

Article

Lincoln in the Bardo: “Uh, NOT a Historical Novel”

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Abstract: While George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) has many of the characteristics of the traditional historical novel—lapse of time, incorporation of historical characters, focus on important world-historical events and conditions—it intriguingly challenges the boundaries of the genre by an unsettling approach to verisimilitude. In addition, its fragmentation and an unusual approach to narrative help to qualify it as a neo-historical novel. The author’s thoughts on historical fiction help to clarify its positioning.

Keywords: neo-historical; meta-historical; verisimilitude; George Saunders; Abraham Lincoln; *Bardo*

George Saunders’s 2017 novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* is a historical novel by all the usual criteria, whether they rely on its content, its temporality, or the significance of its themes. This essay, however, constitutes an attempt to distinguish Saunders’s text from what the “historical novel” has come to mean, arguing for considering it instead a neo-historical novel. The distinction consists in its attitude to verisimilitude and its approach to the use of historical source material and certain signal features of form. *Lincoln in the Bardo* is one of the most highly visible English-language fictions in recent years set in a historical matrix. It was awarded the 2017 Man Booker Prize, which proposes to identify the best novel written in English. It achieved bestseller status, it has been widely translated and its film rights have been bought. It seems a useful test case for generic examination, beginning with some consideration of what constitutes the historical novel.

The simplest way of recognizing a historical novel, of course, is by the lapse of time between its narrated events and its composition. One rule of thumb used to be sixty years; apparently this derived from the subtitle of Walter Scott’s *Waverley, Or, ‘Tis Sixty Years Since*’ (1814). A slightly shorter period is suggested in the definition offered by the Historical Novel Society. It declares: “To be deemed historical (in our sense), a novel must have been written at least fifty years after the events described, or have been written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events (who therefore approaches them only by research)” ([Defining the Genre n.d.](#)). The gap of over one hundred and fifty years between 1862, when Saunders’s story takes place, and its composition and publication comfortably satisfies the temporal requirement for the genre.

Another criterion relates to content. Grant Rodwell defines a novel as historical fiction “when it is wholly or partly about the public events and social conditions which are the material of history, regardless of the time at which it is written” ([Rodwell 2013](#), p. 48). The term “the material of history” needs some explanation, though. In one sense, anything that has happened in the past is the material of history. The insistence on “public events,” however, offers a limitation. That seems to mean, quite sensibly, *significant* events—events such as historians might plausibly record—and although Rodwell does not insist on it, we might conclude that public persons, world-historical people, appearing as characters in the novel, even if peripherally, are among the traits that define historical fiction. Saunders’s book qualifies on both counts. Abraham Lincoln is one of the most important American presidents and probably the “most revered” ([Kelly 2017](#)) because of his role in leading the nation through the Civil War, as well as for his wisdom, humor, and humane qualities. Though the title refers not to President Abraham Lincoln but to his son Willie, Abraham is one of Saunders’s characters.

Lincoln in the Bardo, then, includes “one of the most written about men in history, a subject of endless fascination” who “has been explored by countless scholars, imagined by myriad writers, embodied by numerous actors on stage and screen” (Kelly 2017). Adam Kelly testifies to the world-historical significance of Lincoln:

What about the public events and social conditions? Willie Lincoln died of typhoid fever, and Lincoln’s grief is well-established in the documentary record. This event, though heart-breaking for the first family, is small, domestic, and not very different from the experience of countless nineteenth-century families in an age before modern medicine. The death of a child was all too common. And the death of a son was more frequent because the novel is set in time of war, that is, in 1862 in the early phases of the US Civil War (1861–65).

This war was unprecedented and in some ways never paralleled in American history. Some 750,000 American sons died in what Lincoln called, in his Gettysburg Address, “this Great War.” That number exceeds the total American dead in all other wars, and represents a death rate of over two percent of the US population (the same mortality rate in the modern United States would leave six and a half million dead). This is the macrocosmic history within which Willie Lincoln’s death is the microcosm. The two situations resonate against each other and the novel suggests that the president’s experience of his son’s death in some way strengthens his resolve as a war leader—that is, it strengthens his tragic willingness to inflict a similar grief on thousands of other American families. The causal connection between Willie’s death and the President’s firm resolve, and between his awareness of the sufferings of African Americans (acquired, in this telling, from or somehow through the activities of the dead) and the Emancipation Proclamation—these are Saunders’s inventions.

But the historical novel is *always* a sort of hybrid: fiction interspersed with facts, or facts leavened with fiction; creation alongside archival research, imaginary people (usually) sharing the space with “real” people known to have lived and died, imagined events placed within the matrix of real ones. Consider Tolstoy’s creation Pierre Bezukhov, an imagined participant in the “real” Napoleonic wars in Russia, or the entirely fictional and rather preposterous Barnaby Rudge, placed in the midst of the historically documented Gordon Riots in Dickens’s novel. To be sure, the particular tolerance for such combinations is difficult to define. There are historical novels based so firmly in archival research and the study of previous works of straightforward history that they qualify as novels mostly because they invent dialogue and imaginary, though plausible thoughts for their historical characters. At the other extreme are fictions like Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*, a re-imagining of the trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the American atomic spies. In Coover’s version, they are executed in Times Square in New York City, Uncle Sam is a character alongside the Marx Brothers and Betty Crocker (the famous cookbook author), and Richard Nixon is one of the narrators.

The hybridity of *any* historical novel is fundamental, not incidental. The classic treatment of narrative modes, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg’s *The Nature of Narrative*, begins with an account of what happened when the “epic synthesis” dissolved, producing what they call the two major strands of narrative, the *empirical* and the *fictional*, each of which is further divided into two more. The part which bears on the historical novel is what they call the empirical:

We can subdivide the impulse toward empirical narrative into two main components: the *historical* and the *mimetic*. The historical component owes its allegiance specifically to truth of fact and to the actual past rather than to a traditional version of the past. It requires for its development means of accurate measurement in time and space, and concepts of causality referable to human and natural rather than to supernatural agencies. [...] The mimetic component owes its allegiance not to truth of fact but to truth of sensation and environment, depending on observation of the present rather than investigation of the past. It requires for its development sociological and psychological concepts of behavior and mental process (Scholes and Kellogg 1966, p. 13).

Looked at closely, the historical and mimetic categories correspond to what is usually called *history* and what is usually called *the novel*. And the historical novel is a new synthesis across this divide. Or,

as Brian Hamnett wrote, “The historical novel thrives on the tension between fact and imagination. It is at its best when the balance is consistently sustained and the division seamless” (Hamnett 2006, p. 54).

The historical novel genre is not just a hybrid one; it is multifarious. The Historical Novel Society, whose definition I quoted earlier, goes on to welcome under the big tent of historical fiction such varieties as alternative histories, time-slip novels, historical fantasies, and pseudo-histories. To these varieties we might add a fairly recent development, the neo-historical novel. The *neo-Victorian* novel, which has been incisively defined and analyzed recently, if not a subset of the neo-historical, has much in common with it; and indeed *Lincoln in the Bardo*, with its 1862 setting, its concern with the supernatural, and its problematizing of the Victorian consensus, could be treated as a neo-Victorian novel, despite its American setting. The United States experienced a Victorian age, without Queen Victoria.

Elodie Rousselot defines the neo-historical novel in large part by its attitude to verisimilitude. History *qua* history, presumably, is devoted to *veracity*, to “the truth”; the historical novel as traditionally understood is devoted to *verisimilitude*, to what Scholes and Kellogg would call truth of sensation and environment: it may not be exactly true, but it feels true. Rousselot shows the neo-historical novel as one with a different theoretical underpinning. The neo-Victorian novel, she writes (quoting Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn) “must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (Rousselot 2014, p. 1). This may include “the seditious powers of postmodern parody” (4). “Traditionally characterized by the illusion of reality it seeks to convey,” she continues, “verisimilitude is a conventional technique of the historical novel. In the case of the neo-historical novel however, that verisimilitude can be endowed with subversive capabilities. Indeed, despite appearing ‘genuine,’ verisimilitude only ever aims at conveying a surface image of the real. In fact, by its very nature, verisimilitude is emphatically not ‘veracious’” (4). The *awareness* that verisimilitude is only a convention and one doomed to at least partial failure is one presumably shared by thoughtful historical novelists in the past; what is different is the novelists’ response to that limitation. Rousselot explains: “The mode of verisimilitude employed by the neo-historical novel therefore confirms its simultaneous attempt *and* refusal to render the past accurately” (4). If this sounds a bit like what has been defined as historiographic metafiction, she offers this distinction: “If historiographic metafiction employs an overtly disruptive mode, the neo-historical carries out its potential for radical possibilities in more implicit ways” (pp. 4–5).

Lincoln in the Bardo is not *overtly* disruptive; it scarcely reads like historiographic metafiction (though there are postmodern features); and it eschews parody. Let us examine the more implicit ways it explores its radical possibilities.

To begin with, though clearly a novel, it deviates from the expected novelistic conditions by being only in part a narrative. That is, it is not just neo-historical; it is a sort of *neo-novel*. As Scholes and Kellogg reasonably define their key term: “By narrative we mean all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a story-teller” (Scholes and Kellogg 1966, p. 4). But the majority of Saunders’s novel is made up of dialogue, presented in this way:

And there came down upon us a rain of hats.

the reverend everly thomas

Of all types.

roger blevins iii

Hats, laughter, crude jests, the sound of fart-noises made by mouths, from on high: these were the harbingers of the approach of the Three Bachelors.

the reverend everly thomas (Saunders 2017, p. 118).

This is not narrative, as there is no narrator; narrative is mediated, this is immediate. Historian David C. Ward writes that the book is “if not quite a play, more a piece of theatrical art, proceeding by dramatic monologues and conversations among and between the living and the dead” (Ward 2017), and Saunders himself says the novel “looks like a play” (Krasny 2018).

It is true that these dramatic pages alternate with something very different: a series of historical notes that are (for the most part) unmistakably mini-narratives. For instance:

By the time dinner was served, the moon shone high and small and blue above, still bright, albeit somewhat diminished.

In “A Time Departed” (unpublished memoir), by J. B. Bragg III

The night continued dark and moonless; a storm was moving in.

In “Those Most Joyful Years,”
by Albert Trundle

The guests began to depart as the full yellow moon hung among morning stars.

In “The Washington Powers,”
by D. V. Featherly (Saunders 2017, p. 20).

These meteorological details affect to rely on discoveries from research. Though every historical novel must incorporate, usually tacitly, the results of research, and thus rely on historical sources, Saunders’s treatment of his sources is one of the most unusual features in his novel.

The format in these sections is that of histories that comprise a collection of documents—to take examples almost at random, *The Voice of the Poor in the Middle Ages: An Anthology of Documents from the Cairo Geniza* by Mark R. Cohen, or *France and West Africa: An Anthology of Historical Documents*, edited by J. D. Hargreaves, or intriguingly in this context, *The Lincoln Assassination Documents* by Mitchell M. Hunt—though *those* books collect primary documents and Saunders’s excerpts are from both primary documents—diaries, letters, memoirs—and secondary documents including previously published histories. Perhaps another homologous genre is the oral biography or oral history, a kind of writing often focused on popular culture or sensational figures; for instance, *Live From New York: The Complete, Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live as Told by Its Stars, Writers, and Guests*, by James Andrew Miller and Tom Shales, or *Edie: American Girl* by Jean Stein and George Plimpton. Such anthologies as these allow for subjectivity and disagreement, as Saunders clearly also delights to do. The three excerpts above disagree on the presence or absence or color of the moon and elsewhere the voices disagree on what Lincoln looked like.

The other point about the “historical sources” assembled in the documentary chapters of Saunders’s book is that many of them are not historical at all, but made up by George Saunders. Reviewer Trip Slaymaker estimates that of Saunders’s “perfectly appropriate primary and secondary material interspersed throughout,” about half is his own creation (Slaymaker 2018). Certainly my own research efforts have been unable to establish that Featherly, Trundle, and Bragg, “authors” of the sightings of the moon quoted above, ever existed. We shall return to this point.

The novel approach to verisimilitude is the first significant feature that distinguishes *Lincoln in the Bardo* from the traditional historical novel. Contrast it with the previously mentioned novel by Robert Coover, *The Public Burning*. That novel flaunts its deviation from the accepted facts of the period in which it is set, relocating the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg from a prison’s death chamber, for instance, to Times Square in the center of New York City. Saunders’s deviations from plausibility are different. While Coover delivers a shocking story of something that could have happened, for the most part, but did not, Saunders uses the lineaments of historical fiction for a narrative of things that not only did not happen, but could not have happened. This is because of the supernaturalism of much of the story. Ted Gioia points out the paradox: “the author’s commitment to historical accuracy even when he embraces the most fanciful aspects of the supernatural” (Gioia 2018). Gioia goes on to express “intense dissatisfaction with a literary establishment that refuses to acknowledge that this book is, at its heart, a work of supernatural fiction” a refusal, for instance, to consider it for the World Fantasy Award.

Wherein lies the supernaturalism? It begins in the very title. The action of the plot (as distinguished from the numerous quotations from real or imaginary primary and secondary works) is set in the Bardo. This is a shadowy place, or condition, of continued existence after death, drawn from the Buddhist tradition and specifically the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (in Tibetan: *Bardo Thödol*). For Tibetan Buddhists the transitional condition is between death and rebirth; Saunders has shed the notion of rebirth but retains the condition of transitional afterlife. His Bardo is occupied by people who are, in ordinary terms, dead (including Willie Lincoln). But they are still mobile, conscious, self-aware, and capable of interaction, at least with other dwellers in the Bardo if not with the living. All the voices heard in the non-documentary portion of the novel, except Abraham Lincoln's, are those of dead human beings. They retain certain features related to the mode of their deaths—of the three main “narrators,” one has a terrible head wound resulting from a fallen roof timber as well as an enormous erection (he was just about to enjoy the long-deferred consummation of his marriage to a young wife when the roof collapsed on him), another has many sets of eyes, noses and hands, the third a perpetually startled facial expression—and they remember the lives they have lived. Their current status is at least in part a result of denial, the denial of death. They think of their coffins as “sick-boxes,” the hearse as a “sick-cart,” their graves as “sick-holes,” with the suggestion of possible recovery. They can see living people (President Lincoln, most notably) and read their thoughts, but the living “pass through” them and they cannot communicate. Eventually they are to leave the Bardo and pass over into what seems to be a place of final judgment; one of them, the Reverend Everly Thomas, has been given a glimpse of the “dreadful diamond palace,” where he will be judged.

Their departure from the Bardo is accompanied by sensational “firesound/ matterlightblooming occurrences” audible to those who remain. To depart in this way is voluntary, perhaps when the deceased gives up, or acknowledges being really dead; a special case is the young, who for some reason are not meant to linger, and the tension between the desires of well-meaning dead adults to speed Willie Lincoln along and his own reluctance since he wishes to see his father again is the main motor of the plot.

If this were not enough to forfeit any claim to verisimilitude, as traditionally understood, the dead also have the capacity for shape-shifting: a tormented fourteen-year-old, who upon arrival had been “a spinning young girl in a summer frock of continually shifting color,” now presents as (in a series of rapid changes) “the fallen bridge, the vulture, the large dog, the terrible hag gorging on black cake, the stand of flood-ravaged corn, the umbrella ripped open by a wind we could not feel” (Saunders 2017, pp. 36–37).

Within this large, completely original, even spectacular, fictional situation in violation of the laws of nature, and thus of real verisimilitude, there is nevertheless a serious kind of verisimilitude. The psychology of the characters, particularly of the two Lincolns, is believable. And, as George Saunders explains, “there is a way of narrating the (so-called) supernatural in a natural, realist way. For me it has to do with controlling the language—not allowing crazy events to allow sloppily ‘crazy language’” (Saunders 2019).

Verisimilitude in historical fiction is a matter of sensation, but it is often buttressed by a citation of the author's sources, typically in an afterword or author's note. Pat Barker's *Regeneration* includes an author's note citing several books and articles and thanking the staff of eight libraries (Barker 1991, pp. 251–52). Julian Barnes ends *Arthur and George* by assuring his readers in an author's note that all quotations from newspapers, letters, or published writings are authentic and thanking librarians and other informants (Barnes 2005, p. 360). Sarah Waters's *The Paying Guests* begins its author's note with “Many books helped to inform and inspire this one,” followed by a list of thirteen titles (Waters 2014, p. 564). All these are novels, fictions, but it has seemed important to their authors to indicate that the historical parts are really historical (and Barker, at least, has nevertheless been subjected to vigorous attacks on the grounds that her novel is not reliable enough as military history). Without accepting her definition of the “documentary novel,” one can accept these arrangements as Barbara Foley's definition of how the documentary novel operates (Foley uses this term to include both the historical novel and

the “pseudofactual novel”): “it purports to represent reality by means of agreed-upon conventions of fictionality, while grafting onto its fictive pact some kind of additional claim to empirical validation” (Foley 1986, p. 25). Presumably she does not mean to insist that the claim be flaunted; but as Adam Kelly points out, Saunders makes a “key decision [. . .] to refuse to do what writers of historical fiction have always done, which is to conceal the sources of their research [at least until the paratextual acknowledgements] and imagine their subject fresh onto the page. Instead Saunders quotes a wide range of scholarly passages verbatim, attributing the quotations to their author and text” (Kelly 2017).

For example, on solemn events:

When the head of the cortege reached Oak Hill Cemetery by way of Washington Street it was found necessary, because of the length of the line to route a part of the line along Bridge Street into High Street. Climbing the hill past the new High Level Reservoir, it turned into Road Street, and proceeded eastward to the cemetery, where the body of William Wallace Lincoln was to be placed in the vault of W. T. Carroll, on Lot 292

In “Essay on the Death of Willie Lincoln,”

by Mathilde Williams, curator,

Peabody Literary Association

Now all was still and the hundreds of people climbed out of their carriages and walked through the gates of the cemetery to the beautiful little red stone Gothic chapel with its blue-stained windows.

Kunhardt and Kunhardt, op. cit (Saunders 2017, p. 292).

There are pages and pages of short quotations from such sources as “Abraham Lincoln: The Boy and the Man” by James Morgan, “Tad Lincoln’s Father” by Julia Taft Bayne, “Eyewitness to History: The Lincoln White House” edited by Stone Hilyard, and “Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln,” by Doris Kearns Goodwin. Saunders’s explanation for this portion of his novel is that he began with just the Bardo sections, the ghosts, but came to believe there was something weak about it and decided to “‘Add more history’—just as a way of bringing the reader back to attention” (Saunders 2019). Goodwin is a famous historian and the book attributed to her is very well known. The Morgan and Bayne books seem to exist, while the Hilyard one is apparently an invention by Saunders. So Saunders does indeed quote “a wide range of scholarly passages”; he does make a sort of claim to “empirical validation,” but by means of scholarly passages many of which are nothing of the sort, being no less fictional than a conversation with a dead woman who presents as a ripped umbrella. The author explains that he intended to “tell the highest truths via a series of inventions, some of which, in the relative sense, are lies” (Saunders 2019). Admittedly he does not consider this to deviate entirely from what history does, believing that “truth must be something like: the sum total of all the misperceptions and false memories” (Saunders 2019). This skeptical epistemology is radically different from that underlying traditional history or the traditional historical novel, both of which posit that some memories and accounts are more reliable than others, maybe even “correct.”

This complicates the effect of his decision to offer documentation. What complicates it even further is the fact that not only are some of the supposed historical documents (half, perhaps?) no such thing, but most readers will not suspect that they are factitious unless they are so informed, probably by a book review. And then, absent long hours of tedious research, they will not know *which* citations are invented, just that some of them are.

Saunders’s “baring the device”—that is, bringing into the fiction itself the documentation that ostensibly supports his historical novel—is part of the historical self-consciousness of the neo-historical novel, what Rousselot calls a “mode of verisimilitude” that “confirms its simultaneous attempt and refusal to render the past accurately” (Rousselot 2014, p. 4). The novelist has foregrounded the issues that historical fiction has usually elided. Richard Walsh, writing about Coover’s *The Public Burning*,

identifies Coover's practice as the way in which he "transforms his narrative from a historical fiction into a metaphorical realization of the fiction behind history." (Walsh 1993, p. 334).

Another term invoked for such practices is "the metahistorical novel." Brian May uses this term, and his definition of it as encompassing "novels that submit given histories and historiographies to critical, sometimes deconstructive scrutiny" (May 1997, p. 267) suggests its overlap with the neo-historical. It would be excessive to claim that Saunders *deconstructs* history—or historiography—but his handling of history *unsettles* it, certainly. Readers of the traditional historical novel are invited to assume that, though there may not have ever been a Sidney Carton, for instance, the facts of the French Revolution are as Dickens presents them in *A Tale of Two Cities* (because they are based on the historiography of Thomas Carlyle?); that Pat Barker's fictionalizing accounts for the fictional Billy Prior but her account of the historical Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves and Craiglockhart Hospital is veracious.

Saunders not only includes the historical sources; he not only mixes fictional ones among the authentic; he includes alongside each other sources that are at odds, sometimes factually and sometimes in interpretation. A minor but nevertheless real factual disagreement, bearing on the party given at the White House during Willie Lincoln's fatal illness:

Few army officers were present below the rank of division commander.

Leech, op.cit.

... the Whitney brothers (twins and indistinguishable except that one wore a captain's ribbons and the other those of a lieutenant) ...

Garrett, op. cit (Saunders 2017, p. 11).

Margaret Leech's "Reveille in Washington, 1860–1865" appears to be a real historical source; "All This Did I See: Memories of a Terrible Time," by Mrs. Margaret Garrett one of Saunders's creations.

Other contradictions, or lesser shades of difference, appear in tone, or authorial interpretation (many of the quoted sources, incidentally, are strongly anti-Lincoln). In his concern for his suffering son, two accounts which agree on the facts offer a subtly but unmistakably different spin:

Lincoln heeded the doctor's advice.

Stragner, op. cit.

Lincoln failed to overrule the doctor.

Spicer, op. cit (Saunders 2017, p. 242).

Beyond these internal contradictions, Saunders supplies quotations which demonstrate the fluidity of historical "fact." Though in 2017 Abraham Lincoln may be "the most revered of all US presidents" (Kelly 2017), Saunders supplies contemporary judgments like these:

Vain, weak, puerile, hypocritical, without manners, without social grace, and as he talks to you, punches his fists under your ribs.

In "The War Years," by Carl Sandburg,
account of Sherrard Clemens.

Evidently a person of very inferior cast of character, wholly unequal to the crisis.

In "The Emergence of Lincoln: Prologue to
The Civil War, 1859–1861," by Allan Nevins,
account of Edward Everett (Saunders 2017, p. 232).

Whether we focus upon the "documentary" chapters, with their multitudinous short excerpts from primary and secondary sources (irrespective of their ontological status), or on the narrative—or really *dramatic*—chapters, in which the many vividly characterized inhabitants of the Bardo speak, one after another, to advance the story of the Lincoln family (or more usually to tell their own

stories, to make their cases) *Lincoln in the Bardo* is strikingly fragmentary. Though fragmentary fiction is not the exclusive domain of modernism, nevertheless Ted Gioia's declaration that the novel is "unabashedly postmodern, constructed out of fragments and citations" distinguishes it from the more conventional plan of historical fiction (Gioia 2018). Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drag have commented incisively on the role of fragmentation in recent fiction, on the "renewed popularity of fragmentation" in contemporary British and American novels, suggesting that in fragmentary writing, "the seams between the numerous scraps out of which the text is interwoven are deliberately exposed rather than concealed. Hence the stylistic preference for all kinds of lists and inventories, as well as for citation and other forms of appropriation, especially those that do not smoothly integrate the borrowed content with the rest of the text" (Guignery and Drag 2019; pp. xi, xxi). And David Shields's manifesto, *Reality Hunger*, identifies a new "artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-yet-unstated one" that includes fragmentary practices whose common feature is "blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real" (Shields 2010, p. 5). That blurring has certainly occurred between Margaret Leech and Mrs. Margaret Garrett, as well as in Saunders's larger forms. Again, it is not necessary to argue that Saunders is at war with linearity or coherence to recognize his use of fragmentation as another tool in his project of challenging and displacing the traditional and conventional historical novel's assumption of verisimilitude, wholeness, and self-consistency.

A different kind of fragmentation may be one of the signal traits of *Lincoln in the Bardo*. That is disparity of affect. While historical novels, like any other work of literature, are under no obligation to observe any unities, including unity of tone, Saunders's work is unusually varied: the dead people in their Georgetown cemetery are sometimes tragic, but just as often, perhaps more often, funny. Adam Kelly explains that "[t]he mix of these two registers—the comic and the scholarly"—in other words, in the chapters comprising excerpts from "nonfiction" historical accounts, whether genuinely scholarly or just another part of the fiction—"shouldn't work, but it does" (Kelly 2017). Kelly goes on to quote Saunders as envisioning literary stories as "active systems of contradiction," and this seems one way in which his historical novel challenges the conventional assumptions of historicity that underlie traditional historical fiction. He explains the salutary effect of Saunders's fertile mix: "In mixing together what we usually think of as opposites—tragedy and comedy, high rhetoric and bawdy farce, private grief and political action, the individual and the collective—stories can challenge our sense that some things must be kept apart." The collision of humor and pathos is of course more familiar in fiction than in traditional history; novelist Richard Russo has memorably declared, "I want that which is hilarious and that which is heartbreaking to occupy the same territory in the book because I think they very often occupy the same territory in life, much as we try to separate them" (Mudge 2001).

Elsa Cavallé observes another difference in recent historical fictions which might at first seem to help place *Lincoln in the Bardo*, when, commenting on Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch*, she writes: "... like many recent works of historical fiction (one may think of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of Day* [sic] (1989) for instance, which is set in approximately the same period), *The Night Watch* reverses the traditional writing of history by presenting a version of it experienced from the margins" (Cavallé 2014, p. 84). Saunders does the same. His story, which is arguably "about" the US Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln, and the effect that Willie Lincoln's death produced on the president and his determination to prosecute the war and free the slaves, is filtered through a collection of characters who are so marginal that they are not even alive. Lincoln is an object in a field of eccentric deceased subjects, whose primary interests remain their own self-condolence and denial of fact.

But is this really so unusual for the historical novel? The Battle of Waterloo features in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, but it features largely through the panic of a noncombatant, Jos Sedley, trapped in Brussels and terrified of being mistaken for a military man because of his moustaches, and a soldier, George Osborne, of whom readers learn only that he ended the day lying dead on the field of battle. *The Red Badge of Courage* is an account of a Civil War battle so obscurely rendered, and so ironically focalized through a marginal participant, that it is impossible to decode what really happened. Some historical

novels, it is true—and they are as likely to be recent as not—write from the center, with important historical personages as their protagonists or narrators: examples would be Robert Graves's *I, Claudius*, or Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*. Other recent historical novels written from the center include Gore Vidal's *Lincoln: a Novel* (or, less seriously, Seth Grahame-Smith's *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter*) or Norman Mailer's *The Gospel According to the Son* (about Jesus), while Peter Carey's *Parrot and Olivier in America*, Ferdinand Mount's *Jem (and Sam)* and novels telling the story of Mrs. Samuel Pepys and Captain Ahab's wife are marginal. Jennifer Chiaverini's *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker* takes an intriguingly, perhaps doubly, marginal approach. Marginality is not, then, a reliable criterion for identifying the neo-historical novel. It is one approach used by novelists, as is the approach through a central, historically validated and significant character.

We return, then, to the question of verisimilitude: that is, the implicit pact made between novel and reader in the historical novel. The classic historical novel promises (tacitly) to tell the truth as much as possible about real events, to obey the laws of physical nature, to rely on what Scholes and Kellogg call “means of accurate measurement in time and space”—by which is meant, I take it, not so much *measurement* as subjection to the ordinary time and space requirements governing human life—as well as “concepts of causality referable to human and natural rather than to supernatural agencies.” The expectation of natural rather than supernatural agency is flouted in Saunders's employment of the Bardo and its inhabitants. It is ruptured by populating his novel with deceased revenants alongside diplomats and generals, by importing the world of the Bardo into 1862 Washington, DC, by even importing the president of the United States into the Bardo among its vociferous and self-deluding inhabitants whose “sick-forms” he passes through and who manage to affect him, and in some way become partly responsible for the Emancipation Proclamation. The author writes that “I think I wanted the idea of an historical novel to push off from—I had the idea that my book would derive some power, if a reader thought, ‘ah, a historical novel’ and started reading it and then went, ‘Uh, NOT a historical novel’” (Saunders 2019). Some such relationship to the traditional historical novel may be one way to recognize the neo-historical. George Saunders, at least, has defiantly and brilliantly entered into the neo-historical project, combining a kind of verisimilitude with a technique that exposes verisimilitude as a convention like any other.

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