

# History and the Past: The Poetics of the Historical Novel

Marek Hendrykowski

ORCID: 0000-0002-7180-9902

A novel about the past brought to life by the imagination is like a magic carpet. It can take every traveler, both the writer and the reader, to any place and time.

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It lies within you. You feel it, think about it, and plan it for months. For centuries, great writers, like weavers at their looms, have created it like an intricate tapestry. Nothing is given, nothing is simple. Such a novel takes years to write. The greatest writers have it in them and write it sentence by sentence, chapter by chapter, one after another – over and over again. Constantly crossing boundaries. A never-ending process.

Did it really happen? No one can tell for sure. It happened. But did it really? Who can tell? Maybe it did and maybe it didn't. Maybe it never took place? We don't know. Did it take place or not? The historical novel has its own rules. It thrives on confabulation. It examines historical accounts, events, and fates not for their own sake, but in order to turn them into a story. Let bygones be bygones? Not at all – use them.

Events that are not accounted for. When we attempt to describe them, we are never certain if we succeed. We know, however, that we should return to forgotten events, matters, and characters and tell their story: rediscovering various people and facts, both known and unknown, is worthwhile. Brought to light for the first time or shown from a different perspective than before, they bring us closer to the unretouched truth about the past.

The contradance of history and the past is a highly complex choreographed dance. When we turn to the past and confront it with our own here and now, we do not really want to get to know the whole, sometimes heavy and troublesome, baggage of truth that the past carries with it.

One must not forget the therapeutic role of history, which – as numerous instances prove – helps heal the traumas of horrific and (in)humane historical experiences. History has exorcised them and brought people peace. Human memory works in such a way that it smooths things out. Between 1870 and 1920, in the turbulent and dramatic history of Wielkopolska, not everything happened as they say. This is true for at least three reasons.

First, this history happened sequentially, over time, slowly, steadily, at its own pace. Secondly, it happened inconspicuously, behind the scenes of the local history of fighting for survival under the Prussian partition. Thirdly, it happened quietly: so much so that many were inclined to believe that for half a century nothing had happened under Prussian rule, except for school strikes and the Drzymała scandal.

This is not true. Not true at all. Historical drama takes place everywhere. It is not only the crowds in the streets that determine the course of history. It is not only the sound of cannons or the tolling of the Sigismund bell that mark historical events.

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There is one more important thing: instruments must be tuned. The history of Poland usually resounds in two opposing registers: major and minor. One is saturated with our military triumphs, advantages, and victories, such as Cedyń, Grunwald, Vienna, the Battle of Warsaw, Monte Casino, and Bautzen, Psków, Chocim, Gwoździec, Obertyn, Byczyna, Kirchholm, Biała Cerkiew, Kłuszyn, Beresteczko, Kalnik, Parkany, and Zieleńce. The trumpeted battle calls and hussars' wings sometimes resonate louder, and sometimes softer, but this is not the most important thing.

The other register is gloomy, an *ostinato*: invasions, floods, *liberum veto*, rebellions, loss of independence, partitions, insurrections, lost battles, failed revolutions, unsuccessful uprisings, and the sad, solemn months spanning from January to December. Indeed, we are the champions of martyrdom (“well, they got us good, yes, they destroyed us, and they knocked out my tooth”).

Is there room in the collective consciousness for a different tone and a different picture? One that differs from our popular ideas and convictions about what we owe to our ancestors and what makes the next generations of the people of Wielkopolska who we are?

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Behind the horizon of memory, the bygone world of those who have passed away and are long gone wrestles with tomorrow. Marcinkowski, Szczaniecka, Chłapowski, Wawrzyniak and thousands of other people. They were ordinary. They lived like everyone else in Wielkopolska. They took part in ordinary events in which everyone, one way or another, in their own way, participated. They passed away a long time ago. They will not tell us about themselves. We must, if possible, do it for them: make the dead talk to us.

Ordinary, uneventful Wielkopolska. Gray. The pale-gray, gray-brown canvas of ordinary everyday life, which for generations has been pulsating with its own rhythm in this part of the world. Nothing fancy: yesterday, the day before yesterday, then. Stęszew, Ostrzeszów, Poznań, Szamotuły, Bnin, Gniezno, Ujście, Czarnków, Biskupice, Wolsztyn, Podstolice, Pызdry, Borucin, Manieczki, Skalmierzyce, Wylatowo, Wymyślin, Kwilcz and the like.

The eternal ordinariness of existence. Could that be the key to the exciting and extraordinary saga before you? Neither ordinary nor universal, it probably is not the key. However, it is certainly a well-oiled lock in the door (including a solid frame) which opens to the past.

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The past is not history. The two have never been, are not, and will never be the same. The past is not history. The past is so much more than any story about it. The past is not an excerpt but the whole endless past: an endless continuum of what was and has been and of what happened long ago and has taken place only recently. With and without people.

History, spoken, written, molded, carved in stone, embroidered, painted, staged, filmed, any (hi)story, whatever it may be, is therefore a specific version of an arbitrarily selected and presented section of the past. It concerns it, it draws on it, it endows it with meaning, it tries to describe it, and present it in its own way, but – let us repeat yet again – it is never the past *per se*.

The significance of the past as something-that-has-already-happened means that history may never claim to be able to replace it or trade places with it in the collective consciousness.

History and memory. Only a child immersed in the stream of their own experiences believes that the entire world consists of the here and now. Holding a smartphone in our hands, we tend to believe this too. In any case, many of us do. Boastful modernity tries but cannot quite dissociate itself from the past. Whether we like it or not, the past is always with us. It is with us, but it lives on without us.

Unlike the past, history only exists when it is told, written, drawn, painted, sculpted, filmed, or shown on stage: it renders the past present, shaping the image of what happened, whether truthfully or not. The historian does not write in the same manner as the writer. The historian should only deal in facts.

The historical novel is different. It does not have to follow the strict protocols of the past. This does not mean, however, that the author has the right to disregard or distort facts. Both the historian and the novelist search for the truth, reconstruct past events and realities, and build on them in their own way, trying to create a (hi)story.

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Facts are facts because nobody can claim them as theirs. Whether we know about them or not, they are there. Each fact, referred to at a given time, is subject to verification. Something happened or it did not. It is impossible to have “your” facts. “My” facts cease to be facts. Even if we repeat them thousands of times, fabricate them for our own or someone else’s use, advertise them, create, and reproduce them endlessly. The past is the Great Absent one. The past will not defend itself; people who care for it as a whole, as truth, must defend it.

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There is more to the historical novel than facts. The author is allowed, or even has the right, to invent. This does not mean they are lying. The historical novel has a special, relatively loose, relationship to facts, to which it refers time and time again, albeit freely and on its own terms.

Historical fiction uses facts for its own purposes, but it is not limited to facts. Indeed, it is happy and eager to exercise its right to literary exceptions and hypotheses. It is not interested solely in facts. The morphology of the apocryphon is much more similar to the dynamic morphology of the historical novel: I would even argue that it is much closer to that which inspires it.

The historical novel cherishes the format of the apocryphon, which allows it to do almost everything: confabulate, fill in gaps, invent, presume, dodge, question, doubt, transform, re-evaluate, and reframe scenes and historical figures. It may surprise the reader with a revolutionary take, show something “from a unique perspective,” shed new light on something, challenge the collective consciousness, circulate among what is known in order to come face to face with what is still undetermined, unclear, unexplored, and unknown in the past.

The past is a challenge for the historian. (Re)imagining it requires courage. This is a most difficult and dangerous task. It comes at great risk. In its extreme form, this journey beyond the horizon of history is like dancing over the abyss of the unknowable. It is a high-wire balancing act, in which the wire is stretched between the fixed and the verifiable and the probable and the likely.

This exciting game has one goal: to investigate the past, enter it, understand it, reveal it, illuminate it, and disclose its secrets. The skills of the historian and the historical novelist are put to the ultimate test. The desired result is a work devoted to the distant and the bygone. Thanks to their endeavors and tireless efforts, it is resurrected and saved from oblivion.

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The author's desire for truth comes at a cost. This is fear of the untrue. A genuine historical author always seeks to avoid this. You may invent but not lie. You are strictly forbidden to lie. Also, must not forget that the words and images you so relentlessly choose and seek are neither irreplaceable nor definitive, though they sometimes appear to be.

When we lift the lid off the past, invoke the spirits of those who have passed away, and reflect on their fates and actions, we always have the living in mind. History is a story, a narration, a representation, a presentation; *ergo* someone creates it. It is a more or less personal and subjective, and therefore inherently non-objective, image, created *ad oculos et as usum posteris*.<sup>1</sup> And you, you are the one who makes it happen.

The more you try to make the image of the past closer and more vivid in the eyes of the viewer, the deeper you enter the story and become part of it. Therefore, to be objective, as one would want you to be, is in no way considered beneficial. At best, it is an ideal the author tries to attain. They will never be able to achieve it, though.

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The performative properties of history make the past accessible, molding it in so many ways. Both fair and reprehensible. Signs (representations of facts) that were used in the process may adequately represent the past or distort it, fake it, replace it.

The good historian and the good writer both know this. They both use the imagination. It is thanks to the imagination that (their) unique vision of the past is conceived and born. They both make past events and characters into a story. They show and order facts, arranging them into a (hi)story.

The topic seems to be the same – but not its development, representation, and arrangement. Wherein does the difference lie? In the approach, it seems. In the poetics. Poetics determines the way the past is represented and explained. The historian seeks the unambiguous, while the historical author is open to interpretations. The past, presented in a different light, is not the same.

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A long, long time ago there lived a Scottish ruler named Macbeth, whose tragic life was certainly worth describing. No wonder that someone finally did describe it. There is nothing wrong with the images of bloody events found in Holinshed's Chronicles of England, provided

we have never heard of William Shakespeare's play. Was Holinshed's account deprived of credibility because of such a rewriting?

<sup>1</sup> Ad oculos et ad usum posteris – (Latin) visually and for the benefit of posterity.

Not at all! Both the chronicler and the playwright are truthful. They both tried to be credible, but it is clear that they are not credible to the same degree. In his rewriting, Shakespeare kept the subject, the basic understanding of contemporary events, the main protagonists, and their character traits. Everything else, documented in Holinshed's *Chronicles* and Boece's *Historia Gentis Scotorum*,<sup>2</sup> was transformed completely under the pen of the genius from Stratford. Are we to conclude that the story of Macbeth, borrowed from Holinshed, lost its credibility because of such a rewriting? As if!

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Such an orthodox binary logic turns out to be deceptive and useless in navigating the seas of the historical imagination. The facts and just the facts versus fabrication. Fiction (that is: not the truth) versus truth. No in-between. No fraternizing, let alone crossing the green border to the other side. No deductions or vague guesses.

Very well, someone might say, but in the end it does not matter. Everyone has their own story. After all, stories based on real accounts of the past are somewhat different from pure nonsense and pseudo-historic lies. There must be a line between the real and the imaginary. Well, there is such a line. When one writes about the past, bringing to symbolic existence one's own story, one must not misuse facts. They should be presented with integrity and discipline.

The historian must adhere to such rules but what about the writer of a historical novel? And who can tell if fiction, even though it is made-up, does not contain truth that may be confirmed (or denied) in the light of the facts and knowledge we have access to today?

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Non-fiction is *the* element of the historical novel. It is also intimately associated with the author of a historical novel, who weaves imaginary tales around known and unknown authentic historical figures and events. So, is it fiction or not? Well, it is fiction! Of course, it is. Epic, poetic, dramatic, theatrical, painterly, radio, film, television, comic book fiction, game fiction, etc. boldly reaching and transcending the horizons of the known and the verified. However, at the same time, it is fiction that cannot be denied or refuted by facts. Although, as the name implies, it is fictitious, and thus used to making things up, when it shows the past, it is no worse than hard facts, to which it refers.

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The pages in old documents have long ago turned yellow and been covered with the dust of oblivion – which can be dangerous because it is deceptive. Without careful examination, oblivion has

<sup>2</sup> The chronicler Raphael Holinshed rewrote the version of the events recorded by his predecessor, Hector Boece, in *Historia Gentis Scotorum* (1527) some three decades later.

fed and continues to feed collective confabulations. Amnesia often opens the door to fabrication. Although it told stories about history, it was not history (a reliable vision of the past) in the strict sense. Instead, it replaced it, gradually displacing the true course of past events.

Such a story is like a false lineage, made for the benefit of a person who wants to present themselves to the world as dignified and glorious, rather than as they truly are. Falsified stories falsify and distort reality, offering in return its surrogate, an illusory substitute. This will not satisfy the reader's curiosity. We can do better than that.

Thus, ambitious historians and true historical writers have a chance to accomplish more. Thanks to their efforts and hard work, a vision that is not embellished, but much closer to the truth, may emerge. Such a vision has been gradually forgotten in the process of creating legends which glorify the ruler, or lessons *ad usum delphini*, for all his subjects and school children, when people are turned into heroes and awarded laurel wreaths. Such an alternative image of the past, often overlooked, patiently waits to be discovered.

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It is a shame that historians rarely venture into the realm of historical fiction, considering such "*terra incognita*" un-scientific or un-academic. However, the exact same thing can be said about the authors of historical novels' reluctance to traverse the cobbled roads of the past, paths that have long been paved with facts.

I believe that both could benefit from exchanging the road maps of imagination they use to guide them in their travels. Neither history as an academic discipline nor creative writing, for which historical events act as a trigger, activating historical imagination, will suffer as a result.

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Facts. A fact is a fact, they say. Did it take place or not? Did it happen or not? And how did it come about? The eternal dilemma of both the untrue and the true. Let us consider, for example, the following question: did Piłsudski ever visit the Poznań Province? Did he ever venture into or visit Wielkopolska, since he was neither popular nor welcomed here, apparently because he did not support the uprising? Is it a historical fact or simply a story? Is it true or not? Let's find out more about it, and then...

It is not true. Piłsudski visited Wielkopolska more than once. The truth peeps through this fabrication, like mistletoe hidden in the branches of the past. It is certainly true that Piłsudski did not have many supporters in Wielkopolska; on the contrary, he had many opponents. For some time, at least. Some of them changed their opinion about Piłsudski later, when he arrived in Poznań one December evening and gave a beautiful toast about the people of Wielkopolska at Zamek.

Well, the untrue is like a parasite – it feeds on the true. It draws on it, consummates its juices, and attaches itself to its root system, which extends deep into the past. Therefore, it requires constant verification. Truly means credibly. Facts matter, especially when they inspire a revisionist approach. Only the facts – facts to be extracted for the benefit of collective memory. And the facts in this case have not been studied very diligently. They have been disregarded, overlooked, or revised in keeping with someone’s specific needs.

The attitude of the people of Wielkopolska towards Józef Piłsudski is but one example of many similar situations that have persisted for generations as clichés. Revised “history” displaces the past, and when repeated and replicated over and over again, becomes a “well-known fact.” There are many, many such pseudo-historical “facts” in the collective consciousness.

The one associated with Piłsudski has been taken for granted by the public and transformed into a semi-mythical axiom or statement: as everyone knows, the head of state and First Marshal of Poland never visited Wielkopolska. Everyone knows that...

The problem is that not everyone knows that, or, indeed, that everyone is wrong about it. In such a case, a popular story about the past is neither encouraging nor motivating, but only disturbing. Instead of our own past, which has something important to say about ourselves, we come face to face with an obscure, false, and artificial myth.

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We should know our past, first of all, because it is our own. We should all examine and discover our past. Scientific, artistic, and literary histories can help us greatly. Provided that we acknowledge as true (that is, actual) the existence of some events that actually took place, and not stop at the very beginning of the road, accepting a substitute mockup of an alleged reality of the past and the illusion it evokes for granted.

History as a mock-up imitates the real. Not only does it distort the truth about the past, but also propagates lies and untruths. Flavor and color are gone. It thus falsifies reality. Historians and historical writers are aware of this. But not only they...

The propagandist (not to be confused with the propagator) knows this too. For propaganda purposes, they use “fake news” and camouflage. They manipulate texts, treating them selectively and instrumentally. They prey on human ignorance and use the illusion of “facts,” pulled like a rabbit out of a hat, to achieve specific goals. After all, propaganda does not use facts, but pre-processed pseudo-facts, prepared with a specific goal in mind, used as substitute for facts.

The result? The result of such a treacherous substitution, of appropriating the past, is visible to the naked eye. Instead of accounts based on facts, various factoids have found and continue to find their way into the collective consciousness: they pose as reliable accounts of the past, but they are mere fantasy. In such texts, therefore, there are facts and pseudo-truths –



in contrast to what actually happened in the past, that is, the actual course of certain events, which function as both personal and collective experiences.

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We still have (relatively easy) access to authentic traces and accounts of the past, real life, from one hundred or more years ago: in short, to everything that actually happened or took place. The protagonists, perhaps not all of them but still many, made sure that the memory of them and the important events in which they participated would not be lost. Not everyone, like Dezydery Chłapowski, had his Kalinka with them at the end of their life.

Our common past, be it represented or not, belongs to our predecessors and, more importantly, continues to exist and is constantly made visible through and thanks to witnesses, archives, accounts, memories, photographs, films, and documentaries.

Fortunately, these records, so valuable to us, have not been lost. Most of them can be found in archives, chests, and drawers. One only has to look at them carefully, making sure that they are not lost forever in a furnace, paper mill or garbage dump and thus completely forgotten like thousands of camera rolls, illuminated with images of the past, that were used to reclaim silver or to make combs and hairpins.

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Every thread counts in the fabric of history: even the tiniest detail that has survived to this day. Details that are misused, misplaced, or turned into a boring textbook or a pseudo-historical text not only fail to create myths but, when served in such an easily digestible and bland form, effectively destroy them, forcing you to start all over again.

History in all its forms turns out to be a means of testing past events: a story built around the past and, realistically speaking, what is no longer present. Let us repeat once more – following in the footsteps of great polymaths such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Thucydides, Tacitus, Pliny the Elder, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Michelet, Burckhardt, Ashkenazi, Ariès, Huizinga, Braudel, Gieysztor, Geremek, Modzelewski, Topolski, Sklar, White, Davies and others – past events are not synonymous with history.

History is created. It is represented as a sequence of images. It cannot exist otherwise. The past exists, it happened, it cannot be (ex)changed, it is. Contrary to what tyrants and totalitarian leaders have been and still are doing with it, the past cannot be changed. The past is factual. It is truthful. Indeed, it is never history.

How so? After all, the task of history is to show the past, tell it, present it, visualize it, bring it as close as possible to the contemporary reader. Is it not? So, what exactly is its function? In short, history is the process of discovering the past, be it as an individual or as a collective. We are

talking here about our own and some else's past, about ancient times and contemporary events. Indeed, the past is always considered by someone as their own, insofar as, without exception, the one who (re)presents it is always behind it.

Such a vision of history, (re)presented by either the academic or the novelist, allows us to reflect on the past, so that those who live here and now and those who will live after us may learn from it.

Historical reconstruction is an (incomplete) expression and examination of an individual discovery, of something that once, *in illo tempore*, happened. It is a subjective attempt at recreating the past after many years and centuries have passed. Such an attempt is necessarily full of gaps: despite the author's best efforts, it is imperfect, flawed, incomplete, which is what usually happens when we dare to touch the untouchable.

That is it. Indeed, apart from what we have at our disposal in terms of materials and sources, at the level of intentions, though not in its final form, it is made of and built around the known and the unknown, be it events, people, or memories.

Indeed, absence that is present... The known discovered in the distant. A detail, letter, document, or photo that, lucky for us, has survived: a single element that is a building block for the whole. It is like a pebble in a mosaic, but without "the whole" it is just a pebble. This surviving fragment is all that we have at our disposal today. This is a lot, and yet almost nothing, when we consider how much has taken place since then.

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We still must establish the connection between what really happened (and is real in our "now") and history. *Distinguendum est*. Let us begin by pointing to a fundamental ontological difference. The lava of everyday events that is constantly boiling and rising to the surface, along with their unusual circumstances – just like the frozen magma of the past – is not history in itself.

The past may only turn into history if we participate in this process. People write accounts of events, they present them, they create history. It is people who see something significant in certain events and arrange them in keeping with a certain logic. They usually (if not always) do so because it suits them, because they are not objective, because something is at stake for them.

The yesterday and the day before yesterday are equally worth discovering and knowing. Do not leave everything to historians, anticipating that they will show you the true past. They know how much truth is hidden in the imaginary past. The best historians admit that a historical myth (a founding myth, etc.) is a fascinating object of study.

We do not have to go back to the Middle Ages to find that historians are often the biggest liars. Otherwise, they would have written down only the facts. Indeed, the writers of historical novels are not that much different from them – both are master-confabulators.

Let us remember that a fact, whatever it may be, happened and existed – and in this sense it exists forever – with no writers or chroniclers present. Something simply happened; it actually (that is, really) happened. It has become. There is consistency at the heart of this “happened.” Facts are facts, people say. And they are probably right.

It took place, it happened – it happened in the past – and then went down in history, as if in the next stage of an eternal process in which our predecessors participated, and in which we still participate today. “It happened” also has one more advantage, namely it can be verified, that is, established as a fact. The historical writer who navigates the seas of the imagination benefits from this: they have a body of water which they can explore.

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Yes, it is true, facts are facts, but what does that really mean? Whenever one wants to describe or present a fact or any sequence of facts, one “adds” oneself to it. The past constantly demands remembrance and personal reworking from those who have inherited it. This is an individual and a group task: the human being must participate in it.

But how does what we conventionally call “a fact” make its way from the past to history? How does it become history?

Well, there is only one path, one transmission lane that leads to it: through story(telling). Someone has to tell it: save it from oblivion, pass it on to someone, testify that it was so, write it down, make a note with the living and posterity in mind, present what happened – report it.

Someone has to tell it. We need an intermediary or a medium. Thus, the story is embedded and anchored in a specific textual medium, with its beginning, middle, and end. This medium is a narrative. In order to be able to exist in the space between the sender and the addressee, history must be communicated as a story, as a narrative.

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History, like fiction, takes on a life of its own. By living in its own way, it becomes a fact. It is described and presented in a specific way. (Re)presented in someone’s account, it conceals itself. *Nolens volens*, we accept it as a fact and recognize it as the truth. And we no longer know whether this fact actually happened. Probably it did or perhaps it did. But did it really?

Did a fact that was recalled and described by someone, and was thus communicated to us, really take place? We have no control over this. A fact, *omnino vere*,<sup>3</sup> or some version of it – a legend, a myth, an academic lecture, a school lesson, a textbook, a popular account, to name just a few – is internalized by us, allowing us to build a picture of the past: the history of the

<sup>3</sup> *Omnino vere* – (Latin) quite true.

Proto-Slavic tribes, the first Piasts, the golden century of Jagiellonian power, the Wettin dynasty, the drama of the partitions, the longest war in modern Europe.

Told and retold in a given community, historical narratives crystallize over time. If they are not revised, they consolidate, freeze, harden and turn into stone or amber as the only version of truth about the past: the human mind no longer feels the need to refer to facts. Historical narratives are recognized as one's own and cherished by a given individual or community.

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What connects historical fiction with reality? Everything and nothing. Fiction is not pure fabrication, illusion, fantasy, or mirage. Marked on the roadmap of the eternal paths of the human imagination, whether we like it or not, it becomes an object – it has a shape, and its own dimensions, topography, and characteristics. However deceptive, detached from the world, and fantastic it might seem, it always exists right next to the real: on the periphery of the real, as a specter of the past, its second life, an alternative form of being.

Writing a novel has always been a time-consuming and tedious activity. The writer works hard, always searching and wandering, unsure of the final result. The novel, like any other creative act, imprisons its author: the writer desperately wishes to overcome their limitations, escape, and find freedom. Only the daring are able to finally sail to their designated destination and port.

If you have not experienced this feeling personally, you do not know how much it torments the heart and the mind of those who are trying to create something based on the past. Each work is created and suspended between imprisonment and liberation. It finally comes to the light of day and finds independence, leaving behind the embarrassing and rather unnecessary author who created it behind.

Is the historical writer alone in their writing? Not exactly, though it might seem so. After all, the writer writes with their own hand, holding the pen or typing on the keyboard; no one guides or controls their hand, standing behind their back.

In fact, however, something, a certain invigorating power, is always with them. It is the expectations of their readers, whose existence and presence are always recognized, even if they are dismissed. It is they who, one way or another, turn out to be a mirror in which, *nolens volens*, their original intentions are reflected and reviewed.

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A novel about the past tells its own story. It binds and intertwines *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit*. Like a brilliant smuggler, it is constantly on the run, transporting contraband across the green border of writing. Every historical novel constantly oscillates between the probable and the unlikely. Thus, by its nature, it lives on the margins. It moves, complements, and supports

the facts that the past is made of. As long as it remains probable, it is a historical novel. It is a must, a *sine qua non* condition, and a loan with a notarized guarantee that the author took out at the bank of the past.

Historical writing in all its shapes and sizes should reveal the past as evocatively as possible and help us understand it. This can be considered its proper destiny. And what should it not do? It is clear. It should never replace the past. It is not authorized to do so. Although we know that it can impose itself on people and seduce, charm, and deceive them if they succumb to its deceptive power.

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A good historical novel thrives on confabulation. This is its natural element and basic *raison d'être*. However, it cannot ever claim to replace what is real in the past. Deprived of a safety net, fabrication always endangers those readers who are captivated and deluded by it. Naive consumers of fiction are eager to believe in something that does not really exist. This naive belief in the non-existent has often brought them pain and suffering.

The point is that society as a whole – and I refer here to the collective consciousness, especially its most delicate parts, which are susceptible to infection, is not immune from contamination by historical untruth. Its immune response is often too weak. Then it becomes infected. Luckily, sometimes it is a minor infection. However, even such a minor (local) infection may turn out to be devastating and disastrous when the rapidly progressing gangrene of pseudo-historical lies follows.

Facts are initially denied. Especially painful, difficult, unacceptable, and even undeniable facts. It is impossible to completely ignore them, forget about them, deny their uncomfortable existence. The less they are processed by the collective consciousness, the more real they turn out to be: like a thorn stuck in a wanderer's foot, making them unable to go any further.

Our memory is selective. Memories of what happened come back to us in a series of close-ups: sometimes close and loud, sometimes distant, coming from afar. Each triggers a new, often difficult, revision of what we remember.

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Should we remember the past? Today I know that it is by all means worthwhile. In the past, when I was young, I only cared about the present. Only the new today mattered and it absorbed me completely. I treated the past with contempt – as unimportant, irrelevant, gone, passed. The future was my illusory tomorrow, that is, a (predictable) continuation of the sequence of the now.

Today I feel and perceive it quite differently. The past, present, and future should not be compared. This is a big mistake. It is enough to think about how the present, in which we are immersed like in a stream rushing into the unknown, flickers and passes in a moment. It is so

insignificant, especially when considered against the abyssal background of all that has happened in the world, good and bad, before us. It is hermetically closed with us in a capsule, the here and the now, against the background of the unknown future – the possible and the impossible, the hypothetical and the true. It is hidden behind the gates of the unknown tomorrow.

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Historians versus authors of historical novels. Both write (about) history. But is it only them? Does what connect and divide them exhaust the past and contemporary understanding of historiography? Of course not. There is someone more. We must not forget this. Each is someone who studies the past, who is knowledgeable about it, and who wants to share it with others in order to preserve it.

Neither historiography as a science nor historical fiction, with all due respect to the efforts of those who cultivate and create them, have a sole claim to history. They constitute but a part of it, a *pars pro toto* of its daily and eternal existence.

The otherwise well-deserved praise for scientific historical treatises and historical novels would not be possible without their primary frame of reference. This must not be forgotten or taken lightly.

The system in question is an inexhaustible reservoir of all kinds of ordinary, that is, well-known, texts about the past, be it in speech or in writing. These include, among others: stories, legends, myths, songs, hearsay, notes, letters, reports, correspondence, family stories, communal stories, textbooks, diaries, calendars, glosses and notes, memoirs, chronicles, private stories (microhistories), personal memories, journals, travelogues and travel reports, official and unofficial life stories, accounts of past events, testimonies, biographies and autobiographies, memories, anecdotes, comments on current events and history, memes, etc.

Although they seem, and in fact are, very different, they form a certain set of texts which share an operating paradigm. They are connected by discourse and language. I shall conventionally refer to such a discourse and language as colloquial. Let me add that, although it is extremely important and popular, it is not the only discourse and language out there.

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In general, there are three social historiographic discourses:

- colloquial discourse,
- artistic discourse,
- scientific discourse.

How does one recognize and distinguish between them? They have all developed their own distinct poetics. These poetics determine the specific paradigm of these discourses and the difference between them. Linguistic resources and tricks-of-the-trade, diverse as they may be, are repetitive:

the matrices, means of expression, words, rhetorical figures, and conventional tricks used to (re) present the past and transform it into history are used in specific texts time and again.

Apart from the historian and the author of a historical novel, someone else is important as well: an ordinary person who tells someone else what they have experienced or what others have experienced. In other words, an ordinary, be it anonymous or not, author of a microhistory. The past is (re)presented differently in a scientific treatise, a historical novel, family accounts, and other types of texts.

I place particular emphasis on colloquial discourse because it is so popular. It cannot be ignored. It is only against the background of the commonplace and the everyday that the discourses of the historian and the historical writer emerge as distinct.

We are all self-proclaimed historians and authors of historical novels. We all take part in this primal discourse. The emancipation of the scientific historical treatise and the glorification of the historical novel, as well as the glorification of both types of works and discourses, would not be possible without the popular, social, historical discourse. It is the primary frame of reference for both, although for each of them in a different way.

Surprising as it may be, both scientific and artistic discourse draw on colloquial discourse, because it is colloquial discourse that gave rise to them in the past. Even more importantly, they both continue to rely on it and are based on it. This constitutes their foundation, just as colloquial language is the basis for poetic, literary and scientific language.

All stories are based on someone's subjective experience of the past. Some call this empathy, I call it understanding the past. It is through and in these three types of discourse that human interest in what has been, since time immemorial, circulates in different communication circuits.

\* \* \*

Why do we need the past? What is it for? And why does a traveler need the road they have already taken, the road on which they are now, or the road that is ahead of them? Why does a tree need its roots which feed and nourish it?

I have already discussed various utilitarian practices of falsifying history that poison individual and collective perceptions of the past. I do not think they are dominant or inescapable, however. On the contrary, I have described them in order to be able to point out their polar opposite. It is a disinterested, so to speak, relationship with the past, in which the today feels the need to connect with the past.

A scientific text and a work of art, but also caring for graves, an album with family photos, researching a family tree, or telling a story so that a memory or an experience can be passed on to the next generation, as well as many other forms of connecting with the past – seen in such a perspective, they are an *acte gratuit*, a noble symbolic manifestation of preserving and connecting with the past.

\* \* \*

It is taken for granted that the past is irretrievably lost. Is it really? Yes, it has passed, it has fallen into the well of the past. But not quite. It still exists in us, albeit differently than when it was alive with current – or indeed past – affairs, and the daily hustle and bustle of people who have passed away.

Is history always true? Not at all... This is a deceptive belief that has been held for centuries by historians. An idol of absolute truthfulness. Mortals cannot even come near it, let alone touch it. However, it should not be questioned, challenged, condemned, or mocked. The fact that a scholar wishes to be as objective as possible in their study of the past is praiseworthy.

The fact that we will never know the whole truth about the past does not mean, first of all, that we should not try; *secundo*, that the truth about what was and actually happened does not exist and – seen by contemporaries as lost forever – will never be discovered. Yes, it existed, it exists and will continue to exist, and thus it should be explored.

There is such an intriguing ancient paradox. Its seemingly irresistible logic suggests that the past does not exist because it has passed away, and neither does the present, because it is always already the past. And there is certainly no future, because the future is yet to come and, in a moment, it will also become the past.

And what is left for us? Let us abandon the deceptive teachings of the sophists and follow our own logic, basing our knowledge of the past and ourselves on truthful personal experience. The past exists in the present in many ways. Immersed in the stream of the present, we do not have to, and in fact we would not be able to, completely break our ties with the past. The only question is: what to do with it? Maybe we should renew our contact with the past even though this may be difficult? So, let's get to the point...

In general, we do not know as much about the past as we would like. That is why it is so attractive, mysterious, and alluring. It is a land of facts and doubts. Whoever wishes to explore it, looks for the necessary support in facts. If these are missing, all we have left is the power of the imagination. Reconstructing the past, and this is what history is, is essentially a creative and imaginative act.

Anyone who explores the past processes the past through imagination. *Nolens volens*, it is our inquisitiveness, perceptiveness, curiosity, doubts, hesitations, knowledge and ignorance, our question marks, insistence, empathy, our wish to broaden our horizons, and our ability to associate and draw logical hypotheses and conclusions that makes us do it. And, last but not least, an individual and collective need, the skill and courage to come to terms with the past.

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Who needs fiction? Shouldn't we write only about real events and people? First of all, who said that fiction must be untrue? Accused of being untruthful simply because it is fiction?



Nonsense. Secondly, does fiction, by definition, exclude the presence and participation of facts? Why should it? Thirdly, who will ensure that what is called true history is indeed truth and nothing but the truth? Or maybe the story that is recognized as true is also but a confabulation? Or what is worse, it poses as truth?

Fiction does not have to lie. A myth, like a novel, moves in-between the true, based on facts, and the fabricated, derived from facts, constantly bringing together the real and the unreal. Neither myths nor novels are simply created in the blink of an eye. Such texts need time. They are preceded by a complex process of crystallization and shaping.

We can only talk about the past if human imagination is there to make it happen. The historical novel, because it is of particular interest to us in this text, is the result of a tirelessly persistent game. A game of zooming in and out, a game of moving in-between the known and the unknown.

\* \* \*

Fiction may be surprising at times. Let us imagine that, for the sake of our novel, we come up with a fictional town name. Let us assume that the town is called Wymyślin. However, the name of Wymyślin, invented *ad hoc*, does not stay “fictional” for long. To our surprise, we discover and realize that there is a town called Wymyślin in Poland.

What a surprise! The Wymyślin in question turns out to be not as sophisticated and imaginative as someone might think. It is a village near Lipno located in the Kujawy-Pomerania Province. It was and it is. Quite real and not made-up. Well, reality can be unexpected and official lists of town names are long. Apart from Wymyślin, we also have Wymysłowo, Wymysłów, Wymysył, Wymysły, Wymysłowice (near Strzelno), Wymysłe, Wymysłówce and Wymysłance. Really. It seems that our ancestors beat us to it.

Enough! Definitely enough. Both in the past and today, it is born and exists in its own way, governed by its own rules. It is impossible to completely distill it, drain it, purge it of reality. Even the most ridiculous and fanciful things refer to reality. They belong somewhere.

\* \* \*

It gets really interesting when life is turned into a story. When it disappears forever, locked in the dark labyrinth of the past: Ariadne suddenly cries for help and guides Theseus, who wants to save her beloved.

Theseus, and this is my version of the myth, did not know how dangerous and fraught with danger his journey would be. He wanted only one thing: to rescue Ariadne and bring her back to life. If we compare a storyteller, be it a scientist, a writer, or perhaps a chronicler, to the mythical Theseus, they become someone who, whenever they set out on their way, wishes to reverse the death of what once lived and to reverse the irreversible. They thus undertake a dangerous task.

Nothing else matters to them. Their only desire and goal is to save someone's life: to show them the way out of the maze thanks to a thread of facts: to save the past from dying in the darkness of eternal non-existence.

\* \* \*

When does man cease to exist? When will the trace of them disappear forever? Well, you exist for others: you live in them, through them, and thanks to them. Indeed. Like Dr. Peiser who returned from the war to his beloved daughter Lili, we may cease to exist in our lifetime. He loved his daughter and missed her during all those years and eventually became a complete stranger to her, wandering around his family home like a specter of his former self.

Without a story, without a novel, characters are banished and thrown beyond their imaginable boundaries defined by the trajectory of the word: they are expelled beyond the horizon of reality onto the distant margins of non-existence. But do those who lived before us, our ascendants, once present here, completely sink into this lifeless nothingness the moment they die? When we stand up for them, we fight to save ourselves. *Non omnis morietur*. Disappearing, falling beyond the horizon of existence, mortals continue to live, be it forever or for a while.

They all have one thing in common: one day or night they suddenly go away forever. Nevertheless, they do not quite pass away. Memory can bring them back to life. It is thanks to memory that, despite their disappearance, they continue to live. They are because they once lived and existed. There once was the Devil of Venice. Someone like that really lived in Wielkopolska centuries ago. And he is not the only one.

Emilia Sczaniecka, Filipina Kottek, General Chłapowski from Turwia, the Herse brothers and their friend Władysław Jerzykiewicz, count Władysław Zamoyski, the pianist Paderewski, Marshal Piłsudski and the German diplomat count Harry Kessler, who was kind to Poles – they all once lived. So did Dr Karol Marcinkowski, Dr Heliodor Świącicki, the bookseller Jan Konstanty Żupański, the sisters Zofia and Aniela Tułodzieckie, Michał Drzymała, Bogusław Łubieński, Major Andrzej Kopa, the aviator from Ławica Wiktor Pniewski, and the brilliant chef from Wielkopolska, Maria Śleżańska.

Are all of these people gone forever? Not at all. Not in the least. They are with us as long as we remember them. They live and are still with us, albeit not in the same manner: they have been transformed into a story thanks to human memory. They exist in it as real people, perhaps even more fully than when they lived, though in their own way. And then, thanks to the magical power of memory, they can become whatever they like. The overseer Wolfgang Otto Wagner and his servant Steffi; the descendant of the Poznań Bammers, Maks Handschuh; the grandfather of Zygmunt Bauman and wise accountant Cohen; the famous Nobel Prize winner Koch, Michał Drzymała, and the future film star little Lili Palmer (*de domo* Peiser), who did not recognize her father when he came back home after war.

\* \* \*

Once upon a time, there was... A magical land of stories. When you wander through this elusive and deceptive land, you are unable to tell the difference between a fairy tale, a cliché, a story, a legend, and a myth. How many times have we heard such an emphatic denial: utter nonsense, untruth, fabrication, legend, myth! However, a myth – a myth about someone or something – does not necessarily falsify the real, and it is by no means synonymous with lies.

Indeed, not every story about what was and what happened tends to idealize reality. On the contrary, stories often demystify, destroying distortions and simplifications and showing clearly the real (it is worth noting the unintended paradox – after all, we refer to fiction) events and people.

In any historical novel, regardless of what it is about, there is a conflict between two cognitive approaches. On the one hand, things take on a simplified and unambiguous “comic” form. On the other hand, together with the author, we try to trace the meanders of past events: we discover contradictions, complications, and the surprising ambiguity of the (re)presented.

As the latter approach suggests, the “good guys” no longer embody pure idealized heroism, and the “bad guys” are not simply villains. It is neither a western nor a Charles May novel. When we explore the past, trying to uncover it and save it from oblivion, we discover step-by-step that the lives of the people of Wielkopolska, our ancestors, turn out to be much more complex and ambiguous than we thought.

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The game of fiction thus presents the reader with conflicting positions and opposing parties. The story of Drzymała, the children of Września, the Wielkopolska Uprising, the war with the Bolsheviks. Let us return once again to the question of myth and its complex relationship with the past. Myth, regardless of what it talks about and what it presents, makes reality unreal, transporting it into another dimension. What dimension? Generalized, uncomplicated, parabolic, suspended between the real and the unreal. Let's refer to it as the metaphysical dimension.

It is believed that a myth and a factual description are mutually exclusive. In other words, a myth is not history, as defined by objective, scientific, historians. Hence the fairly widespread view that a myth that tells its own version of historical events exists completely on and of itself: in its own mythological (non-factual) framework.

However, this is not the case. Like a legend, a fairy tale or a story, a myth grows from and draws on the real. Though it appears to be autonomic, that is, freed from reality, the universal nature of myth does not completely break away from reality, but only rises above it. It transposes history and (re)tells it in its own way. It cannot be reduced to history; on the contrary, it moves away from the fleeting and the transient.

How is this possible? Well, each myth, without exception, creates and establishes its own autonomous space-time. Thus, as a specific type of text, it turns out to be pre-historic and timeless at the same time. Thanks to this, it can be constantly reborn, and multiplied in the collective imagination. The historical matter of reality, from which it originated, disintegrates, passes, and disappears, while the myth continues.

Crucial as it may be, there is more to the myth than its lifespan.

The structure of the myth, which comprises its functions, fills in the common space with a captivating image or a set of images that a given community is willing to accept and recognize as its own. Whenever in social life a myth swaps places with reality (myth becomes reality *tout court*), it replaces, overshadows, and displaces reality, becoming more important than it.

The collective memory of the past then somehow disintegrates. This provides an illusory experience of certainty and knowledge about the past. Both the mythmakers and the lovers of myths are thus deceived – they travel along a well-worn, but in fact treacherous and ultimately disastrous, path which leads straight to idealization and, thus, to falsification, distortion, and manipulation.

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The Egyptian pharaohs knew that human life was fleeting. They also knew how resistant to the effects of time monumental structures made of huge blocks of stone were. “Soldiers! Forty centuries are looking at you.” This brilliant phrase was uttered by a man who faced the past and used a stone historical fact to create his own (hi)story.

History and the past. These concepts are often confused and treated as synonyms. Taking into consideration this semantic confusion and its serious consequences, let us try and to prevent it by redefining it. The past, as I understand it, is a primary being: the primary cause and the reason for existence – not only human existence. On the other hand, history, in its various forms and references to the past, is a secondary modeling system.

When we talk about “the past,” we always refer to the testatrix. When we talk about “history,” we refer to the heiress. Even though we participate in the past, it is our beginning, we can by no means consider ourselves its creators. History is different. The individual and society are constantly creating and establishing history anew. You cannot establish the past, it is there. Unlike history, because the essence of history is to establish.

Every inheritance, as is well known, includes assets and liabilities. One may not accept or reject it. However, if it is accepted, and life does not offer us other possibilities, it means that we are responsible for both its assets, from which we will create something, and its liabilities, things that although unwanted, are inherited by us, and cannot be disposed of, like bad debt. This is how history, understood as a systemic exploration of the past, makes itself known.

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Unlike the past (that is, what happened once, actually was, or, let's repeat it again, actually happened), history is implicit and hypothetical. It has just been said that statements and various judgments about the past can be and are made in good or bad faith.

Apart from the author's point of view, something else plays a role in this process, namely internal or external historical policy, motivated or dictated by the interests of the authorities. Look at what happens with history and the past at historical turning points. Such new openings, including new founding myths, have a profound impact on the present.

However, we are not interested in politics, but in the question of investigating and finding the truth about the past. Why? Why is this issue important in the lives of both the individual and the community? Well, because both the individual and the community use the past to fuel the sense of who they are and who they intend to be. Thus, for generation after generation, people who are knowledgeable about their own and others' past participate in social life of a given community – this is in our best interest. To know and understand the past does not only mean that one has a good understanding of today, but also that one is able to find the right path to tomorrow.

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Not everyone who revises and verifies the past-turned-myth is a dreaded myth buster. History is not a fossil. The tectonics of collective memory are in constant motion. Static popular images of the past come face-to-face with the dynamics of the new and *vice versa*.

Revising and vivisectioning historical memory usually leads to agitation, and sometimes condemnation, in the name of defending an established (imposed? sanctified?) vision of the past. You should listen carefully to the arguments of both parties. A myth buster is not a vandal, nor a barbarian trying to destroy collective memory. On the contrary, they often play an important social role. Doubt brings with it new questions. Doubt is like a breath of fresh air.

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Do you remember this famous sentence? *Historia magistra vitae est*.<sup>4</sup> How many times have we heard in school? Should we believe it or doubt it? I am of the opinion that we should be extremely cautious and skeptical about this ancient maxim. We should take nothing for granted. History, in all its forms, teaches some people one thing and teaches others something else. If it misrepresents the past, it can cause devastating mental damage.

<sup>4</sup> *Historia magistra vitae est* – (Latin) History is life's teacher.

A history lesson must not be confused with indoctrination. Historical facts (events, historical figures, etc.) become real to us if we understand them. It is a process of learning and discovering the past, not a collection of textbook truths to be memorized and believed. Staying open-minded about the past, provided it is guided by the truth, nourishes and fosters the micro- and macro-processes of the development of collective consciousness in a given place and time.

The present, in which the individual and society both exist, determines the relationship between today and the past. But it gets more complicated. It is a loop. On the other hand, the past also influences the present, its current affairs and developmental perspectives. Whoever is not aware of this is ready to believe that the past is lost forever, and that only today exists.

I focus on such complexities not for the sake of logical paradoxes, but to underline the importance of the relationship between the individual, the community, and the past. In times of peace, this does not play such an important role. Everything changes when war and other calamities escalate. The individual and the collective react to them in different ways. One such particularly interesting extreme reaction, on which I shall comment in a moment, is the activation of cognitive irony, which has been deeply hidden in the psyche. At heart, it is often endowed with a historiosophical aspect.

Hegel's *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time, never disappears and always demands to be expressed by those who experience it. The morbid humor which developed under the Nazi occupation, to which I would like to refer here, is a socio-cultural phenomenon which, in its many manifestations and forms, is a Polish *specialité nationale*. It is truly dark. The popular Warsaw couplets reflected the unimaginable terror of the occupation in the wider context of today, tomorrow, and yesterday:

Siekiera, motyka, bimer, szklanka  
 W nocy nalot, w dzień łapanka.  
 Siekiera, motyka, gaz i prąd  
 Kiedy oni pójda stąd?  
 Już nie mamy gdzie się skryć  
 Hycle nam nie dają żyć.  
 Po ulicach chodzą wciąż  
 Patrzą kogo jeszcze wziąć.  
 Ich kultura nie zabrania  
 Robić takie polowania.

Hatchet and hoe and a bottle of vodka  
 Bombs by night, in the day it's lock-ups  
 Hatchet and hoe and electric light  
 When will the German dogs take flight?  
 What to dream and what to do  
 Damn Germans make our life a zoo  
 There they are on the street  
 Snatching people like meat  
 Their *Kultur* prohibits not  
 Hunting people 'round the block.

Long before the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, Tadeusz Borowski published a poem titled "Pieśń" [Song] in the volume *Gdziekolwiek ziemia* [Anywhere this land] (1942). It begins thus:

Nad nami – noc. W obliczu gwiazd  
 Ogłuchłych od bitewnych krzyków,  
 Jakiż zwycięzców przyszły czas  
 I nas odpomni – niewolników.

Above us – night. In the face of the stars  
 Deaf from the screams of battle,  
 What is the future of winners  
 And who will re-remember us – slaves.

The poem ends thus:

Nad nami – noc. Goreją gwiazdy,  
Dławiący, trupi nieba fiolet.  
Zostanie po nas złom żelazny  
I głuchy, drwiący śmiech pokoleń.

Above us – night. The stars are burning,  
The sky is purple, overwhelming, like a corpse.  
What is left of us is scrap iron  
And the hollow mocking laughter of generations.

No other Polish twentieth-century poem is more profound and concise and, at the same time, more bitter and ironic. It expresses the historiosophy of the Columbus generation, marked by historical tragedy, combining its own yesterday and today with someone else's indifferent tomorrow.

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I wish to argue that the past, the present, and the future are not three separate entities, but communicating vessels. They are available to everyone; they are efficient and work for the benefit of a given community.

Our beginnings are in the past. We derive from it; we grow out of it. It is our mother and father. We are its continuation, bustling and working hard for tomorrow's present.

The present works not only for the future. It also works for the past that will become and transform into tomorrow. This is what teaching history should be about in the first place.

Looking at the past from a distance and noticing that the gap between the past and the present grows wider and wider with time does not happen instantaneously. It is each time a complex process in which the target result is/should be an individual or collective equilibrium between the rational and the emotional. History is not only a story about what was, but also a reminder that we carry the torch – we are the descendants.

Indeed, it is a complex process. Its driving force is not the mechanical passage of time. The past may be effectively discovered and assimilated only if the individual and the community play an active role in this process. A rational taming of the past, which plays an important psychosocial role for each community, depends on a personal (subjective) relation between the now and the past.

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The historian, just like the historical writer, sets out on a journey to discover the world of the past. They venture into the abyss of the past, looking for traces of ancient cultures and Atlantis. They both understand and accept the risks involved. Importantly, they do not want to avoid them; on the contrary, they are attracted to and animated by danger. They are fed by the always patient she-wolf of the past. Drinking her milk in order to survive, they are like the

milk brothers Romulus and Remus, filled with the same energy, overwhelmed by a common desire, moving in-between passion and truth.

What unites them is that they both try to discover the truth about the past. The historian tries to build their story solely on facts. They are interested in facts, only facts and nothing but facts. This is their field. This is their profession. This is their duty. The author of a historical novel does not avoid facts, but, apart from them, what attracts them personally to the story is the space of the imagination that opens up in-between.

They thus navigate among the facts, known and hidden, guided by a map on which they are marked. They are not playing it safe. They are fascinated by undiscovered and unknown lands. They look for them, similarly to the writer of the biblical apocrypha, knowing that the ancient Greek word *ápókryphos* does not mean untrue but “hidden, secret.”

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This is a great opportunity to take a fresh look at the past as a mysterious and unknown land. It is not easy to discover, recognize and describe it. All attempts to reach it, examine it and present it, that is, to describe it, in some respects remind us of our encounters with a culture that is not our own (I have deliberately omitted the highly unfortunate expression “foreign”), that relies on a system of values and ideals that we do not understand.

The past exists without us. In this sense, it remains an impersonal being, unlike and in contrast to history, which, in all its forms, is a subjective creation. What is important is the nature of the relationship established by the individual and the community with the past, with particular emphasis on its imaginary and emotional aspect.

People respond emotionally to the past, which is brought to life in and through the medium of history. This relationship may take on different forms, be dependent on different factors, and involve different attitudes. It fluctuates and oscillates between the distant (alienation, repression, hateful attitude towards the past) and the accessible, namely the state of immersing oneself in the past, considered by an individual or a given community as real, exciting, tangible, still present in their present environment (closeness, collective and individual fascination, admiration, self-identification, believing in it).

Connecting with the past in its cultural anthropological aspect is an act of translation: we translate ancient culture, often so distant from us that it is almost exotic, into contemporary culture. There are different translations. Apart from sophisticated and congenial renditions, there are also inaccurate ones.

We should remember about this difference and bear in mind that the process of translating one culture into another is subjective and thus poses the inevitable question: How good/fair/faithful/accurate is it? This makes us reflect on the art of translation. Both historians and writers should master this art.



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This raises a crucial question: Does the author respect history? Does respect only imply maintaining popular ideas about the past, or on the contrary, discovering real events that really took place (they did happen!)? In a word, respect has more to do with discovering the past by a bold and uncompromising author. Indeed, the author should reject distorted and mythologized versions of the past: in the name of the truth about people, matters, deeds, and times (re)presented in the novel.

The latter, in addition to thorough knowledge, requires personal courage. It is not easy to tell the truth, to bring it to light, and to show it in a different perspective. Especially when, for various reasons, it has been ignored, concealed, hidden, or distorted for so long.

Artistic demystification or fictional demystification may be brutal, but they save reality from omissions, clichés, stereotypes, and outright lies. They save reality from falsifications, half-truths, and appearances in which it has been trapped or stuck. The past demands the truth about itself. So don't say that you don't know what the truth is. Wise Aristotle says: "A judgment is true if and only if its predicate corresponds to its object."

\* \* \*

Unfortunately, many still believe that a historical novel – indeed, it should be pointed out that in the eyes of many it would be supposedly its only goal and property – should transport us into the realm of the unreal, should help us escape from the real. There are no rules. You make things up, you can fantasize as long as you give your readers hope.

To give one hope. This is a good and noble goal if the fictional work only feeds on the illusion of credibility. *Se non e vero...*<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, would give the novel itself and its author the alleged right to present a fanciful, fantastic, and sometimes completely unreal image of the past.

Write in such a way that your story gives others hope. Is this its only goal? Its sole purpose? Is it only capable of this one thing? Well, if so, it should be added that this is a simplification. What is worse, it weakens or even distorts the very essence of fictional writing – not only historical, by the way – and deprives it of its *raison d'être*.

The novel, like the mythical Antaeus, immediately loses its power when it loses contact with the ground of reality: it must be anchored in the earthly and the human here and now. Let us add, both today and in the past. The past, the actual events, make this ground real: *terra nostra incognita*, from which the source of the story springs forth.

<sup>5</sup> *Se non è vero, è ben trovato* – (Italian) Variant of Giordano Bruno's aphorism: "Even if it is not true, it is a good story."

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So, when it comes to the past, are we allowed to invent and confabulate or not? Of course, we are. The only question is to what a degree? As a reader, I cherish, and sometimes I admire with delight, historical fiction lined with reality, like an infant sucking a mother's breast. It is a natural state. It has existed for centuries. We have the right to create different images of the past.

Literary fiction presents and assimilates the past differently than a historical treatise. Its confabulations allow you to articulate, express, and convey your thoughts without proof. It cannot be proven and yet it is true. In contrast to a scientific dissertation, historical fiction can do more: it can confabulate, imagine, and fantasize.

On the other hand, historical fiction does not necessarily contradict or avoid facts. That is not its proper goal. On the contrary, by confronting them, showing them due respect, discovering, and exposing the past, examining it in detail, it can act to their advantage. It achieves its intended goal not by departing from and/or distancing itself from reality, but by coming as close to it as possible: this is possible thanks to the work of the imagination and its effective use of its means of expression.

One way or another, historical myths are rooted in reality; they spring forth from it and feed on it. Why? There are many possible answers to this question. One would be that they express human desires, both hidden and disclosed, as well as record various psychosocial traumas. These in turn always stem from the pain of existence experienced by the individual, as well as the mutilations and phantomatic suffering of the community, usually caused by the scarcity of the (painfully) real.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

# KEYWORDS

poetics

MYTH

PAST

**ABSTRACT:**

The text examines the complex relations between the past, history, and historical myth, in an interdisciplinary perspective, combining narratology, cognitive studies and cultural anthropology. The author redefines the interdependencies between the terms “the past,” “history,” and “myth,” pointing to the differences between the poetics of different historical narratives, as well as the cognitive potential of the category of the sign, semantic structure, and semantic function in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research on artistic and non-artistic accounts of the past.

narration

methodology

SCIENCE

art

history

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Marek Hendrykowski – film and media scholar, semiotician, scholar of contemporary culture, professor at the Institute of Film, Media and Audiovisual Arts at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, author of articles and books, including: *Film jako źródło historyczne* [Film as a historical source] (1999), *Semiotyka twarzy* [Semiotics of the face] (2017), *Scenariusz filmowy – teoria i praktyka* [Movie script – theory and practice] (2017), *Drugie wejrzenie. Analizy i interpretacje* [Second look. Analyses and interpretations] (2018), *Ogród Europy. Eseje z semiotyki i antropologii kultury Starego Kontynentu* [Garden of Europe. Essays on the Semiotics and Cultural Anthropology of the Old Continent] (2018), *Polska szkoła filmowa* [Polish Film School] (2018), *Short. Małe formy filmowe* [Short. Short films] (2019), *Narracja w filmie i ruchomych obrazach* [Narration in Film and Moving Pictures] (2019). Founder and senior editor of *IMAGES. The International Journal of Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Culture*. |