I was Southerly’s blogger for the month of September, 2014. For most of September, I was travelling across Europe.

1. Historical fiction (6 Sept 2014)

This endeavour: there are three shelves on my bookcase dedicated to it. In my citation management app, there are several hundred articles on its various aspects. And so many notes, scattered among ring-bound notebooks, online backups, and annotations: digital, or pencilled in margins. I could not begin to count my trips to the library, beginning on the campus of an obscure town in the American Midwest, and continuing in Australia, increasing both in frequency and the weight of each bag of borrowed books; I think I must have unwittingly saved enough rarely-read volumes from the Fisher Library’s infamous ‘dust test’ to fill a reasonably sized ute.

All this study. I’ll have to admit that there is something a little odd about it. Two things, actually. First is the subject: thousands of years in the past. It’s too far removed from our modern experience to be of much interest to anyone. I certainly couldn’t use this information to seem erudite at a dinner party. Except perhaps at a dinner party of etymologists or archaeologists. No, not even there—they would find me out soon enough as an amateur, a dabbler. That’s the second odd thing about it: I’m not even a historian. I’m not even a particularly good student; I don’t have the attention sp
So what have I been doing? It's a question I ask myself, gazing at those rows of hardback spines on my shelves, with a mixture of contentment—the satisfaction of the hoarder—and guilt, that I haven’t done, yet, what I set out to do, ten years ago. Yes, it’s research. But research for what?

Historical fiction. An awkward name for a strange genre: the contradiction of the two words reveals an inherent tension. History, an attempt to reconstruct the past, to establish authoritative truth from patchy and incomplete evidence, is a stern, empirical discipline that necessarily deals with the unknown, the uncertain and the unreliable: enemies with which it must contend, yet accept as the inevitable conditions of its labour. In a way, the past is also the raw material for fiction, but it’s a different kind of past, the author’s own memory. And its transformation into the finished work is a process not of purification but of bricolage: real-life experiences must be melted down and reforged in new configurations, to create stories of events that did not, by definition, actually occur. There are similarities, sure: common modes of rhetoric (diegesis) and production (synthesis), and a measure of quixotry to each. But their epistemic foundations could not be more different. They have antithetical attitudes to truth. One strives for objective fact, the other for subjective authenticity.

If the two went on a blind date, it would be a disaster. To indulge in a little crude stereotype: History, a prim woman from Oxfordshire, would look askance through her owlish spectacles at Fiction, a louche Dubliner in a velvet jacket, already on his third glass, leaning back in his seat as he regales her with an inexhaustible supply of anecdote, cheerful at first, but descending, through dinner, to a series of tearful and deplorably maudlin reminiscences—none of which, she suspects, contains a word of truth. Fiction, meanwhile, would find her stuffy, tedious and stuck-up; so cautious that she cannot recount an incident, however trivial, without listing exactly how she has heard about it, the reliability of each eyewitness and every slight discrepancy between their accounts, until any she has wrung out any drop of interest there might have been in what actually happened. The only time she shows a spark of passion is when she starts talking about competing theories of how to distinguish truth from falsehood; boring enough, and then she makes it worse by droning on about her ex-boyfriend, Philosophy, of whom she still seems to be in awe, though to Fiction he sounds like a pompous old fool, even more self-obsessed than she is. History is likewise annoyed when Fiction won’t shut up about his ex, Poetry, with whom he is still clearly infatuated, despite complaining of her erratic behaviour and addiction to absinthe; besides, if History were inclined to listen to hearsay, which of course she is not, she would know this Poetry as a woman as a woman of loose morals and a penchant for vulgar exhibitionism.

Yet I fancy—to persist with this conceit a moment longer—for all their mutual dislike, there would be a hint of envy in their attitude to each other. History, though proud of her work’s rigour, wishes that she had just a little of his pizzazz; Fiction would love to tell some of the great stories that she is burying under all that pedantry.

The temptation is there, then, on both sides; though it’s not without danger for each. In popular history, the tools of the fiction writer are sometimes used to allow the reader to follow a certain historical figure as if it were a character in a novel, for a while at least. Inevitably, this technique risks the elision of uncertainties and lacunae inherent to the historical record, in a narrative that must—if it is to seize the imagination of the reader—give the impression of an assurance that the available evidence rarely justifies. Step too far in this direction, and the historian will be accused of crossing the line that separates history proper from historical fiction. The other way historians can engage with fiction—to cite literature written contemporaneously with the events they are recounting (I’m thinking of Thomas Piketty’s references to financial matters in Austen and Balzac, to illuminate the economic history told in Capital in the Twenty-First Century)—is much safer, because here the historian acts not as novelist, but as literary critic; of a New Historicist persuasion, perhaps.

Writers of historical fiction also face a highly specific problem. In a way, it is something like a balancing act, to walk the thin line of intersection between the subjective truth of the story and the objective truth of historical evidence. Having done plenty of research, it is tempting to show that off,
to festoon every page with detail and historical allusion—and thus to bore the reader to tears. Even the greatest novelists are not immune from this temptation. It is what makes Romola, despite flashes of brilliance and a cast of fascinating characters, the most plodding volume in George Eliot's oeuvre. The other danger is of sensationalising the history, of straying too far from the facts, or using them as superficial cladding for a storyline and characters that have obviously been transplanted from the modern day. Most of what’s published under the heading of historical fiction fails on one or the other of these counts. I remember trying to read one particularly inept novel that managed to do both: tedious exposition intermingled with clumsy anachronism. I managed about ten pages before it went in the bin.

The sheer volume of bad historical fiction makes finding an accomplished instance of the genre all the more remarkable. The diversity of approach is also striking. While the bad or mediocre ones tend to seem pretty similar to each other, every good piece of historical fiction I’ve read has taken a different approach from every other. To take two obvious examples: there is little in common between the emotional intensity and immediacy of Hilary Mantel's novels, which inhabit the past with such assurance and adroitness that they seem to naturalise it, and the much more self-conscious and layered approach of A. S. Byatt’s Possession, in which we follow the journey of the historians themselves, via Byatt’s brilliance for convincing literary pastiche. While Mantel makes the history in her fiction invisible, Byatt foregrounds it: we could almost call Possession historiographical, rather than historical, fiction. Yet both are excellent. It seems that, more so than in other kinds of fiction, the genre needs constantly to reinvent itself to avoid falling into cliché.

Writing fiction is always a somewhat mysterious activity, even (or especially) for the writers themselves, and the marshalling of historical research together with the resources of the fiction writer—memory, imagination, intuition, empathy—more so. I have a kind of superstitious dread of probing the process too closely, of dissecting the golden goose. So it is in a practical rather than analytical spirit that I approach the question facing me: how best to make use of a decade’s worth of—admittedly intermittent—research, and begin to pivot from the amassing of information and the weighing of competing theories, to the antithetical activity of composing a fictional narrative.

I’ll go into some detail about the specific challenges involved in my own project in a later post. For now, I’m simultaneously inspired and intimidated by the series of posts by an earlier guest on this blog, Claire Scobie. Intimidated, because she writes about the process of historical fiction from the vantage point of having finished her novel, The Pagoda Tree, set in eighteenth-century India. I’m at the uncertain transition stage between research and beginning to write in earnest, having written no more about my chosen era (excluding research notes) than a couple of short stories: sketches, really, just getting my feet wet.

But the passage that gives me heart is where she recalls a moment of panic, when an academic tells her that the voices of her historical subjects is ‘irretrievable’. Then, she says, ‘it dawned on me, for a historian, these voices may have vanished. For a novelist, it was a question of becoming quiet enough to hear.’ With that in mind, I’m about to set the books and notes aside, allow the buzz of disputatious scholars and their warring theories to subside from my mind, get on a plane, and walk through wilderness on the other side of the world. I hope to hear some echo, to catch some glimpse of the ghosts of past millennia.
I am writing this longhand on board a barge, for the second and longer leg of a trip down the Danube via Linz to Vienna, from where I’m catching the hydrofoil to Budapest (where I’m now typing it up, and trying to make sense of the Hungarian keyboard–keyboard–layout), then a twelve-hour train ride to Bucharest, from where I’ll be able to get out to the Carpathian mountains. These cities are simply waystations for me, stopping points to sleep as cheaply as possible between the stretches of countryside I’ve been photographing and describing in obsessively detailed notes. The old adage about the journey being more important than the destination is literally true in this case.

The primary reason for this journey is to get a feel for the setting I’m writing about, and to escape from the dense tangle of fact and theory that has been clouding my mind and leaving me in a state of near-paralysis. As Claire Scobie writes on this blog: ‘If you research first and write later, there’s a danger of getting lost in the morass of reading and sinking into your sources without trace.’ That’s exactly the situation in which I found myself; the fact I’ve managed to pre-empt the opposite risk: of devising a plot that ends up unusable because of some fatal anachronism, is cold comfort, when I have been writing so little actual story.

So here I am, alternately sitting by the window and scribbling with the buzz of my fellow-passengers’ conversation in my ears (thankfully it’s in German and thus unintelligible to me), and standing out on deck taking photos of trees, which have become less dense and formidable since leaving Bavaria behind. I’m mostly ignoring the riverside houses, charmingly painted in ochre, pale
greens and subdued pinks; the old castles, proudly watching over the river traffic, or ruined and brooding; the industrial buildings and rows of pylons, arms akimbo; the Gothic churches, their steeples pointing imperiously heavenward. For me, none of these exist. My characters inhabit a time when the only permanent buildings were the great stone megaliths of old Europe, and the first cities and forts of civilisation, which had not yet spread this far west, and which would be known—if at all—as improbable rumours from distant realms: Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Levant.

Not really historical fiction, then; history doesn't reach that far back, as there are no historical sources yet—not that pertain to its geographical setting, Europe. 'Prehistorical fiction', perhaps; a neologism appropriately ugly for the obscure provenance of its sources: archaeological, primarily, supplemented by various disciplines prefixed with 'comparative'—linguistics, mythology, poetics. This is what comprises the bulk of those shelves on my bookcase I mentioned in my last post.

This may not sound like promising material for artistic endeavour. But for me, it's the acting-out of a kind of longing for the ancient past, such as described in Seamus Heaney's poem 'Bone Dreams':

Come back past
philology and kennings
re-enter memory
where the bone's lair
is a love-nest
in the grass

I don't think it's a coincidence that, in my case, this impossible desire to know the ancient past (and its sublimation into an attempt to interrogate it via the lens of fiction writing) began almost immediately on leaving Europe for the so-called 'New World'. This may be a self-indulgent reflection, but I'm hoping it has resonance for many others who have had a similar experience: to arrive, for example, in the American Midwest (and later Australia) was to be bewildered by these places' extreme novelty, the historical shallowness; there is space out there that feels unbounded, but little depth in time; or, rather, time in settler societies is perceived as a straight line, beginning with 'discovery' (invasion) and rushing forward with a relentless focus on the future.

The cycle of history is absent, or at least inaccessible. Feeling this lack is the opposite of the 'call of the sea' evoked by Italian Germanist Claudio Magris in his wonderfully rich book _Danube: A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea_, in a passage I chanced on yesterday:

The ochre and orange-yellow of the Danubian buildings, with their reassuring, melancholy symmetry, are the colours of...the confines, of time. But that blue, which the culture of the Danube has no knowledge of, is the sea, the swelling sail...the voyage to the New Indies. From the inland prison of time one yearns, understandably, for the maritime freedom of the eternal...

But— as Goethe's dictum has it— freedom only has meaning within limits. So conversely, in the void of New World presentism, I longed for the deep roots of the Old. (Of course, there is nothing really 'New' about the New World; but its pre-settler past, though fascinating, is entirely foreign to me, and unusable for a (pre)historical setting, unless I were to blunder into cultural appropriation. Such stories, I feel, are not to be told by me—a member of the invader group—but by writers with a personal, cultural connection to the past that is their heritage.)

I wonder if any such feeling prompted J. R. R. Tolkien, who spent his childhood in colonial Africa, to devote himself to philology, ancient literatures and the devising of imaginary languages and myths of a world based on his profound knowledge of archaic European cultures. Perhaps; though the
undercurrent of colonial racism, no doubt unconscious, is also, regrettably, visible in his work, and not just the Hollywood version, with its dark-skinned and dreadlocked ‘Orcs’.

I mention this not to annoy any among his legions of fans (of which I was one, as a child), but because the study of the ancients, and especially the ones that interest me in particular – the speakers of various Indo-European proto-languages (i.e., languages of which no direct record remains, but which have been partially reconstructed via the painstaking work of comparative linguistics) – has often been bound up with nationalist myth-making and racialist essentialism. The most repulsive example of this is of course the Nazis’ misappropriation of various terms and symbols, in particular the words ‘Aryan’ (which properly applies only to speakers of the Indo-Iranian proto-language, not to the western branches of the Indo-European language family) and ‘swastika’ (a conflation of a Sanskrit symbol with an ancient Germanic one that’s probably unrelated). The surge of interest in Indo-European studies, beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth, subsided considerably in the twentieth, in the face of understandable, though mostly unwarranted, odium. When the discipline revived, it had benefitted from some instructive self-criticism.

I remember being astounded by the idea that both sides of my family (Bengali with some supposedly Persian ancestry on one side, and Anglo-Irish on the other) had, at some distant point in the past, a single, common heritage. This turned out to be a little fanciful: language origin does not necessarily imply family descent, especially in the case of such a vastly expansive language group as Indo-European. Later, I became more interested in the indigenous non-Indo-European languages of Old Europe, that had been almost entirely submerged by the various invasive ones, mostly Indo-European, that supplanted them, except for a few isolated cases like Basque, in successive waves of invasion and imposition: the ‘Kurgan culture’ described by the great Lithuanian archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, for instance; a more recent example is Latin and the Romance vernaculars it left behind. These have no historical trace, and are only visible, in the languages that replaced them, as substrates: mere residues of pronunciation and grammatical quirks, with a scattering of words, mostly names of natural geographical features like mountains and bodies of water. The river Danube I am currently traversing is one such name.

These ancient lost cultures, engulfed long before the advent of writing, are an extreme case of those voices of the past deemed by scholars to be ‘irrecoverable’. As such, they present a great challenge – and, I feel, and even greater opportunity – to the fiction writer.
On the first floor of Foyles, the bookshop in Charing Cross Road, London, I found the bookshelf devoted to historical fiction. It's free-standing, and the reverse side is populated by romance novels: a not unsuitable pairing, though the appearance of the books themselves suggest an affinity with the fantasy genre: the authors' names are displayed in large, chunky lettering with aspirations to Gothic or Celtic style. So close is the marketing style or ‘branding’ of the book covers of the two genres that a stray swords-and-sorcery title had been misshelved between a novel about the Wars of the Roses and another set in the French Revolution.

From a marketing perspective, there is probably a significant overlap in the target readerships, and what likely attracts them to those genres: escapism, the desire to explore another world, and perhaps a quasi-Romantic sense of alienation from the contemporary world and its technology. I even saw one ‘prehistorical’ fiction title listed in the ‘fantasy’ category on a publisher’s website; the opposite mistake to one I spotted in Foyles. The creation of the texts themselves also poses similar challenges to fantasy writing: unlike historical fiction, the protagonist's Lebenswelt is not an adaptation of historical sources but an extended exercise in imaginative projection. The facts known about a given time in prehistory are necessarily more scant, and, between them, much wider gaps must be filled in with the writer’s speculation.

The deeper into prehistory one goes, the more acute certain problems become, while others are settled perforce: there is no question of using plausible ancient-language words in the Ice Age, for instance, because we have no idea of the languages spoken, or even the hypothesised protolanguages. That doesn't stop some authors from merrily making up arbitrary combinations of phonemes, of course, but if they do, the impression given by their work tends to degenerate into heroic or romantic fantasy; and what is true for language is true a fortiori for the broader task of the accurate portrayal of ancient culture and society. Others attempt a kind of austere simplicity, a ‘primitive’ existence in which the main reference points are the natural world, a kind of cultural tabula rasa. But this is implausible. Nowhere in the world, in any sufficiently thorough
anthropological study, can we find a simple culture; complexity seems to be an immutable feature of humanity's being in the world.

As the Hungarian philosopher and critic György Lukács argues in The Historical Novel, these questions are not cosmetic ones, but intrinsic and vital:

The historical novel therefore has to demonstrate by artistic means that historical circumstances and characters existed in precisely such and such a way. What in [Walter] Scott has been called very superficially ‘authenticity of local colour’ is in actual fact this demonstration of historical reality.

Evoking the past, not just in the sweep of history but in the small details that constantly remind us of its otherness, is indeed no trapping or guise but the substance of historical (and prehistorical) fiction, the means by which it carries out its function. And yet: ‘reality’? ‘Precisely’? These strong terms oversimplify the relationship between text and setting. The text, if it is successful, is realised as a compromise between our own language and culture and that of the past. It is not a transparent medium that lets us see into that other world, the lost world of history or prehistory. Prehistorical fiction, especially, cannot pretend to precise verisimilitude, which is why realism is a highly unsuitable mode for the genre. It is, nevertheless, the most commonly deployed one, despite the obvious anachronism of using a prose technique that originated in the nineteenth century. Perhaps the reason for this is an assumption that it is natural, invisible; but that’s a terrible assumption, as the briefest perusal of a mediocre, conventional novel set in the prehistoric past will demonstrate.

What, then, is the alternative? The opposite method – to create a pastiche of the literature contemporaneous with the setting – is incredibly difficult to pull off, and usually results in a pompous disaster. Besides, it's unavailable to prehistorical fiction, as by definition there was no literature then. The most successful and evocative texts take other routes. Margaret Elphinstone’s The Gathering Night opens with a brief dramatis personae, from which are drawn a number of first-person narrators. Each section is introduced with the narrator’s name: ‘Haizea said’, ‘Amets said’. Jim Crace’s The Gift of Stones uses a layered narrative structure, with narrators of varying degrees of reliability, constantly probing its own veracity in a way that somehow brackets questions of the authenticity of the novel as a whole. Ian Sansom, reviewing The Devil’s Larder in the London Review of Books, suggests that ‘Crace doesn’t really write prose at all: he writes dramatic poetry.’

Certainly, the texture of Crace’s writing, its spare and luminous lyricism, resists association with a particular time; in the same publication, Adam Mars-Jones remarks that Crace’s novel Harvest is ‘a historical novel that takes place outside history’, and points out the futility of trying to root out anachronism, which is endemic, like ‘Japanese knotweed in language’ that ‘sharpens the pleasure of an evocation of the past by reminding us that it can’t be more than that.’ I can recall just one such effect in The Gift of Stones: Crace repeatedly refers to the ‘scripture’, meaning an article of faith or received wisdom, of the stone-smiths who work flint, whose way of life is eventually overturned by the coming of bronze-smiths. The word operates as a metaphor, for the benefit of the reader, drawing attention to itself (and its metaphorical nature) by the fact that pre-literate, Neolithic society knew nothing of actual ‘scripture’.

The aesthetic success of books like Crace’s and Elphinstone’s – which, it must be said, makes them stand out in stark relief from the bulk of novels written in prehistoric settings – indicates that an experimental, or at least not a conventionally realist, approach is required for prehistorical fiction. This is why I’m reticent to say yes when asked if I’m writing a novel; fiction, certainly, but is the best medium for that story the novel? I can’t pretend to know the answer, yet.
Regardless of what form the story will take, the question remains: where to begin? Not with an encyclopaedic mastery of the facts, but with some detail that will catalyse the creative process: an irritant, grit in the shell, an indecipherable image or an indigestible notion.

The epitaph to Jim Crace’s *The Gift of Stones* is an excerpt from an archaeologist’s memoir: the discovery of ‘the skeletal lower arm of a child’ prompts its excavators to speculate ‘in the darkness of our tents, inventing reasons why the arm was there, and what the fate had been of that child’s other bones’. The novel can be read as an extended exercise in just such speculation.

Those kinds of moments—jumping-off points for the imagination—are impossible to force. (Or if it is possible, I would like someone to tell me how!) A few years ago, on a trip to Ukraine and Scandinavia, I visited Klekkende Høj, a collective burial mound on the Danish island of Møn, dating back to the third millennium BC. I will admit, now, that I was hoping for such a moment, an epiphany: a gift, perhaps, from the entombed souls of the ancients, a flash of atavistic insight that would illuminate their world for me, to smudge the hard academic pencil-line that separates the known from the unknowable.

As it happened, I did have an epiphany, of sorts. But it had nothing to do with my story, or any insight into the world of the ancients. The photos I took that day, indifferently shot with a cheap camera and obscured by the glare of the late afternoon sun, convey little of the thrill of sighting the burial mound, high on the hillside, or of the solemnity of the great stone slabs that form its entrance. Crouching, I could just about make my way along the passage into increasing darkness.
I waited. And experienced no moment of insight, no glimpse back across the centuries. Feeling my way through the tunnel in hoodie, jeans and sneakers, I was no more or less than a modern man, trying not to scrape my head on the ceiling.

I’m willing to admit to this moment of embarrassing naiveté and predictable failure only because this month’s travels have been so different. Certain aspects of what I want to achieve, and the outlines of a path to arrive there, have started to become visible. That’s horribly vague, isn’t it? I can’t help it; I’m too superstitious, too instinctively private. Perhaps a writer more in tune with the Zeitgeist, more willing to share the machinations of their process in the medium of a blog post, would be able to say more. These posts have already travelled to the far edge of my comfort zone for ‘sharing’—I can’t be more specific. All I can say is that after these weeks of journeying, note-taking, reading, taking photos and reflecting, I feel like I know my story’s direction of travel. That’s certainly more than I could say for that last trip, the one that included the visit to Klekkende Høj.

Is there some lesson to be learned from this contrast? A moral of the story? I can offer little but the obvious: patience, being open to the possibilities of the moment, and—perhaps this is the influence of the Germans among whom I have been travelling—the Protestant virtue of hard work.

Dull stuff! It may be—as is so often the case—the failure that’s more instructive, though I didn’t realise it at the time. It’s true that my visit to Klekkende Høj did not afford me the short-cut to a time traveller’s insight for which I had hoped. But as I mentioned, I did have another kind of epiphany. Being inside that tomb was an extraordinary experience. I can bring it to mind most effectively by recalling what is missing from the photos I took within the tomb. Even when I took them—one with a flash that eradicated the very enclosing darkness that was the essence of the moment, the other with the flash turned off, delivering only a rectangle of barely-differentiated black—I knew they would fail in their purpose, a physical record of that experience. I can only describe it in negatives, such as to say that for me, time appeared to be suspended, or at least irrelevant; or that, despite being entirely alone, I felt neither presence nor solitude.

The memory of that feeling stayed with me for some time. It was not until several years later that I found an intellectual framework in which to situate the experience. In Being Singular Plural, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy interrogates the primary qualities of existence, suggesting that its foundational nature is not individual, but shared, or communal; that Mitsein (being-with) is ‘essential to the constitution of Dasein’ (being-there), but that this centrality is obscured or underdeveloped in Heidegger’s own work, which, he suggests, requires a ‘recomposition in which Mistein would be actually coessential and originary’. Writing two years later, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk takes a similar tack, conceiving his Spheres trilogy as companion and continuation to Being and Time, and in particular, a corrective to what Sloterdijk sees as its neglect of questions relating to being-together in the world, an ‘ecstatic entwinement of the subject in the shared interior.’ It is difficult to describe in words that which precedes or follows language: ‘Once the point of being-inside has been reached, all language games of observing and facing must indeed come to an end.’ Perhaps this is why religious communion can only be evoked obliquely in the anti-discourse of mysticism; though it’s perhaps significant that Sloterdijk also insists on the primacy of song over speech. It’s in the harmony of the singing voices, rather than the meaning of the sung words, that the communal nature of the song resides. To subvert Wittgenstein’s proposition: whereof one cannot speak, therefore one must sing.

Silence, or song. Of course, the state of pre- or post-subjectivity to which Sloterdijk refers is a far more profound and extraordinary state than stumbling into a cave. But even in the simple, literal case of ‘being-inside’ at Klekkende Høj was a moment about which speech falters, and images misrepresent. I sought to cast my mind back to another time, but instead, I found myself in a profound darkness, in which, for a moment—suddenly and unexpectedly—I forgot to be myself. However irrelevant to the project of prehistorical fiction, this accidental discovery, the meaning of which has so far eluded all my attempts to grasp it. It is just the kind of indigestible notion that sticks in the craw of the mind and catalyses the creative process. I still don’t know what, if
anything, it will provoke me to write. All I know, really, is that I did not find what I set out to find—and I’m glad of that.