



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 3 No.3, September, 2018

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.3, September, 2018

Representing the Past Between Historiography and Literature: An Overview

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Received 3 August 2018

Revised 23 August 2018

Accepted 26 August 2018

Abstract: Like historiography, literature has always been preoccupied with the process of representing past events. Although both disciplines can provide an image of past, the methods they follow and the outcome normally differs. History was as deeply-rooted in rhetoric as literature, and there is much evidence to this in the writings of different Greek and Roman intellectuals. Still, at later stages they departed and constituted two disparate fields of knowledge. It is important to showcase the difference between historical and literary depiction of a historical incident as this relation is the base upon which exist many theoretical frameworks concerning representation.

Keywords: Historiography, Literature, Representation, Disciplines.

Known as the body of knowledge that is rooted in human mentality and psychology, history is a form of thought that shapes our conception of the past. It is created by human perception and is sifted through human prioritization of what should be included in humanity's records of the past and what is to be excluded or ignored. Thus, it endows human life with meaning which is formulated by the identity that the notions of order and progressiveness historians use in documenting the past create in the process. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle establishes juxtaposition between poetry and history based not on the medium they use, verse and prose, but rather on the method they follow in their representation. His argument reaches the conclusion that poetry is "more philosophical and more elevated than history" (59). This is justified by his view that history is limited in its representation to what has actually happened; that is to the particular only, while literature portrays events in their universal character extending the representation to what might be



or happen, which gives rise to the element of possibility. It is important to keep in mind, though, that the literary account of events does not have to verify the facts but merely to present them in a way that makes them credible; namely, literature is not required to offer the kind of verification of facts that history is expected to do.

Further theorizations on the relationship between history and literature appear in the work of Dionysius of Halicarnassus who exhibits history and literature as entirely combined and united. This argument is justified considering that any textual construction starts with using artistic tools to transfer knowledge into texts. For Dionysius, the historical text abides not only by its credibility, the verity of the incidents it depicts, but also by the rules of rhetoric, the factor which turns historiography into an art whose subject lies in depicting past incidents.

However, at later stages when literary representation started concentrating on figurative writing, history began to drift away from literature gaining an independent status as a branch that restricted itself to the objective representation of past occurrences. As the gap between history and literature increased due to their increasingly divergent methods and cognitive concerns, the formal recognition of these two branches of knowledge as distinct disciplines became formally acknowledged along with the growing scientific tide in the nineteenth century. The disparate cognitive concerns that eventually led to the dichotomy between these two fields of knowledge appear in literature's tendency to discuss and produce particular or individual representations. For that it employs intra-textual generalizations that are constructs of the intrinsic features of a particular text. History, however, constructs generalizations that are supra-textual, i.e. they are depictions of collective issues: cultural, social, or economic. Furthermore, while literary criticism examines a small number of sources for a thorough study of them, history studies many sources tracing certain few issues excluding the rest. As a result, it becomes clear that in order to formulate an outcome of the data they process, literary criticism keeps its concentration on a few sources, but history studies a great bulk of sources.



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Thriving into a fully-fledged entity, history became an absolute in the nineteenth century. Yet, this state did not last and its authority as a master discourse became questioned and eventually undermined due to many factors including the harsh experience of the World Wars which affected the way historical concepts were viewed. Also, the various technological developments that swept over the world awakened the awareness of 'the other' that was blurred by geographical distance. This aroused an increasing suspicion about the unified version history presented and consequently led to admitting the probable existence of different scenarios and narratives of the past which was perceived as absolute. This initiated a long debate between historians about the nature of history as a discipline. Followers of the traditional school of history, which is rooted in the Enlightenment notions of objectivity and certainty, tried to delineate historical knowledge using empiricist rules and claimed history to be a science delivering "pure" factual truths that are unblemished by the subjectivity or interpretation of the historian. For them the truth delivered by the historian is ought to fulfill the condition of neutrality in order to be classified as historical. History here is evinced as an objective unitary account of the past that is reached at by the historian's reconstruction of the past truth which awaits the historian to uncover it. This notion was debunked and substituted with the notion of history as a construct of the historian's understanding of the past event.

Famous for his opposition to such empiricist approach to historiography, historian E.H. Carr claims that the "belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historians is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate" (12). Further, in his book *What Is History*, Carr foregrounds the highly selective nature of history, which is seen as a natural result to historians' choices and interpretations of the past events. Carr dismissed traditional historiography practices and beliefs which promote the presence of an objective version of history devoid of the interpretation of the historian. He stressed that the very natural practice historians follow, that of selecting the data in addition to arranging them in a certain order and giving them a specific context, means that the historian is giving the floor to an agenda. Carr shows throughout his argument that historians promote including morally accepted 'historical



facts' in their version of history, deciding in the process, which 'facts of the past' will turn into 'historical facts' by being legitimized in history books. He concludes that: "By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation" (Carr 23). Thus, selection and evaluation are part and parcel of the historian's work. The data he gets are naturally processed and filtered by his assessment to their importance; namely, by his conviction that some specific data are more relevant in the context he covers than others. Without a doubt, the process of electing the historical facts out of the plethora of historical records gives a new dimension to past incidents. The historian's task of analyzing data is necessarily affected by the views and prejudices he has developed throughout his life taking into consideration the popular social and cultural views of the time.

With the arrival of postmodernism yet another departure in the modern understanding and practice of history as a discipline was suggested with postmodernist accentuated emphasis on the indispensable need to consider the relationship between the past and present throughout the process of reconstructing the past. In this vein, the issue of representation is seen as a perplexing predicament by postmodern historians given the suspicion with which they perceive its relation to reality. This is because reality is believed to have an insubstantial or even no existence outside the framework of representation, so it is formulated out of textual depiction and falls short of existing outside its framework. This gives rise to the factors that directly affect reality as an outcome to the process of representation since it is generated only with it. In this sense, historical reality as a construct becomes relative as it is delineated and shaped by representation politics. Such view could be seen as a direct contrast to the earlier notions of historical reality as fixed, authentic, and reliable. Since the objective of the historian behind representing past events is transferring coherence and meaning; and since history was thought to be doing this with neutrality and objectivity, a sharp destabilization of history as an unquestionable discourse was brought about with these new notions. It was accompanied with the reluctance to accept any superiority of history over other modes of representing the past as a result to undermining the notions of reality and the unitary subject to



which was attributed the deeply-rooted authorial nature of historical discourse. This does not come as a surprise with postmodernism which is skeptical towards grand narratives, to which history is no exception.

In the recent critical approaches to history which tend to concentrate on the similarities rather than differences with literature, history is seen as a construct of verisimilitude rather than unchangeable and unbiased truth. This is understood given its dependence on linguistic and ideological bases as well as possessing a highly intertextual nature which stems from the process of weaving its narratives utilizing texts of and about the past. Keith Jenkins remarks that when we examine history, “we are not studying the past but what historians have constructed about the past” (56), which deprives history of its once-sacred accountability. This notion highlights the intertextuality of the historical narrative as Jenkins stresses in *The Postmodern* that:

[T]he attempt to pass off the study of history in the form of the ostensibly disinterested scholarship of academics studying the past objectively and “for its own sake” as “proper” history, is now unsustainable. ... In fact history appears to be just one more foundationless, positioned expression in a world of foundationless, positioned expressions.” (6)

It becomes obvious how postmodernism changed the way with which history was approached with the breach it has imposed on the traditional philosophy of history which attempted for long to create a unitary linear structure into which the historical incidents or events fit. These elements of the monolithic linear module are the first constraints that postmodernism aimed to break free from since they proved historical narrative to be inadequate when it comes to filling the gaps and silences in history. The process of filling up these gaps in the historical narrative is the way of reconstructing history by the voiceless groups who aspire at defying the traditional version produced by the power structures. The final aim of this process is to obtain a voice of the marginalized groups and recreate their identity by turning this practice into a counter-hegemony discourse. In the postmodern context, a total history is not an option because there cannot be one frame to fit all kinds of history. The result is discontinuous elements that ask for heterogeneous



frameworks to relate them together justifying, in the process, the rise of metahistory. Thus, the postmodernist project aims at inserting multifaceted readings of history; which implies processing the same historical event from different standpoints.

Jenkins stresses that history is subjectively constructed, and this gives rise to various perspectives and multiple identities in society. Writing history, for Jenkins, is a subjective mission established strictly on literary construction instead of the objective grounding that was thought to be the basis for historiography. Due to the influence of postmodern thinking, historians agreed on the impossibility of recounting past events accurately, driven by the conviction that writing history is more about creating an invented meaning than searching for facts which lie waiting for historians to uncover. Indeed, history is a recreation of the past via language, or narrative, and it is this very use of language as a means for communicating the historian's perception of the past that creates an image of the past that is not equivalent to it. We see history as divided into stages and eras but these divisions are not part of reality itself but of our perception which is framed by the accounts we get of it.

The narratives of history and fiction do not seem to come closer to one another more than when we consider Hayden White's theory of history. White's work has strongly affected the way historical discourse is regarded as his proposition in shifting historical discourse from the domains of science and epistemology to that of literature turned historical investigation into a literary quest; and consequently, blurred the boundary between historical discourse and fiction. White's reading of history as a narrative endows it with the same tool which literature uses to recreate the past with all its artistic implications and elements. So, the process of reconstructing the past becomes a narrative strategy used to explore new readings and new versions of history. In *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-century Europe*, White renders historical work into a narrative discourse in which historians process past events into stories of verbal structure. This turns history into a body of texts susceptible to multifaceted readings and interpretations. This foregrounding of the postmodern emphasis on the aesthetic aspect of history cannot be a pure product of objective and



empiricist paradigms but rather based on subjective and cultural notions and constructions of the past. White states that:

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by “finding”, “identifying”, or “uncovering”, the “stories” that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between “history” and “fiction” resides in the fact that the historian “finds” his stories, whereas the fiction writer “invents” his. This conception of the historian’s task, however, obscures the extent to which “invention” also plays a part in the historian’s operations. (6-7)

The so-called “facts” cease to have an objective entity once they use language to convey and communicate truth as it controls the way truth is produced and introduced. In other words, once “facts” are transferred via the vehicle of narrative, their verity becomes dependent on the rules delineating language. But these same “facts” do not exist or speak for themselves unless they are given life through language. They do not have a material being but are conditioned in form and content by language and the historian who reconstructs them. The different reality constructs that are built out of facts affect the way they are perceived, i.e. passing through the channel of language, which is determined and made by social and cultural texture, the income and outcome in this process do not match with the obvious repercussion of questioning the past reality.

Still, this new approach to history is not accepted with ease given that the obvious result of the process of reconstructing the past as proposed by postmodern historians is to transform the cultural identity that is fashioned by the past into a political construct. The present introduced in such readings is shaped by the past which is, consequently, transformed from an objective phenomenon that exists in its own right into a transitive power that has the ability to exert influence on the present as well. By validating the presence of manifold versions of history against a dominant one-sided version, the process of reconstruction triggers the marginalized aspects of the past. This endows the voiceless with the ability of articulation, which makes it hard not to give way to attempts of dissent, having become harder to repress due to the decentralization of the authority



responsible for generating the unilateral version of history. The emergence of a counter narrative happens as an unmistakable result for giving voice to the marginalized and voiceless. Its ability to defy the hegemonic narrative that is imposed by the power structures threatens these structures and undermines their influence. White maintains that:

History-writing thrives on the discovery of all the possible plot structures that might be invoked to endow sets of events with different meanings. And our understanding of the past increases precisely in the degree to which we succeed in determining how far that past conforms to the strategies of sense-making that are contained in their purest forms in literary art. (24)

Yet, White draws our attention to the notion that the historian's invention is limited to the data he finds; he creates as much as he finds, using to reconstruct these clues narratives which are modes of representation and recounting, not of discovery. The data the historian works on are unrelated and disordered, and his task lies in arranging them within a specific sequential design or order that results from the 'emplotment' strategy the writer follows. After being thus processed, the various historical data emerge as a meaningful story; one that has a beginning, middle, and end and is molded according to the type of emplotment employed by the writer; be it romance, tragedy, comedy, or satire. White observes that the plot operates as a controlling model that rules over the story as the historian is obliged to follow the logic it suggests or rather imposes. The meaning the historian wishes to bestow in his reconstruction is created through the plot form he uses but which contributes as well to giving the narrative a fictional content. In *The Content* (192-193) he argues that life is void of a narrative structure and that this structure is given life only after literary representation.

David Carr severely criticizes White's theory showing that narrative reflects the inherent structure that already exists in life itself even before it came to be literarily represented. He stresses that system does not stem from the narrative structure, although it exists in it, but rather from life itself which already has an intrinsic structure in and to itself. He shows that it is erroneous to treat



structures “as if they were imposed on meaningless data by the act of narration itself, as if the events of life, experiences and actions, had no such structure in themselves and achieved it only at the hand of a literary invention” (49). Another drawback to White’s theory is that he abandons the realist aspect of fiction concentrating, rather, on choosing emplotment and the strategies to be adopted in narrative. This attitude derails from seeking an honest reconstruction of the past, which forces the receiver or reader to regard historical discourse as a composer of historical occurrences rather than a transporter of them.

The process of reconstructing past events and turning them into part of documented history is indispensable for offering new readings of the past. In a way, it erodes history as we know it by breaking the fixity that traditional ideas of history tended to associate it with, highlighting new aspects or presenting them in a new light. Reconstructing history suggests new versions of the historical truth every time it is recreated, taking into consideration that the outcome of this process is shaped by the factors of subjectivity and the politics that stem from it. In one way, it facilitates the rise of an infinite number of readings and perspectives which are inaugurated afresh every time the past is approached for depiction and reconstruction.

To fictionalize history is to evoke the memory of a past event and employ it or reflect on it from the present using both, history and fiction, without losing trace of the historical fact in the text. Appearing in the 19th century modern literary tradition in the works of Sir Walter Scott, Honore de Balzac, James Fenimore Cooper, and Leo Tolstoy, historical fiction aims at drawing an image of the social and cultural conditions of a particular era set in the past. In this literary genre, authenticity constitutes a problem for those expecting historical fiction to contrive a version of past events identical or tantamount to the one produced by historians. Indeed, the issue of authenticity becomes the center of attention of critics and commentators on historical fiction and historical discourses.

Some critics believe that the goal of historical fiction might get blurred, or even sabotaged, when fiction is given the upper hand over fact to the degree that the historical epoch gets distorted.



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Other opinions favor the excess of the fictional over the factual ingredient in representation as it is believed that accurate representation of the historical epoch in question is not among the ends aspired to by historical fiction but that its goal lies in representing the human condition in a general manner. The logic behind such an opinion might be that we tend to take for granted the fact that what we get in history books or under the category of historiography might not be the truth or the unblemished representation of what happened in the past, and that history is viewed differently every time it is rewritten as there is a possibility of the new representation being more comprehensive than the previous. Writing historical fiction is a tour into the reasons of events portraying people's motivation behind the actions they did. As a result, it can be seen as providing the analytical side of history, that which historians do not include in their records due to the nature and purpose of their discipline. What distinguishes the historical novel from ordinary fiction is that it is shaped by the historical moment which becomes an indispensable part of the plot and story line, and this formulates a dynamism that stems from combining reality and fiction and shaping its structure by their rules and principles. Still, it is this very affiliation to historical events that puts it under suspicion of having weaker storylines than ordinary fiction. Thus, writing historical fiction becomes very challenging to writers who are burdened by paying attention to the way and degree to which they allow "true" incidents and details to control their texts.

Linda Hutcheon, who is famous for her influential theories of postmodernism, debunks the absolute verity history claims over historical fiction since history uses narrative as its medium, the factor which makes it as good as fictionalization. Hutcheon illustrates this point further showing that considering the similarities between historians and fiction writers in terms of the framework of the credulity and truthfulness of both, it is easy to prove that they operate in the same manner imagining the incidents of the past and trying to construct accounts of them. She stresses the importance of history-informed postmodern literary awareness as she believes that postmodernist poetics is crystallized by what she calls "historiographic metafiction" which legitimizes the blend of history and fiction in a way that allows us to approach the historic vision of the past through fiction,



which grants a better and more complete reading of the past. Hutcheon coined the term 'historiographical metafiction' to delineate "well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5). This creates novels that are self-conscious about their status as fictional constructions of the past events.

This use of actual historical documents in fictional depiction of a historical event turns the reader into an active participator in the process of creating new versions of historical truth. The reader builds on the previously acquired knowledge about the event and tries to dynamically question it filling in the gaps that were left untouched by mainstream historical discourse. Fiction assumes the part of narrating past events and exhibits the previously existing versions of history in new frames. This leads to breaking the rigidity of official records and motivates the process of reevaluation and reassessment in light of new data and different contexts. Indeed, Hutcheon proposes that installing historical narratives in fiction endows the reader with the opportunity to be part of the whole process of interpreting and reconstructing history and "of making the reader into an aware collaborator, not a passive consumer" (88).

Another reaction to such critiques of historical fiction is found in the theories of critic Robert Scholes who introduced the term "fabulator" to historical fiction in order to break away with the stigma of producing a kind of fiction that is not totally compatible with the historically-valid version of the past that writers of historical fiction are accused of. "Fabulation" is the name he gives to the postmodern literary movement that comprises of fictional texts that stem from realism, and its objective is "not a turning away from reality but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality" (Scholes 8) in order to endow fiction with the legitimacy to recount truths without breaking with its nature as fiction.

This is not to say that historical fiction is a copy of history proper neither should it aspire to jeopardize its unique status and be transformed into it as they are two distinct branches with vital



differences. The disparate purposes of each discipline constitute one of these differences. Historians use empirical data in order to answer the question about what took place in the past while writers of historical fiction try to portray what it was like, molding empirical data in the process, to make it fit into their storyline. The purpose behind this delving into historical data necessarily makes the focus of both types of writing different. While historians focus on events, historical fictionists highlight the real historical figures or events with manipulating and fictionalizing the setting in which these figures dwell. They revisit the past where the events they want to highlight exist, producing a fictional world that is tantamount in importance to the past constructed by the historian. This fictional world results from using a literary form that utilizes a proportionate combination of the techniques used in writing novels with what Scholes calls fabulation. Frederick M. Holmes argues to the same end by stressing the different methods and ends of history and fiction as he finds that “recorded histories supply the past with clarity, order and definition, but novels can question the reality of these patterns of significance” (23).

An undoubtedly significant method for widening the horizon of the earlier readings of history is by giving the stage to the voices that were silenced or neglected earlier. Jerome de Groot asserts that “[h]istorical novels have often been used to reinsert communities into the past, rescuing them from the marginal positions to which they have consciously been consigned” (148). De Groot suggests that the mission of rescue is done by bringing the previously overlooked aspects to the foreground as he believes that “it is here, in the gaps of history, in the spaces between knowledges, in the lacking texts, within the misunderstood codes, that historical novelists work, and it is the very insubstantiality of the past that allows them to introduce their version of events” (182). Thus, formulating a rounded image of a historical event is done by negotiating the mainstream historical record which can take place only by introducing historical documents and narratives into contemporary texts. This only asserts the dialogic nature of historic narrative and historiography. Jay Winter proposes that the process of evolution takes place in historical narratives and can be projected to fictional narratives: “Writing history is always a dialogue. When historians put pen to



paper, they carry with them the accumulated interpretations their colleagues have developed over time” (1).

It is obvious that the concerns of the process of representing the past differ between historiography and literature. Still, by examining the development of both disciplines, it is easy to notice that they have some common grounds which became more obvious with the postmodern view on history and the rise of historical fiction which provide a multifaceted assessment of the past. This underscores the notion that as historiography and literature are interconnected, we can fully comprehend the past only through a consideration of both disciplines’ representations.

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