Knowing the past: history, fiction, and faction

The most pellucid pearls of historical narrative are often fount in fiction, long a major component of historical understanding. More people apprehend the past through historical novels, from Walter Scott to Jean Plaidy, than through any formal history. Some novels use history as a backdrop for imaginary characters; others fictionalize the lives of actual figures, inserting invented episodes among real events; still others distort, add, and omit. As in science fiction, some fictional pasts are paradigms of the present, other exotically different; both invent pasts for readers' delectation. Yet historical novelists also declare intentions similar to historians', striving for verisimilitude to help readers feel and know the past.

Many historians consider analogies with fiction even more invidious than comparisons with memory. Their distaste is the greater because, as we have seen, they cannot avoid 'fictional' rhetoric in their own narratives. Resembling novelists as story-tellers, historians seek to distance themselves as scholars, emphasizing that history is scrupulous to the facts of the past and open to the scrutiny of other observers, whereas fiction is heedless of both constraints.

Both the distinction and the distaste are recent, however. In former times, history and fiction often coalesced or conveyed mutually supportive insights. Oral rhapsodists transmit history in much the same fashion as chroniclers, and with equal credibility. Aristotle termed fiction, showing what might and explaining how it might have happened, superior to history, which more prosaically showed what had happened. Instancing Homer's Iliad, Erasmus commended pagan historians for devising 'appropriate' fictional dialogue, 'for everyone accepts that they are allowed to put speeches into the mouths of their characters' (Erasmus allowed Christian historians less scope for invention). Style and language mattered more than fidelity to historical facts; through the eighteenth century, history was read less for what it said about the past than for how it was said.

The segregation of historical from fictional narrative was a by-product of late-Renaissance concern about the validity and accuracy of historical sources. Previously fused in classical and medieval epic, the two genres were increasingly segregated into 'history' (actual events open to scrutiny from other sources) and 'poetry' or 'romance' (which eschewed any pretence to historical fidelity). The aristocracy in late medieval France recorded its ideology in prose, the preferred language of factuality. Others preferred fiction, for 'the poet may say or sing things, not as they were but as they ought to have been', as Don Quixote's Samson remarks, while 'the historian must write things, not as they ought to be, but as they have been, without adding or taking aught from the truth'. Constrained to seem faithful to known facts, historians surrendered the authorial omniscience that epic bards had had. And as history retreated to the arid confines of empirical rigour, novelists took over the richer if more fanciful aspects of the past that historians relinquished. To make the past present, to bring the distant near,... to invest with the reality of human flesh and blood, ... to call up our ancestors before us with all their peculiarities of language, manners, and garb, to show us over their houses, to seat us at their tables, to rummage their old-fashioned wardrobes', as Macaulay put it, 'these parts of the duty which properly belongs to the historian, have been appropriated by the historical novelist.'

As history's handmaid fiction gained general acclaim in the nineteenth century. Scott's imaginative empathy with the past made history itself enormously popular; he taught that 'bygone ages ... were actually filled by living men, ... with colour in their cheeks, with passions in their stomach', as Carlyle attested, 'not by protocols, state-papers, controversies and abstractions'.

The historical novel not only made history vivid; it was held a more trustworthy guide to the past. 'Out of the fictitious book I get the expression of the life of the time - the old times live again', Thackeray asserted. 'Can the heaviest historian do more for me?' Fiction dealt with common
everyday things as well as with the momentous episodes to which history was mostly confined. 'I would have History familiar rather than heroic', echoed his Henry Esmond. No wonder the Marxist critic Georg Lukács commended Scott. The poetic awakening of ordinary people caught up in great historical events mattered more than the events themselves; through the humble annals of the poor, readers could re-experience what led men of the past to think, feel, and act as they did. To bring out 'the nature and power of a people's genius', academic history should give way to historical fiction. Scholars turned novelist the better to convey the past to their readers. Newman, Wiseman, and Kingsley wrote historical fiction to get across their religious messages - the holiness of the medieval church, the need to restore it in contemporary creeds - to the widest public in the most convincing way. In their means if not their ends the Oxford Tractarians saw eye to eye with Hegel, who praised novels for making the past accessible to those with little learning.

That the novelist deliberately invented was held a virtue; his past was more vital than the historian's because it was partly self-created. So profoundly did the popular demand for imaginative views of the past permeate nineteenth-century fiction that many identified it wholly with the past; a realistic contemporary novel, the Goncourts said, was simply an historical novel about the present.

Historical fiction found its staunchest advocate, however, in a twentieth-century historian. 'The past as it exists for all of us is history synthesised by the imagination, and fixed into a picture by something that amounts to fiction', wrote Butterfield. The historical novel fulfilled two needs. First, it let readers feel the past as formal history could not: The life that fills the street with bustle, that makes every corner of a slum a place of wonder and interest, the life that is a sad and gay, weary and thrilling thing in every hillside cottage, is a dim blurred picture in a history. 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 ... farther away from the heart of things ... To make a bygone age live again, history must not merely be eked out by fiction; ... it must be turned into a novel.

Second, fiction put readers in the past like people of the time, who could not know what was coming next. Encumbered with hindsight, the historian was not content to let the past tell its own tale but hauled it 'into relationships with the whole of subsequent development'; thus 'the reader does not lose himself in the past; he stands aside to compare it with the present', and seeing from a distance a world finished and ended he is forcibly reminded that he is not in the past.

It is not enough to know that Napoleon won a certain battle; if history is to come back to us as a human thing we must see him on the eve of battle eagerly looking to see which way the dice will fall ... The victory that is achieved on one day must not be regarded as being inevitable the night before ... To the men of 1807 the year 1808 was a mystery and an unexplored tract; ... to study the year 1807 remembering all the time what happened in 1808 ... is to miss the adventure and the great uncertainties and the element of gamble in their lives; where we cannot help seeing the certainty of a desired issue, the men of the time were all suspense ... History does not always give us [these] irrecoverable personal things; but we know they existed.

These things 'are the very touches that are needed to turn history into a story'. Unlike history, Butterfield believed, fictional narrative could forget or transcend hindsight. The distinctions between history and fiction Butterfield elaborated left each with a clearly defined role: 'To the historian the past is the whole process of development that leads up to the present; to the novelist it is a strange world to tell tales about.' That is no longer the case. Each genre has encroached on the domain once exclusive to the other; history has grown more like fiction, fiction more like history.

Both the structure and the content of contemporary fiction substantially rearrange the past. Gone is the linear time of nineteenth-century fiction; flashbacks, streams of consciousness, duplicitous narrators, and multiple endings now decompose temporality. Although - or perhaps because - The French Lieutenant's Woman is saturated with history, John Fowles suggests that the reader make up his own ending. Best-selling books confound the two categories; the 1982 Booker prize for fiction went to Thomas Keneally's Schindler's Ark, which the author terms a true history, but then, as the prize chairman temporized, 'history is always a kind of fiction'. Many novelists share this view. 'There's no
more fiction or nonfiction now, there's only narrative', asserts E. R. Doctorow, who calls his novel Ragtime 'a false document'; novelists are said to transcend 'the inconsequential distinctions we constantly make between fact and fiction'.

This presumed convergence tempts some novelists to exaggerate fictional understanding of the past. 'Historical fiction is more truthful than history itself, say compilers of the former genre, arguing that history often pretends to be true but is false, whereas historical fiction claims only that much of its content is 'true to life and much fictional', leaving the reader to decide which is which. Some novelists relegate historians to the 'outside' of the past while arrogating to themselves the 'inner' undocumentable truths. 'An historian can tell you just what happened at Borodino, but only Tolstoy, often dispensing with facts, can tell you what it really was to be a soldier at Borodino', writes William Styron, enlarging on Butterfield; the novelist's 'imaginative truth ... transcends ... what the historian can give you'. Styron degrades history into a barren chronicle, while elevating the novelist into a superior historian who tells it like it really was.

Other contemporary novelists present fact as fiction because they consider fiction 'the higher reality, not limiting and arbitrary like historical truth'. As a Vidal narrator says, 'there is no history, only fictions of varying degrees of plausibility. What we think to be history is nothing but fiction.'

But few of these comminglings effectively convey the spirit of the past. Modern sensibilities in John Barth's picaresque seventeenth-century world blur the line between facts and fictionalized versions of facts, suggesting that Barth 'does not believe in such a thing as history even while his narrative pretends to evoke it'. In 'modernizing' well-known historical figures, Ragtime's racial confrontation subverts the specific realities of both the 1960s and the Edwardian era.

Fiction criticizes history while cannibalizing it; history derogates fiction's claims while adopting fictional insights and techniques. New materials and recording devices enable contemporary historians to do what Victorians thought only fiction could do — chronicle the everyday past. The resurgence of narrative has brought back the past in the form of stories. And historians are increasingly aware of the need for the fictive rhetoric championed by Hexter.

Some go still further, like David Ely's protagonist avowing errors and omissions as integral to historical validity. Alex Haley thus defended Roots when much of his eighteenth-century data was shown to be invented or transformed. The actual facts could never be known, Haley retorted, and in any case mattered less than his fictionalized symbolic past with which millions of black Americans identified. He acknowledged that the Juffure he described was a Juffure that never existed, but justified it as a composite likeness of Gambian villages of the time. Haley's Juffure was in fact much more than that -it amalgamated West Africa with Avalon, Eden, and idealized small-town America in a Club Mediterranee type of Platonic city-state. Indeed, only such anachronisms enabled black Americans to identify their past with this remote and unlikely place; had Haley depicted Juffure as it actually was, his picture would have been not just disbelieved but ignored. In short, factual faithfulness was jettisoned for a symbolically serviceable past. And that past has triumphed, for tourist fame has since begun to transform Juffure into a facsimile of Haley's eighteenth-century idealization.

The historical novelist similarly heightens illusion at the expense of accuracy. Because he must 'give his readers as complete an illusion as possible of having lived in the past', according to Hervey Allen, 'he is under obligation to alter facts, circumstances, people, and even dates'.

The novelist most critically affects the past by modernizing it. 'To all situations one brings a modern spirit', in Goethe's words, 'for only in this way can we understand them and, indeed, bear to see them.' As Scott explained, 'it is necessary, for exciting interest of any kind, that the subject be translated into the manners, as well as the language, of the age we live in'. Scott's Anglo-Saxon and Norman characters not only spoke more or less modern English, they expressed historical relationships far more clearly than men and women of the time could have done. In short, fictional anachronism is both desirable and essential. Butterfield to the contrary, historical fiction shares with history the burdens of hindsight, not just to make the past intelligible but to account for processes of change not originally apparent.

All accounts of the past tell stories about it, and hence are partly invented; as we have seen, storytelling also imposes its exigencies on history. At the same time, all fiction is partly 'true' to the past; a
really fictitious story cannot be imagined, for no one could understand it. The truth in history is not the only truth about the past; every story is true in countless ways, ways that are more specific in history and more general in fiction.261

Thus historians who assert their unique fidelity to the past and writers of fiction who claim total exemption from such fidelity both delude themselves and their readers. The history-fiction difference is more one of purpose than of content. Whatever rhetorical devices the historian deploys, the tenets of his craft forbid him knowingly to invent or to exclude things that affect his conclusions; in terming himself an historian and his work a history, he chooses to have it judged for accuracy, internal consistency, and congruence with the surviving record. And he dares not fabricate a character, ascribe unknown traits or incidents to real ones, or ignore incompatible traits so as to make his tale more intelligible, because he could neither hide such inventions from others with access to the public record nor justify them when found out.262

By contrast, the historical novelist is bound to invent characters and events, or imaginary thoughts and actions for real people of the past. The constraints the historian gladly embraces are intolerable to the writer of fiction, as John Updike found when gathering materials for a life of President Buchanan. Suffocated by the determinable facts of history, Updike could not leap the divide from fiction to fact. ‘Research details failed to act like remembered ones, they had no palpable medium of the half-remembered in which to swim; my imagination was frozen by the theoretical discoverability of everything. An actual man, Buchanan, had done this and this, exactly so, once; and no other way. There was no air.’263

To deny that history and fiction are either mutually exclusive or utterly indistinguishable routes to the past, however, is not to condone a compromise that claims the virtues of both while accepting the limitations of neither. What is called 'faction' imitates much new fiction and some new history in smudging the distinction between them, but displays a pretentious omniscience that traduces both approaches.

Glossing over the past's alien nature, faction resembles certain Victorian novels which made the past popularly accessible by enlivening it in present-day terms. Now obvious, the anachronisms of such fiction then went largely undetected. Few realized that while humanizing everyday life in the past it also glamorized it, even while 'claiming to do the opposite', writes Jenkyns; 'lending a bogus sense of intimacy with Pompeii' by flattering the masses they had 'a special knowledge denied to pedants and professors'; bringing people into intimate relation with the past but at the same time diluting its passions through the sieve of distance.264 Sheer verisimilitude made the late-Victorian novel seem historically valid, but it perverted public understanding of the past by denying, taming, or explaining away its utter strangeness; in such fiction, as in Whig histories, the past was present, the present past, anachronism became decoration, and residues too dreadful to digest were hidden or bowdlerized. Apropos all such re-creations, Henry James objected that Sarah Orne Jewett's Tory Lover sought to do the impossible - to represent 'the old consciousness, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose minds half the things that make ... the modern world, were non-existent, ... [people] whose own thinking was intensely otherwise conditioned'.265

Reluctance to face up to that impossibility makes factional portrayals shoddy and disingenuous. While 'firmly anchored to the facts', as one producer says, television documentaries like historical novels must in the end 'make a stab at the personality'266 - in other words, abandon fact for fiction, letting go of the anchor while pretending still to be grasping it. The adaptation of history to television exacerbates tendencies to accept versions of the past as gospel. Even when producers confess that shows commingle fact and fiction, viewers mistake them for literal accounts of what actually happened and what life was really like, assuming that what costs so much and is seen by so many must be true.

'This is how it was' heralds faction shows, rather than 'It may have happened something like this'; the tone of all-knowing certitude, cloaked in authoritative anonymity, lends such sagas a stamp of revealed truth.267 In written histories, the author's voice usually alerts us at the outset to his own perspective; in television sagas, presentation eliminates authorial specificity and responsibility.

Faction 'includes so much known to be true, and shown with such patient expertise, that the rest of it is swallowed in ... easy credulity'. And visual images are more convincing than written accounts. 'In
the good old days, people believed things they read', says a critic. 'This sweet faith in the invariable veracity of books and newspapers' has given way to the belief 'that the television camera never lies ... You can actually see it, so it must be true.' Even film-makers formerly shared this faith. Those who made *The Birth of a Nation* (1914), along with 'most of the people who saw it, regarded it as exact history; "You will see what actually has happened', said director D. W. Griffiths,' "there will be no opinions expressed, you will merely be present at the making of history ... The film could not be anything but the truth."' Gone are the breezily cynical days of Moviola, when few knew and none cared where fact ended and palpable fiction began, like Nicholas Bentley's Cecil B. de Mille, who:

Rather against his will
Was persuaded to leave Moses
Out of the *Wars of the Roses*.

In place of ignorance or philistinism we are now so besotted by the past that anything goes as long as it is 'authentic'. In what purports to be history, such as Haley's *Roots*, 'authenticity' means fidelity to feeling that swamps facts in anachronistic invention, a search for roots so engage as to include very little of the actual past.

In what purports to be fiction, the passion for authenticity perverts the tale by larding it with painstakingly genuine detail. Viewers may spot Trollopian or Dickensian costume dramas as palpable fables, but what can they conclude from *Brideshead Revisited*, whose producers went to the trouble of securing Waugh's actual rooms at Oxford, of speckling pullets' eggs to simulate the novel's breakfast plovers' eggs, and of adding simulated marble columns and Felix Kelly's murals (echoing Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor) to Castle Howard? Was all this actually done, as claimed, to make it 'real for the actors'? Seeing Oxford, Castle Howard, and Venice on the screen degrades the novel's fantasy world by making it seem a slice of the actual past, with real rather than fictional events. Nineteenth-century tourists went to Kenilworth 'not to see a place where the acts of history had really happened long ago but to see a place where the deeds of fancy were fictionally recurring forever', writes Christopher Mulvey; today a *National Geographic* type of geography is enlisted to contrive an historically authentic framework, turning past fiction into present fact.
inspired to explore the past by Scott's novels, von Ranke later renounced historical romance because Scott's portrayals of Charles the Bold and Louis XI in *Quentin Durward* so offended his standards of historical evidence (Wedgegwood, 'Sense of the past', p. 27; idem, 'Literature and the historians', p. 71). See Anne Green, *Flaubert and the Historical Novel*, p. 1.


251 Larzer Ziff (see n. 248 above).

252 *Sketches of the Past*, 1876, pp. 196-7, 194.

253 Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970*, p. 245, referring to Barth's *Sot-Weed Factor*.

254 But most historians still employ the narrative form of the late nineteenth-century novel, leading to 'the progressive antiquation of the "art" of historiography itself (Hayden White, 'Burden of the past', p. 127-).


257 Quoted in Werrell, 'History and fiction', p. 6.

258 'Teilnahme Goethes aus Manzoni' (1827), 14:838.


261 Munz, *Shapes of Time*, pp. 214, 338 n.10. See also Mink, 'Everyman his or her own annalista', pp. 238—9.


265 To Jewett, 5 Oct. 1901, in James, *Selected Letters*, pp. 234-5: 'You may multiply the little facts that can be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints as much as you like - the real thing is almost impossible to do.'

266 Rallings, 'What is television doing to history?' p. 43.

267 Ibid., p. 42.


269 Sorlin, *Film in History: Restaging the Past*, pp. viii-ix.


272 Anglo-American Landscapes, p. 18.