

Brief Definition and Characterization of a Historical Novel

By Carlos Mata Indurain (University of Navarra)

Translation for *Culturahistorica*, 2009.

What is a historical novel? What requirements must a novel meet to deserve the adjective 'historical'? What makes it possible for us to bring together under this heading such dissimilar works as *Ivanhoe* and *The Charterhouse of Parma*, *War and Peace* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Lord of Bembibre* and *Bomarzo*? We all have, with a greater or lesser degree of precision, a notion of what a historical novel is, and intuitively possess the certainty of whether a novel is historical or not. But when we consider a generic definition, the question is not so simple. The most obvious characteristic is that in all the abovementioned novels, so different from one another, the (fictitious, invented) action takes place in a more or less distant (real, historical) past. This is a first approximation that, even though it is still too vague and general, coincides with a definition provided by Buendía: 'To define the historical novel strictly speaking means simply saying that a novelistic action unfolds in the past; its main characters are imaginary, whereas the historical figures and the real facts constitute the secondary element of the story.'

Later I shall allude to the characters of the historical novel in more detail. For the time being, another characteristic could be added to our provisional definition: for a novel to be truly historical, it must reconstruct, or at least attempt to reconstruct, the period in which the action occurs, precisely as Amado Alonso proposes: 'In this respect, the historical novel is not simply one that narrates or describes events and things that occurred or were existent, nor even –as is usually accepted– one which relates things about the public life of a people, but specifically that which aims to reconstruct a past way of life and to offer it as past, in its far off times, with the special feelings that monumentality arouses in us.'

It happens, however, that if we lay down the archaeological reconstruction of a past age as a *sine qua non* condition for a novel to be historical, their number is greatly reduced, either because not all achieve such a reconstruction or because those that succeed in doing so lose many points as novels. It is well known that Flaubert, referring to his novel *Salammbô*, acknowledged that in the end he had erected too large a pedestal (the reconstruction of Carthage) for too small a statue (the psychological characterization of the

main character). Solís Llorente states that ‘there must be an intention on the part of the author to present the time, to use the atmosphere of the novel to raise awareness of the historical reality of a given time.’ In the same vein, Francisco Carrasquer clearly insists on this feature:

‘Because if it is a subgenre of the novel, the historical novel has to be and cannot be anything other than a novel. Not ‘primarily’ or ‘particularly’ a novel, but a novel from head to toe. After being a novel, only afterwards, can it be imbued, dyed or painted as *historical*. But this adjective cannot be converted into a noun, at the risk of it ceasing to be literature.’

Thus, we can see that here lies one of the main dangers of this type of narrative; because of its very nature, the historical novel is a hybrid genre, a mixture of invention and reality. First, in this type of work we require the author to reconstruct a more or less remote historical past, for which purpose a series of non-fiction materials should be attached; the presence in the novel of this historical framework will show the way of life, customs, and generally all the circumstances necessary for a better understanding of that yesterday. But at the same time, the author should not forget that in his work all this historical element is the adjective, and that the noun is the novel. And this is an essential touchstone for deciding whether a particular work is a historical novel or not: its fictional nature, as the final outcome of this mixture of historical and literary elements is not a work of history, but of literature, in other words a work of fiction.

All this makes the historical novel a relatively complicated subgenre. In fact, the greatest difficulty for the historical novelist lies in finding a stable equilibrium between the historical element and characters, and fictional elements and characters, without one of the two aspects drowning out the other. If it errs too much in the direction of reconstructing the past, it will cease to be novel to become a scholarly historical work; in contrast, by default the novel will be historical only in name if its actions take place in the past and it introduces a few themes and pseudo-historical characters.

Another interesting question we might consider is the following: What temporal distance is needed between the author and the story being told? Critics have stipulated a minimum separation of fifty years, which, in any case, remains an arbitrary figure. For Juan Ignacio Ferreras, historical novels can be constructed in at least three different ways: ‘either remote in time and by attaining what we might call an archaeological novel; or by moving back to our grandparents’ generation; or finally by writing about contemporary or very

recent historical affairs.’ I think it would be interesting to differentiate between the historical novel and the ‘contemporary national episode,’ reserving the latter term for those works whose action take place in a not too distant time, that is, those works that transform historical events which were experienced by the author—or which might have been experienced— into a novel, as in Pérez Galdós’ five series of *National Episodes*, which cover developments in the history of Spain from a few years before the Spanish War of Independence (the battle of Trafalgar) to the Bourbon Restoration.

Summarizing the above, we may conclude that the historical novel is a subgenre of narrative (and therefore fiction) in the construction of which certain elements and/or historical figures are included. However, there is no structural peculiarity that allows us to distinguish a historical novel from another kind of novel. This is recognized by Gyorgy Lukács: ‘If, therefore, we seriously consider the problem of genre, we can only pose the question as follows: what are the vital elements on which a historical novel rests and that are specifically different from those vital elements which constitute the genre of the novel in general? If we ask the question in this way, I think we can only answer thus: there are none.’

Baquero Goyanes, speaking of the detective novel as a type of storytelling that has a very definite structure, also shows that it is not the case with the historical novel, but rather the latter takes advantage of all the structures of the novelesic genre. ‘The detective story, rather than a literary category, is primarily a structure. [...] A historical novel will always be defined by some specific aspects that differentiate it from other forms of novel; but in fact it lacks the structural framework which is typical of the detective novel. (In the historical novel genre the most disparate structures can be found alongside. Compare, for example, *Quo Vadis?*, by Sienkiewicz, and *The Ides of March*, by T. Wilder).

Ultimately, what makes a novel a historical one is a question of content, subject matter or plot. Be that as it may, despite the absence of a well-determined structural framework, the historical novel is still growing and continues to be fashionable, to the point of being considered by some critics as a possible means of salvation for the declining genre of the novel.

In this ‘Retrospective note’ I have endeavoured to reconsider some general aspects relating to the historical novel, paying particular attention to the relationship between

history and fiction in this narrative subgenre. I have insisted that history is a scientific approach to historical reality and the historical novel an artistic or literary one: historians must adhere to historical truth while the novelist has to comply with novelistic truth, and both approaches complement each other. In the novel, truth or objectivity does not have such a great weight, since it is question of providing a well-told story, and novelists are thus allowed a degree of licence and falsifications in their treatment of the characters and historical facts provided that these are maintained within certain limits: they are free to distort them, but not to the extreme of making them unrecognizable or false. Moreover, total objectivity is impossible, even for the historian, because he is a man situated in a specific time and society: 'The historian belongs not to the past but to the present,' said E.H.Carr, and the mere use of language 'forbids him to be neutral.'

The historical novel, situated between history and literature, can narrate and explain events with greater vivacity and emotion, without the seriousness of the purely historical account; it can revive the past, instil this material with new life, or penetrate the main characters of a period or a society; in short, reach the very heart of their being. There is no incompatibility between history and literature: history supposes rigour, faithfulness, exactitude, whereas the novel provides fantasy and imagination, in a nutshell, literary fiction. Not only does the presence of historical elements in a literary work not destroy it as such, but rather can make a powerful contribution to embellishing and enriching it. It can all be reduced to a question of proportion, to both elements, the historical and the fictional ones, being mixed in the right amounts and in the suitable way (as long as this mixture is also created artistically, of course).

Thanks to the exemplary nature of history, the historical novel is also a genre that helps mankind to reflect, since it obliges us to think about the passage of time. Contemporary man is aware of himself and of history as never before. Present and past come together in the historical novel: on the one hand, the vision of the past is illuminated by knowledge of the present and, in turn, the understanding of the past enriches the present-day world and makes us look at the future with new eyes; the man who asks himself about his past wants to know where he comes from in order to know better what he is and where he is heading. Similarly, it contributes to recovering our historical memory, the collective memory of a people and, therefore, to considering our own freedom in greater depth.

In the historical novel, history and literature go hand in hand, and, as a result of placing one within the other, a dialogue arises, a constructive and at the same time an enjoyable dialogue, between the past and the present, an updating of past experience. The historical novel is therefore an invitation to history, an invitation to broaden our knowledge of our own past and, in short, our knowledge of ourselves because, as Witold Kula said, 'Without history, human society would know nothing of itself.'