

ARTICLES

Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality

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In a well-known essay on history and fiction, Michel de Certeau maintained that ‘fiction is the repressed other of historical discourse.’ Why? Because historical discourse wages everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real—which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable. A simply true account of the world based on what the documentary record permits one to talk about what happened in it at particular times, and places can provide knowledge of only a very small portion of what ‘reality’ consists of. However, the rest of the real, after we have said what we can assert to be true about it, would not be everything and anything we could imagine about it. The real would consist of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could *possibly* be. Something like this may have been what Aristotle had in mind when, instead of opposing history to poetry, he suggested their complementarity, joining both of them to philosophy in the human effort to represent, imagine and think the world in its totality, both actual and possible, both real and imagined, both known and only experienced.

De Certeau goes on to assert that the return of the repressed other (fiction) in history creates the *simulacrum* (the novel) that the history refuses to be. However, in refusing the real (which can only be symbolized, never represented), history refuses the *possible*, and it is precisely this refusal that prohibited history from becoming a *modern* science. For it is a characteristic of modern science (as against its Aristotelian prototype) to be more interested in the real than in the true; that is why it can, like fiction,

proceed hypothetically, testing the boundary between the real and the possible, exactly in the way that modernist writing did in Pound, Eliot, Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Musil and others.

It may seem strange to conceive the difference between history and fiction in terms of the difference between enquiry directed at the provision of the true and enquiry designed to give access to the real. Are not historians interested in the real, even if the part of the real they are interested in is that of the past (or what is often called 'past reality')? To be sure, but historical enquiry is not motivated by the question of the *reality* of the past. The reality of the past is a given, it is an enabling presupposition of historical enquiry. That events actually occurred in an 'olden time' cannot be doubted, since there is plenty of factual evidence attesting to their occurrence. The problem, at least for modern historians, is: What can truthfully be asserted about such events on the basis of the (professionally determined) admissible evidence? And of course, historians are interested in what *might have* happened in the past, had circumstances or contingencies been different from what they actually were, but this kind of possibility is different from the kind typically conjured up in literary fictions set in a real past or present. In the historian's case, she may wish to identify what were the possible options for an agent acting in a situation offering real possibilities for action, but these possibilities are quite different from other, 'unreal' possibilities that may have been imagined by the agent in question.

It is quite otherwise with the writer of realistic fiction, who sets her story within a time-and-place-specific context and examines, through the emplotment of her imaginary characters' actions, the line that divides the real of that time and place from what historians would recognize as the truths we know about it. A novel such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, which recounts one day in the life of a London matron planning a reception for her diplomat husband in the evening, provides an example of what I have in mind here. It is precisely the (permeable) boundary between reality and what we human beings, caught in the throes of memory and desire, conscious and unconscious or subconscious imagining, knowledge and experience, and so on, that is the 'topic' of Virginia Woolf's great book. Her London, or rather the part of it which Woolf's heroine symbolizes, is fully recognizable as a realistic image of what London 'must have been like' in or around 1920. In this respect, Virginia Woolf's novel constitutes a kind of testimony, an example of a kind of 'witness literature' or *testimonio*, exactly similar to the representation of the living death of the inmates of Auschwitz in Primo Levi's masterpiece *Se questo è un uomo* (translated into English by Stuart Wolfe as *Survival in Auschwitz*).

The significance of Levi's book lies less in any new 'truthful' information he gives about the camps than in the artistry (by which I mean literary, poetic and rhetorical devices) he employs in order to conjure up a compelling image of a cosmos utterly horrifying and at the same time horrifyingly present as a possibility for everyone of our time. Do I mean to imply that Levi's account of his year in Auschwitz is a fiction in the sense of being a pure invention? Of course not. My point is that by using the kinds of literary devices employed by writers of fiction—including topoi, tropes and figures, schemata of thought, characterization, personification, emplotment, and so on—Levi manages to demonstrate to his readers the difference between a merely truthful account of an event, of the kind provided by most survivor-witnesses, and an artistic treatment of a real event in his past which transcends the truth–reality distinction.

Primo Levi's book is true in a fictional sense, in the sense that the *image* of Auschwitz conjured up by Levi's poetic prose is 'faithful' as well as being 'true' to the range of feelings induced by the experience of an extraordinary *historical* condition of subjection and humiliation. There is no conflict between the 'truth-content' of what Levi has to say about the experience of the Lager and the 'realism' of the representation (or, as I would prefer, 'presentation'). There is no conflict between the referential function of Levi's discourse and the expressive, affective and poetic functions. The 'coherence' of his discourse is not of the order of logical consistency alone, but of the order of imaginative consistency—the 'tropologic' of imaginal discourse—as well. This is why, even though Levi is writing about real events which took place at a real time and in a real place in his own recent past, it makes as little sense to ask of his work what is true and what is false about it as it does to ask of Picasso's *Guernica* what of it is true and what of it is false.

The conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information. And the reason why historical studies are in crisis today is not because a bunch of wild-eyed 'postmodernists' have captured the minds of the impressionable young; it is because historical studies have manifestly failed in their efforts to become the kind of 'science' they hoped to become in the nineteenth century. Prior to this time, history was cultivated in profitable combination with *belles-lettres*, epistolography and philosophy, as branches of rhetoric, serving as the foundation of a pedagogy of virtue and as a kind of archive of experience useful for statesmen, diplomats, soldiers and other servants of the public weal. But the scientization of historical studies was thought to require their severance from any connection between, not only poetic and rhetoric but also between philosophy and imaginative literature (the novel and especially the romance). This is why the topic of this symposium, the

historical novel, was anathematized by the doyen of professional historians, Leopold von Ranke, virtually from the moment of its invention at the hands of Sir Walter Scott. Henceforth, history and fiction were never to be mixed, even though the historians continued to favour the narrative mode of representation characteristic of myth, fable, epic, romance, novel and drama. Indeed, it may be argued that what Ranke and his followers did was to 'novelize' history while depriving it of both the techniques and imaginative resources of invention and representation that were henceforth exiled into the domain of 'fiction.'

In his contribution to our symposium, Professor Harry E. Shaw asks whether there is a 'problem with historical fiction.' He certainly has a point in arguing that, history, being a domain of an objective reality, is as it were too full to be able to be easily treated without being slighted by omission of identifying details of one kind or another: 'there are limits to how much you can include of the full spectrum of life in history, a spectrum stretching from individual interiority to the largest historical forces and movements.' Such a problem does not arise in the composition of a 'pure' fiction, because the writer, in creating an imaginary world, can decide which aspects of it warrant representation and which do not. The imaginative writer may exclude at will. The only information we can possibly ever have about Madame Bovary is what Flaubert chose to tell us in his novel. But the objective existence of the historical *plenum* requires that any writer wishing to use some aspect of it as a *mise-en-scène* has a reason for speaking of only some of it rather than trying to deal with the whole. Shaw finds in the historical novel an especially utilitarian motive behind the impulse to wed history with fiction: Scott's invention of the historical novel in order to deal with political issues demanding a new conception of what was 'realistic' and what was illusory in a moment of profound historical disruption. Instead of viewing Scott as someone who romanticized history, we might rather think of him as one who brought a new kind of realism to the novel.

Professor Shaw makes his case persuasively in his discussion of Scott's *Redgauntlet*, which I leave for those of our readers especially interested in the strange career of the historical novel in modern times to assess. I want to point out, however, that Shaw, like most of our symposiasts, overlooks the extent to which historians share with historical novelists 'the problem' of the too much and not enough. Historians and especially historians who use narrative as the principal mode of representation have exactly the same problem with respect to the question of what to leave out in their treatment of real events and processes in the past. When dealing with earlier periods, of course, one is helped by the fact that the sources are limited, have been lost, or never existed. Medievalists and ancientists have the problem of too

few sources. But the problem of too many is endemic to the age of print and electronic reproduction.

For anyone working in late modern and contemporary history, the problem is precisely what to exclude from consideration. It is no longer a matter of searching in obscure archives for the one new document that will authorize the admission of at least one hitherto unknown 'fact' to the normative narrative account of a community's history. Anyone opening up any topic on 'Google' will find an intimidatingly long list of sources, secondary and primary, that could take a lifetime to examine, much less analyse or interpret. This situation, even more than during the Renaissance, requires the theorization of a new 'art of topic,' a branch of rhetoric long since discredited by the sciences but one that may still prove useful in the age of digitized archives. In any event, anyone wishing to write narrative history in our time would do well to think about the discursive instruments available in the rhetorical tradition for the translation of structures into sequences and the task of giving to histories the look of a novel for purposes of representing not only the truth about the past but also the possible meanings of this truth.

Professor Amy Elias deals with 'the problem of historical fiction' within the context of her field of specialization, namely the postmodern metahistorical romance, on which she has written a book that is, in my opinion, definitive of its subject. As a gesture of reassurance to the anti-postmodernist handwringers (some of whom may be visited in the current issue of *Historically Speaking*, a journal committed, we are told, to 'an unyielding quest for intellectual integrity'), Elias begins by noting that 'surely people with sense can see that human beings are not going to give up on history' in spite of the fact that recent years have seen some good arguments in favour of giving up on a certain kind of historiography that may have outlived its social usefulness. For her, the genre of the historical romance has come back, been revived, returned (as in 'the return of the repressed'), or simply been reinvented for the same reason that a number of other modes and genres of writing reappear from time to time: as symbolic responses to historical situations that render canonical modes and means of representation, explanation, and understanding irrelevant or nugatory.

Elias believes—as I do—that when it comes to thinking about 'the meaning' of life, history is all we've got. 'When religion became myth, we needed history,' she writes. Indeed, when religion became myth, history became our metaphysics—what Lévi-Strauss called 'the myth of the West.'

We postmodernists are serious about our need for meaning, even if we are scientistically ironic about the possibility of ever finding meaning in the congeries of things we call 'reality.' Hence, we are in the paradoxical

position, so Elias suggests, of being left as our sole possible source of meaning a history understood as a millennial quest and continual failure to find meaning anywhere other than in ourselves. It is this sense of history as the failure—especially in the West—of religion, metaphysics, science, and finally history itself—this failure to find meaning in things and processes external to consciousness, that leads us to think that history—rethought, refigured, re-imagined—might hold the secret to how and why this quest was mistaken. So the anti-postmodernist handwringers are wrong when they say that the postmodernists are ‘against’ history, objectivity, rules, methods, and so on. What we postmodernists are against is a professional historiography, in service to state apparatuses that have turned against their own citizens, with its epistemically pinched, ideologically sterile, and superannuated notions of objectivity—a historiography which, in cutting itself off from the resources of *poiesis* (invention) and artistic writing, also severed its ties to what was most creative in the real sciences it sought half-heartedly to emulate.

According to Elias, this is what the so-called ‘historical sublime’ (cf. Ankersmit, Kellner, Lyotard, *et al.*) is all about:

The postmodern turn on history, at base an assertion of the sublimity of History, is from this point of view a desire for meaning that paradoxically insists on an incomplete answer to ‘why?’ It is an ongoing negotiation with the chaos of history that continually reaches toward completion and fulfillment, toward final knowledge, and is continually thrown back from the barrier of language and culture.

And I think she has a point worth considering when she argues that ‘metahistorical romance is historical fiction that morphs the historical romance genre into a literary form that is able to encompass the historiographical debates of its own time.’ Certainly her book on *Sublime Romance* shows quite clearly that postmodernist literature—from Pynchon to Coetzee—is anything but anti-historical; in fact, it is the most ‘historically obsessed’ literary movement in the history of the West. And historians who ignore it and the way it ‘manages’ the borderlands between a chaotic or entropic historical reality, on the one side, and the orderly and domesticated versions of that reality provided by professional historians, on the other, will have missed a chance to grasp the new consciousness of history emerging in our time.

Thus, as Elias has shown us, we are full in the midst of a new kind of historical novel, if novel it be and however anti-historical it may seem. It is the appearance of this phenomenon that interests me more than analyses of the traditional historical novel’s own history or discussions of early origins,

uses and prototypes. For what we make of the modern (and premodern) historical novel will be influenced if not determined by our take on the current postmodernist version.

Thus, I find Anthony Hutchison's intelligent and economical thematic discussion of Philip Roth's *I Married a Communist* confirmatory of my own sense of Roth's obsession with history (played out most overtly in his recent *The Plot Against America*) and his felt need to supplement history with personal (and for the most part autobiographical) materials in the interest of endowing the recent past with pertinence to present (especially American and Jewish) political and ethical concerns. It seems to me that Roth is in the direct line of Scott, Dickens and Balzac in his belief that history must be heeded as providing the facts that any political ideology must confront if it is to be counted as realistic. Roth's skilful interweaving of historical with personal and ethno-cultural memories, oral traditions, journalism, and so on, make of him a brilliantly pertinent commentator on 'the present' of the West. But what makes Roth something other than a postmodernist in Elias' sense of the term is that he makes it quite clear what is 'history' and what is 'imaginative fiction' in all his works, and no more so than in *The Plot Against America*, where he even appends a chronology of 'what really happened' against which to measure the extent of his own inventiveness in the 'literary' main body of the text.

Roth is a good example of a writer who genuinely believes that the historical and fictional can be mixed for certain literary purposes but ought never be confused, in the way that, say, Oliver Stone does in his movies as a matter of course. Hutchison is right on the money when he concludes that Roth displays the sensibility of the 'chastened' American liberal—'that is, a liberalism alert to the perils of a pre-occupation with moral and political purity.' He may also have noted, however, that in Roth's later work, all of it more or less 'historical' in content (I think of *Operation Shylock* especially), this alertness extends to the form (or rather the formlessness) of his novels as well. A number of the recent works end in ambiguity, bespeaking a liberalism so chastened as to have lost confidence in its earlier enabling illusions.

I have long known Richard Slotkin's work, and I admire it, both for itself and for the political causes his work has served. I have to say, however, that his discussion of the way he tries to keep his historical work and his literary work separate bespeaks the same kind of edgy wariness characteristic of Roth as interpreted by Hutchison. Like Roth, Slotkin wishes to use history, and to write it and to use literary techniques for bringing history to life and to use historical materials to give to his novels the *gravitas* their subjects deserve. Thus, in my opinion, Slotkin is perfectly justified in holding that,

on the one hand, 'history-writing requires a fictive or imaginary representation of the past' and, on the other, that 'the writing of historical fiction can be a valuable *adjunct* to the work of historians in their discipline' (my italics). Thus, he would honour what might be called the generic expectations, regarding what kinds of things we normally expect to find in novels as against histories, of a culture and society more pre- than post-modernist—because it was precisely such traditional generic expectations that modernist writers like Pound, Stein, Woolf, *et al.* both challenged and overturned.

The mixing of the types and the inversion of generic hierarchies were the order of the day for the modernists, and in postmodernist historical novelists this mixing of types goes without saying as a basis for an art worthy of serving the political needs of our time. For every system of genres presupposes a system of contents worthy of being contained only within its classificatory categories. Generic integrity is what postmodernist writers and thinkers and artists in a wide range of fields of cultural production have challenged (cf. the work of the architect Lars Lerup in *Planned Assaults*, or that of Daniel Libeskind, who specifically denies that the older generic formulas to historical-museum design can do the work necessary to adequately present the anomalies of the Holocaust). Indeed, challenges to the system of genres may be a very good definition of what we mean by 'experimental' art and science.

Richard Slotkin proposes changing the topics, subjects, and myths of the national normative narrative history of our country. I wish him well, but from the standpoint of a postmodernist I would have to say that one cannot change the content and above all the values of a given discourse without changing the form. Indeed, it may be even more important to change the form—especially of a discourse such as history, where form is more important than content for the definition of orthodoxy—than the content itself.

The problem of changing either the form or the content of the historical novel is interestingly raised in Sally Bachner's essay on Michael Ondaatje's novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, a biography of an early jazz musician who regarded his own fame as a burden to be cast off lest it require of him that he become reconciled to (white) history. Bachner uses Ondaatje's novel in order to show the dangers inherent in the postmodernist denial of meaningfulness to history. Professor Bachner's opening paragraph sums up the case both for and against the postmodernist *consumption* of history with an economy and pertinence that make it worthy of serious reflection. Sally Bachner knows what is really going on in postmodernist historiophagy. Postmodernists are, she says, lamenting the loss of the history-referent and

acting out their anguish over this loss by attacking the lost object itself. She thinks, therefore, that postmodernists really want to revise or reform historiographical practices in such a way as to justify the anguish they feel over promises that were unkept and illusions lost. Their calls for reforms of historical consciousness are, she insists, 'rarely proposed with any seriousness or sincerity.' We need not worry too much, then, about the threat to high cultural seriousness that postmodernism seems to pose in its expressions of love-hate for history.

But Bachner's Ondaatje is another matter. He not only violates all of the conventions of the historical novel, he so abuses the conventions of both history and literature as to challenge belief in the very idea of historical reality itself. In Ondaatje's fictionalized biography of the New Orleans jazz cornetist, Charles 'Buddy' Bolden, 'history signifies not a mere textual effect but a particular ontology into which—and out of which—both persons and text can move.' Ondaatje seems to believe that one may not only escape history but that history itself is nothing but a 'specific set of social relations that threaten the very exceptionality that brought one under the sign of history to begin with.' One may go mad—as did Bolden—by trying to escape them, but the effort to do so—it is suggested by Ondaatje, according to Bachner—is worth it. Moreover, the effort to escape history, which appears to be little other than a complex web of racist, sexist, classist and other kinds of abuse, is worth even the violation of the prime rule of biography which would prohibit identification of the author with his subject. Bachner suggests that Ondaatje appears to be idealizing madness as a kind of rebellion against history cum society which alone could confirm the genius of the artist without compromising him or her to the seductiveness of fame.

It is not my job to assess the validity or even the plausibility of this reading of Ondaatje's work. For me the question is: what is the moral of Bachner's tale about Ondaatje's tale about Charles 'Buddy' Bolden for our understanding of what is going on in the historical novel in recent times? Is it a moral that applies to the postmodernist project of dismantling a version of historical reality which is thought to have outlived the times of its establishment? Is it a cautionary tale, intended to warn us about never going 'too far,' even in literary invention, much less in historiography? I am unsure.

Certainly the 'mad genius' or artist driven to insanity by his art is an old theme in literary writing. And identification with one's subject is not only dangerous in both historical research and literary writing; it can be fatal. But is it true that one can go mad or be driven mad by the burden of history? Well, if by 'history' one means 'a set of social relations that

threaten the very exceptionality that brought one under the sign of the history to begin with,' as Ondaatje apparently did, then any attempt to escape from 'history' instead of from the 'set of social relations' that made the attempt to escape possible, *is* insane—or at least deluded.

What does Bachner mean by an 'ontology' of history? I am unsure here also. But her very use of the term brings us right up to the limit of rational reflection on the nature of the historical and its relation to literary writing. For I am sure of one thing: the difference between modernism and postmodernism is the difference between a sensibility that still had faith in the effort to discover the 'ontology' of the world and one that no longer has such faith. This difference is fundamental for our time.

That this is so is taken for granted by a certain kind of modernist utopian thinking, of which, according to Professor Lisa Yaszek, the American writer Ralph Ellison is an example. Yaszek argues that Ellison was groping towards, anticipating, or prefiguring what appears to be called 'Afrofuturism,' a genre which Lewis Call also deals with (without naming it as such) in his essay on Octavia Butler and Samuel Delaney. Fredric Jameson has argued that science fiction is the genre that continues to cultivate the utopian vision which, since the time of Sir Thomas More, has attended the development of modern, capitalist society as its antithetical other. Yaszek stresses that Ellison's *Invisible Man* looks ahead to later African American writers (e.g. Reed, Baraka, Delaney, and Butler) who inflect Afro-American utopianism (wish-fulfilment fantasies of deliverance or redemption) in a technoscientific direction. She places this visionary writing within the context of what she calls 'the historical recovery projects that black Atlantic intellectuals have engaged in for well over two hundred years.'

From the standpoint of contemporary historical theory, it is interesting to reflect on the relationship between Afrofuturism, intended to take control of the future of Black people in America on the one side, and the project to 'recover' the history of Afro-americans as an aid to ethnic identity and political organization on the other. This relationship between a political militancy directed to the future and another directed to the past raises the question of the social function of a notion of 'history' deprived of its traditional futurist dimension.

Prior to its disciplinization in the nineteenth century, historiography was informed by an idea of time in which the future featured quite as prominently as the past as an object of study and reflection. Recall that Western historiography did not descend directly from its antique classical prototype but passed through the alembic of Medieval Christian and, then, Protestant enthusiastic futurism (millenarianism, apocalypticism). It has always had a propensity to speculation about the future, a tendency which

translates into what Reinhart Koselleck calls a 'horizon of expectations' which authorizes studies of the past in the interest of not so much predicting the future as, rather, of seeking to have an influence on its shape or form or content. It seems to me that this was More's aim in composing his *Utopia*, in which he sets up an alternative to the social arrangements of his own present in order to gain critical perspective on it and identify possibilities for managing it in the immediate and remote future.

In the case of *The Invisible Man*, Yaszek argues, Ellison undertakes to find in the technoscientific present the resources for remaking, not only the dominant white society of America, but also its oppressed Black component. 'Afrofuturism,' Yaszek tells us, 'is not just about reclaiming the history of the past, but about reclaiming the history of the future as well.' Accordingly, Ellison shows only limited faith in the liberational potentiality of any historical approach to an understanding of the Black situation. One wonders what he would think of 'Black History Month.'

Ellison seems to have recognized that an antiquarian approach to the past of blacks in America can do little to liberate their descendants in the present. 'Men cannot unmake history,' Yaszek quotes Ellison as saying; 'thus it is not a question of reincarnating those cultural traditions which were destroyed, but a matter of using industrialization, modern medicine, modern science in general to work in the interest of these peoples rather than against them.' Apparently, he did not foresee the extent to which modern industry, medicine and science in general would be enserfed to the profit-greed of modern capitalist corporations. Or perhaps he did. According to Yaszek, in the end, 'Ellison's protagonist decides to refuse history—including the history of the future—together,' just like 'Buddy' Bolden in Odaatje's novel. 'Rather than running either backward into a sentimentalized yesterday or a whitewashed tomorrow, he instead opts out of linear time altogether.' This attempt to opt out of linear time sets the problem for Black writers such as Delaney and Octavia Butler, at least as presented by Lewis Call, who use the future-present as a place to confront the drama of desire which impells us to imagine a future and the repression of which turns us back to 'history,' the return of the repressed and the melancholy of ruins.

I have not tried to deal with the two thought experiments—literary representations of some of the problems involved in the writing of historical fictions—written by Linda Orr and James Goodwin, although I read and studied them with great interest. In the end, I decided that they required a completely different mode of analysis. All the other essays are conceptual, these are all figurative. And the question of figurative truth remains an open question. I leave it to the reader—and the authors—to say why.

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