


Historicity

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HISTORICITY—that is, a cultural and aesthetic engagement with historical movement—is a crucial term for analyzing and evaluating what we commonly call “realist” fiction. In *The Historical Novel* (1939), Georg Lukács famously associated literature’s historicity with the realist novel’s ability to capture historical movement through typical characters, a feature he tied to Walter Scott’s historical romances. For Lukács, Scott’s “faithfulness” to history does not imply “a chronicle-like, naturalistic reproduction of language, mode of thought, and feeling of the past.” Rather, it comes from the way Scott uses “*necessary anachronism*” to portray the past “as the *necessary prehistory* of the present,” primarily through his protagonists’ symbolic movement between warring camps.¹

Although historical romances remained popular in British literature after Scott’s death, Victorian historical romances differed from the Waverley novels in important ways. Whereas Scott’s novels delve deeply into the textures of the nation-building histories they narrate, works like Charles Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) mostly use the past as thin backdrops for concerns about contemporary violence and political unrest. Other novels, such as the historical romances of Edward Bulwer-Lytton and William Ainsworth, look beyond recent history to a remote past that bears little direct influence upon the present. Indeed, while nearly every major British novelist wrote a historical romance in the nineteenth century, and some display sensitivity to historical structures in ways that arguably justify a Lukácsian reading, those accomplishments often bear notable stylistic shifts from Scott, so that the idea of characterizing such work as “romance” almost feels like a misnomer.

Consider, for instance, that unlike the highly mobile protagonists of Scott’s fiction, George Eliot’s *Romola* (1862–63) and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863) are primarily interested in the limiting effects of historical environments on young women. Historical constraints shape

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Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 423–426.

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doi:10.1017/S106015032300027X

Eliot's and Gaskell's protagonists in ways that differ from the comparative freedom of Scott's heroes (male or female) and speak to experiences that are far more likely to be omitted from the historical record. In addition, and as a partial consequence of this focus, Eliot's and Gaskell's historical novels are deeply aware of the challenges that accompany their efforts to depict the past. Through Romola's father, Bardo the scholar, for example, Eliot presents Girolamo Savonarola's failed efforts at church reform alongside a heightened recognition of the Florentine Renaissance's own interest in history. A similar reflexivity appears in *Sylvia's Lovers*, in which Gaskell's depiction of events surrounding Napoleon's conquest of Jerusalem in 1799 contains none of the heroism found in Scott's fiction, even as it draws on many of the historical romance's conventions. When a shamed Philip Hepburn rescues Charlie Kinraid from the battlefield while serving under an assumed name, the narrative does not present the situation from Philip's perspective. Instead, it blends the narrator's omniscience with the disoriented, dreamlike confusion of the injured Kinraid, who is subsequently unable to track down the old acquaintance who had previously wronged him. The effect of this stylistic turn away from the clarity of Scott's fiction combines with other moments of ambiguity in *Sylvia's Lovers* to emphasize both the chaos of war and the uncertainty of historical representation. Whereas Scott confidently asserts in the postscript to *Waverley* that "the most romantic parts of this narrative are precisely those which have a foundation in fact," Gaskell, like Eliot, acknowledges the complexities of recovering the past.²

Such a conflicted relationship with romance points toward other limitations in the Victorian use of Scott-like models. When Victorian authors resuscitate the warring camps model of the *Waverley* novels in other genres, including "condition of England" novels such as Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845) and Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), the effect is not that of "necessary anachronism" but of an "unnecessary" obfuscation of social complexity in symbolic conclusions. History, in these works, is no longer an ongoing process but a problem that has been solved. It follows, then, that in many respects, the Scott-like emphasis on representative character types becomes less important to British literature's cultivation of historical awareness as the century proceeds. In its place, it becomes increasingly common for literary works to use alternative means to prompt the reader's recognition of historical processes.

While the particulars of audience and content affect which literary forms are best suited to capturing historical movement, I have recently

argued in essays on Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage* (1849; 1858) and Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) that genre and narrative time become more important to the literary engagement of history and historicity once the historical romance begins to lose steam.³ Genres, we know, are exercises in world-making. This worlding effect is achieved, in part, through what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as genre's chronotopic dimensions (i.e., "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature").⁴ As Bakhtin notes, "It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well."⁵ Yet literary chronotopes are never static, as genres are always subject to hybridity, parody, and change. These processes of differentiation and assimilation intensify our experience of distinct temporal effects even as they make it possible for the figurative work of older genres like Scott's historical romances to be reinvented and transformed in new genres and under new circumstances. While all genres possess temporal characteristics as critical concepts (e.g., the stasis particular to pastoral narratives, the contemporaneity of the sketch, the compressed action of tragedies), each literary work is a singular entity that need not limit itself to any one set of characteristics, temporal or otherwise.

Assessing such creative temporalities highlights a Victorian literature and culture that continued thinking about the course of history through the lens of narrative art in new ways. Victorian literature's novel evocations of time stand between the historical romances of Scott's era and the ever-widening range of historically sensitive literary experiments to follow in, among other things, modernist depictions of uneven global development, the self-conscious (and often ironic) postmodern engagement with the verifiability of historical events, and the persistence of various forms of "realism" into the present.⁶ The historicity of such work reminds us that, while often conflated with historical romance, the historical novel is always on the move.

NOTES

1. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 61 (emphasis original).

2. Walter Scott, *Waverley*, edited by P. D. Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 363.
3. See Benjamin D. O'Dell, "Lyric Moments and the Historicity of the Verse Novel: *Amours de Voyage*," *Victorian Poetry* 59, no. 4 (2021): 411–31, and "The Victorian Counter-Pastoral: *Adam Bede* as Historical Novel," *Studies in the Novel* 54, no. 1 (2022): 26–44.
4. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.
5. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 84–85.
6. On the historicity of literary modernism, see Jed Esty, "Global Lukács," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 3 (2009): 366–72. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), particularly 105–24, Linda Hutcheon analyzes the postmodern tendency to question the verifiability of historical events. Lukács examines early twentieth-century historical novels in a realist vein (*Historical Novel*, 251–350), and in *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), Theodore Martin describes "the improbable resilience of historicist imagination" in literature since the 1980s, wherein contemporary novelists use various genres and concepts to historicize the present (197).

