Stephen Wright’s *Meditations in Green*, A Historiographic Metafiction

Postmodern fiction possesses narrative qualities which markedly set it apart from much of the literature that was written prior. Often times there are dualities woven into the fabric of the postmodern narrative. These narratives are frequently abundant with anxieties about the future of both the individual and of the larger social community. One of the ways that postmodern literature is able to effectively convey these anxieties about the future to the greater audience is by incorporating elements of the past.

In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, literary theorist Linda Hutcheon discusses the nature of postmodern fiction and how its architecture allows for a retelling of the past in order to resonate with the present (71). Hutcheon begins her argument by claiming that texts written in a teleological manner, that is with a fixed beginning, middle, and end, present history within a specific and sometimes limited framework. Hutcheon calls this the “totalizing” of history and she states that this narrative method has been “considered by some critics as the defining characteristic of the novel as a genre” (63). Postmodern narratives, however, do not follow the teleological narrative model and are therefore free from this rigid framework. Because temporal setting is fluid and not fixed to a certain pattern, postmodern fiction is able to portray history in a way that no other movement’s literature can. Hutcheon elaborates on this representation of past events in *Politics*, coining the term “historiographic metafiction” (71). She claims

"[h]istoriography…is more an attempt to comprehend and master [the past] by means of some working (narrative/explanatory) model that, in fact, is precisely what grants a particular meaning to the past”, meaning that by breaking down the conventions of the teleological narrative, one is better suited to learn from history. Traditional narratives only serve to generalize the concept of history, limiting the meaning that can be gleaned from past events and in extension isolating the
past’s potential lessons from the present and the future. Novels that operate as historiographic metafictions break the conventional rules of teleological narratives, blur the lines of temporal setting, and engage with some historical phenomena in order to convey a new meaning from those past events. Hutcheon claims the postmodern “process of making stories out of chronicles, of constructing plots out of sequences…does not in any way deny the existence of the past real, but it focuses attention on the act of imposing order on that past, of encoding strategies of meaning-making through representation” (66-67). What the theorist means is that the postmodern narrative process unveils the deliberately constructed representation of history found in teleological narratives. Historiographic metafictions not only point out the falsities of earlier historical narratives, but because there is “an intense self-consciousness (both theoretical and textual) about the act of narrating in the present the events of the past…they are historical and contemporary” (Hutcheon 71, italics mine).

Stephen Wright’s Meditations in Green is a piece of American postmodern fiction which operates as a historiographic metafiction. The past event Meditations “de-totalizes” (to use Hutcheon’s vernacular) is the Vietnam War. One of the novel’s principle themes is that of the repression and manifestation of trauma in the human psyche. The novel facilitates this theme through the narration of the text’s central character between paralleled temporal settings. In Meditations, Wright explores what effect exposure to trauma (namely the unique violence experienced by soldiers in the Vietnam War) has on the psychology of the individual. Meditations in Green is an example of historiographical metafiction, operates within the parameters of Hutcheon’s definition of the term, and has the ability to offer a different perspective on the events comprising not only the Vietnam War, but also the current state of social order.
Although there are numerous characters in the novel one central personality surfaces in the text. This character is James Griffin. The narrative primarily functions in two paralleled temporal settings: Griffin narrating in the first person from New York City in the early 1980s and the accounts of Griffin (and a cast of other soldiers) in the jungles of Vietnam in the late 1960s. From the beginning of the novel it is clear that Griffin is the narrator of the events that take place in Vietnam, because just before the first narrative jump in time, Griffin introduces himself and the tale by saying “I, your genial storyteller, wreathed in a beard of smoke, look into the light and recite strange tales from the war back in the long ago time” (Wright 8). This structure of the narrative (as well the unstable nature of Griffin’s mind) immediately frees the text from the teleological model. Meditations constantly jumps back and forth in time and space and does not follow any specified reference point. Essentially, the narrative can be explained as Griffin trying to work through the events of his own past involvement in the Vietnam War. This does not mean the narrative follows any straightforward conventions; Griffin’s wounded psyche only complicates the nature of the narrative. The Vietnam War was complicated and therefore a novel that is classified as a historiographic metafiction and deals with such a complex conflict cannot be expected operate on a simple level.

In order to illustrate Wright’s theme of trauma and repressed memories, it is necessary to closely analyze how the text operates in both of these temporal settings. Griffin (in body and mind) is the common link between the events that occur in the time of the war and in the early 1980s. A close reading of a two key passages will aid in showing how Wright’s freedom from a teleological narrative allows him to discuss the nature of the human mind, trauma, and its repression.
The first passage that serves in illustrating these functions takes place in the jungles of Vietnam and is focalized through “1960” Griffin. It takes place just before one of the most brutally violent scenes in the narrative:

Accustomed now to the muscular aches, the tightening of the nerves, the suffocating air, the claustrophobic botany, the sweat slick as slime on his face, he realized at first with a shock, then with a curious mix of pride and embarrassment, that he could actually take this torture, that despite his intentions he truly was a soldier, a fact he had never before been able to imagine. For a moment he saw himself through other eyes, the thin fatigued body in a wet wrinkled uniform, scarred rifle clutched in grimy hand, flushed baby face staring dully beneath battered helmet. (Wright 278-79)

This passage is made up of two sentences. The first gives the reader insight to Griffin’s mind and is greatly contrasted by the perspective in the second. The second sentence sees Griffin from “other eyes” and also allows the reader to see how Griffin imagined this “other” angle.

The first sentence begins by explaining the physical wear Griffin’s days in Vietnam have taken on his body and personifies the environment of the jungle. Wright accomplishes this personification by using adjectives such as “suffocating” and “claustrophobic” in describing Griffin’s surroundings. The alliterative simile “sweat slick as slime” blurs the line between where the natural setting ends and Griffin as a human being begins. He is becoming a part of the jungle. Griffin’s feelings when he realizes he has transformed into a soldier are worthy of further discussion as well. Initially he is shocked, but then feels “pride and embarrassment”, emotions that are contradictory by definition. The reason they are contradictory is because this transformation completely compromises Griffin’s view of himself.
The shift in perspective in the second sentence echoes the realization that Griffin is having at this moment in the narrative. Furthermore, the description of what he looks like lacks grammatical conventions that are equated with a more developed intellect. There is a linguistic reversion to a primitive or animalistic state in this sentence. Phrases such as “clutched in grimy hand” and “beneath battered helmet” (to describe Griffin’s rifle and his “flushed baby face”, respectively) are prime examples of the unrefined use of language in this sentence.

In this passage Wright is using a pivotal moment in Griffin’s life to show how individuals must transform themselves into a being void of emotions in order to cope with trauma. The linguistic shift shows that the soldier is less an intellectual being and more and animalistic being. Wright sees that there is necessity in the reversion, because of the violence soldiers are exposed to and the fact that killing is a part of their job. The Marine is made into a machine, and moral conflict can only aid the enemy. Within the larger context of the novel, this passage comes just before Griffin and his company come to a downed helicopter and the see the craft’s decapitated crew “strung up by the necks with twisted lengths of bicycle chain” (Wright 279). This scene is immensely traumatic to Griffin and Wright describes the transformation of Griffin into an unfeeling Marine just before he sees this horrible image. The helicopter scene is seen through Griffin’s “freshly-discovered soldier’s eyes” (Wright 279). The transformation that Griffin has felt may have been significant, but Wright is saying that no matter how significant of a change a person may endure, they still have a connection to all they experience. There is and always will be a part of the original, pre-Vietnam Griffin within the new soldier Griffin.

The next significant passage takes place in Griffin’s New York City apartment during the early 1980s. He is talking with Trips, his veteran friend from the war:
On the wall above Trips’s right shoulder was a faint dark spot (one of those surfacing scrawls?) I realized I had been staring at for some time when it erupted into blossom, unfolding petals of unbelievable color, a liquid-quick stem plunging to the floorboard, extending curly tendrils and acid green leaves, vines whipping right and left, flowers exploding, seed pelting the room, fecundity gone mad. No, I thought, not this, not now. In seconds the entire wall was covered over, a riot of vegetation that seemed to heave and pulse. (Wright 143-44)

This passage depicts a hallucination that Griffin experiences while talking to Trips, but specifically, Wright’s choice of verbs illustrate a larger analogy to the war. The first and more obvious connection between Griffin’s hallucination and his time in Vietnam is that one of his main jobs in the war was to study pictures of the jungle’s foliage in order to kill off the enemy’s cover. This task grows into a sort of obsession with plants (both in Vietnam and NYC), becoming engrained in Griffin’s mind. The fact that the spot on the wall in this passage becomes a plant is one way that Griffin’s repressed trauma is surfacing in this paralleled temporal setting. The less obvious connection can be seen when the verbs used to describe the plant’s behavior are classified. Wright uses the words “erupted”, “plunging”, “whipping”, “exploding”, and “pelting” to describe the hallucination. The common denominator of all these verbs is that they express a violent feeling. Bombs erupt and explode. Bullets pelt. Helicopters plunge.

The second sentence of this passage is Griffin’s recognition that this is a hallucination and the expression that he does not want it to be happening. The hallucination is the involuntary manifestation of the violence he had experienced for years in the jungles of Vietnam. It can happen anytime and the only thing that Griffin can do is wish that it was not occurring. Wright’s use of internal monologue is effective because it breaks the description of the hallucination and
gives him a chance to voice his insight into the psychological element of repressed memory. The reader can see the distinction between what Griffin sees and what Griffin thinks and desires.

The third sentence of this passage goes back to the image of the hallucination and puts into perspective how quickly (“within a couple of seconds”) it took for the wall to be overgrown. Griffin sees this “riot of vegetation…heave and pulse”, which gives an eerily living quality to the inanimate wall. The language of this passage shows that Griffin is having an unpleasant experience while witnessing this hallucination. There is violence in the image, and the plant is a consuming force, much like the way the manifestations of trauma (i.e. visual hallucinations) are for Griffin.

The ability for Wright’s narrator and central character to shift between two different temporal settings frees the author to discuss the nature of trauma. It is a retrospective look at the Vietnam War, focalized through a participant of the conflict; Griffin’s detachment from reality in the setting of his New York City apartment is a direct result of what he experienced (and uses third person narration to retell) in the late 1960s. These two settings are not mutually exclusive elements. They are woven together by James Griffin, a character who was profoundly affected by the war. At one point in the setting of his apartment, Griffin tells Huey “‘Things grow whether I want them to or not. I try to pretend not to notice. They keep growing. Now I’m trying to pretend to be used to them’” (Wright 180). Through this acceptance of the resurfacing of these repressed emotions, Griffin admits that there are some things that he cannot control. He may not be entirely aware of why he feels as if he has such little control, but he can see the necessity of at least attempting to cope. By “‘trying to pretend to be used to them’” Wright shows that Griffin does not think he will ever totally overcome the trauma, but he at least recognizes that he can learn to accept it as a part of himself (180).
Meditations in Green is an exemplary example of a historiographic metafiction because of the focalization and the temporal setting. Wright is able to portray the Vietnam War through the eyes of an individual soldier, therefore showing the greater public another perspective of the war. Because of the nature of trauma and repression, this narrative model is useful in exploring what sort of psychological impact war and violence can have on the human psyche. Griffin revisits the war while struggling to deal with his current perception of reality and through this Wright is showing that there is a deep connection between the past and the present. Time is a large factor in repression, and by closing the gap in Griffin’s narratives, Wright is able to use Meditations as a staging ground for this psychological discussion.

The connection between past and present (as well as the common anxiety about the future often seen in postmodern fiction) is what Hutcheon claims is one of the most important aspects of the historiographic metafiction. Had Wright followed a teleological narrative structure, he would not have been able to show the relationship between trauma and its manifestations as he did with the paralleled temporal narratives. Instead, with the way his narrative operates, Wright is able to “note the dispersing interplay of different, heterogeneous discourses that acknowledge the undecidable in both the past and our knowledge of the past”, which turns (Hutcheon 66). History is not altered; a new voice from the past is heard to connect the past with the present in order to progress to a more ideal future.
Works Cited
