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CAROL GLUCK

Infinite Mischief? History and Literature Once Again

LIKE MANY OF US, I'D thought the latest series of intellectual jousts between history and literature that began, as did *Representations*, in the 1980s had ended in a chivalrous exchange of scholarly weapons. Literary scholars highlighted the historical embeddedness of their texts while historians recognized the literary aspects of their narratives. Not all literary scholars and not all historians, true, but enough of them to make common parlance of the useful "blurring" of disciplinary boundaries. With that in mind, I volunteered last year to teach in the new MA program in History and Literature offered by Columbia and two universities in Paris, with the commendable and, I thought, unobjectionable goals of mixing literary and historical methodologies and questioning the shifting ontologies of history and literature themselves.

I use this word because it became instantly clear that I was now in France, where *la littérature* is a near ontological, even sanctified category, with the nineteenth-century realist novel as the canonical center for those who theorize or historicize the modern relation between history and literature. Flaubert, Stendhal, Balzac are the canonical writers discussed by canonical French theorists like Barthes, Foucault, and Bourdieu, whose work I taught in the MA core course, and to a degree even for Franco Moretti, now an honorary foreign member of the guild. In his new book *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* he uses the canonical realists and—Moretti-like—works of what the French call "minor literature" to present literary form "as the fossil remains of what had once been a living and problematic present," also known as history. He touches on the work that seems to be everywhere in continental literature-and-history quarters at the moment: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. (This reminds me, as a Japan historian, of the reception of a mid-nineteenth-century Japanese translation of *Crusoe*,

not as fiction at all but as a real-life historical model for Japanese of what man's ingenuity could do to develop an island—their islands.) In terms of theoretical approaches, psychoanalysis, yes, and also sociology figure prominently in French literary studies, including the extension of Bourdieu's "literary field" to transnational space in the growing trend of global literary studies. But hexagonal habits die hard, so that a work like Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* is in fact quaintly Francocentric, while post-colonial literature retains the label "Francophone," a language confined to writers outside the boundaries of France, its literary expressions considered distinct from both French and world literature. The anthology *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History*, which seeks to "world" French literature, is primarily the work of American and international scholars writing in English. Globalizing is easier to say than do.

Other sectors of the literature-and-history terrain in France roiled in lively motion. "New" literary histories were frequently announced, most recently the literary history of the twentieth century as written by the authors themselves, the ethnographic equivalent of literary "natives" telling their story rather than letting the academic outsiders do it for them.¹ Thriving too is work on the "social life of literature," which includes the history of the book, of reading—or nonreading in the case of Pierre Bayard's *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*—of reception, of the uses of literature, and so on. This approach follows the now familiar insight into the historicity-of-everything and seems to be practiced as often, or perhaps more often, by French historians as by literary scholars, from Roger Chartier long ago to Judith Lyon-Caen and Dinah Ribard today, who titled their 2010 guide/manifesto *L'historien et la littérature* in order to challenge historians to do more with literature than treat it as a transparent historical source to mine for pieces of the past. If this sounds quite like the no-longer-new New Historicism—described in French as a *méthode anglo-saxonne*—it just confirms the tenacity of national borders in scholarship, especially perhaps, but not only, in France.

Then there was the latest version of the dialogue about literature as a form of knowledge, or cognition—*Savoirs de la littérature* as the title of a 2010 issue of the journal *Annales* expressed it. In pursuit of the capacity of literature to produce "knowledge of the world," the editors pledge to avoid both the Derridean denial of anything "outside-the-text" at one extreme and the historians' vice of ignoring the literary mediations between the world and the text on the other. Testimony, a ubiquitous presence in current French thinking about the past, is here evoked in terms of literature as a form of witnessing, which, if carefully interpreted, can yield epistemological fruit without a reductionist opposition between fiction and reality.² Sounds good, if not skull-crackingly exciting. But a larger and more heated debate flared up at the same moment, which did in fact oppose literature

and history, fiction and reality, novelists and historians in a controversy over several historical novels on themes related to World War II and the Holocaust. And this I confess did astonish me. As a historian I was committed to exploring both the history *of* literature—which turns out to be the easy path, the path most talked about and taken by historians and literary scholars—and history *in* literature—which I had been doing in a covert amateur way for years and hoped in my Paris teaching to become licensed to practice professionally now that literature and history had reached their amicable disciplinary blurring.

Not a chance, at least in the wake of the critiques of three prize-winning historical novels: *Jan Karski* (in English, *The Messenger*) by Yannick Haenel, *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell, and *HHhH* by Laurent Binet, which appeared between 2006 and 2009. Avowedly fictional and assertively historical at the same time, the novels take the wartime past as their subject, a past that none of the authors themselves experienced, born as they were between 1967 and 1972. The novelists were each accused, in different registers, of playing fast and loose with the facts, of violating the boundary between fiction and “the real,” of misrepresenting history, of—imagine this!—making things up.

Littell had written a sprawling so-called perpetrator novel whose SS officer protagonist, Max Aue, is an over-the-top epitome of Nazi evil. Binet obsessively researched the story of the assassination of Holocaust planner Reinhard Heydrich by two Czech agents in 1942 and the subsequent Nazi retaliatory massacre of two Czech villages. He then wrote his efforts to resist “messing with historical truth” into the narrative. “What would be the point of ‘inventing’ Nazism?” he asks, slaking his “thirst for documentation,” even as he falls, cleverly and consciously, into fiction—including the kind of fiction familiar to historians who, faced with contradictory versions of the same story, allow themselves “to decide which version is true.” Binet’s metahistoriographical fiction accomplishes just what it sets out to do, tweaking the genre without losing the history: “The good thing about writing a true story is that you don’t have to worry about giving an impression of realism.” Indeed.

As for Haenel, his *Jan Karski* took some of the heaviest hits for novelistic trespassing in the paddy fields of history. Karski, a young courier in the Polish resistance, entered the Warsaw ghetto in 1942 and tried, in vain, to rouse the Allies in London and Washington to take action to prevent the murder of the Jews. At first sight less narratively intricate than Binet, Haenel divides his book into three parts, announcing at the outset that in the first part “the words spoken by Jan Karski come from his interview with Claude Lanzmann” in 1978 for the landmark documentary film *Shoah*, released in 1985. In the second part, Haenel summarizes Karski’s words from his 1944 book, *Story of a Secret State*, which recounted his wartime exploits and escapes in the Polish underground in the hope of bringing the plight of Poland to

international attention. In it Haenel wrote of his meetings to bring the message from the Warsaw ghetto to Western leaders, including President Roosevelt and Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, none of whom was prepared to do anything to intervene in the accelerating tragedy. “Part Three,” Haenel writes, “is fictional,” based on historical sources, “but the situations, words and thoughts that I attribute to Jan Karski are pure inventions.” No punches pulled: he made it up.

This is what historians and critics found unforgiveable. Lanzmann, who had long stood as self-appointed guardian of the memory of the Holocaust in France, denounced the book as a “falsification of history and of its protagonists.” Furious at Haenel’s treatment of his own manipulative editing of Karski’s interview in *Shoah*, Lanzmann responded with a new film, *The Karski Report*, which presented the full interview because he felt it “absolutely necessary to reestablish the truth.” Annette Wieviorka, a leading historian of the Holocaust and, like Lanzmann, an ardent proponent of the importance of witnessing for history and memory, condemned Haenel’s position as “intellectually lazy and morally dubious” and accused him—in the strongest terms she knew—of “false testimony” in his fictional rendering of Karski’s inner thoughts. Haenel responded like the novelist he is: he wanted to give voice to the silence that Karski had kept for decades of sleepless nights before he first spoke openly in the *Shoah* interview about his failure to help the doomed Jews of Europe. And for those thoughts, there was only the evidence he presented in the first two parts of the book. These of course were just as crafted, hemmed and stitched, as Lanzmann’s films and Wieviorka’s history writing—not invented but interpreted, not purely fictional but not with apodictic certainty “true.”

What line exactly had these authors crossed? Why the recurrent theme of violated truth, false facts, inaccurate history? It’s not as if historical novels were something new, and despite the debates about the unrepresentability of the Holocaust, Holocaust fiction is an established, and respected, genre. Of the countless narratives of World War II in fiction, film, museums, and other forms that we discussed in my second course for the MA in History and Literature in Paris, none would have passed the Truth Test evoked to protect the precincts of history from these marauding young novelists. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* mixes eyewitness accounts of war and shards of the firebombing of Dresden with a science-fiction narrative, inaccurate facts, and a naive, even reluctant author-narrator who starts out by saying, “All this happened, more or less.” What of Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, Harry Mulisch’s *The Assault*, George Perec’s *W, or the Memory of Childhood*, W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, Masuji Ibuse’s *Black Rain*, and oh so many others? Are they guilty of false testimony? Is there no history *in* these texts? And what is history anyway? Here was the surprise: it was the definition of history, not

literature, that was raising passions to this pitch. History had to be factual, “real,” and “true.” But from what archaic, or at least nineteenth-century, wellspring rose such a notion in these post-postmodern times?

Some French commentators ascribed the fervor of response to the subject of the three historical novels: fiction has its place, but when it comes to the Holocaust, fact—and more specifically, testimony—is considered both necessary and inviolate. Not that anyone suggests that facts, or testimonies, could reveal the past like a looking glass, but the “limits of representation” and the enormity of the historical experience demand narrative sobriety and creative restraint. The specter of “negationism,” the French term for Holocaust denial, only deepened the need for what Paul Ricoeur (to my mind the best writer on the subject) called a true, if never certain, history joined to a “just memory” of the twentieth-century past. If Haenel could invent Karski’s thoughts, then David Irving, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and others could uninvent the Holocaust. And at the moment when the last living witnesses, both victims and perpetrators, were passing from the scene, it may have seemed even more important to respect the truth of their testimony. These three young writers and others of the so-called third generation who took the Holocaust as their subject, such as Bernhard Schlink in *The Reader* and Roberto Benigni in his film *Life is Beautiful*, faced similar criticism for wayward imaginative excursions into historical terrain. Art Spiegelman had to protest vehemently to change the listing of his graphic novel *Maus II* from fiction to nonfiction on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The Holocaust explanation thus makes some sense: for all the discussion of the relation between fact and fiction in recent historical novels, few dwell much on those set in the deeper past, whether in France or in Hilary Mantel’s prize-winning tomes, which though well written are comfortably conventional in their artful combination of fact and fiction.

I think there is more at stake here than the felt need for unembroidered depiction of Holocaust atrocities and more than is confined to historical fiction or to France: we seem anxious about truth. In part this is a modern thing. The notion of “fakes” in painting and sculpture arose only after the Renaissance and acquired its fatal taint, both artistic and commercial, in the nineteenth century. No accident this, since it was at this time that history-writing bent itself phototropically toward the light of science, realist novels refracted and created the bourgeois world, and photography claimed a verisimilitude beyond mimesis that could present reality itself. But that was then and this is now. Intervening was a century in which modern historians repeatedly disavowed the “positivism” of their predecessors and developed epistemological grounds more in consonance with the relativity and interpretive uncertainty of twentieth-century science. Literary modernism rejected realist narratives together with bourgeois certainties, and photography vaunted its

skills in framing, cutting, and airbrushing its subjects into pictorial view. By the end of the century, one could well say, “We are all narrators now.”

Yet the anxiety about truth has, if anything, grown stronger. The furious reaction against faked memoirs, the public hanging, metaphorically, of even minor-league plagiarists, the effort to draw a moral line between fact and fiction—all are indeed modern. Copies of statues were as prized as originals in antiquity; the *Iliad* survived for a long time before its depiction of the Trojan War was interrogated for error or, more positively, myth; Montaigne was not drummed out of the cultural canon for self-deception; and Pierre Bayle discoursed on plagiarism in his great *Historical and Critical Dictionary* even as he nearly practiced it. But if modernity long ago enshrined facts—now data—as the foundation of authentic knowledge, modern ideas cannot alone account for the contemporary demand to draw a line in the sand between history and fiction. Perhaps the expanding presence of the past since the 1980s has something to do with it. Under what François Hartog calls the modern “regime of historicity,” which reigned from the long nineteenth century through the 1970s, eyes on the past were in fact fixed on the future, with past and future linked by narratives of linear or dialectical progress. Once times, and “time,” had changed, Hartog argues that the future disappeared, its place now filled by the present.³ One might also say—since the present is seldom temporally seductive—that the loss of the future made the past swell in enveloping importance. Memory surged as a category of experience and analysis, authenticity lodged in testimony and oral history, and truth-in-pastness was not to be traduced by the historian, the memoirist—or the novelist.

Histories converged—whether of late capitalism, post-cold-war geopolitics, uneven global development, or postmodern critiques that were themselves but the most recent phase of the modern—to create a kind of cosmic uncertainty that made the past, not the future, into the repository of historical and moral meaning. In that case, it probably would not do to have the past floating around in clouds of perspectival truth or positional opinion: if the past is all there is to cling to, it had better be anchored, solid, not melting into air. It had better, in a word, be true, or “real,” at least in the sense of not being invented. To be anxious about truth need not necessarily mean a return to positivism or realism or worship at the abandoned altar of objectivity, but it might imply a somewhat recidivist view of the novelist’s craft on the part of those who feel needy for history. It suggests Thomas Hardy’s stern judgment from the days of high modernity (1912) that “mixing of fact and fiction in unknown proportions” would be “infinite mischief.” In his view, “If any statements in the dress of fiction are covertly hinted to be fact, all must be fact, and nothing else but fact.”⁴ As if—covertly hinted or overtly stated—fictional dress could be tailored without naked facts concealed somewhere in its folds.

Most writers know different. Oral histories become “found fiction,” friends and family emerge unclothed as literary characters. Rejecting the term “novel,” Sebald called his books “prose narratives of an indeterminate sort,” and asked, knowing his own answer, “May one ever invent anything?” In his reflections on Orhan Pamuk’s material counterpart of his fictional *Museum of Innocence* in his eponymous museum filled with kitsch-real objects from his characters’ lives, Elif Batuman pointed out, again, that there was “no way Balzac invented all that furniture.” Readers know this, too. Must historical novels then be held to a higher truth standard because they are dealing, overtly, with history rather than story, even if that history is as horrific as that of the Holocaust? To do so, in my view, would hobble both history and literature: history would lose its interpretive imagination and fiction would become fable. We would be back to the past, in more ways than one.

Carlo Ginzburg once offered historians a jewel of a guide for finding the facts in the fable, the history in the literature, in his case historical documents. Through a meticulous rhetorical analysis (in other words, close reading) of a Jesuit history of the Mariana Islands from 1700, he carefully identified the various European literary sources drawn upon in the narrative. Then suddenly there comes a footnote in which the writer disbelieves what he has just written in the form of a native leader’s harangue about the foreigners having brought “rats, mice, flies, mosquitoes, and all those small animals that exist only to plague us. . . . Before their arrival, did we ever hear about colds and flus?” And there erupt what Ginzburg calls the “alien voices” of the past, for no one but the islanders would have blamed the flu on the Jesuits. “Texts,” Ginzburg concludes, “have leaks,” from which reality, such as it was, emerges.⁵ Literary texts have leaks, too, and I see no reason to ostracize them from the realm of historical truth. Granted, historians are not allowed to make things up while novelists cannot invent everything. Still, in the long tournament between history and literature, it may be time to declare a lasting truce.

Notes

1. Jean-Louis Jeannelle, Marielle Macé, Michel Murat, eds., *L'Histoire littéraire des écrivains* (Paris, 2013).
2. Etienne Anheim and Antoine Lilti, “Savoirs de la littérature,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences sociales* (March–April 2010): 253–60.
3. François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: présentisme et expérience du temps* (Paris, 2003).
4. Florence Emily Hardy, *Thomas Hardy* (London, 2007), 369.
5. Carlo Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Hanover, NH, 1999), 71–91.