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Historical Fiction: Experiencing Past, Reflecting History

Historical fiction has been deemed a genre impossible due to an inevitable friction between artistic composition and historical verisimilitude. Some theorists like Harry E. Shaw (2004) say historical fiction is problematic because historical narrative can never be complete. Others like Ann Rigney (2004) focus on how historical fiction can play a significant role in the formation of cultural memory. While Shaw emphasizes the role of serious realist fiction in representing the historical reality, Rigney suggests that creatively reworked artificial memories may prove more tenacious in practice than those strictly adhering to facts.

An analogical discussion about realism and truth-value can be found around traditional historical fiction and historiographic metafiction. Historical fiction in its traditional form is considered referential, having a bond with the past reality (see Maxwell 1998). On the contrary, the first and also more recent definitions of the postmodern version of the historical novel emphasize its involvement in the epistemological problems present in representing the past, and on the constructed nature of reality and history (see Hutcheon 1988, Nünning 2005). In the former definition the story and its referentiality distinguish the historical novel, in the latter definition historical metafiction is characterized by the emphasis on the discursive formation at the expense of the referential function.

In these definitions it is either content or form, story or discourse that dominates, and realistic representational mode is connected with referentiality. For me it seems that both disputes build on partially false presuppositions as they emphasize one side of historical novel but overlook the other. According to my mind also the 'traditional' historical novel is at least somewhat self-conscious and highlights its own textuality, whereas historiographic metafiction does apply and highlight referentiality even when concentrating on the constructed nature of history. Thus realism and artificial reworking are not opposites but rather constitute a vital liaison in representing history. This is why historical fiction – traditional and postmodern – is able to discuss and thematize history both as *res gestae* and as *rerum gestarum*.

Fictional representational practices like free indirect discourse enable mediating between the characters experiencing the past story-world and the implied author's reflection of that past as history. I will demonstrate how both traditional historical fiction and postmodern historiographic metafiction utilize flexible modes of narration not attainable to historiography proper, and offer the reader interpretative positions that enable engagement in historical discussion. My examples are from Finnish fiction written in Swedish, namely *Sigrid Liljeholm* (1862) by Fredrika Runeberg and *Colorado Avenue* (1991) by Lars Sund.

References:

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