

## Nov. 26 **History and Fiction**

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Historians and fiction writers (especially historical fiction writers) are troubled bedfellows: they can't live together and they can't live apart. Both tell stories; both want to bring people alive who are long dead; both want to attract readers to the fascination of past lives. But the historian chafes against the restrictions of her trade: she can't make things up. The fiction writer looks much freer; no wonder we envy him (and also the quantity of books he sells). Yet many of us want to police the boundaries between truth and fiction carefully: if you can make anything up, what's to prevent "revisionist" historians from erasing the boundary completely? The spectre of Holocaust denial haunts many of the anguished discussions about the validity of using fictional techniques in professional historical writing.

This is why Hayden White arguments stirred up quite an angry debate. (See Peter Novick for details). White's book *Metahistory* grabs the mind so forcefully that you can't escape it. Pretty soon everything looks like a trope. So the passionate debate over 'post-modernism' in historical study looks like a classic melodrama. In melodrama, there are clear good guys and bad guys, black and white are sharply divided, and there's supposed to be an obvious victory of good over evil at the end. Many of the debaters in the postmodern argument prefer this kind of polarized encounter: they don't want to look for middle ground.

Melodrama is an extreme form of the romance, as described by White, where there is a hero who undergoes a series of adventures, often a quest, and finally arrives at home, and peace, at the end. The romance is the bourgeois version of the epic, featuring the same kinds of peripaties [turns of fortune], derring do, battles with evil forces, only Odysseus is replaced by the common man. All the battles over postmodernism are purely intellectual: none of these heroic warriors every picks up a spear; only a pen; but the pretensions seem to have an epic quality: for many of them, the future of the historical discipline is at stake; or even more, the future of Western civilization.

Analysts of melodrama point out that it is basically a conservative genre. It arises in times of social unrest, when elite and popular forces look for points of stability: especially reaffirming the traditional family when it seems to be under siege. 19<sup>th</sup> century France is one place where it arose. 20<sup>th</sup> c. Chinese novels of 'butterfly fiction' likewise describe beautiful women and earnest young men threatened by forces of corruption: sexual license, money, power, usually seen as coming from abroad. The critics of postmodernism, mainly English and American, also see the threat as foreign: postmodernism as the French disease. The irony here is that Hayden White, who takes most of the specific blows, has very little explicit connection to French postmodernists or poststructuralists. He's the traitor within the camp [the Californian!], so even more dangerous.

Can we move on from here? White's scheme is evolutionary, though also cyclical. We move from Romance, to Tragedy, to Comedy, to Irony; and then back to Romance, at a higher level. The basic progression model is taken from Hegel's *Phenomenology of*

*Spirit*. There isn't much room for Comedy, Irony, or Tragedy in the engaged melodramatic critical mode. But there's lots of room for it if we step back from the fray. Irony on both sides: would-be radicals who think they can subvert capitalism from the fortresses of English and History departments; would-be conservatives who really believe that they are a threat. But modern historians are skilled at irony: as White claims, it is the dominant form of historical discourse today. Irony puts us, the modernists, in a superior position to judge the follies of people of the past. It discourages us from turning the sharp scalpels of critical distance against ourselves.. Reflexivity is out.

Will there be a turn of the circle back to Romance? In this mode, historians are passionately committed to the adventure of their subjects [a person, a nation, a social group]. Michelet is the great model of the committed historian; so is E.P. Thompson. Can we rediscover this commitment in a jaded age?

Concrete examples work better than polemics at illustrating the real problems historians wrestle with in exploring the boundary between history and fiction. In *The Unredeemed Captive*, John Demos reconstructs the experience of an American family in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Massachusetts who were kidnapped by Indians during the wars between the English and the French. The Mohawks, allies of the French, raided the frontier town of Deerfield, killing many and capturing other undefended settlers. John Williams lost his wife on the grueling journey to Canada; his seven-year-old daughter Eunice was taken from him and sent to an Indian tribe. Eventually the war ended, and after extended negotiations, Williams and most of his family and villagers returned, but his daughter, Eunice, never did. Despite repeated appeals, she refused to come home. She married an Indian man, was adopted into the tribe, had several children, and became an established member of the tribe. She lost her knowledge of English. Demos traces in fascinating detail the life of John Williams, a very respected minister in the town, and his unavailing quest to secure the return of his daughter. All the sources are English-language documents, mostly letters and sermons of Williams himself. Constantly, Demos is straining against the limitations of the evidence, trying to recover bits of the experience of Eunice herself. But we have only two words from her, the Mohawk words for "maybe not", when she is urged at a personal meeting [with her father?] to return. You can feel the constant pull on the author to move into a fictional style, just so that he can get into her head. He puts a few passages in italics: "Perhaps it was like this....", and engages in imaginative reconstruction of the environment in which Eunice lived. In the end, however, he endorses the classical historian's discipline, and does not go beyond his sources. Like Laurel Ulrich, he succeeds in using the materials to do much more than tell a simple story; he effectively recreates the world of the Puritan New Englanders, and partially, the French Jesuits and their Indian Catholic converts. The interest of the book is in this strange and different world, and in the tension exhibited by the urge to know more straining against the inadequacy of our evidence of the long gone past.

The film about *The Return of Martin Guerre* tells it as a mystery story: another form of the romance. Who is the real Martin Guerre? The one who returns from the war, reclaims his wife [with her approval, it seems], knows in uncanny depth the details of the vanished Martin Guerre's life, or someone else, as the jealous villagers claim? Only at the end do we discover, when Martin Guerre limps into court on his wooden leg, that the first one was an impostor. There are many ways to tell this story. The original sources do not tell it

as a mystery: It was presented as a settled legal case; or in a collection of impostor stories. The fascination of these stories does not come from our ignorance of the ending, but from the realization that only a narrow line divides truth from fiction, real life from acting. But a film can't tell this kind of story, or can it? Films have to follow a very conventional narrative line, or else they're perceived as very avant-garde. So the film of Martin Guerre [and *Sommersby*, a much cruder American version] presents the story as a mystery drama, revealing the impostor at the end. But we all know how the story turned out already, so isn't this only a fake mystery? The second time around, like reading a mystery story a second time, we're not interested in "who's guilty", but in the details of atmosphere, character, and how the puzzle is solved. There have to be several levels of interest if it's more than a one-shot film. I can watch Martin Guerre many times with enjoyment, but I doubt that I'll look at *Sommersby* again.

The history book can be much more subtle: Davis wrote the book after consulting on the film script, partly because she was dissatisfied with some oversimplifications in the film. She wants to show that the theme of imposture is a constant one in many societies, and a very revealing one about underlying social norms. Impostors, like all con artists, must appeal to what people want to believe is true. They are the best ethnographers a society has. Looking at them, we see what the most fundamental underlying norms are: In sixteenth century France, it was land, and family; in pre-reform China, it was personal connections based on Communist Party status; at Princeton, it was athletics, brains, and an exotic, difficult family life. So like Demos, Davis wants to do more than tell bizarre stories; she uses them to reflect on the way social values work in different times and places. In the book, she can work in a much more varied range of social experience as well, and introduce many more complications: the Basque origins of the Guerres, the Protestantism of the judge Coras, the local geography of the region, etc. But a fictionalized novel could probably do this too. Walter Scott is the prime example of a historical novelist who embedded personal stories within a wider political and social environment. Films, it seems, cannot be this complex. The history/fiction debate really is two arguments intertwined: the relation of prose writing of verity vs. Fiction, and the relationship between print and visual media.

Amitav Ghosh writes "history in the guise of a traveler's tale," he claims. He weaves together the story of an Indian slave mentioned in medieval documents with his own experience in an Egyptian village. He jumps back and forth in time, and finds surprising resonances between the people of the twelfth century and the twentieth. The book has footnotes, just like a classic history book. But there's far more of the first person in it than a conventional historian would put in. Do we learn more about Ghosh himself than about the people he studies? Or does his own experience of migration, cross-cultural encounter, and writing help to reveal the unwritten stories of the traders and migrants of long ago? Ghosh acts the ethnographer, using his one site to open up a much larger society, not just Arab, but Indian, Jewish, and transnational. He gives us pictures of different time periods like flashbacks, instead of a connected chronological narrative. Should we trust him? How does he establish his authority? Does he really need the footnotes?

S.D. Goitein spent his entire professional life working on the people Ghosh went in search of, but most of the time never in Cairo itself [the documents had long since been dispersed]. From distant Princeton and Philadelphia, he set out to create a comprehensive picture of a medieval society, in six large volumes, of even greater depth than Braudel. He reveals the structures of daily life – religious, familial, commercial – in extraordinary richness, but somehow the people are lacking as individuals. (Note the analogous issue with Braudel: but Braudel is salted with more anecdotes). The same documents give us a style at the opposite end of the spectrum from Ghosh: detached, scholarly, generalizing, solid: less fun to read, but more “reliable” as history? Why? How does Goitein establish his authority?