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Historical Fiction

Notes from a talk given in May 2015.

Unpublished work / preliminary material.

Martin Paul Eve

- 1.) Traditional notions of what we mean by “historical fiction” can be divided into four key points that I will unpack: relative periodisation; writing beyond experience; accuracy, heft and credibility; and a suspension of disbelief at enclosed epistemologies of the past.
- 2.) These definitions of historical fiction can be broken down and queried.
- 3.) With traditional definitions we exclude many texts that seem to have “historical” qualities. When contemporary events are clearly of “historical” proportions and are fictionalised, they, too, might be thought of as historical fictions.

1.) Traditional notions of what we mean by “historical fiction” can be divided into four key points: relative periodisation; writing beyond experience; accuracy, heft and credibility; and a suspension of disbelief at enclosed epistemologies of the past.

The subtitle of Walter Scott's most well-known novel, *Waverley*, forms the basis of a particular conception of “historical fiction”. Indeed, the phrase “*Tis Sixty Years Since*” is the grounding for the rules of the annually awarded Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction. This prestigious (and relatively lucrative) award stipulates that the temporal setting of the submitted novel must be at least sixty years prior to the time of writing. In turn, this rule is based on the assumption that, at current human lifespans and levels of productivity, this interval will prove sufficient to exclude the author's direct experience, as a mature adult, of the period in question.

This “sixty year rule” is undoubtedly a definition with which many readers would have sympathy and within which the vast majority of texts that we consider “historical fiction” fall. It is, however, hardly the only conception. For instance, the Historical Novel Society, a UK-based self-confessed “campaigning group” that was formed to champion historical fiction, puts the figure at fifty years but also includes works “written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events (who therefore approaches them only by research)”.¹

It is also the case that, as with any taxonomy of literature, a cluster of characteristics are expected of the historical novel that are not purely to do with its subject period. For Sarah Johnson, the aesthetics of writing and parameters of reading are generically codified. As she puts it:

The genre also has unofficial rules that authors are expected to follow. To persuade readers that the story could really have happened (and perhaps some of it did), authors

1 Richard Lee, ‘Defining the Genre’, *Historical Novel Society*, 2014
<<http://historicalnovelsociety.org/guides/defining-the-genre/>> [accessed 12 December 2014].

should portray the time period as accurately as possible and avoid obvious anachronisms. The fiction and the history should be well balanced, with neither one overwhelming the other.²

Likewise, while noting that historical fiction is frequently more of a mediation on the present than on the past, Jerome de Groot shares Johnson's formulaic characteristics of the "historical" novel:

Historical fiction works by presenting something familiar but simultaneously distant from our lives. Its world must have heft and authenticity – it must feel right – but at the same time, the reader knows that the novel is a representation of something that is lost, that cannot be reconstructed but only guessed at. This dissonance, it seems to me, lies at the heart of historical fiction and makes it one of the most interesting genres around.³

From these introductory set of observations, a series of commonly-held characteristics of the "historical novel" can be roughly, but fairly, schematised thus: relative periodisation (the sixty-year rule); writing beyond experience (research); accuracy, heft and credibility (generic conventions); and a suspension of disbelief at enclosed epistemologies of the past (dissonance).

2.) These definitions of historical fiction can be broken down and queried.

Each of these characterising quadrants, however, can be countered. If we are to speak of relative periodisation, for instance, then certain suppositions are made in advance about the conditions of production and reception. In this case, it is a prerequisite of evaluating the "sixty-year rule" that one know when the novel was produced and usually this turns upon the underlying question: by whom? Beyond the fact that this time span is utterly arbitrary (fifty-nine years is not acceptable, it seems), theoretical thinking on literature in the past fifty years has queried the role of the author in the reading experience. Most prominently, and although never fully accepted in all spheres, the works of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault on the so-called "death of the author" in the era of anti-humanist Theory (itself following the New Critical movement) proclaim that the identity of the author is substantially weakened, if not irrelevant, in the reading of texts.⁴ This mode, easy to criticise for its extreme abstraction from the materiality of production, comes with beneficial liberations of thinking. Without a domineering author-ity figure to validate or discredit interpretation, it becomes possible to enact more ingenious readings of works that can reveal tropes never deliberately intended by the writer. If one does take this line, though, then problems arise for the relative periodisation of the historical novel. For one, information about the production of the work and its relationship to its subject period are erased from the record. Knowledge of whether a text was "sixty years since" would simply be unavailable for assessment under such a paradigm.

In a similar vein, Barthes's theory and Foucault's anti-humanism can lead to a questioning of the "research" definition of the historical novel. This overlaps with the previous point about author presence and subjectivity: if there is no author, then there is no experience to inscribe. It can also

2 Sarah L. Johnson, 'Historical Fiction - Masters of the Past', *Bookmarks Magazine*, 2006 <<http://www.bookmarksmagazine.com/historical-fiction-masters-past/sarah-l-johnson>> [accessed 12 December 2014].

3 Jerome de Groot, 'Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction: The New Time-Travellers', *The Scotsman*, 2010 <<http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/walter-scott-prize-for-historical-fiction-the-new-time-travellers-1-813580>> [accessed 12 December 2014].

4 See Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 3rd Revised edition edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

form the basis for a distinct critique, though. Namely, if the Historical Novel Society's definition is used,⁵ then why should this apply solely to time? There are, after all, many subjects of which an author might be ignorant and that could be approached through research. Indeed, if, as we are told, the past is a foreign country, then why limit this research element to time? What about space and geography?

This site of “research”, then, is the historical imaginary, the space of subjective contemporary reimagination of elements only known mediately through the archive. It is at this site – one of appropriation, politics and power – that much historical fiction actually sits. It is where the post-colonial ethical re-writings of history can be situated. It is also the space where the forces of imperialism and conservatism jostle to once more repress. Whether the depiction in fiction is of cultures approached through documentation or history through the archive, the localised imaginary re-filtering that takes place is always a distinctly political act in which the present stakes its privileged claim to represent the past based on an ever-improving textual trail of research.

The third element that is often claimed for historical fiction is “accuracy, heft and credibility”. This is a difficult topic and one that writers themselves have often mulled. Thomas Pynchon, for instance, wrote of this precise matter in a 1966 letter to Peter C. Tamony:

I ask myself, who gives a shit anyway? What's the point of being historically accurate, nobody's going to notice one way or another. A sticky question, one I've puzzled for a long time, how much you have a right to make up out of your own head.⁶

Of course, in the context of “credibility” here, one must assume that those defining the generic conventions are referring to the historical element, rather than the broader suspension of disbelief implied in all fiction. This begs the question, though, of how “plausible” or “credible” is defined. Some historical claims, such as that Napoleon was “attacked” by rabbits in 1807, would seem more at place alongside Pynchon's inventions than in the annals of war and History with a capital “H”.⁷

Finally, a further aspect of “suspension of disbelief” is present in the very nature of the knowledge with which historical fiction must grapple. This is, as Michel Foucault put it (quoting Borges) in the introduction to his celebrated *The Order of Things*, “the impossibility of thinking *that*”.⁸ For Foucault, this expresses the impossibility of reconstructing the conditions for the emergence of an *episteme* (an era defined by the thoughts that are possible within it) in a historical context. In other words: thoughts that were possible in previous eras may no longer be possible in our own. For example, in the current medical *episteme*, it is inconceivable to conclude that female “hysteria” exists or is caused by the wandering of the womb, as it once was supposed to be. We know, though, that this was a common belief at one time. When representing this, therefore, it is impossible for us to now follow the logical train of thought that would legitimate such thoughts and we can only, instead, ironically depict the outcome. This comes with a hint of smugness, a positive teleology, but also implies that any re-rendering of the past will necessarily be unable to achieve totality. This is a dissonance that, when we speak of the realist/immersive historical novel, proponents usually set aside in the name of enjoyment.

5 A reminder: “or have been written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events (who therefore approaches them only by research)”.

6 Quoted in Steven Weisenburger, *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion*, 2nd edn (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2006), p. xii.

7 Alan Schom, *Napoleon Bonaparte: A Life*, New edition edition (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1998).

8 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. xvi.

3. With traditional definitions we lose many texts that seem to have “historical” qualities

For the final point of this talk, I want to speak about five novels by three novelists that can, in various ways, be thought of as historical but that are not counted as such under the traditional definitions of historical fiction. I'm going to speak, briefly, of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo and Jennifer Egan.

Let me speak first of Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon's novel, *Mason & Dixon*, is the text for which the term “historiographic metafiction” might have been coined; meaning a work of fiction that highlights its own fictionality while also being about the *nature* of history, rather than just historical events. The novel, which charts the historical course of the eponymous Royal Astronomers as they plot the line that will later divide slave states from free states in America is also a rumination on history. Its opening line, even, “snowballs have flown their arcs”, highlights the quality of past-ness that will be a central tenet of the text. In the case of *Mason & Dixon*, it is clear that some of the traditional definitions for historical fiction are present. It certainly passes the 50/60 -year test. A extraordinary amount of research also went into the novel. Whether the novel has “accuracy, heft and credibility” and a “suspension of disbelief at enclosed epistemologies of the past” is debatable. Certainly, historical accuracy is of the utmost in Pynchon's text; using original diaries, the timelines for historical events are flawless. The work has heft; it's of a suitable size to weaponize and fight off assailants. But credibility may be pushing it. Pynchon's novel contains fantastical elements such as golems, were-beavers and other aspects that stretch the bounds of credibility. Likewise, Pynchon's novel does not believe that the past can be recovered and, instead of such pretence, simply highlights the fact that the novel is a reconstruction through a frame narrative device; the whole book entails multiple levels, the outermost of which is that of a story told by the implausibly-named Revered Cherrycoke.

Another of Pynchon's novels takes this problem even further. *Gravity's Rainbow* is a sprawling epic text, written in 1973, in which the primary historical setting is World War II. Given that this novel employs the same remarks on the nature of history as *Mason & Dixon* but also noting the time of authorship, Pynchon's novel clearly does not fulfil many of the claimed criteria for historical fiction. And yet, few readers would have a problem of recasting it as a historical novel, albeit an extremely unusual one. It charts a strange, under-explored history of World War II, for sure, but it is based on scrupulous research. In fact, despite the time difference, it is the fact that *Gravity's Rainbow* charts the largely unknown (at the time) history of the V-2 rocket project, alongside its eventual transfer to NASA, the slave labour camps, lightbulb cartels and more. In this way, because these elements appear *strange*, even a recent history seems unfamiliar. Likewise, the undoubted historical magnitude of World War II, even within the short time-lag to authorship, clearly gives a rationale to think of this as historical fiction. If we know an event is historic, even within our own time, surely fiction that deals with such events is, in a sense, historic.

The same might be said for the works of Don DeLillo and, specifically, his novels *Libra* and *Falling Man*. *Libra* treats the conspiratorial history of Lee Harvey Oswald and the assassination of JFK. Again, this work cannot fulfil the 50/60 -year rule, as neither can *Falling Man* in its treatment of September 11th 2001. But, again, these novels deal with subjects – the murder of a President of the United States, the attack on the World Trade Center – that would clearly be known to be of historical significance, even before time had passed. Furthermore, like Pynchon's work, *Libra* is a

novel that takes a well-known event but fixates upon details that were not brought to the fore or are often deemed to be wacky, conspiratorial counter-histories; Oswald's earlier defection to Russia; whether or not he was the sole gunman. Again, clearly of historic proportions, but recent. Clearly of the contemporary, yet made "historic" through defamiliarisation.

Finally, each of these texts that I am briefly speaking of here is interested in considering how fiction and history are intertwined; how the writing of history is also a form of narrative, not unlike fiction. This is explored extremely well, I would contend, in Jennifer Egan's *The Invisible Circus*. This novel, ostensibly about the end of the 60s counterculture, is framed through Phoebe, who sets out to follow in the footsteps of her now-dead sister, Faith. In this way, as Phoebe tries to re-create a past that is unrecoverable, through her nostalgic quest, she *makes the event* – that is, the end of the revolutionary 1960s – *historical* through obsession, a centrality.