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ROMANCE AS A REMEDY FOR HISTORY: ROBERT McLIAM WILSON'S *EUREKA STREET*

A b s t r a c t. The article analyses the 1996 novel *Eureka Street* by the Northern Irish writer Robert McLiam Wilson as an example of historical novel discussed in the context of its evolution influenced by the developments in the theory of historiography. Set in the 1990's Belfast, the novel is both a panorama of the Northern Irish society divided religiously and politically, and a satire on Northern Irish reality and politics. Most importantly, however, it is a romance, which constitutes the generic dominant of the novel and which on the one hand locates it in the venerable tradition of historical romance *à la* Walter Scott, and on the other introduces essential modifications. The most important of them is the changed concept of history, whose elevated status of an explicatory, unified metanarrative is substituted with several micro-histories; important, too is metafiction which exposes the inevitable constructedness of any historical narrative, both academic and fictional; and the shift of accents from history to romance and love, both presented as a remedy for the traumatic past. Discussing various concepts of the sublime, the essay argues that Wilson's novel defines it in a different way: the sublime of history perceived as chaos and terror is substituted in the novel with the sublime of love perceived as order and beauty, thus providing hope for the overcoming of the past, its religious and political divisions, and hate.

HISTORY AND ROMANCE

The last decades of the previous century were marked by spectacular developments in reflections on the nature and strategies of historiography. The debates of historians concerned the status of history and its documents, the processes of production and interpretation of history and the nature of historical narrative. Most of them led to profound scepticism about history, historiography, and their methods, suggesting that they should be treated as an art rather than a science, and that history itself, deprived of its capital letter, is merely one of several human

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narratives. Yet simultanously, history, however understood, continued to be one of the indispensable reference points of contemporary culture, both necessary and impossible to grasp, essential, yet elusive. Thus analysed, it can be described, after Elias (xviii), as the Lyotardian sublime: that which does not allow itself to be made present, and can only be approximated or alluded to (LYOTARD 82). It becomes an object of desire that expresses human craving for stability, order and coherence.

The changing status of history and the studies carried out in historiography have had enormous significance for fiction. History has traditionally been one of its important subjects; the historical novel, in its different variants, is one of the most important kinds of literature. The paradoxical obsession with history demonstrated by seemingly ahistorical postmodernism has been emphasised on a number of occasions (HUTCHEON 70, ELIAS xvii, MALCOLM 13). In the 1980s this obsession was said "to assume near epidemic proportions" (BRADBURY 404). Therefore, the constantly modified status and understanding of history itself had to lead to a modification of the novelistic conventions used to represent it and to different shapes of contemporary 'fictions of history.' Fictional strategies adopted by contemporary novels to render the changing concept of history and its understanding range from historiographic metafiction, through historical fabulation to metahistorical romance, to name but a few of the best-known 'species' of contemporary historical novels. All of them, in various ways, express the idea of the impossibility of grasping the historical real and suggest different literary solutions to compensate for this.

One of the most characteristic of these strategies is the use of romance, widespread in contemporary historical novels. The frequency with which its various forms are employed might be considered yet another paradoxical feature of contemporary fiction. Seemingly critical of the traditional historical novel, perceived as inadequate and old-fashioned in the light of contemporary historiography, contemporary historical fiction does nevertheless use one of its cardinal forms. The novels of Walter Scott, usually considered the founding texts of the historical novel as a genre, are classified as historical romances and their duality, the striking combination on the one hand of fantasy, and historical veracity on the other, is emphasised by virtually every study of Scott. Nor does the affinity between historical novel and romance stop with Scott: Northrop Frye claims that "the general principle [is] that most 'historical novels' are romances" (FRYE 307). Affinities between the seemingly contradictory forms, i.e. the romance and the historical narrative, can be found in their plot structure (a quest), protagonist (a hero), the vision of life as causal and chronological, and the final closure which

both forms attempt to achieve, be it a happy marriage or a satisfactory explanation. Leslie Rabine observes that "the traditional romantic quest narrative, which puts at its centre the development of a single, individual hero, and which rests on strongly end-oriented, rationally ordered, monolinear chains of cause and effect, provides the conceptual form in which history is thought to happen" (RABINE 3). Thus, the connection of romance and history is as old as the historical novel itself; and it is hardly revolutionary to claim that in this respect the contemporary novel brings something radically new. Yet despite this similarity, there are important differences in the definition of the romance as a fictional convention, the function it performs in contemporary historical novels, and the understanding of the concept of history itself. What we seem to be witnessing in the case of historical fiction, and what this paper is going to argue for Robert McLiam Wilson's novel *Eureka Street*, is a significant shift from history to romance, with the former treated as too elusive or too traumatic to explore, and the latter perceived as a refuge from or remedy for history.

There are numerous reasons for the traditional historical novel to be perceived as an inadequate form for contemporary historical fiction. In the era of post-Whitean historiography, its implicit assumptions are exposed as false beliefs rather than objective criteria. As Amy J. Elias suggests, Scott's historical romances posit certain assumptions about history which can be briefly summarised as belief in the ontology of history and the possibility of its assessment by a neutral human observer; conviction of its value; the linear, chronological shape of history and progress as its motivation (cf. ELIAS 12). These underlying assumptions are in keeping with the post-Enlightenment historiography which suggested a similar concept of history; for both late twentieth-century historiographers and novelists they seem at least debatable. History is construed as a narrative, inescapably subjective, its value psychological rather than cognitive, and the notions of linearity and progress are seen as human constructs. The traditional conventions of the historical novel, then, seem too conventionalised and automatised to be of value.

Yet, apart from these assumptions, Scott's novels contained another, seemingly contradictory, ingredient, namely the romance. Again, it is hardly original to observe that his novels, consisting of incongruous elements, are composite in nature. On the one hand, there are elements of historical fiction with the emphasis laid on realism of presentation, conflict as the main theme of the plot, and historical and plausible characters. On the other hand, the romance introduces larger than life figures, plots based on quests, love and adventure, and a problematic attitude towards reality. The last feature is probably the most characteristic of the romance, irrespective of its variant. As Heidi Hansson observes, in romances

either "too simplified a view of reality is taken, as in the popular romances, or . . . the work is predominantly unrealistic, as in the gothic romances, or . . . it deals with the extraordinary, as in chivalric romance" (HANSSON 12). Characterisation and the introduction of stylised, larger than life characters are singled out by Northrop Frye as the essential defining feature of the romance (FRYE 302). Finally, the tension between the ideal and the actual is also given as one of its distinguishing traits. Barron observes that romances "represent life as it is *and* as it might be, as imperfect reality *and* imagined ideal in one" (BARRON 6, original emphasis). Thus, the very convention of historical romance, even in Walter Scott's time, is self-contradictory. It seems that numerous contemporary historical novels thrive on the paradox inherent in the very form; that they draw on the 'romance' part of the historical novel, significantly problematising the historical component.

Understood as a literary genre, romance is one of the most elusive and troublesome categories, differently defined depending on an epoch or even a particular literary work. Diane Elam observes that it "always remains an uncertainty: each text must in some way redefine what it means by 'romance' " (ELAM 7). Simplifying its history and numerous variants, however, we may distinguish two basic understandings of the term. One, derived from the ancient Alexander-romances and medieval quest narratives, defines it as a story of adventure, emphasising the elements of the fantastic and the freedom it offers to the author (these features are prominent in the classical definitions of romance by Clara Reeve or Nathaniel Hawthorne). However, as Susan Strehle and Mary Paniccia Carden observe, "romance of the mysterious, masculine quest-adventure type remains popular to this day, appearing in the Prince Valiant comic strip, the Star Trek television series and movies, and the Harry Potter books. But none of these forms, or any other man's adventure, are thought of now as 'romance' " (STREHLE and CARDEN xiv). With time, the romance has gradually been feminised and domesticated, and the contemporary understanding of the term, as the authors emphasise, substitutes the masculine quest with the feminine searching for love, reducing the supernatural and promoting the emotional component. As a result, Strehle and Carden claim, "romance now refers to the narrative of falling in love, with all of the obstacles, hesitations, failures, and delays that heighten tension and make the eventual consummation of love relationship triumphant" (STREHLE and CARDEN xiv). Generic considerations of the nature of romance are of interest here as one of the important shifts in the shape of the historical romance has to do also with the changing understanding of the romance itself: in numerous contemporary historical romances it is the latter definition of the genre, i.e. the popular feminine

romance, that seems to be employed rather than its older, chivalric variant. Thus, the shift from history to romance is often accompanied by the shift from an adventure story to love story.

This paper argues that the shift from history to romance, a characteristic feature of recent historical novels, has two basic functions. Firstly, it provides a remedy for the otherwise unbearable historical real, and thus serves as a refuge from the trauma of recent history. Secondly, it furnishes the narrative with a generic form which allows it to avoid the shortcomings of traditional historical fiction. Finally, the shift from the chaos and horror of history to the order and safety of romance, both in terms of politics and poetics, may be connected to the changing understanding of the concepts of historical sublime. A good illustration of the above theses is the latest novel by Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street*.

LOVE IN THE TIME OF THE TROUBLES

Set in 1994 in Belfast, the novel's background is the Northern Irish 'Troubles', referred to both in the novel's plot, the spatio-temporal setting and the narratorial comments. The text describes such perennial signs of war as police patrols and checkpoints, helicopters over the streets, graffiti on the walls, and a city divided into sectarian districts, the Catholic West Belfast and the more prosperous Protestant parts. Nor is recent history reduced to mere setting: the conflict is reflected in the personal relationships between characters, in the satirical portrayal of actually existing figures (e.g. a thinly disguised Gerry Adams or a Seamus Heaney), and in the comic characterisation of both Catholic and Protestant fundamentalists. More importantly still, one of the most powerful episodes in the novel is the meticulous, almost minute-by-minute description of a bomb explosion in a sandwich shop, which kills and wounds a number of characters. After the meticulous presentation of the live stories and the kinds of fatal injuries inflicted on protagonists the narrator thus summarises the scale of the carnage:

> So, thus, in short, an intricate, say some, mix of history, politics, circumstance and ordnance resulted in the detonation of a one-hundred-pound bomb in the enclosed space of the front part of a small sandwich shop measuring twenty-two feet by twelve. The confined space and the size of the device created a blast of such magnitude that much of the second floor of the front part of the building collapsed into it and out onto the street. There were fourteen people in the sandwich bar. There were five people in the beauty parlour upstairs when it collapsed and twelve on the street in the immediate vicinity of the flying shrapnel and collapsing beauty parlour. Thirty-one people in all,

> of whom seventeen stopped existing then or later and of whom eleven were so seriously injured as to lose a limb or an organ. (225)

The detailed, matter-of-fact listing of factual circumstances leaves no doubt as to the importance of the Troubles: they are no mere background to the fictional protagonists' adventures; the intervention of history into the everyday is presented as forceful and lethal.

Yet, despite all the above mentioned elements, politics and recent history paradoxically do not seem to be the main theme of the novel. None of its main protagonists is wounded, killed or immediately affected by the civil war. On the contrary, the narrator goes to some lengths to depict the city as actually calm and almost pastoral; the descriptions of Poetry Street and the well-to-do and peaceful "leafy Belfast" contradict the stereotypical image of Belfast as a war zone. Moreover, the lyrical convention employed to describe the city, widely used throughout the novel and especially visible in the tenth, central chapter, which is a love song to Belfast, soften the sharp political edge of the text. The chapter pays a tribute to the city which, normal and banal, is nevertheless unusual and special, not because of its 'Troubles' or war, but because of the ordinary beauty of its inhabitants. The past and the present overlap in it like geological layers, of which the recent war is but an episode, violent yet hardly defining. The narrator thus describes the everyday wonder of Belfast:

> But at night, in so many ways, complex and simple, the city is a proof of God. This place often feels like the belly of the universe. It is a place much filmed but little seen. Each street, Hope, Chapel, Chichester and Chief, is busy with the moving marks of the dead thousands who have stepped their lengths. They have their vivid smell on the pavements, bricks, doorways and in the garden. In this city, the natives live in a broken world – broken but beautiful. ... The merest hour of the merest of Belfast's citizens would be impossible to render in all its grandeur and all its beauty. (215-216)

Juxtaposing the past with the present, the narrator openly objects to the reducing of Belfast to just the city of the Troubles, seemingly familiar and yet profoundly unknown. In keeping with this criticism, the novel focuses on the little suspected everyday enchantment of Belfast, presented as a peaceful provincial city of ordinary people rather than a romanticised battlefield made world-famous by infotainment media. The recent history is merely one of its aspects, and irritating rather than glorious at that.

In a similar way, the elements of the picaresque, clearly visible in the subplot of Chuckie Lurgan, introduce comic tones which weaken the grave effects generated by the elements of the historical/political novel. The Chuckie's subplot

occupies almost half of the novel and seems to ignore the inconvenience of the civil war: the protagonist is determined to pursue happiness, in his case defined as money and sex, and his hilarious ideas and adventures counterbalance the tensions of the political aspects of the novel. Comic characterisation, humorous events, and the happy ending of this subplot overshadow the background of sectarian divisions (Chuckie is a sole Protestant among his Catholic friends) or political violence (Chuckie's mother is a much-affected witness of the bomb explosion). In his case, even such dire circumstances and problems can be resolved: fame-obsessed Protestant Chuckie has nevertheless a photo with the Pope; his traumatised mother becomes a happy lesbian as a result of the shock. The potentially tragic effects of the recent history are turned into comedy-like episodes, provoking laughter instead of terror.

In a similar way works the systematic use of satire, striking in the presentation of both historical and fictional figures, and the events from Irish history and politics. Satirical comments aim indiscriminately at both the 'true IRA' and Protestant thugs, at politicians and the police, at 'moral authorities' and common hooligans. The satirical vein seems to be directed not at a particular party or directly specified agencies, but rather against the war itself and all its supporters, regardless of their affiliation. All kinds of fundamentalists, Protestant or Catholic, Irish or English, are presented with similarly vehement attitude and caricature-like deformation. Writing about *Eureka Street*, Juan Elices observes that "this novel conforms to most of the parameters that characterise twentieth-century satire, specifically its lack of moralising objectives, which is basically what differentiates current satire from that of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries" (ELICES 85). This is a debatable observation in as much as the protest against violence and war can be perhaps interpreted as a moralising objective. What is uncontroversial, however, is that satire is not employed to criticise a particular political party or to take sides, but used as a tool to criticise the stupidity of recent history and the blindness of those involved in it. Thus, the use of satire in this novel is paradoxical: although very political in places, it serves as a device which, instead of involving the reader in politics and history, creates a distance and thus again shifts the accent from history and politics to other themes. The multiplicity of genres employed, despite their differences, emphasises their common strategy which seems to be to draw attention away from topicality and political fiction to focus on more universal themes.

Generically speaking, then, *Eureka Street* is a hybrid, with political and historical novel conventions being employed along with others, such as satire, picaresque and poetic fiction. In this complex generic mixture of a novel, however, it

is undoubtedly the romance that turns out to be the dominant. The romance convention is activated already in the very first sentence of the novel, when one of its protagonists, Jake Jackson, announces that "all stories are love stories" (1). In what follows, his thesis is fully confirmed. The plot construction of the novel is typical of the 'boy-meets-girl' kind of romance, starting with the protagonists' meeting, attraction, obstacles and conflicts, and ending with their reunion. John G. Cawelti observes that in this type of fiction, "[the] organizing action is the development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman" (CAWELTI 41); this novel, too focuses on the process of falling in love and its dynamics. The protagonists, Jake and Aoirghe, Chuckie and Max, as is typical of popular romances, are young, attractive, sensitive and lonely. They perceive love as an indispensable element of their lives and a union with a partner as a necessary step to make them complete. The plot development drives them from the initial infatuation (Chuckie and Max) or prejudice (Jake and Aoirghe), through a series of impediments (geographical, political and emotional), to the final inevitable realisation that it is love alone that can provide meaning to their otherwise incoherent existence. Predictably, then, the plot ends conventionally with one pair of lovers expecting a baby and about to marry, another happily united, and other characters successfully engaged in their own, newly established relationships. As the narrator ironically comments, "it [is] like the last scene of a Shakespearian comedy: everybody [is] getting married off apart from . . . minor comic characters" (354). The happy ending is preceded by the conventionally obligatory stage of testing and overcoming obstacles, before it might lead to the triumph of true love. Interestingly, given the novel saturated in politics and history, the obstacles which have to be overcome in order for the lovers to be united, are precisely the very same history and politics. Jake Jackson, a lapsed Catholic and apolitical anti-fundamentalist, is gradually attracted to Aoirghe, whose political commitment could not possibly be further removed from his: she is a fervent republican and a nationalist pro-IRA activist. Their repeated arguments deal with Irish politics and history, and the differences in their opinions have to be overcome for them to fully fall in love. This is exactly what happens in due time: the novel ends with a sudden 180-degree-change of Aoirghe's political attitude, the reconciliation of the protagonists, and a love scene. The closing paragraph makes this development complete:

> I hear a noise and I turn towards the bed. She has woken. She stirs slowly. She sits up and runs her hand through her disordered hair. She turns in my direction. She smiles and she looks at me with clear eyes. (396)

As Richard Kirkland comments, the last sentence of the novel "signals . . . the awakening, both literally and metaphorically, from false consciousness" (KIRKLAND 228), both political (i.e. from atavistic nationalism) and personal (i.e. from blindness to love). Thus, somewhat ironically for a political and historical novel, it is history and politics which have to give way for love to triumph. The ending of the novel, then, is not only a symbolic small-scale victory of ecumenism over sectarianism but also clearly shows the domination of the conventions of romance over those of the historical novel, picaresque or satire. The romance, defined as a quest for love and emotional fulfilment, governs the plot organisation of the novel marking its beginning, end and turning points; the romance conventions condition characterisation, presentation of the spatio-temporal setting and even the language; picaresque (which might be viewed historically as a derivative form of romance, an anti-romance) and satire are present in the subplots and do not dominate the generic character of the novel.[1]

Defined as a quest, even a quest for love, the romance is a story of adventures leading to the final triumph and spanning considerable space. Accordingly, *Eureka Street* is packed with dynamic action which moves from Belfast to America, involves a war, explosions, excursions, life-saving and incredible business deals; without the supernatural, the sheer concentration of events and of improbabilities resembles that found in more traditional romances. In keeping with the convention, this novel is based on action, which clearly organises the narrative; much as in traditional romances, described as the "literature of the predicate" rather than the subject (cf. BOHUSZEWICZ 82), it is the dynamically changing plot and unusual events that constitute the core of the novel. The conventions of romance, then, combined with the historical setting, events, figures and the reflection on history and its meaning and role, create the generic composition of the novel, which may be read as a contemporary example of the venerate tradition of historical romances.

Yet, analysing *Eureka Street* against the matrix of historical romance leads to several interesting observations. Seemingly, like Walter Scott's romances, the novel shares similar assumptions concerning history: it acknowledges its ontology, its "real" existence; it does not question or problematise the possibility of its representation; nor does it undermine its linearity by any formal experimentation with chronology or fragmentation. Both formally and ideologically it seems to be quite traditional. Yet, despite the similarities, the basic pattern of the historical

[1] For a detailed discussion of the connections between the romance and the picaresque see Fowler (237-241) and his analysis of the early picaresque as an anti-genre, particularly to pastoral romance.

novel is significantly modified in McLiam Wilson's story in at least two respects. For one thing, *Eureka Street* seems to question the very value of history: like politics, history is presented as something poisonous and destructive. As one of the narrators ironically observes, politics and, one may add, history is "antibiotic, i.e. an agent capable of killing or injuring living organisms" (96); it is an obstacle to be overcome rather than a cherished value. Similarly, it functions as a collective illusion, a myth constructed to divide. It is the subject of ceaseless manipulation, a hopeless play of competing versions, Catholic, Protestant and Northern Irish, each of them partial, subjective and instrumental in generating hatred. The narrator comments that "Belfast hatred . . . is a lumbering hatred that could survive comfortably on the memories of things that never existed in the first place" (164). The motivation of history, then, is visibly not progress but regress: it is used as a tool in atavistic tribal fights, preventing Belfast from coming to terms with the past and living for the future. The concept of history, then, underlying this novel, swerves from the path initialised by Scott: although its ontology is not profoundly questioned, it is its explanatory value and the optimism located in progress that are rejected as inadequate and dangerous.

Secondly, although the novel does not disrupt the chronology and linearity of the story, or introduce any alternative versions, by using a mixture of genres and several narrators to tell about Irish politics and history it departs from traditional historical romances which, though composite, did not extend their repertoire so far. This mixture is well motivated: it might testify to the complexity of the story of Belfast, which in itself is a mixture of religions and nationalities; such story cannot possibly be uniform. The hybridity of the city is thus reflected in the generic and narrative hybridity of the text. It is also, at the same time, a clear metafictional reference: in *Eureka Street*, Belfast is represented as a city of stories, "a Babel of prose" (216), a meta-narrative composed of innumerable different stories, both historical, political and private. The narrator thus describes this textuality of Belfast and its being a collective story as much as a physical entity:

> But most of all, cities are the meeting places of stories. The men and women there are narratives, endlessly complex and intriguing. The most humdrum of them constitutes a narrative that would defeat Tolstoy at his best and most voluminous. . . . And in the end, after generations and generations of the thousands and hundreds of thousands, the city itself begins to absorb narrative like a sponge, like paper absorbs ink. The past and the present is written here. (215-216)

The city is represented as a text, collectively created by the multitudes of narratives, each interpretable and in need of interpretation. Each history of Belfast, then, is on the one hand a meta-narrative project, as it has to combine and process

the innumerable micro-histories, but on the other such a project would be clearly totalising — it would transform plural histories into the singular History. Such project, as the quotation implies, would be presumptuous and arrogant, as it would homogenise heterogeneous experience and multiple stories, subordinating them to a single meta-narrative, always ideologically charged and inescapably serving the interests of some party. What the metafictional chapter suggests is the plurality of histories rather than its one unified vision; it postulates subjectivity and multiplicity of points of view. In contrast to the traditional historical novel, *Eureka Street* does not aim at objectivity or the coherence of vision, at synthesis or conclusion: the hybridity of Belfast as a multi-denominational and multi-racial city ties up with the hybridity of the generic make up of the novel, and the postulated plurality of historical narratives. Generic mixture, characteristic of the novel, not only emphasises this tendency but also shows that any narrative constructed about Belfast, or any other place or event, fictional or historical alike, is by very definition a story. Thus, although the novel does not introduce any overtly experimental forms, in its concept of history with its underlying assumptions, and in its contaminated, metafictional form, it comes probably closer to its postmodern, anti-foundationalist vision than to that of Walter Scott.

It seems that it is the other component of the genre of the historical romance, the romance, which is treated more favourably in *Eureka Street*: it is presented as a remedy for traumatic history and a haven from poisonous politics. Yet, the definition of the romance is significantly modified in the case of this novel. For the authors of traditional historical romances the attractiveness of this form lay in its relative freedom. Unconstrained by the requirements of realism, free from having to stick to the verifiable minutiae, it allowed the introduction of the marvellous, sometimes even supernatural. Romance thus understood was still closer to its medieval chivalric variant, i.e. the story of quest and adventure. In *Eureka Street* the romance means a love story: the plot construction, setting, characterisation and even language are closer to popular formula romances than to Walter Scott's novels. McLiam Wilson's novel is not a story of a quest, save a quest for love, and it does not introduce any marvellous, let alone fantastic elements. The protagonists are flesh and blood characters, none of them possessing any supernatural, or even unique, characteristics. The setting, plot, theme and the realistic convention all focus on love rather than adventure, and thus shift the balance from traditional to popular romance. It would be tempting to describe this novel, then, as a love story set in Northern Ireland, yet another "Love in the Time of the Troubles", with the romance, understood both as a theme and as a popular genre, clearly taking over from historical concerns, which are treated as mere back-

ground. Yet, since precisely this background and the concept of history represented in it are far from traditional, *Eureka Street* may be said to constitute an interesting example of a transition from a classical historical romance to a postmodernist historical romance, or, as Amy J. Elias defines it, to metahistorical romance (ELIAS 45).

FROM HISTORY TO ROMANCE

One of the reasons used to explain the shift from history to romance is the turbulent, horrifying history of the twentieth-century and the post-traumatic consciousness it produced (cf. ELIAS xxviii; MALCOLM 33-74). The escape from history, its problematisation, and the questioning of its explanatory powers may be attributed to the general distrust generated by all too real atrocities. Similarly, the genre of historical novel, with its traditional assumptions and form, no longer seems adequate to express this traumatised consciousness. Yet, it is interesting that the remedy for historical trauma should turn out to be the romance; and that popular romance as a genre should try to supersede historical realism. Several explanations might be offered here. On the one hand, the rejection of realism in favour of romance may be read as a postmodern gesture as romance offers the possibility of criticising realism together with the projects of modernity and the progress it usually expresses. On the other hand, romance offers the possibility of "working through" historical trauma, a constructive way of dealing with it, based on action and directed towards the future. John G. Cawelti, however, classifies popular romance as one of the formula fictions driven by fantasy rather than realism; he observes that "the moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties" (CAWELTI 41-41). Popular romance, then, has a clear compensatory function: its purpose is to make up for the shortcomings of reality, to present its "moral," i.e. just and idealised, version. In this sense, it is more attractive than historical realism, both psychologically and artistically.

The shift to popular romance is also an interesting generic choice. The privileging of the private over the public, the defining of the quest as the quest for love rather than national values, and radical criticism of any involvement with history are reflected in the very shape of the novel. In *Eureka Street* history, politics and their consequences are reduced to the background, so much so that even historical dates are not offered, with the foreground occupied by amorous relationships. The stress falls on romance at the expense of history, both as far as the

plot construction and characterisation are concerned. The psychological shift is accompanied by a generic one: the novel is clearly organised by the conventions of a popular romance. Therefore, the escape from history is realised not merely at the level of professed values: it is embodied in the formal structure of the work, which steers away from the historical novel and its traditional underlying assumptions about history. The turn away from history is paralleled by a turn away from the conventions of the historical novel, which is realised by shifting the balance between the elements of romance and historical realism. This direction is in keeping with the general tendencies of contemporary fiction, marked by discontent with realism, understood both as poetics and ideology. Romance as a genre, irrespective of its variant, is free from the shortcomings traditionally associated with it.

Finally, the shift from history to romance can be connected to the changing understanding of the historical sublime. Both history and love might be construed as unrepresentable objects of desire, craved for yet impossible to own, the secular sacred. Yet, as Amy J. Elias points out, the concept of the historical sublime is more complicated than this somewhat simplified definition suggests. She observes that

> it was Schiller who, early on, formulated a theory of the sublime imagination that correlated delight in the physical world to the attraction felt toward savagery, anarchy, and the confusion of the 'spectacle' of history. In contrast, Burke consistently linked historical process to the articulation and order of the beautiful (and thus could condemn the French Revolution as chaotic and monstrous). Burke's position won in the battle of history. The aesthetic supplantation of the sublime by the beautiful would later constitute a definition of the discipline of historical studies. (ELIAS 38)

The quotation implies the change in the theory of history and a different way of conceptualising its subject; focused initially on the "order of the beautiful," in recent years it came to be defined rather as "the order of chaos". Thus, it seems that Burke's interpretation of history as the order of the beautiful gave way in contemporary historiographical debates to that of Schiller, i.e. the anarchy and confusion. This observation does not refer merely to the atrocities of historical events in the last century; more interestingly, it shows that the very concept of history, construed as both unknowable and unrepresentable in discourse, is chaotic and terrifying. The beautiful sublime nature of history, located in its order, is being dislocated by contemporary historiography in favour of the sublime understood as anarchy and chaos. This shift may be perceived as terrifying, and a call for some preventive, if only fictional, measures.

What contemporary historical romances such as *Eureka Street* suggest is that confronted with the chaotic and monstrous sublime of history, it is love which can still preserve the beautiful, its order and meaning. Relegated from history, the beautiful sublime comes back as a romance which, in its popular formula, creates the illusion of stability, order and safety. It is love, then, rather than history that is believed to provide closure and guarantee meaning; it introduces stability, offers explanations and gives sense and direction to existence. In other words, it is able to satisfy all the desires that traumatic history has frustrated or failed to fulfil.

What one seems to be witnessing, then, is not merely a generic shift from the historical realistic novel to historical (popular) romance; more interestingly, *Eureka Street* illustrates the shift in the understanding of history and the shift in the locus of the sublime. Moving from the concept of history as progress to chaos, and then away from the chaos of history to the order of romance, McLiam Wilson's novel indicates the relocation of the sublime. Thus, the seemingly striking combination of the postmodernist concept of history, implying its chaotic and constructed nature, with the ordered optimism of popular romance, is only apparently a paradox: it might be interpreted as a signal of more profound changes in the understanding of the concept of the historical sublime and the desperate remedies taken by fiction to prevent the lapse into chaos.

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ROMANS JAKO SCHRONIENIE PRZED HISTORIĄ: *ULICA MARZYCIELI* ROBERTA McLIAMA WILSONA

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Autorka artykułu analizuje powieść współczesnego północnoirlandzkiego pisarza Roberta McLiama Wilsona pt. *Ulica marzycieli* w kontekście ewolucji gatunku powieści historycznej. Osadzona w Belfaście powieść jest zarówno panoramą podzielonego społeczeństwa Irlandii Północnej, jak i satyrą na północnoirlandzką rzeczywistość i obyczaje. Przede wszystkim jednak jest romansem, który stanowi gatunkową dominantę powieści, sytuując ją z jednej strony w tradycji romansu historycznego *à la* Walter Scott, z drugiej wprowadzając doń istotne modyfikacje. Najważniejsze z nich to odmienna koncepcja historii, podważająca jej rangę i eksplifikacyjne możliwości i zastępująca jedną metanarrację Historii wieloma mikrohistoriami; metafikcyjność tekstu, zwracająca uwagę na konstruowalność każdej narracji historycznej, tak powieściowej jak i akademickiej, oraz przesunięcie akcentu z historii i przygody na romans i miłość, które przedstawiane są jako schronienie przed traumą przeszłości. Przywołując różne koncepcje wzniosłości, autorka dowodzi, że w stosunku do tradycyjnej powieści historycznej Wilson definiuje ją odmiennie: wzniosłość historii, postrzegana jako chaos i terror, zastąpiona jest wzniosłością miłości, przedstawianej jako porządek piękna i nadzieja na przezwyciężenie bagażu przeszłości i nienawiści.

Streściła Barbara Klonowska

Key words: historical romance, historiography, Northern Ireland, contemporary novel, the sublime.

Słowa kluczowe: romans historyczny, historiografia, Irlandia Północna, powieść współczesna, wzniosłość.