to completeness. Wiebe's realism in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, while representing a new approach to realist fiction, is far removed, however, from this reappraisal of literature as primarily a non-mimetic art, a creation rather than a re-creation of "reality." While Wiebe claims to approach a certain kind of "objective" truth with the many stories of *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Bowering in *Burning Water* explicitly rejects that kind of truth in favour of a very personal story with a very "personal" truth, a product not so much of "a particular imagination" as of "my" (Bowering's) imagination and specific cultural context.

These two perceptions of "truth" are also illustrated by the different ways in which the two novels try to "deflate" stereotypes as another means of foregrounding the conventional nature of many of our perceptions.

In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, stereotypical portrayals of the Cree Indians and their lifestyle, and of the events surrounding the signing of the Indian treaties, are "demystified" by our increased knowledge (be it "real" or fictional) of their context—thanks to, among other things, the care with which Wiebe provides everyday details. In *Burning Water*, on the other hand, stereotypes are the subject of a parodic re-evaluation, which makes readers realize that what they hold to be true, or realistic, is very often part of a set of conventions which literature (and historiography) has engraved in our thought system.

Of the Indians, for example, it is explained that

> A lot of people think that Indians are just naturally patient, but that's not true. Before the white "settlers" arrived there were lots of impatient Indians. It's only in the last two hundred years that Indians have been looking patient whenever there were any white men around. (92)

Nor, says Bowering, were they as keen on preparatory ceremonies as white literature has always suggested. During a meeting between Vancouver and the Indian chief Cheslakees, one Indian wonders what Vancouver wants:

> "They haven't said yet," said the second Indian. "So far they have just been going through their elaborate greetings and ceremonial preparations. We have learned not to rush them directly into business or they would feel insulted." (140)

Another stereotypical idea which this text questions is sailors' superstition about albatrosses—especially dead ones. Dr. Menzies, the scientist aboard Vancouver's ship, shoots an albatross in open sea, and submits the dead bird to a thorough examination. The reader, meanwhile, is told: "In case anyone was wondering: yes, this happened on the same day that the English poet was composing his Christian ballad" (87). This reference to Coleridge[19] is picked up later in the book, to explain that the sailors

> didn't give two hoots about an albatross. Unless there was a literary person about. If there was a literary person about, they let on about how the great spread albatross was the source of the supernatural calm, and the dead albatross was a source of the supernatural dread. (162)

As in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, then, we are forced to replace our belief in the truthfulness of traditional perceptions—especially our perceptions of the past—with an awareness of their conventionality. And the fact that, unlike *The Temptations of Big Bear*, *Burning Water*'s questioning of other fictional texts also emphasizes its own fictionality should not obscure this fundamental similarity between the two novels; in spite of their different strategies, both *Burning Water* and *The Temptations of Big Bear* are very much concerned with the "conventionalization" of our views of the past and, by extension, of the present as well.

Also, indicative of this common concern is the overt thematization, in both novels, of the power of language to influence our perceptions of reality through the incorporation of culturally determined "common sense." For Big Bear, "A word is power, it comes from nothing into meaning and a Person takes his name with him when he dies" (398). When an Indian dies, his name, the words that identify him and, in a sense, give him reality, die with him. Similarly, when Big Bear loses his authority, and thereby part of his personality, he expresses this loss by saying, "they have thrown away my name" (267). The power of words, then, is often a positive power, as Big Bear's plea for "one voice" (104), his belief that "only words can stop" the terrible things he has seen in his visions (207), and his confidence in the power of his own words indicate also. But at the same time, this confidence engenders a deep distrust of words that are capable of destroying or distorting his words. After the council with Sitting

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[19] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," originally published in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798.

Bull and Crowfoot he warns them: "Don't let any man poison my words" (207).

Not surprisingly, Big Bear is especially wary of "White" words—not only because, as he tells Kingbird, "it is always dangerous to talk like Whites. Soon one might begin thinking like them" (125), but also because they are so often said without any regard for the Indian words spoken on the same matters. Of the police, for example, he complains that "our word to them is as the wind" (143). Superintendant Crozier is obviously aware of this; after Big Bear's call for a great Indian council, he realizes that, as he puts it, "Indian talk . . . may not forever be cheap" (176).

Written White words are even more of a threat to Big Bear, since these are explicitly presented as unchangeable; this means that Big Bear's words have no effect whatsoever on them, as he discovers when he meets Morris: "I and my people have not heard what the treaty says and already nothing of it can be changed" (31). So that later, in the council with Crowfoot and Sitting Bull, he finally asks, "Why talk to someone just carrying more paper around?" (104). The same "negative" power—negative because it makes new words, and new insights, useless—applies to the law, which nobody can change either:

> As if the Grandmother's law were so impartial and serene above any mere human question or resistance that the very pronouncement of it by one of her polished, scarlet-coated officers was power sufficient for any arrest, in any situation (151).

The sad result of this all-powerful written word, for Big Bear, can be seen in the last chapter, where the law cannot be changed "just" to take into account his different norms and values.

In *Burning Water*, the parodies of accepted "stories" are complemented by several direct references to the power of discourse. For example, Menzies accuses Vancouver of learning to speak the natives' language, not to communicate with them but to control them (150). The pun-like allusion to Benjamin Whorf in chapter 32 (143) emphasizes again Bowering's recognition that language influences culture as well as being influenced by it,[16]

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[16] Cf. the article on Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1961 ed.: "Following some ideas first clearly stated by Edward Sapir, he formulated what came to be known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: that every language is a systematic presentation or analysis of reality as seen by its speakers, that this reality differs from every other such system, that human beings necessarily see reality only through their particular linguistic system and that the linguistic system and the reality the system represents mutually affect and interpenetrate each other."

and that, consequently, there can be no equation of "discourse" and "truth"—an equation disproven also by Vancouver's assessment of the "ownership" of the Sandwich Islands mentioned above.

Such overt references, as well as the general narrative structures of these two novels, indicate the authors' awareness that the power of discourse lies in its capacity to be accepted as objective, as "true." Their insistence that all stories are determined to a considerable extent by the cultural context in which they are created and told can, then, be seen as an attempt to strip discourse—in particular, historical discourse—of this power.

The role of fiction for both Wiebe and Bowering, it might be argued, appears to be a general, constant, renewal of our perceptions, so that they will not be so "conventionalized" as to prevent new insights. By stressing the idea that every story told, every interpretation of reality, is inevitably a product of historical and cultural conditions rather than of objective, disinterested observation and knowledge, both Bowering and Wiebe leave the door open for other stories from other perspectives, and, in doing so explicitly, they even manage to open some of the doors which have already been closed by the acceptance of certain stories as unquestionably true. In other words, by situating their words (by which I mean, in Wiebe's case, those of his characters) in history, they temper the power of all words to appear objective. At the same time, they prevent readers' unmediated acceptance of their stories, and teach them to see not only that what they are reading is a story, not reality itself, but also that their own accepted views of reality rely to a very large degree on convention rather than on open-minded perception.

IV

Wiebe's search for the truth and Bowering's cynicism toward any but the most personal truth are both based on a rejection of the idea that stories can be objective. Accordingly, both *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *Burning Water* insist on situating their stories in history, and on demanding of the reader a critical awareness of this "historicity." Rather than guaranteeing the reader's easy comprehension by relying on conventional views and techniques, both of these novels prevent the kind of communication that cannot transcend the culturally determined set of conventions called "common sense" by those who share it. "Communication," in these novels, encompasses the comprehension not only of the stories themselves but of their historical and cultural conditions.

In this way, then, *Burning Water* and *The Temptations of Big Bear* provoke recognition of narrative as giving "moral" as well as cognitive meaning to reality, which White sees as a necessary component of historical narrative especially. Paradoxically, however, the strategies used by Wiebe and Bowering to make the reader aware of the conventions underlying narrative and the interpretations of reality it presents, undermine what White calls "the value of narrativity," its capacity to communicate. In *Burning Water*, the rejection of conventional "realist" techniques and stereotypes, the author's explicitly personal and fictional interpretation, the lack of a clear story line, all make communication with the reader a lot less "automatic" than in traditional literature; a similar result is produced by the many unfinished, overlapping and often contradictory stories, and the confusion caused by an all too intensive nineteenth-century Indian perspective in *The Temptations of Big Bear.* However, this paradox is implicitly present in White's theory as well, and it seems unavoidable; the awareness of the historical context of storytellers comes only at the risk of a less narrow "common sense."

Whereas the historian's role is, first and foremost, to explain the past, to make it understandable in terms of today's norms and values, fiction can create meaningful "realities" that people may never perceive otherwise, and even bring about changes in our conventional attitudes toward the world. The historical fiction of *The Temptations of Big Bear and* and *Burning Water* not only brings the past to life, but it succeeds in changing our interpretation of it. By telling an "other side" of Canadian history, one that has not found its way into the accepted world view of White historiography (nor, consequently, into that of its readers), Wiebe achieves more or less the same effect as does Bowering by parodying the conventions of historical and realist fiction. Both provoke the reader's awareness of the omnipresence of historical and cultural conditions and of the need to look beyond the conventionalized perceptions of reality—in "metaphorical," but perhaps more appropriate terms—beyond the apparent objectivity, representativity, and unchangeability of stories.

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