theories and methodologies

A Historicist Novel

GEORGE HUTCHINSON

THE VORTEX OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, THE LATE 1930S AND EARLY TO MID 1940S, PROVIDES AN APPROPRIATE SETTING FOR Jennifer Egan's experiment in historical fiction. Many popular histories have glorified the bands of brothers and Rosie the Riveters of the so-called greatest generation. The best fiction and poetry of the 1940s offered a different, unflattering view. Journalists from that era—Martha Gellhorn, for one—said they needed fiction to get the history right (313). Literary treatments of the war focus on its incommunicability and on the crisis of meaning it inspired, but they have been vastly overshadowed by popular history books, documentaries, movies, and television shows that depend for their very production and distribution on an appeal to the fantasies that the contemporary war literature contradicts. In a decade when the idea of making America great again seems supercharged by notions of America when it *was* supposedly great, we can use some diving into the wreck.

Manhattan Beach ferries readers between two worlds, an upper world and an underworld—present and past, bankers and gangsters, merchant ships and submarines, and perhaps, in this maniacally well-researched novel, history and fiction. Such duality inheres in the struggle of the protagonist, Anna Kerrigan, to become a diver repairing ships in the Brooklyn Naval Yard—around the corner to the north of Walt Whitman's Brooklyn Ferry, where the poet pondered "the similitudes of the past and those of the future" as he shuttled from shore to shore ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," line 8). I am reminded of Charles Olson's gnomic statement that "history is the practice of space in time" (27), a function of our lives rather than a force that grinds us out or something past and done (17).

Manhattan Beach is itself the meeting point of sea and land on the southern tip of Brooklyn, facing the Rockaway peninsula. A boathouse there is the scene of Anna's father Eddie Kerrigan's kidnapping, his (attempted) murderer's death, and Anna's own sexual intercourse with said murderer. The two-world motif also pertains to the world of legitimate work and business and to the criminal

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underworld, which turn out to have subterranean commerce with each other. And it pertains to the novel's relation to fiction of the 1940s. As in noir novels of the thirties and forties, the crime syndicates work with banks, the criminal justice system, and local government. The established families of wealthy tycoons (as in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, from 1939) are portrayed as criminals who have simply found ways over the generations of laundering their reputations.

The motif of two worlds also informs the secret lives of the main characters and resonates on the level of Anna Kerrigan's most intimate relationships—beginning with her family:

> Each time Anna moved from her father's world to her mother and Lydia's, she felt as if she'd shaken free one life for a deeper one. And when she returned to her father, holding his hand as they ventured out into the city, it was her mother and Lydia she shook off, often forgetting them completely. Back and forth she went, deeper—deeper still—until it seemed there was no place further down she could go. But somehow there always was. She had never reached the bottom. (Egan 26)

The plot alternates between such polarities, moving into more and more perilous waters for both Anna and her father. This notion of going deeper and deeper presides over the novel and its insistently recursive form. Recursiveness also characterizes its relation to fiction of the forties.

The novel—which takes the perspectives of Eddie Kerrigan, Anna Kerrigan, Dexter Styles, and (briefly but most strikingly) Anna's sister, Lydia Kerrigan, and uses flashback-filled temporal juxtapositions—bears comparison with the best novels of the 1940s dealing with wartime at home or abroad (William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, for example, a book that marked a major turn in his treatment of black characters). Novels of the war frequently spliced into the ongoing action episodes in which characters reminisce about life before the war and wonder what will be in store for them after it ends. On the home front, too, people wondered what would come after "the duration"—as if, as Charles Jackson put it, "only one thing had 'duration'" (12). In *A Time to Be Born*, Dawn Powell wrote, "every one waited, marked time, waited. For what?" (3). The phenomenology of time itself had changed on the home front as well as on the battlefront. Anatole Broyard said the war "broke the rhythm of American life," a constant theme in forties fiction (89). Sudden shifts between present action and memories of the past—most obviously in the "Time Machine" interludes of Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*—set the cadence of many war novels, as in Egan's work. (I must add that I have no idea if Egan has read these novels.) Wartime dislocations often coincide with a character's coming-of-age and issues of self-identity. Such is the case with Anna Kerrigan. Considering whether to abort the baby she is carrying after her affair with Dexter Styles, give it up for adoption, or keep it, she realizes that "[h]er life was a war life; the war *was* her life. There had been another life before that—her family, the neighborhood—but everyone from that time had died, or moved, or grown up. Its last vestige had been the odd dark magic of her father's death" (Egan 414).

Soldiers in the war novels, the same age as Anna Kerrigan, must grow up quickly in foreign circumstances. In a related vein, Frankie Adams in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* transitions into adolescence in the course of the war: "It was the year when Frankie thought about the world. And she did not see it as a round school globe, with the countries neat and different-colored. She thought of the world as huge and cracked and loose and turning a thousand miles an hour" (23). Egan taps into the sense that the world is becoming larger, perhaps never to return to being small: "One thing was certain: [her friend] Rose had been wrong about the world becoming small again. Or at least

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it would not be the same small world it had been. Too much had changed" (431). As Broyard remembered, "It was as if a great bomb, an explosion of consciousness had gone off in American life, shattering everything. Before that we had been too busy just getting along, too conventional to be lonely. The world had been smaller and we had filled it" (80).

Egan also taps into the motif of the war itself as the mysterious axis of the time. Anna wants to "touch" it, to be a part of it: "Anna felt her own grating distance from something urgent, elemental"; even in the Naval Yard "the war seemed maddeningly abstract, at too great distance to be felt. Anna longed somehow to touch it, and sensed she wasn't alone" (58). In McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie Adams has a similar anxiety: "she could not join the war, and this made her sometimes feel restless and blue. She decided to donate blood to the Red Cross" (23). This notion of abstraction, of the war being far away, can be found not only in home front fiction in the 1940s but in battlefront novels as well, as in Harry Brown's *A Walk in the Sun*: "It was strange to be so close to things and yet so far away" (33). Even men in battle felt a sense of unreality. Time itself acquired spatial coordinates; one was closer to or more distant from the indefinable center at which time ceased to exist, the center of the maelstrom that would never get into the books. The world "whirled." One is reminded of Whitman's wartime: "Quicksand years that whirl me I know not whither" ("Quicksand Years," line 1).

People wonder what is in store for them after the war. Will they return to their former lives? Will there be jobs? This, too, was a common feature of war novels in the 1940s. Dexter Styles, ruminating on his father-in-law's predictions about the postwar world, feels "a dark umbrella of worry opening slowly inside him. He'd been a soldier for over two decades, observing a chain of command to ensure the prosperity and vigor of the organization he served: a shadow government, a shadow country. A tribe. A clan. Now, suddenly, everyone was an American. . . . What would Dexter's own place be when the war ended?" (Egan 92). By implication, a silent absorption or rubbing out of the underworld by the reigning capitalists was in the making as surely as the absorption of white ethnics into the white melting pot. For gangsters like Dexter Styles, the writing was on the wall even as American troops invaded Sicily.

Dexter Styles's father-in-law bears comparison with Mailer's General Cummings in *The Naked and the Dead*: "'I see the rise of this country to a height no country has occupied, ever,' he said quietly. 'Not the Romans. Not the Carolingians. Not Genghis Khan or the Tatars or Napoleon's France. . . . We'll emerge from this war victorious and unscathed, and become bankers to the world. We'll export our dreams, our language, our culture, our way of life. And it will prove irresistible'" (Egan 91–92). Mailer's character makes a related prediction, but one that is different in revealing ways:

> The concept of fascism, far sounder than communism if you consider it, for it's grounded firmly in men's actual natures, merely started in the wrong country, in a country which did not have enough intrinsic potential power to develop completely. In Germany . . . there were bound to be excesses. But the dream, the concept was sound enough. . . . America is going to absorb that dream, it's in the business of doing it now. When you've created power, materials, armies, they don't wither of their own accord. Our vacuum as a nation is filled with released power, and I can tell you that we're out of the backwaters of history now. . . . Watch. After the war our foreign policy is going to be far more naked, far less hypocritical than it has ever been. We're no longer going to cover our eyes with our left hand while our right is extending an imperialist paw. (321–22)

Mailer's generation of writers—especially Jewish writers in or near New York City—had

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been shaped by the Marxism of the 1930s, the so-called red decade. Egan has a different perspective, writing after the triumph of American popular culture and neoliberal globalism.

Egan also attends to the ethnic divisions of the time in relation to class and to the assimilation of white ethnics in the course of the war under the umbrella of American identity, common preoccupations of forties fiction, offered here with a perspective only possible in retrospect. Styles nearly dies when he rises too quickly to the surface after helping Anna search for Eddie's body in the harbor, but he has a sudden revelation: "An essential thing was clear to him at last, one that underlay everything else" (340). Only later do we learn what the revelation was, as he recalls the night he had Eddie dumped into the bay while he is himself targeted in the very boathouse where he had captured Eddie (and, on a subsequent occasion, fucked Anna). It is the day after the dive, and he has been betrayed by his own father-in-law, a high-class WASP banker. Facing the gangster who will murder him, "[h]is discovery of the night before returned to him with effortless clarity: rising through the dark harbor, he'd felt his own edges dissolve, and a surge of current had leaped from inside him toward a glowing intimation of the future. What he was trying so hard to do, he'd already done! He was American! The lust and yearning that seethed in his veins had helped to fashion whatever was to come" (358).

Manhattan Beach implies that wartime disorientation, which cut people loose from their former moorings, has unleashed erotic drives and transgressive sexuality. In forties fiction, too, there is a greater frankness about sex than in earlier decades. It was, after all, the period in which Alfred Kinsey produced his studies of sexual behavior, rates of extramarital sex and brief hookups rose, and references to homosexuality became much more common. A kind of shadow world emerges with greater frequency in the literature of the time, especially in a rising tide of fiction by gay and queer authors (such as Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, McCullers, Tennessee Williams, John Horne Burns, and Jackson).

Egan's free indirect style, sporting plenty of thirties and forties slang—"fruit" for a gay man, "loogans" for a gangster's henchmen, "marrieds" for married women in the workplace—immerses the reader in the ambience of the late 1930s and the war years, bathing us in the era's lingo as much as its smells, sounds, sights, and technical arcana. Even syntactical inflections contribute, maybe a bit too insistently: "she hadn't dared ask"; "they hadn't any money" (10); "Oh no. He's nothing to do with the union" (11). Yet one could never mistake this for a forties novel. At times, in fact, Egan draws attention to its backward glance, as when she refers to a "screw—as propellers were known" (293).

I have emphasized the dualities structuring the novel and its echoes of noir novels. At times, one hears echoes of noir novels in Egan's very style. Her plentiful, extravagant, sometimes hard-boiled similes are memorable in their juxtapositions, recalling Chandler: "The *Sea Cow*'s rusty hull raked the pier like a cur rubbing her scrofulous hide against a tree. . . . She'd an air of lazy complacency, like an old whore who knew she'd cornered the market" (361).

While centered on a single working woman's experience of the home front in World War II, a subject that has gone under the radar of most popular histories of the era, Egan's novel is of our time. While it resonates with fiction from the 1940s—a mostly unexplored canon—it does things no novel of that decade imagined. It is far from antiquarian. For instance, *Manhattan Beach* differs in tone and characterization from the most striking feminist-oriented fiction of the forties, which combined irony, paradox, and satire—often as not directed at women as well as at men—to produce self-lacerating humor. Here I'm thinking particularly of Powell, Mary McCarthy, and Dorothy Parker. As Sandra M.

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Gilbert and Susan Gubar have pointed out, "the blitz on women during World War II contributed to the formation of a female literary tradition which . . . documents female artistic survival behind a mask, a survival achieved only with the rictus of a grin set in place" (265). There was a lot of dark comedy inspired by the gendered structure of power. Egan carries on this strain in her treatment of Anna's struggle to become a diver and in the characters of Brianne, Anna's aunt, and Nell, Anna's friend. Yet the self-directed humor feels muted in comparison, the explicitly feminist message more pointed and contemporary. Symptomatic of the difference between women writers of the 1940s and those of the late twentieth century is Elizabeth Bishop's comment about her poem "Roosters," written in 1941, which seems to unequivocally attack the rampant misogyny of the time. In a 1977 interview, Bishop recalled, "Some friends asked me to read it a year or so ago, and I suddenly realized it sounded like a feminist tract, which it wasn't meant to sound like at all to begin with. So you never know how things are going to get changed around for you by the times" (320). Bishop would have no truck with "women's anthologies." College women of her generation got "so used, very young, to being 'put down' that if you have normal intelligence and have any sense of humor you very early develop a tough, ironic attitude" (324).

Egan's novel features an alliance between a black man and a white woman, formed on the basis of their being discriminated against by a white male authority figure. Plenty of novels of the 1940s criticized American racism; indeed, there was a broad expectation that legal segregation could not long survive. The ironies of fighting a war against fascism in Europe while white civilians in Detroit and sailors in Los Angeles started race riots at home were not lost on American authors. Critiques of male supremacy also appeared in many works of fiction (particularly those written by women) during the 1940s. Yet the idea of white women and black men feeling an identity-based solidarity against the white male power structure was sparse at best, even in the case of white women authors who wrote powerful critiques of racism and white supremacy alongside critiques of women's subordination to men (e.g., Lillian Smith, McCullers, Eudora Welty, and Jo Sinclair). In African American women's writing one finds no such theme, let alone in the novels of Richard Wright and Chester Himes. Black women's fiction and poetry, such as that of Ann Petry and Gwendolyn Brooks, more often than not gives white women unsympathetic roles and aligns them with white supremacy. The critique of white male authority in Egan's novel resonates with the shift in gender roles the war brought about and with white women's writing of the forties, but it voices the sensibilities of contemporary white feminists. This draws attention to the recursive quality of cultural change and continuity, and of memory, much as the form of *Manhattan Beach* is itself recursive.

This distinction is symptomatic of a more far-reaching one between the aspiration to universality in the 1940s and the identity politics of our time, which has played no small role in the general scholarly neglect, if not dismissal, of the literature of the 1940s. In Jewish, African American, and queer—and to a lesser extent feminist or quasi-feminist—fiction of the 1940s, the attack on oppression is most often framed in terms of universal humanism. The avatars of identity politics were Hitler, Mussolini, Hirohito, Father Coughlin, and the Ku Klux Klan. Universality resonated across the world, especially in the work of "minoritized" authors—as in the final sentence of *Invisible Man*, from 1952: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" They resisted minoritizing discourses in favor of universalizing ones, to borrow terms from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. (Richard Wright called it humanism.) They did this because they came to believe, in an

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era shadowed by fascism, that all forms of minoritization and oppression interconnect (being tendencies in the human heart), and therefore that the battle for liberation must be fought on broader grounds than what one's precious identity alone provides, even when oppression operates by particularizing identity—marking the Jew, the Negro, the homosexual, and the Japanese American for subordination or worse. The universal did not reside in the abstract human being—the classical liberal subject—nor was it a Platonic ideal; it was a potential at the crossroads of social identities, forming a brake on chauvinisms, separatist idealizations, and monumentalizing traditions that curb the reach and power of creative imagination and that support *inhumanity*, to use a common term. The universal would have to be made.

An early feminist critique of *Manhattan Beach* recoiled at Anna's last-minute decision to stop her abortion and give birth to the child she has conceived with Dexter, calling it a bow to popular narrative conventions (Klemperer and Stanley). Yet it would have been anachronistic for Anna—the daughter of an Irish Catholic and the sister of a severely disabled, and beloved, girl—not to be filled with ambivalence about aborting her fetus. Her decision also reinforces the narrative pattern by which Egan has established Anna and her father's parallel life stories. While beginning to go under anesthesia for her abortion, Anna suddenly has a vision of Lydia: "With an immediacy she hadn't experienced since the night with Dexter Styles, she recalled Lydia's milky, biscuity smell, the softness of her skin and hair. Her coiled, unfinished state. The fluttering insistence of her heart. And hovering around her always, like gossamer, the dream of who she might have been. . . . It seemed to Anna now that she might bring that girl to life" (Egan 387).

Eddie Kerrigan had felt guilty that he did not love Lydia, because of her disability, and one night while his wife, Agnes, was away working he was tempted to smother her with a pillow as she slept. He told his wife afterward not to leave him alone with Lydia anymore. Agnes quit her dancing career to care for the girl. Later, on the verge of death after weeks on a life raft, Eddie "recalled his younger daughter—her mind locked inside a body condemned to stillness. His discovery of their likeness pierced Eddie with such intensity that he cried out, although no sound came. . . . And for the first time, the only time, the crime of his abandonment assailed Eddie, and he cried out, 'Lydia! Liddy!'" (398). In his guilt-ridden grief, hallucinating at the point of death, he finally can understand Lydia's babble as "the beating of a heart: his heart, her heart, one heart. Here it was, the truth that underlay all the rest, like stirrings from the bottom of the sea" (399). Egan taps into something universal here, the distinctly human entanglement of guilt with love. Binary oppositions such as past and present, sea and land, may well inhere in human cognition (even as cognition and narrative by many accounts form a binary opposition themselves), which may be why the boundary between the opposed terms and their implication in each other have always drawn writers' imaginations to the shore. "Meditation and water are wedded forever," as Egan quotes Melville in her epigraph. Call that a historicist's claim.

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