

## **The Historical Novel and the Historical Narrative**

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

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“In history, nothing is true but names and dates. In fiction, everything is true but names and dates.”

So what does this tell us about fiction? It tells us nothing about history, for we know that while no history is entirely true, it does contain more true things than just names and dates. We know since Aristotle’s times that a narrative depends greatly on the narrator’s point of view, or his biases. So doesn’t the fiction writer have any biases?

And doesn’t history have truths on which historical novels, or historical plays, are based?

Georg Lukacs taught that we cannot know the past in any real sense except through the historical novel. And how do we judge the truth of a historical novel?

If this is true, we can know nothing about a past which has not been the subject of a historical novel. And should we believe that Scott gives us a better acquaintance of medieval Scotland than the chronicles on which he drew upon to make his novels?

A history may be defined as a narrative which follows all or most of the rules of Narrative, except that it doesn’t indulge in character analysis on a situation by situation, event by event basis.

Perhaps the main difference between the historical novel and the historical narrative is that the latter tries to give all the truth, while the historical novel gives what it considers to be the basic, or the central truth about an event, a person, or a period in history.

In a work of history, as also in a historical novel, we know, or are expected to know the main events: A victory; a betrayal; a defeat and death; a surrender; a marriage; a trial; and so on. But the novelist, while he makes you wait for the expected events to take place, he also gives a new narrative impetus to the chain of events that lead to the expected event.

Stephen Greenblatt:

In the most fully realized historical novel, the historical figures are not merely background material or incidental presences but the dominant characters, thoroughly imagined and animated. They are at the centre of our attention, and their actions in the world seem to carry the burden of a vast, unfolding process that is most fully realized in small, contingent, local gestures. Those gestures are ordinarily hidden from official chroniclers, but they are the special purview of the historical novelist.

But isn’t it obvious that this is not what Lukacs meant when he spoke about the historical novel giving us the real truth? Perhaps he meant that the historical novel is

coloured more deeply with the biases of the novelist who looks at his material as the raw clay or the block of stone in which the real shape is hidden. He has only to mould the clay, or chip away at the excess stone to realize the figure hidden in it. Ghalib said in a Persian verse of his:

*One who has the true seeing eye, when such a one  
Sets his heart upon inventorying beautiful ones, finds  
A hundred chiselled idols dancing within  
The heart of a block of stone.*

Stephen Greenblatt again:

Shakespeare borrowed what he found useful in the chroniclers and then relied on his imagination to confer upon his historical figures the appropriate intimate gestures and a language in which to articulate their dreams and desires.

Yes, this is what a historical narrative cannot do, however true to its sources it may have been. But who is to judge what is the “appropriate intimate gestures” and the “dreams” of those characters? The reader’s merely saying, “Yes! That’s how it must have happened” cannot always do. In fact, must not do. For who is to judge the reader?

It might be closer to the truth to say that the historical novel takes a real historical event or character and tries to imagine it as if it wasn’t real; rather, it was a creation of the novelist’s imagination.

Given the stipulation that all history cannot be all true, the best thing that can happen to history is that it should live like a narrative within the pages of a novel.

We know that history (as it’s written, mostly) tends to give prominence to the things and the interpretations of events which are, to put it mildly, in fashion at a given time.

Hilary Mantel:

It’s not only the voiceless workers of England who have been subject to what E. P. Thompson famously called “the enormous condescension of posterity”; it is our ancestors as a class, made fodder for theories.

Perhaps the historical novel can do justice to those whom the historical narrative has betrayed.

But let’s pause here to consider why the historical novel took so long to arise. If the novel, in Fielding’s eye, was “a comic epic in prose”, what better material could there be for the novel than the epic stories of conquests and defeats and reconstructions from our past? We note that the historical novel makes its appearance in the age of nationalism, that is, the age when the notion of the nation-state takes root. At that time, the historical novel was expected to embed national history, a nation’s aspirations, its achievements. But why couldn’t the historical novel come into existence side by side with, or shortly after history began to be conceived as a way, or in fact the way of embodying the past?

Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that until before Enlightenment, all things were supposed to have a place ordained by God (or nature). If the place of everything was known and fixed, it was clear that our world, and in fact the universe was deterministic. Such a world view cannot give birth to the historical novel which valiantly tries to explain the nature of events and people in terms of their unique characteristics. A historical novel is the creative imagination’s ultimate effort at making sense of things.