Death of the Fox Short Guide

Death of the Fox by George Garrett

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Sir Walter Ralegh, the Fox of the title, dominates George Garrett's novel. The other characters are defined in terms of him. The book has been called "a fictional biography" of Ralegh; and, indeed, the author once intended to write a straight-forward nonfiction treatment of this enigmatic Elizabethan figure. Ralegh is the cause of other characters' sleepless nights, the subject of their memories and daydreams, their worries, perceptions, meditations. And his own thoughts and actions provide scenes of high drama and contemplative depth.

Ralegh is presented as a multifaceted, paradoxical figure whose characteristics and contradictions embody those of the Elizabethan period, still regarded as Britain's Golden Age.

However, Garrett is no starry-eyed romantic offering the reader sanitized nostalgic pleasures. True, Ralegh, like the stereotypical hero of historical romances, possesses a flair for drama and a thirst for adventure, as well as, in old age, a stoic dignity. Still, he can be seen at times as arrogant, posturing, cruel, self-destructive, foolishly impractical — like Elizabeth herself and the era she created. Garrett's portrait of Ralegh as a man of action with a poet's sensibility is finally and definitely the portrait of a hero, but a hero of sometimes bewildering complexity.

Because of the interest he shares with the Elizabethans in "Fortune," Garrett often uses playing cards and gambling as metaphors, and these metaphors are especially useful in thinking about the Ralegh of Death of the Fox. Ralegh (who, we are told, often played cards with the brilliant and cunning Queen) has been dealt a bad hand: he has been accused of treasonable conspiracy against the new monarch, King James I, and faces inevitable conviction of the charges no matter what the evidence. The King fears Ralegh, just as he feared the late Queen; therefore, the King will not rest easy until Ralegh, like the Queen, is dead. As Ralegh's last two days unfold before us in the book's more than seven hundred pages, we witness the Fox's skill at playing his very bad hand.

Ralegh strives to turn an inescapable defeat into something of a victory. In the novel's first extended scene, a flashback to Ralegh's first treason trial in 1603 at Winchester, Ralegh wins the admiration and sympathy of the hostile audience and even scores legal points against Sir Edward Coke, England's finest legal mind. His defense is a dazzling verbal performance that is part crafty logic and part moving poetry "in the old chivalric manner."

With astounding ease the towering Ralegh (some six and a half feet tall), dressed in the "absurd fantastic elegance which the late Queen so loved," makes the King's law look "devious and equivocal." Yet he is condemned to the grisly death of drawing and quartering and imprisoned in first one "high tower" and then another to await execution. The towers symbolize Ralegh's superiority over ordinary men, even in his disgrace and defeat.

More than two hundred pages — and fifteen years — later Ralegh once again confounds his enemies, this time in a closed hearing in the "oldest, largest hall of this kingdom" at which he appears astonishingly as an elderly, lame man in sadly impoverished clothing. Instead of the anticipated legal fencing, Ralegh, in a calculated show of humility, pleads, in his own dignified way, for mercy. The King's Attorney General, Sir Henry Yelverton muses, "Both times [fifteen years ago at Winchester and now at Westminster] Ralegh astonished his antagonists. Each time may be thought of as a victory for him. . . . The Fox has tricked them again and especially the King."

Yelverton, like the King, realizes that this imprisoned man has "a dimension of freedom which staggers the mind."

Still, the sentence of death is confirmed, although it is softened to mere beheading, and will take place in the morning. At the end of the novel, Ralegh manages to put on a joyous banquet on the eve of his death, cheer his family and friends, win the admiration of his chaplain, command the respect of the witnesses at his execution, and in effect choose his place in history. In other words, he plays his poor hand with courageous skill and control to the very last moment of his life, even commanding the headsman to do his job: "What does thou fear?

Strike, man, strike!" Although he has been imprisoned for more than a decade by those with power over his body, his spirit has remained free, has seized every opportunity to shape the life of the man. It is of more than documentary significance that Ralegh, during his conditional release from the Tower to fetch gold "for a spendthrift King," built his own ship in which to sail to the New World one last time and that the ship's name is Destiny. The detail tells us that no matter what restrictions are placed on him, Ralegh continued to exercise his free will and shaped, to the extent that he can, his own destiny.

Ralegh's accomplishments, especially in the narrative's antecedent action, are impressive, but Death of the Fox characterizes Ralegh more through thoughts, memories, and speculations than through overt action. Unlike the typical historical novelist, Garrett is much more interested in psychology than in plot. The more than seven hundred pages of the novel are given over primarily to flashbacks, memories, meditations about the "contraries" and strengths of the Fox, as Ralegh reviews his life and options and as his friends and enemies try to understand his past actions and predict his future ones.

That Ralegh's enemies — even the King — fear him tells us much about the power of the man's personality. That unsentimental soldiers, sailors, courtiers admire him tells us much about his abilities as a leader and social intriguer. That the Queen kept him outside the inner circle of power tells us she understood that he was too much like her, that his independence of mind could threaten her own interests. That she forgave him for seducing and marrying one of her ladies-in-waiting and retained him as the Captain of her Guard tells us that she admired him and, unlike her successor and cousin James, respected his dangerous qualities but did not fear them.

Despite Ralegh's refusal to seek popularity, he becomes at the end of his life something of a legend. Despite his reputation as a free-thinker, indeed, an "atheist," he is conventionally and sincerely Christian. Despite his respect for the individual and love of the fruits of peace, he has slaughtered civilians in combat and continues to urge war with Spain. Despite his love of life, of the beauty of the present moment, he can risk his life almost on a whim.

Despite his fine clothes and dramatic public persona, he sees these things as unimportant in themselves. Despite his immense practical and social skills, he is scornful of "the world."

A word used often to characterize Ralegh in the novel is the word "indifferent," a word that means, in this context of power struggles, not that Ralegh is unambitious or unskilled at intrigue, but that he knows their place in the scheme of things, that he lives in the present, without ignoring the past or fearing the future. The "indifferent" characters in this novel are the characters who refuse to be influenced by fear, and that is what so awes the friends and infuriates the enemies of the Fox and his Queen. Ralegh and Elizabeth, unlike King James and his Lord Chancellor Francis Bacon, are not afraid to act or to live. It is this fearlessness, this acting upon positive rather than negative motives that so links Ralegh to his beloved Queen and so endeared him to her. They, unlike the cringing James who is paranoid about the possibility of assassination, are both fiercely unafraid of the future, not dominated by the past but cognizant of its living presence in the here and now, and so can savor the moment and act in it.

Both the Queen and Ralegh also know the difference between the public life and the private, between the necessary illusions required of monarchs and other public figures and the reality of human weakness beneath the fancy clothing and brave displays. They are both realists who have retained a kind of idealism, both self-interested pragmatists who are nevertheless capable of the immense personal sacrifices required by loyalty and honor, both good schemers and yet, finally, essentially uncorrupted. The mystery of Ralegh's loyalty to the dying Queen while all the others were seeking the favor of her successor, his apparently foolish reverence for the past while "forfeiting his future," is a mystery only to those corrupted minds in the novel (minds like King James's) who, for all their talk of virtue, cannot recognize simple honor and loyalty when it presents itself. Ralegh was the Captain of the dying Queen's Guard, the Queen who had honored him and who, he believed, had sacrificed her entire personal life for service to England. When overtures came to him from agents of James, Ralegh said simply that he "could serve only one prince at a time," a comment inevitably misunderstood by men scheming to protect their own financial and political interests, James included.

King James is the villain of the novel because of the destructive cynicism and distrust he sows in England. He de spises his English subjects and has none of their innate courage, candor, or common sense. In contrast to the pragmatic and clear-eyed Elizabeth, he is a theory-bound hypocrite who deludes himself into believing that his cringing before Spanish power is love of peace, that his attraction to boys is virtuous rejection of the evils of women, that his avarice is glorification of God, that his execution of Ralegh is protection of the realm. James's misunderstanding of the Queen is a

measure of his own vanity and of her greatness. In his very first internal monologue in the novel, James, justifying to himself his theory of the divine right of monarchs, thinks: "[T]he truth of [the Queen's] common humanity, of her flesh and blood, was no more than a dream to her . . ."

Ralegh, however, knows the truth. On the eve of his execution he composes a long letter to his surviving son. In the letter he writes that at the end of her life the Queen was required to be not herself, but much like a player . . . For she must wear a wig and cover her wrinkles with thick powders, flush her cheeks with rouge, brighten her lips with paint, not smile for fear of showing her last few blackened teeth; must perfume away the stink of aging, wear many jewels to divert the eyes from frail flesh and bones ...

The Queen ordered the mirrors in her palaces removed or covered up in the last years. And this has been taken by some as a sign of her vanity and self-deceit. They do not know, or do not remember, that her inmost bathing chambers, where she was alone with herself, as naked as God made her, were made of mirrors — walls, floors, and ceiling. To see herself. And not in delusion or vanity or selflove. But naked from all sides, as no one sees himself, so that she would know and never forget the truth of herself.

Social Concerns

Death of the Fox is the most valuable sort of historical novel, one that enters into the historical past in a profound and immediate way, one that sees historical figures as individuals of their time, not as quaintly dressed versions of ourselves. Garrett's novel is no "costume drama" in which the historical aspect is mainly a matter of clothing and other such superficialities. In interviews and essays Garrett emphasizes that the Elizabethans were different from the people of our time, and it is that difference, not "relevance," that he wanted to honor in his work.

Since the characters and events in Death of the Fox are not presented as thinly disguised versions of the reader and his or her experiences, there is no true satire in the novel. Its social concerns are more subtle and universal than those of mere satire. Many of Death of the Fox's characters are "unmodern" not only in their unquestioning religious faith, but also in what Garrett has called their "sustained duplicity, a characteristic involving feeling and perception as much as ideas, a capacity to entertain, simultaneously, paradoxical, indeed, contradictory feelings and perceptions. That capacity," he emphasizes, "stands like an ocean between us." It is partly this "duplicity" that makes possible the religious faith and the bold, enterprising actions of the Elizabethan era.

But it is important to note that the "now" of Garrett's novel is not, strictly speaking, that of the Elizabethan era.

As the novel opens, the Queen has been dead fifteen years, the length of time of Ralegh's disgrace. Ralegh has been called "the last Elizabethan," and Garrett's novel can be seen as confirming this judgment. The Jacobean characters of Garrett's novel have not yet become like the reader, but perhaps are beginning to adopt attitudes and ideas that will lead to those of the twentieth century. Twentieth-century men and women too often suffer from a decidedly un-Elizabethan anxiety about their own as well as others' motives, an anxiety that makes them suspicious of bold actions, especially of "virtuous" actions.

Shakespeare's Hamlet is typically seen as "modern" precisely to the extent that he appears to be immobilized by duplicity and inner conflict. And Hamlet's paralysis and depression are often be seen as prophetic of the social illness many have seen in Jacobean England, an illness represented in Garrett's novel primarily by King James. James frets and gives in to whims and weaknesses but does not truly act, even in the execution of Ralegh, which he simply lets happen.

Shakespeare's Hamlet was written in Queen Elizabeth's last years, when the outward glories of her reign were rapidly fading, when courtiers were beginning to scheme for preference in a new court, when Englishmen of all social classes were beginning to fear for the future of England itself. Hamlet is so disgusted by corruption and so oppressed by lies that he, like Garrett's King James, withdraws from the world in a way that twentieth century readers not only understand but more often than not heartily approve.

But Garrett's most representative Elizabethans are doers and heroic ones, strong people who can use paradox and conflict for great good, as Elizabeth did during her long reign by cleverly playing her courtiers against one another but, more importantly, by providing her countrymen with an image of greatness. In the words of R. H. W. Dillard, she and others "created an illusion of a great England and thereby made England great." Garrett shares with the Elizabethans a belief that humans are by their very nature contradictory, creatures of social as well as personal interests, of spirit as well as body, sinful creatures who are nevertheless capable of salvation. In the most indirect and subtle way, we readers are invited to consider whether our world is more like Elizabeth's (kept alive in the person of Ralegh) or more like James's. We are further invited to wonder whether we are capable of learning Elizabethan "duplicity" and whether our world would be improved or harmed by our adoption of it.

By taking us into the mystery of lives different from our own, Garrett affirms the worth of the individual.

The Elizabethans are people, not automatons responding to social forces.

The essence of Ralegh and Elizabeth, as represented by the historical record and preserved in Garrett's novel, is their adaptability, even unpredictability. If there is a social or ethical lesson here, it is that the reader, too, can act rather than react, that to view oneself as merely a victim of forces beyond one's control is to surrender whatever freedom one possesses. Bad hand or good hand, the honor or shame — and the sheer enjoyment! — resides in how skillfully one plays the cards dealt, Garrett implies. Ralegh's pleasure in even the grimmest battle of wills or wits is a measure of his freedom and vitality. It is also a measure of his emotional and moral health.

Techniques

Garrett restricts the "now" of his narrative to the last two days in Ralegh's life. This radical limitation in a novel of such length and scope allows the author to place emphasis on character more than plot, on motives more than facts, on psychology more than history. Garrett dramatizes minds in action as they dream, remember, perceive, and plan. Through multiple perspectives, the novel draws the past and the future into the present of Ralegh's final hours. The mystery of how such a resourceful figure could find himself in such a predicament focuses the fantasies, memories, and speculations of characters from all social levels and dispositions. At the center of these dreams, memories, and speculations is Ralegh himself.

Because the main characters are not purely fictional creations but are primary actors on the stage of history (characters whose fate the reader presumably already knows), there is none of the cheap suspense of the typical historical novel. There is suspense, however, about how the inescapable events will play out and how the novel will invest them with meaning. Purely fictional characters are minor figures in this novel; and one of Garrett's more effective devices is the introduction of "ghosts" — a soldier, a sailor, a courtier — each with a distinctive voice, who meditate upon the historical characters' actions and motives and thus provide the reader with a wealth of information and some compelling judgments.

But by far the most important ruminator in this novel is Sir Walter Ralegh, whose gifts as a historian and poet allow Garrett to invent a language appropriate for a narrative whose central theme is the reality and yet illusory nature of time itself. The language of Death of the Fox is both old and new, both Elizabethan and modern. The language is possessed of the variety appropriate to so many different points of view, yet uniform enough to be taken for the true language of an era.

Without distracting the reader with unconvincing, archaic diction, Garrett manages nevertheless to create a language that seems to capture the very consciousness of this complex, wordloving world that is as alive as our own and yet retains its difference, its strangeness, its remoteness in time. The synthesis of twentieth century and Renaissance language makes the simultaneity of then and now, the paradox of living and yet long dead characters, believable.

Themes

Death of the Fox explores the complex relationships between illusion and reality. The novel finds the truth about the individual devilishly difficult to obtain. And it finds the truth about humans completely inaccessible to those who see only the social or only the personal, only the body or only the soul, only the physical or only the spiritual.

In the broadest terms the novel refuses to take the cliche romantic view of Ralegh and the Elizabethans, the view that all was well in the Golden Age, that a goddess like Elizabeth was universally loved and utterly benevolent and that Ralegh was the cardboard courtier whose greatest achievement was that he gallantly draped his expensive cape over a puddle to keep a little mud from his lady's dainty feet. Garrett's Renaissance England is vicious with intrigue, filled with the brutality of death and the smells of decay and mortality. The author's refusal to accept the conventional, sentimental view can be seen in many small things, down to his refusal to accept the popular spelling (Raleigh) of his protagonist's name, a spelling that, because of its associations at the time of the novel's composition, reduced the real man to a figure on a cigarette pack or an image of mindlessly impractical chivalry.

If Garrett refuses to take the cliched "romantic" view of life, he also refuses to take the cliched "modernist" view, the view of the Elizabethans which asserts that the glory of Elizabeth and her age were merely a lie and Ralegh a ruthlessly ambitious courtier whose gallantry was just one more cynical ploy to gain power and wealth. Life, Garrett insists, in Elizabeth's or James's or our own time is neither harmlessly and thoroughly positive nor viciously and cynically negative.

Rejecting the complacently or sentimentally beneficent, the novel's view is finally positive, however. As the narrative exposes romantic illusions about life, it nevertheless shows that these illusions are, paradoxically, part of the truth, providing as they can glimpses of joyful spiritual realities. The true glory of man is the borrowed or reflected glory of God.

And the novel demonstrates that even in a more mundane sense illusions are often inescapable and benevolent — even essential. One of the charges leveled at James's court by the "ghost" of the old courtier is that it, contrary to Elizabeth's court, "is exactly as it appears to be[; that is,] idleness is now deadly serious. Men die of it ... " Idleness at the energetic Elizabeth's court was merely a graceful illusion that heightened the court's grandeur, a grandeur Elizabeth needed to govern effectively. The reader is led to the conclusion that some forms of social hypocrisy are necessary evils.

Although a rich person's clothes in effect "lie" about the flawed body underneath (and a beggar's clothes may lie about the handsome form beneath), honest people still do not go around naked. Nakedness in Garrett's work is what it was for Shakespeare and Mark Twain: a symbol of raw truth. "Rawley," as the King punningly calls him at their first meeting, stands for that, and yet knows the value of a glittering exterior. Ralegh knows the truth even as he acts the deception. The King, on the other hand, lies even to

himself and is deluded about his own motives. It takes a rigorous mind and a good heart to live among the true and the false and to use them for good.

Honest lies — the paradox is inescapable — can make life livable in this world too often filled with destructive realities. As the realist Garrett says in his poem "Angels," we must learn to "lie a little and live together."

The theme of time is perhaps the most profound theme in Death of the Fox. Ralegh's experiences and meditations have taught him that time is given meaning by an active and courageous mind, a mind that can seize and savor the present moment — that, indeed, in a very real sense, the past and the future exist for the individual only because the mind gives them reality by remembering the past, by imagining the future. This is the truth that makes action possible. But Ralegh has learned also that this is not the whole story. The past and the future both are and are not illusions. The wise man concedes the limiting presence of the past in the living moment, admits the continual arrival in the now of an invariably surprising future. Although one must live and act and rejoice in the present, wisdom and maturity (in a monarch, say, or in a soldier or a father) must learn from the past and attempt to prepare for the future.

The Ralegh of Death of the Fox is a splendid example of a mind that can somehow hold all three aspects of time to be simultaneously precious and worthless. Ralegh in 1618 is the sum of all he has done and seen and imagined in the past, present, and future. He is an old man whose knowledge of the past has allowed him to write A History of the World, a project he brings up to the living present in the long letter to his son Carew, which he drafts on the eve of his execution — and then destroys. He is a poet, whose sharp appreciation of the sensuous surfaces of the here and now allows him to absorb and rejoice in the immediate presence of the world — and yet to scorn it as the vain show of the merely physical.

He is an energetic, vital man whose perilous situation presses him to anticipate the dangers and plan the stratagems of the future — and yet to reject fear of and occasionally even consideration of time to come.

To be honest about time, Ralegh must admit that, although we do possess free will, our fate is to a large extent beyond our control, shaped by Fortune, and that Fortune is no respecter of virtue or honor. We apply our intellects to the problem of calculating and perhaps influencing the odds. But the struggle between Fortune and free will is only part of the truth about time in Death of the Fox. For Garrett, as for the Elizabethans, there is a larger force shaping the brute facts of history, a force accessible only by faith: Providence. Faith in Providence is celebrated in the perhaps otherwise inexplicably positive tone of Garrett's novel of injustice, sorrow, and death.

The artistic shape and rich imagery of the novel, which give meaning to what could have been a meaningless collection of historical events, suggests the divine shape and meaning of history.

Ralegh, playing his final hand on the scaffold, is still the resourceful Fox, speaking at great length partly, no doubt, to allow the King one last opportunity to send a messenger with a royal pardon. As a man, he must give wit and even Fortune their last chances. Ralegh acts both in the world and beyond considerations of the world, submitting finally not to the headsman, whom he must command to act, but to Providence.

Key Questions

Because it is a historical novel, Death of the Fox can inspire discussion of historical as well as literary matters; readers may want to read a biography of Walter Ralegh in preparation for discussion of actual historical events.

And because the novel's historical and literary truths are complex and subtle, Garrett's book encourages readers to consider all side of its central concerns.

Can a writer convey the truth about a historical era or even a historical event? This may be the broadest philosophical question prompted by this book. The broadest literary question readers will want to consider may be, does Death of the Fox, a novel, finally tell unambiguous truths about its (fictional) characters? From these general questions, readers can proceed to logically related specific ones — or readers may prefer to consider specific issues such as those suggested below before attempting generalization. Death of the Fox is rich enough to provide stimulating discussion through a variety of approaches.

1. To what extent is Ralegh free to act? How does his exercise of freedom compare to and contrast with that of other characters?

2. How is King James different from the previous monarch, Elizabeth I?

What do these differences suggest about Garrett's themes?

3. How has Ralegh changed over the course of his lifetime? Does he change in the course of the last two days of his life? What does such change or lack of change suggest about the novel's meaning?

4. How can one sum up the relationships among the past, present, and future lives of these characters? Which characters seem to live primarily in the past? In the present? In the future?

What are the consequences for each?

How are Ralegh's attitudes toward his sons related to these questions?

5. Can one argue that James and his supporters are sympathetic characters and Elizabeth and hers unsympathetic?

To what extent does Garrett honor the complexities of even villainous characters? To what extent does he avoid the black and white simplicity of melodrama?

6. As presented in Garrett's novel, how are the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods different? In what ways are they both different from our present era? In what ways similar?

7. What symbolic functions do clothing, card playing, birds, eyeglasses, and mirrors perform in the novel? Are these functions different from those found in other novels?

8. How can the reader reconcile Ralegh's violent acts with his role as a Christian? As a hero? To what extent is there conflict between his Christianity and his military, political, and other ambitions?

9. Why does Ralegh directly disobey royal orders on his ill-fated final voyage? After having done so, why does he return to England?

10. Why does King James seem to feel such conflict over Ralegh's situation? Why hasn't the King pardoned him long before the opening of the novel? Why does he delay Ralegh's execution for so long?

Literary Precedents

The most obvious literary precedents for Death of the Fox are to be found in the tradition of the historical novel, a form invented by Walter Scott in 1814 with the novel Waverley. It was popularized in America by James Fenimore Cooper in his sea adventures and frontier romances and continues down to the present day in such works as Colleen McCullough's novels of the last years of the Roman Republic. In his later Renaissance novel The Succession (1983), Garrett even pays somewhat ironic homage to the genre's originator by dealing directly with one of Scott's most famous subjects, Leicester's entertainment of Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth Castle.

The eminent critic Monroe Spears points out that Death of the Fox and its companion novel The Succession "are such remarkable historical novels that they may be considered either fulfillments of the genre or repudiations of it." They fulfill the best aspects of this often scorned genre because they contemplate with respect the historical past and do not try to remake it in the twentieth century's self-centered image; yet, they repudiate the worst aspects of the genre in that they are thoroughly modern works, refusing to provide escapist narratives of superficial spectacle, cheap thrills, and quaint decorative detail.

Death of the Fox can also be seen as a tragedy. Like Sophocles's Oedipus or Shakespeare's Macbeth, the protagonist is a great man trapped by a combination of Fortune and his own free choices whose fall from greatness moves the audience (the choruslike witnesses at Ralegh's execution as well as the reader) to terror and pity, in the Aristotelian sense of these terms. As in classical tragedy, the time of the action is limited and the focus of the relentless motion forward is on the inevitability of defeat.

But Death of the Fox is as much a "fulfillment" of and "repudiation" of tragedy as it is of the historical novel.

It is, in effect, also beyond tragedy.

Viewed from the broadest perspective, the work is a sweeping lyrical expression of celebration and acceptance, with affinities to such works as William Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale (c.1610-166), Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass (1855) and James Joyce's Ulysses (1922). From this point of view, the novel is more akin to King Lear (c.16051606) than Macbeth (c.1606) — and finally more akin to The Winter's Tale and The Tempest (c.1611) than any tragedy. Its tone of acceptance, its Christian fusion of ugliness and beauty, of defeat and triumph aims to take us beyond the ordinary pains and pleasures, triumphs and losses of the world. Its staggering wealth of detail and its subordination of plot, its hymns to the energy of London and its moments of earthy celebration of sex can remind us of Whitman's ecstatic New York catalogues and of Joyce's incomparable meditation on Dublin, the latter an exhaustive examination in multiple voices and radically limited clock time that ends with the rapturous beauties of "Ithaca" and "Penelope."

Finally, Death of the Fox, in its obsessive preoccupation with historical and theological concepts of time can be seen to have affinities with Eliot's Four Quartets (1943). Eliot might almost have been speaking for the Fox when he wrote such lines as, "What we call the beginning is often the end/And to make an end is to make a beginning."

Amid the whirl of events, the Fox seems to have achieved that "still point of the turning world" Eliot and his speakers yearn for. In the end T. S. Eliot, the ultimate modernist skeptic, revealed himself to be, like Garrett and his characters, an almost medieval Christian. Eliot's famous call for literature of historical consciousness that is nevertheless truly new, for an irreverent newness that is nevertheless solidly traditional can be said to be answered in the rich, poetic prose of George Garrett's most celebrated novel.

Related Titles

The Garrett work most clearly related to Death of the Fox is, as its full title indicates, The Succession:A Novel of Elizabeth and James. Its similarities to Death of the Fox are many. It, too, is a historical novel set in Britain during the time of Queen Elizabeth and King James. And it, too, is less a driving narrative than a meditation on time and history and a lyrical evocation of the age. Like Death of the Fox, The Succession brims with accurate historical details and vivid images presented in a precisely modulated diction suggesting but wisely not literally reproducing Elizabethan and Jacobean language.

The novels share a number of characters, most notably the two monarchs of the latter's subtitle. In The Succession James is presented in a somewhat more positive light. As we never did in the earlier novel, here we enter the Queen's mind. Through most of the narrative, however, the Queen is conspicuously absent. Elizabeth and James meet only in their letters, interpreted for the reader by Robert Cecil, the Queen's Secretary, another character from Death of the Fox. There are also purely fictional figures who correspond to the "ghosts" of Death of the Fox, most memorably a Jesuit priest, a player (actor), and a group of talespinning reivers on the border between Scotland and England.

If Death of the Fox is an experimental form of the historical novel, The Succession is even more so, having no protagonist as such and presenting even more minor characters and shifts in point of view than the massive (and longer) Death of the Fox. Garrett's ambitious technique here can seem radically and perhaps inappropriately "modern" — until one considers the Mannerist art of the Renaissance. The "radically new" Expressionism of T. S. Eliot's Waste Land was, we can see now, a form of artistic fragmentation and distortion remarkably similar in some ways to Mannerist works — and held together, finally, by a similar underlying Christian vision. The Succession, like Death of the Fox, is thus even in its surprisingly "unconventional" structure both of the Renaissance and of the twentieth century, early and late.

The machinations that cost Ralegh his life in 1618 are here made clearer, although Ralegh's problems are now a peripheral matter in a narrative whirlwind of spies, agents, conspirators, and innocent bystanders. The Fox testifies at the 1601 treason trial of the Earl of Essex and is seen in the novel primarily as one of Essex's antagonists and as a pawn in games played by Cecil and James. Ralegh is glimpsed as a charismatic, arrogant, intelligent, dangerous man whom events have rendered expendable.

The stable center incarnated in Ralegh in Death of the Fox seems entirely missing until one comes to realize that it is there behind the characters, rather than in them, a force or spirit rather than a body. From "a novel of Elizabeth and Ralegh" to "a novel of Elizabeth and James" Garrett, like a Mannerist painter, has consciously left the center of his new composition blank. Shakespeare's Mannerist Troilus and Cressida becomes important in the narrative, as if Garrett were pointing up such parallels. A failing Elizabeth opens and closes The Succession — but between those first and last scenes the Queen rarely appears. For more than five hundred pages the Queen and her world

are dying. But the elegiac tone of The Succession is broken again and again by the sheer vitality of its many remarkable lower class characters, from the courageous priest who goes about the country in disguise to the rowdy reivers on the northern border to the cynical player who turns out to possess "old fashioned" values and virtues. In the midst of massive political and social changes, human life goes on and amid heart breaking losses something precious is preserved. The Succession ends with a mixture of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the shrewd and the spiritual, the cynical and the innocent, the high and the low, the temporal and the timeless, a mixture which produces a moment of transcendence that manages to exceed that of Death of the Fox.

Entered from the Sun: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe (1990) appears to have concluded George Garrett's recreation of Renaissance England. The "now" of Death of the Fox is 1618; the titular succession of The Succession unfolds in 1602-03. Entered from the Sun moves yet further back in time to 1597, with flashbacks centering on 1593, when the playwright Marlowe was killed. In this novel Garrett is again concerned to imagine in the most vivid terms the daily lives of Elizabethan men and women. The central characters — Barfoot, Hunnyman, Alysoun, and the "ghost" narrator — are purely fictional creations, although saturated with the believable life of the time. In Entered from the Sun Garrett combines the historical novel with the murder mystery in order to further dramatize the difficulties humans have in arriving at the truth. The soldier Barfoot and the player Hunnyman are coerced by mysterious powers into investigating the circumstances surrounding Marlowe's death. The questions of precisely what happened in the past, what were the motives of those involved, and what is the meaning of it all are some of the same questions that engaged the reader in Death of the Fox.

Garrett's and the Elizabethans' belief in the limitations of human reason cause this novel, like the Death of the Fox and The Succession, to produce ambiguous and paradoxical answers about those aspects of life accessible to rationality.

In Entered from the Sun the reader is again offered the opportunity of seeing important Elizabethan events in a new light, including the Queen's accession and Sir Walter Ralegh's intrigues. We discover toward the very end of the novel that Ralegh, who has appeared to have nothing whatever to do with the present story, is in a way central to it.

Ralegh turns out to be the mysterious figure who has hired Barfoot to investigate the Marlowe matter. About twothirds of the way through the narrative, in one of the novel's numerous epigraphs, Ralegh's poem "The Lie" has shown him to be a courtier who talks like a reforming preacher — and in the police state of Elizabethan England, a bold one: "Say to the Court it glows and shines like rotten wood./ Say to the Church it shows what's good and doth no good./If Church and Court reply then give them both the lie." When he steps on stage in "the topmost chamber of the tower" of his Durham House, Ralegh is an awesome figure indeed. Charismatic, plain spoken, quietly menacing, keenly intelligent, imposing physically and mentally, he is a man who can make even the fearless Barfoot feel "a gust, a ghost of something I had not felt in a long time. A breath, a touch of unalloyed fear . . . ."

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