

HISTORY AND LITERATURE: A TRIAL SEPARATION

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One of the persistent problems for those who think broadly about history has been that of drawing a line of demarcation describing its common boundary with literature. At first glance, the distinction between literature and history may seem so clear-cut as to be beyond debate. Substitution of the related terms fiction and non-fiction only further bolsters our confidence that we are dealing with an objective and indisputable dichotomy. Philosophers of history know better. However plain the differences discerned between these two modes of writing, one keeps coming back to an inescapable uniformity: Both provide the reader with a rich variety of experience extending beyond the possibilities of any single human life. And if this liberation from self to the potentiality of the species is indeed the spirit that informs literature of all kinds, the philosopher must sooner or later ask himself and others what difference it makes that some of this vicarious existence has actually been lived, and some has not. Or, to put it more succinctly if too simplistically, what does it matter that history is, in some sense, "true"?

A number of developments presently conspire to effect a closer merger of history and literature than ever before. One is the increasing popularity of that hybrid called historical fiction, which has frightened certain purists who worry that Gore Vidal's Abraham Lincoln may replace in the public imagination the more conventionally researched Lincoln of Benjamin Thomas or Stephen Oates. Of more practical and compelling concern are instances where the blurring of distinctions between fiction and non-fiction can create dangerous misperceptions. A controversial case in point is William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, in which the novelist imagines lust for a white woman in his main character, whose real historic existence lends credence to a fiction that may fuel ongoing racial prejudice.¹ In addition, even highly respected scholars have recently indulged in what is called counterfactual history, pondering such questions as whether the Great Awakening would have occurred in the absence of Jonathan Edwards.² In one respect, of course, this represents nothing more than a new path toward understanding Edwards's role in the movement; viewed in another way, however, such an approach betrays an attraction to the seductive domain of fiction. Historical and non-historical literature have tended to overlap too as a consequence of history's steady movement away from its earlier preoccupation with politics and war toward greater concern for social and family life, women's studies, and especially the history of the nameless and inarticulate--once the nearly exclusive province of the novelist. Nor have invasions across the disciplinary border come only from history's side. Fascination with literary biography, and the obsession of literary critics to discover the personal reality behind a piece of fiction, amount to an implicit confession of the inadequacy of imagination not demonstrably grounded in fact. Completing their

¹ See John Henrik Clarke, ed., *William Styron's Nat Turner* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 57, 71, 74.

² John M. Murrin, "No Awakening, No Revolution? More Counterfactual Speculations," *Reviews in American History* 11 (1983), 161-171.

mutual attraction, the novelist thus finds a counterpart to historical fiction in the *roman à clef*.

At a time when novels are routinely assigned in history courses, not infrequently in the openly expressed belief that students can get a better "feel" for a certain era from fiction than from a standard history, it is necessary to sort out the claims of the two disciplines and to set history once more on a course that establishes its distinctive mission. To accomplish this it may be well to consider in turn a series of plausible hypotheses about the relationship of history and fiction, analyzing each as we go, retaining or discarding elements when appropriate, aiming at a formulation that captures the essential contribution of history to our understanding of human affairs.

1) **History is true; fiction is not.** As long as we temporarily suspend a critical exploration of meanings and definitions, this assertion can at least be comprehended as a rudimentary description of commonly shared certainties. Events described in Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday* in all likelihood did happen; events in *The Great Gatsby* in all likelihood did not happen. If we take even one step beyond this cautious position, however, our easy assumptions are threatened. Is the whole truth embodied in Allen's book? Is there no truth in *Gatsby*? *Only Yesterday* makes no mention of Marcus Garvey, one of the most charismatic personalities of the twenties and arguably the best representative of several leading themes of the decade, including black culture, immigration, urbanization, and the popularity of fads. By contrast, *Gatsby* evokes images of wealth and waste, hope and nostalgia, romanticism and despair, all of which recognizably constitute the mood of the times. How, then, are we to locate truth? To fall back on some notion of relative truth has frequently recommended itself as a compromise. History can no more be said to possess absolute truth than fiction can be relegated to a realm of absolute falsehood. One is reminded of the reaction of Richard Wright's grandmother in *Black Boy* to the discovery that Richard has just published his first piece of fiction. To the young man's protest that "It's just a story I made up," the grandmother responds, "Then it's a lie."³ Both fiction and non-fiction are interpreters of the past; both seek truths in that process of interpretation, and both are doomed to failure in the search for an ultimate truth that exactly transcribes objective reality. Moreover, historians never have before them the entire record they would wish to analyze. Given these limitations, the difference between history and literature may be less one of category than of degree: Perhaps history is simply the most realistic form of fiction.

This discussion, though, has so far neglected the most damaging case to be made against history as truth: the phenomenon of historiography. For present purposes this term may be taken to refer specifically to the constantly varying interpretations of the past resulting primarily from the changing times in which historians themselves are living and writing. Accordingly, in explaining the American Revolution, a historian surrounded by the expansive democracy and nationalism of the Age of Jackson found the colonials united against oppressive British rule by an ideological consensus sustained by a common desire to advance liberty, while a historian affected by the often disruptive and divisive reform pressures of the Progressive Era wrote of colonists in conflict with one another over who should rule

³ Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, Perennial Classics (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 185.

at home.⁴ Each generation in this way uses the same materials to construct a new reality. Working historians, of course, see nothing wrong with such transforming views of the past, and would be likely to maintain that the writing of history moves closer to the "truth" with each successive reinterpretation. That even such a faith in linear progress may be excessive is suggested by occasional pendulum swings back to older views: In the ideological rigidity of the Cold War, in fact, historians once again returned to a position emphasizing consensus in the American Revolution. Nevertheless, the assurance of academic historians in the superiority of the most recent scholarly research on the topic remains unshakable, as is evident to anyone who reads book reviews in professional journals, where colleagues regularly praise one another for "adding to our knowledge" or "correcting earlier views" of familiar subjects. Not surprisingly, this obligatory gesture of deference to the steadily advancing cause of truth has no equivalent in reviews of literature. Even the most enthusiastic of J.D. Salinger's critics would never claim that *Catcher in the Rye* provided a much-needed adolescent view of twentieth-century America. Yet it is entirely possible that historians will one day cite the book for precisely that perspective. (Precedents for such judgments are not lacking. To mention only one, some historians have come to believe that Flaubert's *Emma Bovary* offers greater insight into the bourgeois mentality of nineteenth-century France than any single history or biography.) Thus does the messenger of truth fly freely between history and literature, occasionally lighting on one or the other, but effectively denying us the option of using the standard of truth to the comparative advantage of the historian's craft.

2) Fiction creates, history recreates. If both fiction and non-fiction are inventive, then, are they at least inventive in different ways? Does not the novelist employ his imagination without limits on creativity, while the historian's task is rather an imaginative recreation of the past as faithful as possible to the way it was? If an analogy to visual art be allowed, perhaps the novelist is the painter and the historian the restorer of paintings. Put in this way, however, the historical role seems far too limited, for while history is certainly a reconstruction, it is not restricted to mere copies of earlier visions. Historians must not only bring the past back to life, but explain it as well; otherwise *All Quiet on the Western Front* would suffice as our memory of World War I, with no need for historical accounts. With allowances for the shortcomings of analogy, we may yet find a more suitable historical equivalent to painting in the art of photography. If both painter and photographer are free to create, the photographer is clearly more constrained by the world as it is; if both are interpreters of life, the photographer's interpretation flows less from his manipulation of materials than from his identification of certain elements as more important than others; if both have an eye for possibilities, the photographer relies less on his mind's eye than on those images that are actually recorded on retina and film. To be sure, this is a humbling comparison--it is certainly easier to be a photographer than a painter. (Confirming this, John Lukacs has asserted that it is

⁴ Jack P. Greene, ed., *The Reinterpretation of the American Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 3-17.

much harder to be a great historian than a great novelist, while much easier to write a mediocre history than a mediocre novel.⁵)

But, of course, the historian is not really a photographer either, because he has never actually viewed the past he is describing, even through a lens, and at best is dependent on "photographs" taken by others. What real creativity, then, is history permitted? Certainly not that of "inventing imaginary characters," Lukacs insists, nor of investing real figures with motives that cannot be documented by actions.⁶ Few would quibble with this injunction as stated, but it may well be wondered whether it places any substantial obstacle in the way of the historian. The vulnerable word here is "imaginary," for from where is a historic character ultimately to be summoned except from the historian's imagination? It is hardly necessary to create deliberately fraudulent personalities when so much latitude is available for those who are real. Who is the true John Brown, the madman or the dedicated crusader? Which Lincoln is invention and which not, the Great Emancipator or the racist, Honest Abe or the consummate politician? It is not that we have to choose between these, because we do not. The point is that each Lincoln can be supported by evidence believed to show the real essence of the man. We may not like to call these varying interpretations creative, or the person they describe imaginary, but like it or not we have made little progress along this line toward establishing the uniqueness of history.

3) History is Apollonian, fiction is Dionysian. This distinction aims at a further refinement of the previous dichotomy, specifying contrasting modes of creativity practiced by the two disciplines. The Apollonian world, dominated by reason, is orderly and controlled, oriented to the intellectual; the Dionysian world, one of license, is orgiastic and unrestrained, oriented to the emotions. To classify fiction in the latter category appears to endorse its stronger claim to creativity, but it can be argued that the impulse to create is also present in the Apollonian. The historian, after all, creates order and harmony where none previously existed; the novelist, governed by no such restraints, is free to create chaos. The difference has less to do with originality or lack of it than with its focus. The novelist's creativity is measured by his ability to express the inner experience of characters or life in a meaningful way. The historian's creativity is judged by his success in ordering the external behavior of human beings into a meaningful pattern. Once again, here, the historian plays the photographer's role: Unable to see inside his subjects, he must analyze them from outside, making sense of what they say and do. The risk in this contrast, however, is that of underestimating the restraints applied as well to the Dionysian artist. Fiction too takes as its subject matter the commonly experienced world of human existence, and must be plausible in its expressions of that world. A Victorian novelist, for instance, might challenge but could not simply ignore social mores of the day. The shared search for meaning, the inhibitions of language, the need to be understood--all these may be unifying factors too easily distorted by recourse to Apollonian-Dionysian polarities.

4) Fiction is a partial view; history sees the world whole. Even if its Apollonian tendencies are insufficient grounds for acquittal on charges of creative

⁵ John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 127.

⁶ *Ibid.*

truth-making, history may yet lay claim to rendering a more complete canvas than fictional literature either attempts or succeeds in constructing. When it is said that Dickens conveys England's Industrial Revolution with more poignancy than a historian can, it is easy to overlook the fact that Dickens does not have to give both sides of the story, while the historian does. (The latter must, in other words, take an interest in how well workhouse orphans other than Oliver Twist were eating.) One scholar has suggested with a measure of irony that the novelist may unwittingly be a better historian than the real thing precisely because fiction is free of limitation by sources that may be inadequate or at least incomplete.⁷ But the wholeness of history can also be liberating. In the aftermath of the civil rights and black history movements, for example, questions have been raised in some quarters about the social impact of the celebrated opera *Porgy and Bess*. Overriding the unquestioned artistic qualities of this work for certain dissenters is its portrayal of racial degradation and poverty, which is felt to be an inappropriate representation of black life. What the objections amount to, in short, is a concern with art as a partial, incomplete, and sometimes misleading vision of social reality. In adopting this position, the critics of *Porgy* have, in effect, been seeking to enlist the aid of history for their cause. History's appeal in this case is generated by its tendency to pressure individual insights into a consensus that represents fairly, if not equally, all the elements constituting the whole. The historian is indeed interested in the particular, but implicitly it is the particular as evidence for the totality. This perspective allows us to restructure our debate along more profitable lines: It is not so much that history is "true" (vis-à-vis fiction) as that it is whole.

5) Fiction is private, history is public. Closely allied but not identical to the previous discussion is the special interest of the historian in a public sphere of action, which is essentially irrelevant to the novelist even though he may shed some incidental light on this dimension. If history comprehends a totality of experience separating it from the partial insights of literature, as asserted above, it is the public realm of human activity of which much of this larger perspective consists. It must be made clear, however, that this is no throwback to that older political obsession of a discipline not yet enlightened by the social sciences. "Public" here refers rather to a process by which the lives of individual people are endowed with a larger significance by virtue of their inclusion in a social context. Presumably this is the force at work when novels are integrated into history courses, thereby taking their place in a more comprehensive structure of meaning. This point may be illustrated with reference to one of the most colorful of historic characters, Gregory Rasputin. Let us imagine for the moment that Rasputin never actually lived but that a character with the identical traits and experiences had been invented by Dostoyevsky. No doubt the fictional Rasputin would be engaging and fascinating too—a mad monk with mystical powers who transcends his peasant upbringing to become adviser to the emperor, only to die a bizarre death at the hands of those who would save the country. This is the stuff of fiction, replete with opportunities for psychological insights not excluding those that might open windows on Russian peculiarities. Nevertheless, this fictional Rasputin would still exist in a vacuum,

⁷ Gabor S. Boritt, "The Sandburg For Our Time: Gore Vidal's Lincoln." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, New York, 30 December 1986.

conveying little beyond the particulars of his own actions within the novel, and nothing of the larger public experience of the Russian people as a whole. To see the historical power of Rasputin, by comparison, is to feel the powerlessness of ordinary Russians, the incredible vulnerability of the empire, the revolutionary potential released by his death. We are lifted out of the private world of fiction to a public consciousness that only historians can supply.

6) Fiction has no linkage to the present; history does. Identification of the larger context and public sphere provided by history still leaves undisclosed the source from which these supplementary dimensions are derived. In theory, at least, both could be added by novelists themselves, some of whom have taken significant steps in that direction. (One thinks first of *War and Peace*.) The essential ingredient in the historian's more comprehensive view, though, which no novelist can adequately provide, is simply the vantage point of another age. The historical novelist (as opposed to the one who is contemporary to the events he describes) may seem to enjoy this advantage too, but it must be remembered that his concern is to make the past interesting to the present, rather than in any conscious way instructive, as Styron's *Nat Turner* clearly demonstrates. History is, after all, a way of thinking about the present, using the past as a tool for that end. The reader of fiction, on the other hand, is learning more about an imagined past than about his own time, in this way losing the connection that gives history its functional value. History, to be history, cannot be mere antiquarianism, but must be made to exist for a living generation. It is no accident that we frequently refer to fiction as an "escape," perhaps unconsciously acknowledging its irrelevance to present concerns. The historian can never be irrelevant in this way, as Abraham Lincoln understood in proclaiming, "We cannot escape history."

Here, finally, rests the vindication of history from that false dichotomy of truth versus untruth. The truth of history lies in its capacity to make our own times comprehensible in light of the past. This is a formula that gives respectability to all those changing interpretations, now no longer seen as inconsistencies but as potential linkages of past and present. The inspirational Lincoln may provide essential meaning for one generation, while the racist Lincoln offers definition to the problems of another. This is no contradiction. We have, rather, located a truth that serves our vital interests, and one for which historians need not apologize.