

Problematizing Representation of the Past and of its Verisimilitude in Historiographic Metafiction

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History has always been of interest to a wide range of people. The past and ascertaining its truth has more often than not aroused the curiosity of not only historians and writers but that of the common man. This penchant to fathom and mirror the past on the one hand, and the heterogeneity of vantage points concerning it on the other, has provoked controversies over the degree of verisimilitude of information disseminated by those trying to give a true account of a given period. The present paper is an attempt to examine the treatment of history and the past by postmodern historical novelists in general, and to shed some light on E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, and J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* from the perspective of postmodernists in particular so as to problematize the representation of the past, and to indicate history to be a constructed narrative, and not something completely corresponding to the past.

The obsession to write of history stretches back to the nineteenth century with Sir Walter Scott as a pioneer. His *Waverly* (1818) and *Ivanhoe* (1819) are thought of as early efforts. Such works as Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), and George Eliot's *Romola* (1863) also fall into this category. These writers, with truth on their side, set out to utilize historical events and personages and presented them in such a way in order to make readers acquainted with, and cognizant of, what truly occurred in a particular time period, of a special worldview, of a way of life in a realistic manner. They, by drawing heavily on a particular bygone era, sought to portray historical materials from an objective angle, struggling to lend verisimilitude to what they depicted, to create the illusion of reality.

In contrast to realistic writers who pretended their works to be a tool whereby readers could obtain the requisite information of the past phenomena, postmodernists hold a different perspective. They treat history with a degree of skepticism. As against the above-mentioned authors, postmodernists's writing of history and the past make a deliberate attempt to demonstrate the subjective nature of narrating the past, and simultaneously mingle it with fiction so that the borderline between truth and fiction, between what actually occurred and what later on was added, becomes increasingly blurred. They dramatize the inevitable reworking, omissions, and embroideries done by authors when representing the past.

The special kind of the postmodern fiction dealing with the past is referred to by Linda Hutcheon as *historiographic metafiction*. It is highly "self-reflexive," and at the same time "lays claim to historical events and personages." What is underlined in this kind of fiction is that history and fiction are "human constructs" (5). The inevitable difference between the real past and its representations is the motivation behind the *historiographic metafiction*. The reader is made conscious of the "fictionality" of the historical events and characters in a narrative and paradoxically aware of "its basis in real events" (Nicol 103). Postmodern writers of this ilk build up the illusion of representing truth, only to shatter this illusion by revealing that 'THEY' are the

creators of what is narrated. *Historiographic metafiction* is thus “fiction which uses metafictional techniques”, says Nicol, “to remind us that history is a construction, not something natural that equates to the past. History is not the past, but a narrative based on documents and other material created in the past” (99). It too accentuates the plurality of truths associated with the past, and tackles the relation of the past and its representation, that what historians provide us with is not a true reflection of what really took place. The information handed down the centuries are heavily affected by historians’ worldviews and biases. What readers in this kind of writing are asked, is to think of many and not just one truth, “that there are only truths in the plural, and never one truth” (Hutcheon 110). Readers of postmodern fiction are invited to consider history as something constructed, to ponder over marginalized voices which might have been oppressed throughout history. “Postmodern fiction suggests,” writes Hutcheon, “that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (110). *Historiographic metafiction*, as Hutcheon puts it, “asks both epistemological and ontological questions. How do we know the past (or the present)? What is the ontological status of the past? Of its documents? Of our narratives?” (50).

The sort of history we are made conscious of today, is poles apart from the one a century earlier that historians talked about. As Herbert Lindenberger believes:

The new history we are beginning to see these days has little in common with the old- and for an interesting historical reason: its practitioners were nurtured in the theoretical climate of the 1970s, time during which the individual literary work came to lose its organic unity; when literature as an organized body of knowledge abandoned the boundaries that had hitherto enclosed it, to an extent even abandoned its claims to knowledge; and when history began to seem discontinuous, sometimes in fact no more than just another fiction...(qtd. In Hutcheon 91)

Or as Barnes puts it:

We all know objective truth is not obtainable, that when some event occurs we shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate into history, into some God-eyed version of what ‘really’ happened. This God-eyed version is a fake- a charming, impossible fake, like those medieval paintings which show all the stages of Christ’s Passion happening simultaneously in different parts of the picture. But while we know this, we must believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we believe that it is 99 percent obtainable; or if we can’t believe this we must believe that 43 percent objective truth is better than 41 percent. We must do so, because if we don’t we’re lost, we fall into beguiling relativity... (Barnes 245)

Such mingling of history and fiction is found in E. L. Doctorow’s (1931-2015) *Ragtime* (1975). The novel is set in the early twentieth century (from 1902 until the time America enters World War 1) in New Rochelle, New York with some parts in other cities blending numerous historical figures with fictional events pertaining to America’s politics and history. The novel centers on a family whose names we are never told but referred to as Father, Mother, Mother’s Younger Brother, Little Boy, and Grandfather considered a “microcosm of American self-conception at about the turn of the century” (Fowler 58). It is a historical novel, but different from those produced by nineteenth-century writers since throughout the book there is no clear border between the events which actually occurred and the ones constructed by the author. The historical and fictional personages and events are so deftly juxtaposed that its reader cannot differentiate between truth and fiction. What in reality took place and what fabricated are barely distinguishable. Some of the fictional figures included in the book are: Harry Houdini, a US

magician, the escape artist, Evelyn Nesbit, an artist's model and aspiring actress, Stanford White, a US architect, Emma Goldman, an anarchist, Sigmund Freud, the Austrian doctor, Henry Ford, a US businessman and engineer along with such political personages as Theodore Roosevelt, William McKinley, Woodrow Wilson. The book is thought of as a *historiographic metafiction* in that some prominent figures become embroiled in situations, most of which are not grounded in reality but in fantasy, as in the case of the affair between Evelyn Nesbit and mother's Younger Brother, or the little boy's encounter with Houdini. There are several fictive encounters as well, and the fiction keeps up in the course of the book. The novel is also known as *documentary fiction*, a "twentieth-century variant of the historical novel" in which not only historical characters and events are incorporated, but also "reports of everyday events in contemporary newspapers" (Abrams 230).

From the very outset, the author, by saying that "Teddy Roosevelt was president" (*Ragtime* 9), and "coincidentally this was the time in history when the morose novelist Theodore Dreiser was suffering terribly from the bad reviews and negligible sales of his first book, *Sister Carrie*" (27), creates the illusion of portraying truth. He aims at lending veracity to what is narrated. Doctorow too does not give the actual occurrences priority over the fictitious ones. It appears that they all are of equal significance. Not only does he do this, but he also pretends that what the reader is told of is founded on reliable evidence. Throughout the book, there are numerous instances in which history and fiction are mingled in a way that readers are almost incapable of differentiating between the two. Regarding the events leading up to Younger Brother's joining to Coalhouse Walker, "the colored man" and his gang and its ensuing bombing the "Municipal Firehouse No. 2", for example, it is alleged, "Our knowledge of this clandestine history comes to us by Younger Brother's own hand. He kept a diary from the day of his arrival in Harlem to the day of his death in Mexico a little more than a year later" (195). Similarly, when Morgan's library is occupied by Walker, of the significance of the library we are informed, "Do you know the value of Mr. Morgan's acquisitions! We have four Shakespeare folios! We have a Gutenberg Bible on vellum! There are seven hundred incunabula and a five-page letter of George Washington's!" (219). Concerning the death of Younger Brother as well, the reader is told, "We are not sure of the exact circumstances of his death, but it appears to have come in a skirmish with government troops..." (244). The meeting between some characters like the one between Younger Brother and Nesbit, or between Houdini and the Boy, for example, can be regarded as "the problematizing of the nature of the subject", as Hutcheon notes, "in the sense that it foregrounds the inescapable contextualizing of the self in both history and society" (84). Postmodernists do not refute the fact that the real past existed, but rather they question the way we tend to know it.

We as readers of the book come to believe the events and situations expounded in the course of the novel as history and fact. There are a couple of instances of this case, "Booker T. Washington was at this time the most famous Negro in the country" (*Ragtime* 224), or elsewhere writes Doctorow, "by this time of course the president in the United States was Woodrow Wilson" (244). Concerning the Younger Brother's impressive achievements we are informed, "Younger Brother invented seventeen ordnance devices, some of which were so advanced that they were not used by the United States until world war II" (252).

Treating the well-known historical events, Doctorow mixes them with fictitious characters. As in the case of *The Lusitania*; the British passenger ship that was sunk by Germans during World War I, registered as an armed merchant ship, for instance, he includes Father (one of the fictitious characters), whose most of his income is first derived from the "manufacture of

flags and buntings and other accoutrements of patriotism, including fireworks” (9), and then being an “amateur explorer with considerable reputation” (14) in it:

Twelve hundred men, women and children, many of whom were American, lost their lives, among them, Father, who was going to London with the first shipments for the War Office and Admiralty of the grenades, depth charges and putted nitro that undoubtedly contributed to the monstrous detonations in the ship that proceeded its abrupt sinking. (253)

Of the trip to Egypt taken by Morgan and the club he and Ford founded by the name of The Pyramid, the writer says of the significance of it, “it endowed certain researches which persist to this day” (125). In the following chapter of the book, he continues to cite, “Of course at this time in our history the images of ancient Egypt were stamped on everyone’s mind. This was due to the discoveries being reported out of the desert by British and American archaeologists” (126).

The book, therefore, does not “trivialize the historical and factual”, that the real past did not exist, rather it “politicizes” them by means of its “metafictional rethinking of the epistemological and ontological relations between history and fiction”. It also draws readers’ attention to “cultural bias and interpretative conventions” in retelling the past (Hutcheon 121). As observed, the author narrates the events in a way which seem well-founded. He, by citing the sources of what he presents, seeks to create the illusion of portraying the truth on the one hand, and to suggest the unreliability of what we are told of as history and fact on the other. *Ragtime*, it is argued, is thought of as a “tragicomical novel starring American historical personages,” and simultaneously a kind of “prose cartoon strip starring allegorical every people purposely drained of biographical reality”; that is, at once history and fairy tale, for some events occurred historically and some are pure fantasy (Fowler 57). It is, to quote O’Donnell, “one of the hallmarks of *historiographic metafiction*” on the “making of history” in its rendering of American history and family inserting some historical individuals into the life of its fictitious personas (24).

In contrast to this, the implausibility of seizing the past is depicted in Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*. Barnes’s (b. 1946) most acclaimed and celebrated work has to date been *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), a book which is resistant to categorization through its hybridity and disparity compared to fictions which are generally acknowledged as novels. The book concerns Geoffrey Braithwaite traveling to France where he feels disposed to find out what happened to the parrot borrowed by the French writer Flaubert from the museum of Rouen while the author was writing his novella *Un Coeur simple*. Having visited two museums each alleging to display the parrot and the multiplication of them by the end of the book, Braithwaite concludes that the parrot he was searching for could be any of them. The whole book, however, is not dedicated to identifying the true parrot. Most of the chapters concern Gustave Flaubert’s early life, love life, and literary criticism. The beginning and the end is, nonetheless, concerned with identifying the stuffed parrot.

Throughout the book, the narrator is obsessed with, and interested in, how we tend to seize the past, and if there is ever a way of doing so. The past and the plausibility of knowing it, to his way of thinking, is highly elusive and therefore difficult to comprehend. He, from the outset, by citing an example of the time when he was a student seeks to elucidate the point, “When I was a medical student some pranksters at an end-of-term dance released into the hall a piglet which had been smeared with grease. It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell over trying to grasp it, and were made to look ridiculous in the process. The past often seems to behave like that piglet” (*Flaubert’s Parrot* 6). Notwithstanding amassing seemingly compelling evidence and document, and freeing ourselves from prejudice, Braithwaite asserts, the elusive

nature of finding out the truth as to the past remains yet intact. The past, he believes, is a “distant, receding coastline, and we are all in the same boat” (89). Indeed, *Flaubert’s Parrot*, it is thought, demonstrates the fact that all our efforts in reaching a general consensus on the authenticity and verisimilitude of data concerning a given past era is all but implausible, and any assertion of representing the truth is merely an allusion. *Flaubert’s Parrot*, to quote Guignery, “oscillates between repetition and difference, between the awareness of past literature and a desire to go beyond and make something new and hybrid” (49). Barnes is in no way constrained by the heritage of Flaubert or by past conventions, but manages on the contrary to create a voice of his own and a form of his own” (Guignery 49). The end of the book suggests that there are still various questions to which there are not patently obvious answers:

Everywhere I looked there were birds. Shelf after shelf of birds, each one covered in a sprinkling of white pesticide. I was directed to the third aisle. I pushed carefully between the shelves and then looked up at a single angle. There, standing in a line, were the Amazonian parrots. Of the original fifty only three remained. Any gaudiness in their coloring had been dimmed by the dusting of pesticide which lay over them. They gazed at me like three quizzical, sharp-eyed, dandruff-ridden, dishonorable old men. They did look- I had to admit it-a little cranky. I stared at them for a minute or so, and then dodged away. Perhaps it was one of them. (*Flaubert’s Parrot* 176)

J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* does something different: he makes use of ineluctable embellishments in representing the past. J.M. Coetzee’s (b. 1940) *Foe* (1986) is drawn upon Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). It is, to put it precisely, a reworking of Defoe’s in which a female castaway is inclined to make her residence along with Cruso (Coetzee leaves out the ‘e’) and his black slave Friday on a desolate island into a book. The novel is thus narrated from the perspective of Susan Barton whose name is expunged from Crusoe’s narrative. In order to make a book, Susan comes across some difficulties. Since she herself is not capable of doing the job, she goes to Defoe (he is referred to by Susan as *Foe* until late in the book), to set the events on the island down on paper. On hearing Susan’s story, the captain who saves her and Friday from dying, urges her to set it down on paper and offer it to booksellers because, “there has never before, to my knowledge”, he says, “been a female castaway of our nation” (*Foe* 40). Susan’s problem is, however, an inability to make it charming and gripping, “what little I know of book writing,” says she, “tells me its charm will quite vanish when it is set down badly in print. A liveliness is lost in the writing down which must be supplied by art, and I have no art” (40). She is indeed apprehensive that no one will feel disposed to read her story. The captain’s instigation seems to solve the problem, “the booksellers will hire a man to set your story to lights, and put in a dash of colour too, here and there...their trade is in books, not in truth” (40). Nevertheless, Susan intends to have the truth told, she thus does not concur, “I would rather be the author of my own story than have lies told about me” (40). As time moves on, she comes to acknowledge the need for “a dash of colour,” “I will admit, for it must not only tell the truth about us but please its readers” (63).

Foe exhorts Susan to incorporate her story with such extra material in order to make the book more intriguing as landing cannibals on the island, the building of a boat, and a venture to sail to the mainland. Susan thinks of the possibility of writing a story devoid of strange circumstances. *Foe* as a writer is aware of the lack of interest in the story of the island. He finds it not worth writing about and wishes that Cruso was younger, had more passions towards Susan, and there were some cannibals so that the story would be appealing to a general readership. Susan begins to concede the difficulty of writing of history and of the past, of telling the truth, and yet making it quite gripping:

“I must go, Friday. You thought that carrying stones was the hardest of labours. But when you see me at Mr Foe’s desk making marks with the quill, think of each mark as a stone, and think of the paper as the island, and imagine that I must disperse the stones over the face of the island, and when that is done and the taskmaster is not satisfied (was Crusoe ever satisfied with your labours?) must pick them up again (which, in the figure, is scoring out the marks) and dispose them according to another scheme...” (87)

Susan is utterly obsessed with conveying the truth on the one hand, and with writing her story in a manner that appeals to its readers on the other. She is cognizant that though her story “gives the truth”, it does not give “the substance of truth” (51). Even when she tries to record the events of the island, due to the vapid nature of the island story, she soon comes to the realization that it may does not attract any reader and she wonder if her story is strange enough to make a story of, and how much she can concoct new and strange circumstances. She too wonders if it will be possible one day to write a story devoid of any bizarre circumstances, and what historians writing on the castaway have done, “whether in despair they have not begun to make up lies” (88). To Foe’s way of thinking, the story of the island is a slow one, a slow history. He, for this reason, thinks of placing it in a larger and more fascinating story; composed of five chapters beginning with the loss of Susan’s daughter and ending with “the reunion of the daughter with her mother” (117). Due to the fact that the island, Foe argues, is not riveting and is wanting in charm, he has the intention of making it more appealing and compelling. His manner of making up the book causes Susan to feel let down, and all the joy she felt in finding Foe fled her, because she wishes to be known by the story of the island. Foe is, nevertheless, willing to consider it as an episode within a larger and more comprehensive story:

The island is not a story in itself... we can bring it to life only by setting it within a larger story. By itself it is no better than a waterlogged boat drifting day after day in an empty ocean till one day, humbly and without commotion, it sinks. The island lacks light and shade. It is too much the same throughout. It is like a loaf of bread. It will keep us alive, certainly, if we are starved of reading; but who will prefer it when there are tastier confections and pastries to be had? (117)

Despite Susan’s tremendous effort to convey the truth of her story to readers, she, at the sight of Foe’s initial representation of the way she and Friday ran into written down in his lengthy manuscript which is quite incidentally, faces a version of events which is at odds with the one that happened ensuing the shipwreck.

Foe indeed concentrates on the plausible marginalizations and suppressions perpetrated by Defoe, whilst he pretended to mirror the island occurrences. It is somewhat meta-fictional in that it underscores the role the author plays in constructing and narrating a given event. Coetzee invites readers to speculate on the “omissions and reconstructions evident in the finished novel.” Defoe attempted to “conceal artifice and appeal to verisimilitude,” presenting the novel as if it is the “autobiographical account” recorded by Crusoe himself. Coetzee, by contrast, is concerned with “literary artifice,” and by reversing some details from the original one, he seeks to make his readers contemplate on the “implausibility of the original” (Head 114).

Thus, as argued, history is no longer deemed as fact, as something perfectly corresponding to the past. As against writers writing during the nineteenth century, who considered history a tool whereby they could reflect the past, postmodern ones assert the impossibility of doing so, the plurality of truths which can be given no priority over each other. To put it another way, a complete apprehension of a given past occurrence is almost impossible. In the unlikely event of discovering the truth, or better to say, truths, it cannot be done with consummate ease.

The authors whose works were scrutinized in the preceding section, imply the above-mentioned claim. Their novels, in contrast to historical works releasing a century earlier, suggest the facts of which most readers were formerly unaware. Doctorow, by mingling truth and fiction, sets out to debase what readers thought of as absolute fact. Interested in the life of Flaubert in general, and the stuffed parrot in particular, the narrator of Barnes's seeks to provide proof of the unattainable nature of reaching a consensus on the validity of information regarding the past. Coetzee, through a female narrator, intends to accentuate the marginalized facts and the expurgations narrators make so as to represent an event more pleasing and palatable to contemporaries. The ineluctable adornments on the behalf of narrators in depicting a past occurrence, is also made noticeable. Coetzee posits that Crusoe's account of the remote island in which he dwelled is heavily affected by his embellishments, and is in no way a true and accurate description of the things transpired to him. The fact that the real past occurred is not declined, but the way we are used to apprehending it, is called into question.

What we, as readers are indeed expected to do, is not to readily accept what we are presented with as absolute truth. It instead needs to be taken as one truth among many others that might have been marginalized and suppressed. Since all of us are more or less under the influence of the culture and the ideology from which we cannot escape, an unbiased reflection of the past is more often than not inconceivable. *Historiographic metafiction* indeed, seeks to remind us of the implausibility of recounting the past without reconstructions and additions on the part of those who pretend to give a totally unbiased account of a given past event, and to raise awareness about the facts of which most readers are not conscious. Having studied the above-examined works, one acquires a totally new and disparate perspective on what s/he was formerly provided with as truth.

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