

BOOK REVIEW/ KİTAP DEĞERLENDİRME

“THE RETURN OF MARTIN GUERRE”

Natalie Zemon DAVIS, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1983, 162 pages.

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In this work we want to explain some of the important developments in historiography that mark the last decades. The strating point of this work is the book of Natalie Zemon Davis “The Return of Martin Guerre.” This is the story of what happened in the sixteenth century French town of Artigat and it deals with rural peasant life. The book is Davis’ interpretation of the events in which there some blank areas that needed filling in with assumptions, well founded as they might be. Her work is after all a scholarly endeavor where there is very little description of the scenery and the appearance of the people. In Davis’ book truth seems to be the more important value that she is trying to get at and she gives the feeling in the book version of the story that the characters are more interested in truth than anything else. It appears that truth and identity are the motifs of the book.

When the reader holds the Davis’ book and starts to read, some important questions appears at his/her mind. Firstly is this book “The Return of Martin Guerre” is a real historical document or only a story, in other words what’s the importance of this document for historical documentation? If it’s a typical example of narrative story then what does narration mean and why historians narrate to explain historical events? On the other hand why some others found narrative history problematic? And what are the advantages and the disadvantages of the narration?

Before looking at the Davis’ we should turn to 1940s and 1950s in order to explain the abandonment of narrative as an ideal model:

Historians do not have to report their truths about the real world in narrative form; they may choose other, non narrative, even anti-narrative modes of

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representation, such as meditation, the anatomy, or the epitome. Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Huizinga and Braudel, to mention only the most notable masters of modern historiography, refused narrative in certain of their historiographical works presumably on the assumption that the meaning of the events which they wished to deal with did not lend itself to representation in the narrative mode. They refused to tell a story about the past (Mitchell, J. W., 1981: 4).

However Lawrence Stone declared:

Historians were at that time strongly under the influence of both Marxist ideology and social science methodology about fifty years ago. As a result they were interested in societies not individuals and were confident that a ‘scientific history’ could be achieved which would in time produce generalized laws to explain historical change (Stone, L., 1981: 76).

Then what are the measurements of an historical document to become scientific? Generally it was accepted that “The first ‘scientific history’ was formulated by Ranke in the 19th century and was based on the study of new source materials for all establish the facts of political history”(Stone, L., 1981: 76). Nevertheless as Stone explained in the last thirty years “There have been three very different kinds of methods. There are Marxist Economic Model, The French Analyst Model and the American Cliometric Methodology.”(Stone, L. 1981: 76). Of course all the three main groups of scientific historians were supremely confident that the major problems of historical explanation were soluble and that they would succeed in solving them. On the other hand they believe that the analytical rather than the narrative mode was best suited to organize and present data, and data should be quantitative in nature. Then why these historians are not fond of narration and why they found it problematic? As Lawrence claimed there has been three important deficiency in other words disadvantages of narration:

The first problem was the old one, that argument by selective example is philosophically unpersuasive, a rhetorical device not a scientific proof. The second problem which arises from the use of detailed example to illustrate mentalité is how to distinguish the normal from the eccentric. The third problem concerns interpretation if the historian succeed to get inside the past man head the narrator will need all the skill and experience and knowledge acquired in the practice of analytical history of society, economy and culture (Stone, L., 1981: 94, 95).

Hayden White however believes that “narrative becomes a problem only when we wish to give to real events the form of story. It’s because real events don’t offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult”(Mitchell, J. W., 1981: 4)

Although some of the 20th century historiographers criticized the narration mode some other modern historians be severely criticized for their “Obsession with social, economic and demographic forces in history, and their failure to take sufficient account of political organization and decision-making and the vagaries of the military battle and siege, destruction and conquest” (Stone, L., 1981: 81). And the revival of narration started at here. These matters were neglected until the reappearance of the narration. “The inevitable importance of power of personal political decisions by individuals has forced some historians back to the narrative model” (Stone, L., 1981: 82). The second reason of the current revival of narration is “Widespread disillusionment with the economic determinist model of historical explanation” (Burke, P., 1990: 89). And the third reason was about quantification:

Despite it’s unquestionable achievements, it can’t be denied that quantification has not fulfilled the high hopes twenty years ago. Most of the great problems of history remain as insoluble as ever, it has told us a lot about the what questions of historical demography, but relatively little so far about why. (Stone, L., 1981: 85).

After all in what sense the work of Natalie Davis reflects the ‘new history’ methodology in other words narrative mode of historical writing? In her book Davis claimed that the book “Grew out of an historian’s adventure with a different way of telling past”(Davis, N. Z., 1983: vii). In this text she was narrating the 16th century rural life of France. In the 1540s in Languedoc, a peasant who was named Martin Guerre suddenly left his wife, child and property and not turned back for years, one day he came back, but after three or four years his wife said she had been tricked by an impostor and brought him to trial. At the first trial which was in Rieux this strange man persuaded the court that he was Martin Guerre, but at the second trial in Toulouse the true Martin appeared and the counterfeit Martin was hanged. This work of Davis is at the first place is a kind of a micro history looking at very minor location of three people: Martin Guerre, Arnaud du Tilh and the wife of Martin: Bertrande. But although it was an example of micro history a host of questions come from such as: disposing agricultural lands, village life, ritual ceremonies, relations between men and women, religious aspects, superstitious, judicial practises...

Davis states in her book that there were no official court transcripts for the case that have been preserved so she only had the de Coras book and the Le Sueur book for written accounts and documented sources for this story. In fact Davis included brief biographies of both de Coras and Le Sueur and their other writings as well in her book. From the book we get the sense that identity is the central issue of the story. For the author, the task of doing so is harder because she is dealing with a “micro-history”, which is a local history of small events and basically the story is a biography of one unknown peasant, Martin Guerre. In doing so Davis is concerned with local truths. One of the most important

sources for Davis's work comes from the book written by Jean de Coras which is a written account of the trial of Martin Geurre in which he was the judge. Davis states that she was compelled to write the story from reading de Coras' book because it had the "perfect narrative structure in the events of the past and it was one with such a dramatic popular appeal." Davis' book however is much richer with detail and she draws attention on a large amount of written documentation of this period in France. On the other hand she searched the archives for information, but it is from the public report that she finds most of this material including court records. There are no personal memoirs of the people in the story.

Then it can be said that she strives to reach macro aspects or in other words general results by using micro causes, particular, simple units. According to Stone the 'new narrative historians' explain "the story of a person, a trial or a dramatic episode; not for it's own sake, but in order to throw light upon the interval workings of a past culture and society." (Stone, L., 1981: 19).

Her work was one of the typical and specific example of history from below. In her work she mostly dealt with the lives of individuals rather than the elite. She looked at the lives of peasants rather than kings, presidents and generals. From the book we find out that in fact there were many different languages and customs or cultures living together in the same region at the time. This is one of the characteristics of the narration method. As Stone admitted narrative historians indicate almost without exception concerned with the lives and feelings and behavior of the poor and obscure rather than the great and powerful. (Stone, L., 1981: 19).

It was also one of the examples of history of mentality. She looked at psychological aspects of human beings and what was going on inside people's heads in the past. This was also another property of narration. "More and more of 'new historians' are now trying to discover what was going on inside people's heads in the past, and what it was like to live in the past, questions which inevitably led back to the use of narrative." (Stone, L., 1981: 85). Generally quantitative history comes to be reductionist to the study of mentalities. Because history of mentalities can't be counted. The simple problem was whether statistics were reliable indicators. And in her book Davis abstain from using quantitative tools. As we told before the inefficiency of the quantitative approach was one of the other important reason of the revival of the narration:

One further reason why a number of 'new historians' are turning back to narrative seems to be a desire to make their findings accessible once more to an intelligent, but not expert, reading public, which is eager to learn what these innovative new questions, methods and date have revealed, but can not stomach indigestible statistical tables, dry

analytical argument. Increasingly, structural, analytical, quantitative historians have found themselves talking to each other and to no one else. And 'new historians' changed this situation by abstaining from these methods.

She also utilized psychology and anthropology in her work. As we said before she was interested in feelings, emotions, behavior, patterns, values, and states of mind.

The first cause for the revival of narrative among some of the 'new historians' has therefore been the replacement of sociology and economics by anthropology as the most influential of the social sciences. Psychology itself has also had its effects on a generation now turning its attention to sexual desire, family relations and emotional bonding. (Stone, L., 1981: 86).

Peter Burke believed that the story which has been retold by Davis was "not only for its dramatic qualities but also to shed light on social structures including the structure of the family and on the way in which these structures were experienced in everyday life." (Burke, P., 1990: 92). For example Davis explained wedding ceremonies, religious aspects, geographical conditions, social and cultural life of the middle age French country side, superstitious in detail. Burke also added that in this book the central figure was "not so much Martin but his wife, Bertrand." (Burke, P., 1990: 93). This theory proves that Davis' book is also related with female history. Also the inner –psychological- conflicts and contradictions of Bertrand was emphasized and dominant in this work.

Then what kind of sources she used and in what manner these sources are used:

I use Le Sueur and Coras to supplement each other, through in the few places where they are conflict I give greater weight to the judge. In the absence of the full testimony from the trial I have worked through the registers of Parliamentary sentences to find out more about the affair and about the practice and attitudes of the judges. In pursuit of my rural actors, I have searched through notarial contracts in villages all over the dioceses of Rieux and Lombez. I would follow the villagers through the criminal courts and explain the judges changing verdicts. When I could not find my individual man or woman in Hendaye, in Artigat, in Sajas, or in Burgos, then I did my best through other sources rural families, marriage contracts, parish records of births and deaths, letters, diaries memoirs and courtship rituals and charivaris. (Davis, N. Z., 1983: 1).

From these words we understand that she was highly based her work on testimony of two jurists; the judge of the Toulouse Court Coras and one other little known figure Le Sueur. In her book at some points she also used her senses such as "I think, may be..." these interpretations should be criticized because they influence the confidence of the

work negatively. Then why she wrote this book: “My hope is to show that the adventurers of three young villagers are not too many steps beyond the more common experience of their neighbors.” (Davis, N. Z., 1983: 9).

Consequently as Stone says: “Historians have always told stories and history has always had many mansions and must continue to do so if it is to flourish in the future.” (Stone, L., 1981: 4). And as it generally accepted by the modern ‘new historians’ narration should be one of the main subject of the modern historiography. “Where there is no narrative, Croce said, there is no history, and Peter Gay, added historical narration without analysis is trivial, historical analysis without narration is incomplete.” (White, H., 1987: 5). Kant on the other hand claimed that “history is nothing without narration and historical analysis without narrative are also blind.” (White, H., 1987: 5). In general “The Return of Martin Guerre is really a very impressive book especially when we focus on the events revolving around the people in the story. The relations between the fake Martin and Bertrande’s are interesting. The gentle woman knows that the man who claims that he is Martin is a liar. But because of desperation she accepted everything and played this game. As a result she shared the sin. Some of the other most interesting events in the tale were the Bertrande’s connivance in the crime, the lawsuit, the harshness of the criminal justice system of the day, and the final verdict. Nevertheless, Davis’ work to be far less enjoyable in those parts of the novel wherein she relates conditions in sixteenth century France that are not directly tied to the main thread of the story. Despite some of the unanswered questions this is an excellent book. The Return of Martin Guerre is historically significant because it gives the reader some insight into peasant life in sixteenth century France, while keeping him entertained. Davis is able to weave details about traditional behaviors, rural life, peasants’ feelings, marriage, superstition, gender roles, familial relations, religion, and the harsh criminal justice of the time into an intriguing tale that educates as well as entertains. All these features are enough to accept Natalie Zemon Davis’ book as an historical study rather than a sole story.

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