

NARRATIVE IN HISTORY / HISTORY IN NARRATIVE

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Summary

The article moves from the illustration of the one-time flourishing relationship between history and narrative, to investigate its breakup and demise in late twentieth-century literature. The traditional alliance of historiography and fictional form is called into question by the epistemology of the beginning of the century, and especially by the revolution operated by de Saussure’s linguistics. The new notion of signification as a complex, unstable process, open to the contingent and the relative, and determined by the reader’s reaction rather than the author’s intention, comes to subvert the time-honored conception of truth as the sole objective of the textual labor. This contributes to bring on a whole sequence of changes and revisions, first of all in narrative form (to date at least from Gustave Flaubert), then in the discussion on the status of historiography (from Benedetto Croce to A. J. Toynbee to Hayden White), then in its interplay with the arts (especially in the German tradition of philosophy, and such authors as Walter Benjamin, Ernst Cassirer, Erwin Panofsky, Aby Warburg), then in the denunciation of all “grand narratives” (Jean-François Lyotard) as useless speculation, now superseded by “an assemblage of linguistic elements, narrative as well as denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, etc.” – messages excluding their own universality and lasting intelligibility, and thus, at the end of the day, history in the traditional sense. The climax of this process was reached in the 1960s and ’70s, in the work of French (Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida) and American (Nelson Goodman, W. V. O. Quine, Richard Rorty, Clifford Geertz) intellectuals, showing deep concern for the aesthetic and poetological aspects of the controversy over history and anthropology. The literature of the late twentieth-century offers imposing examples of the difficulty of adapting narrative coherence and efficiency to the record of historical facts.

1. Introduction: narrative and history in the allied paradigms of historicism and realism

For a very long time it has been a widespread notion that narrative and history were sister arts, working hand in hand to the end of representing experience faithfully, and, at the same time, of gaining the reader’s mind; they were performing equivalent tasks, in an

almost bi-dimensional paradigm. From Herodotus to Victor Hugo to Georg Brandes to Benedetto Croce and A. J. Toynbee, that is from antiquity to the first half of the twentieth century, the belief was prevalent that the historian should possess, among his/her more valuable virtues, that of being a good narrator; viceversa, a good individual story could not avoid incorporating some elements of historical, i.e. collective significance. *Truth* – the inner truth no less than the manifest – of human nature and life was the common aim and the key-word for the historian's method, no less than the narrator's. Clio, "she who gives fame" to men through the historian's work, was one of the nine Muses, the goddesses presiding over the various forms of expression open to mankind: history was counted on a par with music, poetry, tragedy, comedy, dancing, astronomy etc. The fame that Clio secured to the heroes derived from the combined action of rhetoric, the technique of persuasion, and history, the technique of memory.

Clio: a Muse (1913) is the title of a book by G. M. Trevelyan, one of the great historian-narrators, the author of a *History of England* (1926) which, if the blurbs of its infinite editions are to be credited, "reads as a novel"; and the title of his last book was *A Layman's Love of Letters* (1954). He was born in the nineteenth century, but produced his most acclaimed work well into the twentieth, within an established tradition of historiography which sees the well-made, rhetorically accomplished narrative as an indispensable tool, procuring to its authors lasting successes allying scholarly to commercial concerns. England is particularly prolific with such figures: to quote but two examples, Edward Gibbon and Thomas Babington Macaulay, authors of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788) and of a *History of England* (1849-1855) respectively, to this day among the most popular and widely read texts in all British culture. This is how "respectable" history should be written according to Macaulay's *History* (1828): "Men will not merely be described, but will be made intimately known to us. The changes of manners will be indicated, not merely by a few general phrases or a few extracts from statistical documents, but by appropriate images presented in every line. If a man [...] should write the history of England, he would assuredly not omit the battles, the sieges, the negotiations, the seditions, the ministerial changes. But with these he would intersperse the details which are the charm of historical romances." As a fitting parallel to the British school of popular historians, one can mention the equally numerous and historically coterminous school of novelists, who throughout the nineteenth century based their vast notoriety on the revival and recreation of historical events, interpreting them according to contemporary ideological trends and interests, immediately recognized and greatly applauded as such by the reading public. Walter Scott's version of the English Middle Ages in *Ivanhoe* (1819) can be quoted as an example of this interplay of painstaking documentation and topical interpretation.

By the mid-eighteenth century, fictional plots involving a hero, a family or a whole set of characters, began to move closer and closer to, and finally to epitomize on a symbolic scale, patterns of events more generally significant. Many plots became exemplary of what was generally regarded as the development of a determined epoch. The first and major achievement in this line, and the archetype for the new and long-lived fictional genre called *Bildungsroman*, was J. W. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (W. M.'s years of apprenticeship, 1796), representing the protagonist's individual fortunes as the core and essence of the collective history of the German nation.

Though from different standpoints and with a different theoretical status, the day-to-day

record and the imaginative effort were thus expected to cooperate in endowing the text with a sense of living, dynamic, transmissible, recognizable truth. And the validation for such a process was to be found in the very corner-stone of the aesthetics of realism, i. e. in the immediate translatability of fact into discourse – where the word, spoken or written, stands to represent the event in a one-to-one relationship, through an immediate, “transparent” act of signification. Within this paradigm, the logic of historical writing would roughly operate in these terms: yesterday’s happenings – the battles, the sieges, the negotiations which Macaulay saw as history’s backbone – are exactly, truthfully reproduced in history’s book, by the historian who has dutifully delved into the past, performing his task of documentation, and now arranging his/her subject-matter accordingly. Such a belief is implicit in Dr. Johnson’s famous verdict, quoted approvingly by Macaulay, to the effect that “the historian tells either what is false or what is true: in the former case, he is no historian; in the latter, he has no opportunity for displaying his abilities: for truth is one, and all who tell the truth must tell it alike.” In other words, truth has one and one form only, which cannot be ambivalent, or ambiguous, or opaque. And in order to be true, history and narrative have to meet in the unique, clear-cut, essential expression that suits both.

It is by virtue of the logic internal to that discourse, of its immediate readability and its prophetic potential, that the knowledge of the past can be assumed as a guide to the assessment of the present, as well as to the prediction of the future. And it is this paradigm that empowers the historiographical attitude often referred to as “grand narrative”, whose very successful theoretical basis – history as a guide to an inevitable goal unfolding under our eyes day by day, and repeating its lessons from age to age – survives today especially in popular culture, e. g. in historical films, not to speak of visionary histories such as that implied in D. H. Lawrence’s *Etruscan Places* (1932), where the transition from the Etruscan to the Latin civilization bears a curious resemblance to the transition from the rural to the industrial stage in history, that the author was witnessing in the present.

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Biographical Sketch

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