

FICTION OR HISTORY? A BRIEF THEORETICAL ELABORATION ON HISTORICAL FICTION AND FICTIONAL HISTORY

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ABSTRACT: In the last decade, there has been a surge of interest in historical fiction both home and abroad. However, despite this phenomenal interest, there is not much written recently on the theory of the historical fiction and there seems to be much confusion about it. How can a genre such as “historical fiction” truly exist? Is it a form of fiction or history? How reliable should historical fiction be? In this article I explore these questions both as a scholar of literature and as a writer of historical fiction by making a comparative analysis between the narratives of history and fiction. Finally, I offer a set of ground rules that clarify the genre of historical fiction.

Keywords: Historical fiction, historical novel, historiography, genre studies, literature

KURGU MU, TARİH Mİ? TARİHİ KURGU VE KURGUSAL TARİH ÜZERİNE TEORETİK DEĞERLENDİRMELER

ÖZ: Geçtiğimiz yıllarda hem ülkemizde hem de uluslararası düzeyde tarihi kurgu alanına büyük bir ilgi artışı olduğu gözlenmektedir. Fakat bu yoğun ilgiye rağmen, tarihi kurgu türünde pek çalışma yapılmayı bu tür hakkında ciddi bir kafa karışıklığına neden olmaktadır. “Tarihi kurgu” tam olarak nedir? Bir hayal ürünü müdür, yoksa tarih anlatımının bir dalı mıdır? Ne kadar güvenilirirdir? İşte bu makalede hem bir akademisyen hem de tarihi roman yazarı olarak, tarih ve edebiyat alanları arasında mukayeseli bir karşılaştırma ile, bu sorulara cevap aranmaktadır. En sonda, tarihi kurgu türünün daha iyi anlaşılmasını sağlayacak bir takım temel kurallar önerilerek makale sonuçlandırılmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Tarihi kurgu, tarihi roman, tarih yazımı, edebi tür çalışmaları, edebiyat

Introduction

The term “historical fiction” is perhaps one of the most problematic cases in the fields of literary genre, criticism, science, and arts. The two components of the term—“history” and “fiction”—can even be conceived as the two oppositional ends of a long line of lexicon consisting of thousands of

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words. As a general understanding, history is a field based on dates, evidences, manuscripts, coins, documents, buildings, books, and any other artifacts, which are mostly accepted as concrete and factual whereas fiction is anything but factual; it is based on imagination and creation. Factual is the ultimate antonym of fictional as well as “fact” is the opposite counterpart of “fiction”. These are some of the reasons why Manzoni, a former practitioner of the genre, believes that historical fiction is doomed from the onset as “the falsest of genres”¹ in *The Historical Novel*, (although of course his detailed study goes beyond this simple remark that he uses to make an important point).

Once we start inquiring into the nature of this genre, questions abound: How can a genre such as “historical fiction” truly exist? Is it a form of fiction, or a branch of history? Is fiction the governing body, or is it history which forms the basis of the genre? If a form of fiction is the ultimate aim, then why does it at the same time claim to be historical? If the reverse is true, then why does history try to seem to be fictional? Moreover, what is at stake when fiction and fact merge into each other; when history and story become one another? As far as a century ago, Michael Williams noted, “The definition of historical fiction is like many other branches of the subject, a matter of dispute and uncertainty”². It is an old debate that requires new answers. In the last decade, there has also been a surge of interest in historical fiction in publishing industry, TV shows and cinema both home and abroad that has made this issue even more timely than ever. However, despite the phenomenal interest in TV shows such as *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* and *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* and *Vikings, Tudors* and *Rome*, internationally, and the ever-increasing sales of the bestselling historical novels of İskender Pala, Orhan Pamuk, Ahmet Ümit and Elif Şafak or Dan Brown, Phillippa Gregory, Ken Follet, and Umberto Eco, for that matter, there is not much written on the theory of the historical fiction and there seems to be much confusion about this particular genre.

To be able to have clear understanding and framework of historical fiction, therefore, it is imperative to continue the discussion on the genre, the theory of which has been started almost a century ago. Both as a scholar of literature and as an author of several bestselling historical novels, both as a theorist and a practitioner³ of the genre, I will explore the questions above to

¹ Alessandro Manzoni, *On the Historical Novel*, trans. Sandra Bermann, Lincoln, 1984, p. 81.

² Michael Williams, “Opportunities in Historical Fiction,” *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1922, p. 360.

³ Winner of 2015 Grand Prize for Historical Fiction by the Writers Union of Turkey.

establish a better understanding of historical fiction. To be able to have a sound analysis, it will also be necessary to decode the field of history, and its rather fragile aspects, as we will see. As Da Silva and Macedo indicate, “We cannot explore this theme without considering its counterpart from the perspective of the historian, that is, without trying to identify the limits, traceable or otherwise, of history and fiction”⁴. This will be a study more of principles and theory than one of analysis of specific works. After going through several major elaborations on the issue, I will try to establish some ground rules in the final part of the article. (The reason why I use “fiction” and “novel” sometimes interchangeably is that the term “historical novel” works as the accepted title of the genre in the field of literature as there are incomparably more novels than instances of short fiction which are meant to be historical.)

Given the quite puzzling and labyrinthine nature of the issue and the ever-present and increasing interest of readership in this genre, it is surprising to see there is not much written on the subject. *The Historical Novel* by H. Butterfield written at the second decade of the twentieth century provides us with one of the most helpful texts written to define and clarify what the genre is. “[T]he historical novel is a fusion,” Butterfield states, “It is one of the arts that are born of the marriage of different arts. A historical event is ‘put into fiction’ as a poem is put to music; it is turned into story as words are turned into song; it is put into a context of narrative . . .”⁵. Based on this premise, historical novel has a double character quality. It is historical because the historical event forms the basis of the narrative, but it is fictional, on the other hand, as the pure history is turned into a narrative, into the structure of the novel. Secondly it is a “marriage”, and a marriage requires harmony, which in turn requires compromises on both sides. It is neither a history nor a novel, but at the same time, it is both of them as well as being neither of them, henceforth the paradoxical nature.

In addition to the definition of the term, we also need to look at “historical fiction” as a linguistic entity, by taking apart its structural components with an aim to see the actual signification. Saussurian linguistics might have a something to offer in this argument since he connection between the signified and the signifier might not be fixed here since the

⁴ Teresa Christina Cerdeira Da Silva and Suzetta Macedo, “The Aura of History in Historical Fiction,” *Portuguese Studies*, Vol. 14, 1998, p. 205.

⁵ H. Butterfield, *The Historical Novel*, Cambridge, 1924, p. 6.

assumption that history is the objective narrative of events as they happened in the past is itself problematic. “The question involves a reflection on language,” explain Da Silva and Macedo, “in its dynamic relationship with the referent, in this case history; in its capacity to express reality in constantly changing terms, because it apprehends the real in discursive form; and in its inability to repeat this reality in exactly the same way on any plane other than that of language itself”⁶. To turn back to our argument, the term “historical fiction” is composed of the structure, *adjective + noun*, which makes it a noun phrase, in which “fiction” is the noun. “Historical” only modifies it, changes its meaning, shapes it, as yet, the “fiction” is the core of the phrase. “Fiction” can stand alone whereas “historical”, in this instance, cannot, as it requires a noun to exist. In the phrase, “brown table”, “brown” is an adjective and it needs the noun “table” to exist to be able to function properly whereas “table” can stand alone. The ultimate referee is not “brown” but the “table”. This analysis helps us see that in the term “historical fiction”, the ultimate referee is the “fiction”, not “historical”. To put in another way, the novel tries to be historical as yet keeping its form as a novel, rather than vice versa; a history trying to be novelistic. Using *difference* by Derrida, the “historical novel” exists by being not “novelistic/fictional history”. However, this does not mean, at all, that the noun is the same regardless of the adjective. On the contrary, the adjective does change the meaning of the noun; a “flying elephant” is, of course, different from an “elephant”, and, a “historical novel” is dramatically different from a “novel”. The point is the direction; the arrival point of the noun phrase is the noun that is the “novel”. That is why Butterfield says it is “historical event put into fiction”. Fleishman expresses the same opinion saying, “As art is of the imagination, the historical novel will be an exercise of the imagination on a particular kind of object. It is an imaginative portrayal of history, of past states and of affairs affecting human experience”⁷. The ultimate focus is on the imagination imposed upon history; and the arrival point is more towards the novel rather than it is to history.

Then the question is why the “novel” tries to be historical. What is it in history which is missing that the “novel” strives to fill in by using the events in the past as not only its starting point but also as the whole content? Here is the paradox: The novelist cannot aim to educate the audience as the field of

⁶ T. S. C. Da Silva and S. Macedo, *ibid.*, p. 205.

⁷ Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel*, Baltimore, 1971, p. 4.

history already does it, neither does s/he discover some facts during his/her background research as this makes him a historian rather than a novelist. On the other hand, yes, a novel can aim to inform the audience as it reaches incomparably greater audience than history books can do, and, yes, a writer can set out to discover some facts as a historian, as the background research s/he does requires him/her to be historian as well as a novelist. Like the historian, the novelist can also intent to teach some facts by writing a historical novel. However, none of these characteristics make neither a real historical novel, nor explain the ideal motive which should drive the historical novelist.

To solve this puzzle, we might look at how different the historical novel is, first, from other novels, and, secondly, from historiography, that is, the writing of history. Fleishman answers to the first question as, “The historical novel is distinguished among novels by the presence of a specific link to history: not merely a real building or a real event but a real person among the fictitious ones. When life is seen in the context of history, we have a novel; when the novel’s characters live in the same world with historical persons, we have a historical novel”⁸. A historical novel is not one in which only the setting; the countries, cities, towns, houses, or the context of the characters, or dresses are those of the past, but one in which any aspect of the novel, ranging from the character traits to the nature of events surrounding them is historical. If one is able to move the characters of a work to another era, to another country and if the story is still valid, then what we are mentioning is not a historical novel, but a novel only. Butterfield names this as “mere picturesqueness”⁹. Putting imaginary characters in a world which existed some while ago will only make these characters of familiar action in an unfamiliar dress, unless they can themselves be provided with a past, and in varying degrees, a consciousness of that past¹⁰. The time of the story and the context, with every bit of it should be inseparable from both the story and the characters in a historical novel:

“Every age has its own life-problems; and the novel of an age of monasticism will range through a different scheme of problems from that of an age of divorce-law activity, and the world of the Industrial Movement will show life dominated by issues different from those of the age of Chivalry.

⁸ A. Fleishman, *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ H. Butterfield, *ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁰ Mary Lascelles, *The Story-Teller Retrieves the Past*, Oxford, 1980, p. 33.

*The twentieth century differs from the twelfth not merely in its language, its dress, its implements and armor, but in its whole experience of life.*¹¹

The second question—how historical novel is different from historiography—is more problematic because this is the focal point where the ultimate clash, the most controversial aspect of historical fiction is embodied. There are similarities that almost equate these two fields, and yet, there are differences that separate them worlds apart. At first sight, it may be thought that a historical novel is simply a novel with a historical basis; a historical narrative with the traditional structure of introduction, complexion, and conclusion, consisting of inherent elements of a piece of literature such as reversals, turning points, epiphanies, major conflicts, deep and real-like characters, in a form of unity. According to this same thought, historiography, on the other hand, is only writing of history with the aim of representing the facts leading to the representation of the past as accurately as possible without worrying about artistic effects unlike the former, at all. Upon a second thought, however, it can easily be seen that the genre “historical novel” turns into a double-edged sword as, for one thing, it is supposed to represent past, as well—that is why it is historical—but, on the other hand it is supposed to be fictional and artistic—that is why it is a novel. It should be both loyal to history and representation of facts, on one hand, and to the novel, a form of art, and thus creativity, on the other. However, if it only serves to be loyal to history, than it turns into historiography; but if it serves to the novel only, than it is no more historical. While the novelist is writing his/her novel, if s/he ignores the loyal representation of facts, then there is the risk of being a traitor¹², whereas, if s/he makes writing of the facts the sole purpose, than why in the first place, did s/he want to write a novel rather than a history book?

“What makes a historical novel historical,” explains Fleishman, “is the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force—acting not only upon the characters in the novel but on the author and readers outside it”¹³. Her main emphasis is on the quality of historical novel as the point of convergence between the universal and the specific. The genre is a “hybrid;” it aims at the universal but does not depart from the rich factuality of history in order to reach that stage. “In the historical novel, the generic properties of plot, character, setting, thought, and diction operate on the materials of

¹¹ H. Butterfield, *The Historical Novel*, Cambridge, 1924, p. 34.

¹² A. Manzoni, *ibid.*, p. 74.

¹³ A. Fleishman, *ibid.*, p. 15.

history to lend esthetic form to historical men's experience"¹⁴. At this point, there are two ways to conceptualize the historical novel regarding the representation of facts: the first one is seeing the genre as transformation of facts into fiction, thus getting away from them, and giving "false" information to the reader about the past. The second way is to conceive the process as shaping history with dramatic and artistic effects and thus making it much more effective, much more "historical", more "humane", and thus, paradoxically, truer to reality. Butterfield shows how the second option is the real path of the historical novel, pointing out to the grave fact that fiction can be truer than history that I will elaborate more later on. After pointing out to some general topics of history such as treaties, military techniques, mysterious of pacts, evolution of democracy, statistics, and budgets as several examples, he states:

*"[These] are far from life. [. . .] The most homely and intimate and personal things slip through the hands of the historian. [. . .] About the closest human things, history only tells us enough to set us guessing and wondering. Because of this, history cannot come so near to human hearts and human passions as a good novel can; its very fidelity to facts makes it not perhaps less true to life, but farther away from the heart of things."*¹⁵

We may not recapture in the science of history the love of a janissary, the wrath of a king, the suffering of a peasant or the heroism of a warrior. These are the things only the historical novel can provide us with. In doing so, it makes history a truer story. However, this does not mean that the novelist can reshape history and use it as a means to his/her own ends. The responsibility is key in historical novel unlike any other artistic endeavor. Now that the novelist has chosen a piece of history as his/her subject matter, s/he is bound by the rules of the time and the findings of the other partner of the genre, which is history. It is mostly argued, then, that the historical novelist is limited by history and his/her hands are tied by chronological tables. History restricts one's imagination, and might create an insurmountable block before creativity. However, stating it as such, conceiving of historical facts as binding the novelist is an option—but a wrong one, indeed. In the creation of a good historical novel, the author sees facts as helpful and orienting, thus freeing rather than as binding. History is not merely the chain that ties the novelist down; rather, "it is the wing that helps him to soar into a new range of problems and experiences. It is his

¹⁴ A. Fleishman, *ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁵ H. Butterfield, *ibid.*, pp. 13-18.

inspiration, and not simply a tie”¹⁶. Butterfield further explains, “If the author has steeped his mind in some past age, and has lived in that age, turning it over and over in his imagination, realizing the conditions of affairs and the relationships of men and pondering over the implications of these . . . the historical peculiarities of that age will become a power”.¹⁷

In her essay, Irwin Carruthers covers the same issue using the concept of “balance” as the key: “Too many scholars lack imagination, and too many imaginative writers lack scholarship”¹⁸. She points our attention to the fact that the historical novelist should neither be solely imaginative nor totally scholarly. Rather, one should be able to find a nice balance which leads neither to fiction nor to facts, but to historical novel. But information comes with a price; in “The Novelist as Historian”, Brodine indicates the issue of responsibility as, “The genre gives great power but a responsibility commensurate with that power”¹⁹. She is also more than aware that historical facts and details are far from binding the novelist; on the contrary, it empowers the author, a quality that is not existent in other forms of art. Lukacs, in *Historical Novel* gives the example of Scott—an almost legendary historical novelist, who not only established the genre according to many, but also perfected it—for this balanced way: “He seeks the ‘middle way’ between the extremes and endeavors to demonstrate artistically the historical reality . . .”²⁰. In most of his novels, it is seen that when applied properly, history and fiction complement one another and function quite harmoniously, rather than being opposites of each other.

Let’s now look at the other side of the coin. While we mention how loyal the novel should be to the history to represent the past as it happened, we take for granted that history represents reality, and it is a field of science, which supposedly reflects the past objectively. However, is this notion really true? Does or can history give us an objective representation of the past? What is the difference between the *past* and *history*? Who writes the latter one? Is the historian narrating the Ottoman Empire the same as a chemist analyzing and describing the components of the iron? To what extent does the narrative of history borrow from literature? Such are the questions I will

¹⁶ H. Butterfield, *ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁷ H. Butterfield, *ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁸ G. Irwin Carruthers, “Historical Novels,” *Greece and Rome*, Vol. 5, No. 15, 1936, pp. 178.

¹⁹ Virginia Warner Brodine, “The Novelist as Historian,” *The Historian Teacher*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1988, p. 207.

²⁰ Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, London, 1962, p. 33.

try to answer at the second half of the paper, to have a more accurate understanding of the nature of history, and better grasping what “historical novel” can be. First, I will look at what happens when past turns into a narrative such as history, then make a comparison between the two narrators—the historian and the novelist, and finally look at how history, and thus historical novel are perceived in today’s postmodern world.

Fleishman indicates clearly at the opening of her book, “history itself does not tell truths that are unambiguous or absolute; even the nature of historical fact is problematic”²¹. Manzoni expresses the same doubt questioning, “Does history really create in its reader a succession of unproblematic and rational beliefs? Even apart from any will to deceive, has there ever been a history containing nothing but the clear and honest truth?”²². Lucaks also defines, “History is an art, an essentially literary art”²³. It is no news that a lot of scholars in the field of humanities cast serious doubts on the ultimate question of whether history can really be objective. But this should not be confused with malicious intent. What we are dealing with here is not deceptive and manipulative historiography, one which is deliberately written to distort reality for one’s own ends. Neither is it directly related to patriotic agendas of the field. Although we will also talk about these aspects rather indirectly later on, the real question here is whether pure objectivity by even the best honest historian is possible or not. Once the past is put into the narrative form of history, options of both form and content arise. The most satisfactory and comprehensive analysis concerning this issue comes from the works of Hayden White, who makes a groundbreaking analysis of the field of history.

In *Metahistory*, the term referring to the history and analysis of *history* itself, White introduces the term “emplotment”. It means that while transferring unprocessed historical data ranging from chronicles to inauguration speeches into a complete story such as, let’s say, the Fall of the Roman Empire, or any one chapter of the fall of the empire, the historian uses whether consciously or unconsciously an overall structure, a governing logic which shapes and defines his/her narrative. To put it even more simply, the historian uses an overall “plot” in the narrative, thus “emplotting” the narration. “The important point is that every history, even the most

²¹ A. Fleishman, *ibid.*, p. 4.

²² A. Manzoni, *ibid.*, p. 72.

²³ Qtd. in T. S. C. Da Silva and S. Macedo, *ibid.*, p. 206.

“synchronic” or “structural” of them, will be emplotted in some way”²⁴. While a historian may use the death of a king as the end of a series of events, another may use the same death as a beginning of “his/her” set of events. White defines at least four modes of emplotment, following the line indicated by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire*. As examples, he gives which famous historian used which mode: Michelet cast all of his histories in the Romantic mode, Ranke in the Comic one, Tocqueville in the Tragic mode whereas Burkhart used Satire. The epic plot structure, White goes on, can also be easily seen in most of the ancient histories. In one way or another, the historian finds himself already caught up in a web of emplotment; like a light switch, which is either on or off; either this or that, there is no ground in between. Emplotment is inescapable.

Let’s take, for an instance, the “Conquest of Constantinople in 1453”. For centuries now even the mere naming of this phenomenal event of history has caused serious debate and conflict among historians through ages and cultures, let alone mentioning the narratives of it in detail. Starting from the fifteenth century, many Europeans chose to name his event as “fall” or “capture” of Constantinople whereas Ottoman, Turkish and Muslim historians chose to list it as “conquest.” This is a great example to prove the inescapable nature of subjectivity and perspective in historical narratives. Without penning one single sentence, the way you name the event exposes your ideology and perspective. It could even be argued that even if you avoid making a preference between these two descriptions, let’s say, by saying, “the *War* for Constantinople in *1453*,” simply by stating the date, it is still dependent on one’s cultural positioning: A lot of Muslims wouldn’t call it “1453” but rather “857” of the Islamic calendar based on Hijri years. “Reality and the discourse on reality cannot be mixed,” say, therefore, Da Silva and Macedo²⁵. These examples show us how reality and the representation of reality are indeed two completely different things. (Even the preference over “Constantinople” or “Istanbul” can tell a lot about an historian’s perspective and here I use the former since it was Constantinople that was conquered by Mehmed II, not Istanbul which has been a Muslim metropolis ever since.)

²⁴ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Baltimore, 1973, p. 8.

²⁵ T. S. C. Da Silva and S. Macedo, *ibid.*, p. 205.

“Emplotment” is only one of many other conceptualizations of the past (not history). Explanation by formal argument is another important type. In this level, the historian may try to seek to explicate “the point of it all” or “what it all adds up to” in the end. S/he searches for an overall argument which will work as a unifying element of his/her materials at hand. “Construction of nomological-deductive argument” is a way, White states, for this end. “The most famous of such putative laws is probably Marx’s so-called law of the relationship between the Superstructure in the Base (comprised of the means of production and the modes of relationship among them) . . .”²⁶. Even the taken-for-granted events of history can change shape according to the different conceptualizations. In “Interpretation in History,” we come across the example of the French Revolution:

*“The events which occurred in France in 1789-90, which Burke viewed as an unalloyed national disaster, Michelet regards as an epiphany of that union of man with God informing the dream of the romance as a generic story-form. Similarly, what Michelet takes as an unambiguous legacy of those events for his own time, Tocqueville interprets as both a burden and an opportunity. [. . .] Marx, on the other hand, explicitly characterizes the fall of the Old Regime as a ‘tragedy’ in order to contrast it with the ‘comic’ efforts to maintain feudalism by artificial means in the Germany of his own time.”*²⁷

These historians each tell a different story about the French Revolution, and “explain” it accordingly. None of them is truer than the other one, and none is objective whereas every one of them is. Even more astonishing is that this is not the case only in the nineteenth and twentieth century historians, but also in the giant sweep of all the field of history since its beginnings. When we look at the evolution (not in the sense that it gets better, but in the sense of “change”) of history through time, what we come up with is not that surprising. “More properly speaking, the past is not recovered, represented, in the same sense as in a theatrical play”²⁸.

Another example comes from the ancients. Are we to follow the argument in the Plato’s *Republic*, it would not be difficult to infer that the history at the time should be one based on the glorification of the patriotic men and “emplotment” of events in a way that aims at the rational principle. For this reason, Plato allows hymns to the Gods and praises of famous

²⁶ H. White, *Metahistory.*, pp. 287, 327.

²⁷ Hayden White, “Interpretation in History,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1973, p. 294.

²⁸ T. S. C. Da Silva and S. Macedo, *ibid.*, p. 206.

people as the only form of poetry and he places historians to a much better position as long they are loyal to logic and mind, rather than the emotional temper. The history writing of the medieval times, on the other hand, is one based on the determination and righteousness of the established Church; more specifically that of the Catholic one against any other belief. The word “infidel” plays a major role in the history texts of this era as the historians mostly come out of the Christian Church.

When we look at later centuries, what we face is the conceptualization of history which governs mankind up to the nineteenth century: the roaring Enlightenment Era boosted by the movements of Renaissance and Reform. “The Enlightenment,” indicates Fleishman, “was notable for beginning a spirit of critical, objective interpretation, in which the past was to be related to the present and in which the total culture was to be considered, not only its political and military history”²⁹. It is true that the ultimate mode at the time was to be objective, and focusing on the culture; that is to say, to appreciate the individual rather than the military history. However, it also true that this mode was objective to the degree that the framing ideology—one of progression and development of the humankind—allowed it to be. The society, it was believed, was progressing from the primitive and savage cultures to sophisticated individuals to even better ones. “The Enlightenment attempted to justify an Organist conception of the ideal human community on the basis of an analysis of social process which was essentially Mechanistic in nature”³⁰. Voltaire, Montesquieu, Hume, Gibbon, and Kant—the great rationists of the era, White explains, put before the historian the ground for his/her analysis: “reason.” In the *Philosophy of History*, Voltaire claims that it is a simple matter to distinguish between the true and the false in history³¹. After all, didn’t man have the necessary means for this, such as faculty of reason of the mind—the pinnacle notion of the Enlightenment? (!)

Let me continue a bit more on White’s exposition of implicit plans behind historical narratives to make sure that we understand how history is closer to being a “story” than we might really think. The nineteenth century pushes the reason of the Enlightenment further meeting the realistic and scientific mode. To be realist meant collecting every available data, sorting them out, and draw “appropriate” conclusions. Epistemology was the key word defining the century. This was the age of the Victorians, of the great

²⁹ A. Fleishman, *ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁰ H. White, *Metahistory.*, p. 48.

³¹ Qtd. in H. White, *Metahistory.*

novel, of Dickens, Hugo, Thackeray, Dumas, and Balzac, as well as of Darwin and of science. As the Empire got bigger and bigger, and the Industrialization reached its zenith, the urge to understand the “human” such as the novel form suggests, to reach to universal understandings as the theory of evolution attempted, and the drive to understand the universe such as the science of the time initiated became the norms boosting the notion that man could very well do without God, trusting in science. Ironically, on the other hand, this was also the age of “realistic” historians whom we have already cited in detail: Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt. When the twentieth century came, the man had learned and compiled science enough to rule the whole world, a fact which gifted the world with two world wars. So much for the “enlightenment” narrative!

Three important figures help us understand the subjective nature of this kind of narratives from related perspectives: Foucault, Levi-Strauss, and Derrida. Looking at these theorists further demonstrate the problematic nature of the narrative of history. In *The Order of Things* Foucault exposes the close connection between language and culture. Based on the Saussurian linguistics, he believes that the words “man”, “society” and “culture” are language games of the Western mind. The first and foremost rule, according to this system, is to apply a notion of “order” in all grand narratives of history; keywords being “order”, “organization”, “construction”, and “naming”. Given the sketch of theories of history given as examples above, the drive for order is obvious, let it be the order of religion, order of mind, or order of science. Thus establishes Foucault *disordering*, *unnaming*, and *destructing* as his first and foremost missions, which White labels as “disremembering of things past”³². Discontinuity, and turning upside down the whole structure are Foucault’s main techniques, White summarizes, exposing the rather arbitrary nature of these narratives. Language, he claims, cannot represent the real unlike the previously-held assumptions. (We should also note that White clearly refutes how Foucault himself is led by “order” in his endeavor to aim at a system capable of explaining everything, being pray to his own critique—“so much for the disjunction”³³).

Levi-Strauss, as an anthropologist, focuses on the “Western” aspect of the question and indicates how history is actually written by the white Western man discriminating against the rest of the world. He further shows that no history can exist which serves objectively the interests of each and every

³² Qtd. in H. White, *Tropics*, p. 233.

³³ H. White, *Tropics*, p. 255.

culture, nation or person: “History is never history, but history *for*”³⁴. It always serves a specific group, a specific purpose. Furthermore, in *The Savage Mind*, he aims to show how the excluded, discriminated and opt-out history of the “savages” is not lower in its importance or in its sophistication than the Western mind. Stating that there has never been a “savage”³⁵ he goes on, “The history of modern science dates back only a couple centuries. However, in Neolithic times, man’s mastery of the great arts of civilization of pottery, weaving, agriculture and domestication of animals became firmly established”³⁶. This means, Levi-Strauss states, genuinely scientific attitude. However, none of the histories existent acknowledge this fact, because that was a different science fed by perfection and imagination. Accordingly, even the dates and chronologies themselves are subjective as each historian’s set would have his/her own set of “hot spots” which are richer and more crowded than other dates³⁷.

Derrida’s deconstructive analysis, which we have already applied at several points, finally indicate how the center keeps changing throughout time ranging from religion to rationality and to deconstruction itself. The evolution—not necessarily leading to a better state—of the field of history shows how the whole structure is turned upside down once the center is deciphered and when it changes hands. Moreover, the *reality* and the *factual* are themselves at stake once the signifiers lose track of reality, perhaps an illusionary term itself.

Now that we have seen how the historian is perhaps no more than a narrator, far from being objective, then what is the difference between the historian the narrator, and the novelist the narrator? How does the historian’s imagination differ (if it does) from that of the novelist? The term “constructive imagination” is rather useful here, a term coined by R. G. Collingwood, an influential name on the study of history. Historians make use of constructive imagination which drives them to see “what must have been the case” at the light of the available evidence. White compares this notion to Kant’s *a priori* imagination which functions when it tells us that even though we cannot perceive both sides of a tabletop simultaneously, we

³⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, 1966, p. 257.

³⁵ C. Levi-Strauss, *ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁶ C. Levi-Strauss, *ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁷ C. Levi-Strauss, *ibid.*, p. 259.

can be certain that it has two sides if has one, because the concept of one side entails another³⁸.

In the *Idea of History* Collingwood discusses the notion of *apriori* imagination exemplifying it as that when we first look at a ship and see it at a position, and when we later on look at it again, we see it at some other position, and we find ourselves obliged to imagine it as having occupied intermediate positions when we were not looking. This is “historical thinking”, which may be called as *apriori imagination*³⁹, one which is bound by rules. Collingwood further adds that the type of imagination applied by a novelist is not arbitrary, either. He acknowledges that characters and incidents are all imaginary; “yet the whole aim of the novelist is to show the characters acting and incidents developing in a manner determined by a necessity internal to themselves. The story, if it is a good story, cannot develop otherwise than as it does; the novelist in imagining it cannot imagine it developing except as it does develop”⁴⁰. The novelist’s imagination is thus also apriori; not arbitrary fancy, at all, let alone mentioning the case of the historical novelist.

The resemblance between the historian and the novelist is much more than one would expect, Collingwood argues. Both of them partly narrate events, he explains, partly describe situations, and partly exhibit characters and motives behind them. They aim at making their narratives coherent, where characters, events, settings, etc. complete the whole picture. In both of their works, nothing is admissible except for what is necessary. As works of imagination, the historian’s work and the novelist’s do not differ. Where they do differ, Collingwood argues, is that whereas it is enough for the novelist to create a coherent picture, the historian’s is a double task; s/he has both to be coherent and construct a picture of things as they really were and of event says they really happened⁴¹.

We have argued enough to say that the historian’s task of narrating of things as they really were and of events as they really happened may be an impossible one, indeed, narrowing –if not, erasing- the gap between the novelist and the historian. White criticizes Collingwood for being unable to see that no given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; they just offer some *elements*. The events are *made* into a

³⁸ H. White, *Tropics* p. 84.

³⁹ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, 1946, p. 241.

⁴⁰ R. G. Collingwood, *ibid.*, p. 242.

⁴¹ R. G. Collingwood, *ibid.*, p. 246.

story “by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play”⁴².

The questionable status of the story of history has become only more complex in the last century. Derrida indicated several decades ago that when the binaries are disrupted, all the system would be shattered. As such has been the story of history. How people understand history and historical novel have undergone a major change in our so-called postmodern era. In his historical analysis of the historical novel, Lukacs displays that changes in historical novel are representations of the changes in society and world at large⁴³. It could be argued that concurrent with these changes, the historical novel of the twentieth century, at least some of it, turns out to be one gotten rid of unity, order, and rationale but one based on fragmentation, unconscious, and the specific. The history of the mankind turns into history of the individual being. Fleishman draws our attention to the case of Conrad, who has written more historical fiction than any other major novelist after Scott. “Yet, the imagination which shaped history in his fiction was of a quirky, inconsistent kind”⁴⁴. Woolf, as another example, was concerned with the historical formation of the individual, and in turn, depicts history as a series of projections of personal style⁴⁵. Multiple perspectives, unreliable narrators, a game-like structure, meta-textual plays, and fusion of all sorts ranging from genre distortions to usage of direct lines from other sources regardless of whether they are chronicles or pieces of literature are some of the qualities which put their stamp in today’s postmodern (historical) novel. With the stream of modernism and post-modernism, Margaronis concludes, therefore, “with its recognition that all experience is subjective and every narrative necessarily partial: it is no longer possible to write serious historical fiction in the manner of Sir Walter Scott, who implicitly offered an omniscient, author initiative view based on extensive research”⁴⁶.

After having seen the problematic nature of both historical fiction and historiography, their areas of difference and similarity, and several major

⁴² H. White, *Metahistory*, p. 84.

⁴³ G. Lukacs, *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁴ A. Fleishman, *ibid.*, p. 212.

⁴⁵ A. Fleishman, *ibid.*, p. 233.

⁴⁶ Maria Margaronis, “The Anxiety of Authenticity: Writing Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century,” *History Workshop Journal*, No. 64, 2008, p. 139.

elaborations on the issue, now we can put forward some theoretical ground rules for historical fiction. All of these discussions can be categorized under seven points. Although they are in no way final or binding, these rules, I believe, would help both scholars of literary genre and authors of historical fiction have a better grasp of what is called historical fiction. It is not my aim to create a top-down mandate for authors and critics to follow. Rather, these should be taken as a road map and fundamental criteria to draw a general framework of historical fiction as our discussion above demonstrates the necessity for clarifications in the field.

1. Historical fiction is fiction that builds on sound historical research. Although it is first and foremost a piece of literature, good historical fiction is equally a narrative of history. But I do not say this in a naïve sense that historians' research and that of writers are two completely different things. "[T]he 'research' which tries to recapture the past is not so different from the imagination which produces a 'fiction': both are activities of the mind which men employ in order to find their bearings and establish meanings for an enigmatic reality"⁴⁷. I am aware that both historians and writers of historical fiction are sensitive to what they call "facts" during their research. My emphasis here is, rather, on the responsibility of the writer. The author has responsibility for representing history as accurately as possible and to the best of his/her knowledge. The author of historical fiction has national-cultural responsibility unlike the author of any other genre. Since the events and characters of the story come directly from history, and since this history is the product of the nation that made those events and characters possible in the first place, there is a certain national-cultural ownership of this story material. In other words, the material of historical fiction is partly the common property of the nation. Therefore, the author cannot treat this subject material as one wishes to do. This material should be given due consideration and respect that it deserves and the author should act with this sense of responsibility towards the material. It is one thing one author creates Harry Potter and make him the kind of person one wants; and quite another when same author choose Mehmed the Conqueror as his character.

2. Historical fiction is not a masquerade ball, as Georg Lukacs also indicates this in his genre study as "mere costumery." Historical elements of a story should not be put there as mere decorative elements; there needs to be an inherent connection between the context and all other elements of the

⁴⁷ Ursula Brumm, "Thoughts on History and the Novel," *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Special Issue on the Art of the Narrative, 1969, p. 329.

story. “A clear distinction has to be made between that fiction which merely uses history as a backdrop to a story which could have been set at any time, and a genuine historical novel rooted in the period in which it is set”⁴⁸. This is to say that the text should not only carry the atmosphere and aura of the historical period that it aims to contextualize in, but also all other elements of the story such as characters, dialogue and setting should come forth directly as a result of the historical period that the story takes place in. The author should always ask this question to test the validity of his/her characters in being products of their age: If one moves the characters and the story to another time and age, what would be lost in this story? “A lot” would be the answer if the work is truly a work of historical fiction.

On the other hand, it is also true that the story and characters in a work of literature should be universal and timeless. If twenty-first century readership is still interested in a story that takes place in medieval times, it is hardly because these readers are trying to get a degree in medieval age. Rather, these readers easily associate with characters and follow the story because there is a quality of ever-present and ubiquitous nature of the human condition in them. Put in another way, characters and their reactions to the events of the story are still relevant regardless of the age the events take place in. “Good historical fiction does what Charles Reade declares to be its mission,” says “Williams. “Namely: it interprets the puzzles and mysteries of history, it interprets the human nature and the spiritual interests hidden behind the records of the past; it reveals *the continuity* of the ideals and the aspirations, the struggles and the arrows of humanity”⁴⁹(*emphasis mine*). In short, it is left to the author’s genius (and hard work, for that matter) to make sure that the story is historical enough to be historical fiction; but still timely and relevant so that the readership can identify with the characters and find parallels in the events of the story with those they live in. For all this complexity, this might very well be one of the most difficult tasks of the author of historical fiction.

3. Historical fiction should easily be accessible to readers of the age the author lives in. This item might seem being at odds with the rule above since “historical” and “now” are two oppositional elements. In a novel, let’s say about the conquest of Constantinople, if the characters speak in the manner that fifteenth century Ottoman people do, the dialogues would be cryptic at

⁴⁸ Clive King, “The Historical Novel: An Under-Used Resource,” *Teaching History*, No. 51, 1988, pp. 24.

⁴⁹ M. Williams, *ibid.*, p. 362.

best, and sound ridiculous at worst. So, it would not be too far-fetched to say that all historical fiction is, in a sense, a work of translation. The dialogue (and any other related element in the story, for that matter) should be written in a way that contemporary readers of the author can easily follow and enjoy the story. However, this does not mean that the language should completely be adapted to the era of the readership. The author should try as much as possible to keep the aura of the era the story takes place in.

4. The author of the historical fiction has a similar liberty to “the poetic license.” I use the term “poetic license” rather broadly, to refer to the creative and artistic freedom of the writer. However, this creative license is only permissible as long as the author keeps his/her loyalty to the research. Creative freedom can only be used as long as it does not clash with historical facts. Therefore this liberty is most useful for dramatic purposes, to enhance the artistic elements of the story; not to bend or reverse facts. Lukacs calls this “artistic faithfulness to history”,⁵⁰. To give an example, let’s say two historical events occurred with a five year interval in between them. The story might require author narrate these events consecutively and since there is not much worthy of narration relevant to the story, it might seem as if these two events occurred rather closely even if the writer does not state explicit the dates of these two events. To put in another way, the author is free to fill in the gaps of historical facts with artistic creativity as long as this creativity does not get in the way of historical facts.

5. Historical fiction is a hundred percent copyrighted, original work. Although we said above that the subject material is the product of the nation, the end work of the author is his/her sole artistic creativity. The way the events are told, the way the characters talk, the perspective, elements of dialogue, the design of the chapters, the description of characters, etc. any other element one can think of regarding the work in question are all original work of the author. The fact that more than one author can use from same historical materials does not mean that their work is common property.

6. Historical fiction is not historiography. It is first and foremost a story; a work of literature. Historians cannot fill in the gaps of their research with creative imagination; writers can. Historians cannot provide information without necessary citation; writers can. Historians cannot focus on a certain element in a given historical event to the extent that it excludes other elements; writers can. History can neither entertain nor provide catharsis as its first and foremost aim. The list can easily be multiplied, but the important

⁵⁰ Qtd. in C. King, *ibid.*, p. 25.

thing is that writers can do these things as long as they are in tune with the rules above, or, in short, as long as they do not bend historical facts. It is also true that “History is an art, an essentially literary art,”⁵¹ and that “[both history and historical fiction] requires a knowledge of evidence and each uses imagination to understand such evidence”⁵². Nevertheless, “whilst the historian can extrapolate from the available facts, he must not invent. The novelist is not so bound, he or she can invent dialogue and situations. Both the historian and historical novelist, if they are of worth, must remain tethered to the available facts regarding a particular period.” King also explains that “The novelist's line is more elastic, allowing him/her to explore the past in ways denied to the historian.” Therefore, “we can allow the novelist greater room for speculation and invention to illuminate the past”⁵³.

7. Finally, as the most important distinction between the two fields, historical fiction is about “truth,” whereas historiography is about “facts.” Historical fiction goes beyond mere facts, conveying of which is the sole purpose of the historian. A long list of critics and philosophers from Aristotle to Lukacs have emphasized this particular aspect for centuries. “[P]oetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts,” explains Aristotle in his *Poetics*⁵⁴. Historical fiction pursues larger questions about life and the human condition rather than mere facts of history. It would therefore be fair to state that historiography is after facts, whereas historical fiction is more interested in “truth” of the human condition. Michael Williams explains this as:

*“Truth is not merely a matter of fact. Truth is the spirit which underlies all appearances and materializes in facts and deeds; truth is a hidden and spiritual force and facts are only modes of its operations A characteristic legend, or tradition, or myth concerning a city, or a man or a woman, when rightly interpreted, will often express more truth than will barrels and bales of statistical facts.”*⁵⁵

⁵¹ Qtd. in T. S. C. Da Silva and S. Macedo, *ibid.*, p. 206.

⁵² C. King, *ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵³ C. King, *ibid.*, p.25.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, “Poetics” in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 23, trans. W.H. Fyfe, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA; William Heinemann Ltd., London, 1932. Available online: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0056%3Asection%3D1447a1>, 451b-1.

⁵⁵ M. Williams, *ibid.*, p. 361.

When historical fiction follows this “truth,” it also, paradoxically, has the opportunity to capture more “facts” than a historian can ever achieve. The author of historical fiction starts from facts, but the reaching point is much more beyond these facts. King points to the same issue, explaining, “Whilst recognizing the distinction between imagination and empathy, and that between fiction and historical empathy, I believe the historical novel can be used to develop a deeper understanding of how individuals and periods might interact”⁵⁶.

Conclusion:

In this article, after seeing the problematic and confusing nature of the term of “historical fiction,” I have showed how several theorists have approached this puzzle throughout the last century. This elaboration also demonstrated how “history” can be fictional and how “fiction” can tell us more about the past than history can ever do. We have seen that the components of the term, “historical fiction” may not be that oppositional, after all. The history is a composition of narration and facts in a meaningful as yet always questionable manner; as the past turns into the narration of history, it not only loses its factual credibility but also gains a fictional quality. On the other hand, the historical novel is not a pure form of fiction as it feeds on historical events and data (no matter how questionable these very sources are), and bears a certain responsibility of loyalty to what it is based on. Finally, I have drawn a necessary seven-point road map to clarify some of the confusing elements of this genre, something that has been needed urgently given the ever-increasing interest in this genre recently.

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