ENGLISH LITERATURE AND CULTURE IN CONTEXT 3

Paweł Schreiber

Stage Histories

Post-War British Historical Drama

PETER LANG
EDITION

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The book presents post-war British historical drama not only as a phenomenon within literature and theatre, but also as an alternative form of representing the past, not as much competing with historiography as complementing it. The author shows how some of the central concerns of late twentieth-century methodology of history were also crucial for the historical drama of that time by applying Hayden White's classification of categories determining the shape of historical writing to the plays of Robert Bolt, David Hare, Howard Barker and Tom Stoppard. The plays discussed in the book offer not only different visions of past events, but also different visions of historiography itself.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Histories and the stage

The title significantly contains the word 'histories' - in the plural. One of the discoveries made in the twentieth-century humanities was that the monolythic nature of history has to be regarded as an illusion. In the place of a single, all-encompassing narrative describing past events, there appeared a number of accounts, not only different from each other, but very often incompatible. In the post-war world, together with the fading of colonialism, the tales of the European conquerors became supplemented by those of the conquered, originating in Asia and Africa. The shock connected with the Soviet and Nazi totalitarian regimes forced many to look closer at the abuse of history in their propaganda, and ultimately search for alternative visions of the past. With the increase in literacy and the growing level of education, many social groups which had not had their own audible voice in the pre-war world started to explore their identities and compiling their own histories, often opposed to those offered by the rest of society. The growing need for pluralism has led to a great emphasis on the differences between the various points of view possible in the reconstruction and interpretation of certain events. Describing this state of things, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob (1997: 217) write in the introduction to their book *Telling the Truth about History*: "Since no one can be certain that his or her explanations are definitively right, everyone must listen to other voices. All histories are provisional; none will have the last word". The result is "a democratic practice of history", a polyphonic venture, in which "an ever growing chorus of voices is heard" (Appleby et al. 1997: 217).

Apart from the point of view, modern historiography has become fragmented also on the issue of the subject matter. While traditional historiography concentrated on political history, in the twentieth century there appeared other areas of interest, most notably social history, which to a large extent changed the face of the whole discipline. More recent developments, such as the history of mentalities, have moved it even further from its roots. Furthermore, the importance of historiography in the post-war world is reflected by the fact that many domains of human activity have developed their own branches of history, each with its own focus and, importantly, with different criteria of recognising historical facts.

It appears possible to reconcile all of the above mentioned types of history (or *different* histories). In the case of the various points of view compromises can be reached as for the facts that are common to all those looking at the past (indeed, the authors of *Telling the Truth about History* opt for "the rigorous search for truth usable by all peoples" – Appleby et al. 1997: 217), and the different subject matters can all be viewed as separate branches of the same tree, complementing each other. However, in order to reach such an agreement, it is necessary to speak a common language, which in the universe of historiography would consist in starting from

the same premises, using similar methods and aiming at results of the same kind. This, however, is not the case in the late twentieth-century historical writing.

Contemporary historiography is largely built upon on a methodology originated in the nineteenth century by Leopold von Ranke, based on the archival document as the most important source of knowledge about the past. The examination of such documents was conducted according to a set of rules which guaranteed the historian's objectivity on the one hand, and his deep understanding of the mentality of the authors of the document, on the other. However, in the second half of the twentieth century Ranke's paradigm of documentary history came under criticism from various sides, and alternative methods of examining and describing history were devised. For example, the *Annales* school in France, founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, and incorporating historians such as Fernand Braudel of Georges Duby, created a model of historiography based on long-term changes, emphasising lengthy processes (from fluctuations of prices to climatic change) much more than singular events, thus introducing such diverse disciplines as economics or geology into the study of the human past. An example from the opposite end of the broad spectrum of modern historiography is the group of experimental historians connected with the journal *Rethinking History* (edited by Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone). In the introduction to the published collection of texts from the journal, entitled *Experiments in Rethinking History*, Rosenstone writes:

> […] we as a culture are no longer so firmly wedded to the notions of literal reality that pervaded the nineteenth century. The impact of the visual media themselves […] alone assures a certain alteration in our sensibilities. Equally important, the continual revolutions in artistic visions over the past century – the movements and tendencies we label cubism, constructivism, expressionism, surrealism, abstraction, the New Wave, modernism, postmodernism – have helped to alter our ways of seeing, telling, and understanding our realities. (Munslow – Rosentsone 2004: 1)

In their work, they combine traditional historiography with the techniques of art and fiction, adopting literary style, using or imitating devices strictly associated with art and in inventing fictitious characters or events and embedding them in the historical context – connections made possible by the essential assumption that historiography is, in fact, part of the realm of fiction.

The alternative kinds of historiography are divergent to an extent that makes it very difficult to reunite them into a uniform discipline. They are divided by the different kind of accepted material, different methods used to examine and process it, different results expected. Furthermore – and perhaps more importantly – even the attitudes towards the truth value of the created narrative of the past vary from methodology to methodology. While the more traditional schools of historiography believe that their findings are compatible with the past reality as such, historiographers influenced by postmodernism (such as the contributors to *Rethinking History*) situate their writing on the level of fiction whose connection with reality is a very problematic and potentially insoluble issue. The varying methodologies produce a plethora of accounts of the past told in ways so incompatible with each other that

it is sometimes more useful to explore the differences between them than to focus on the far less numerous similarities. As the breaches in contemporary historiography exist on such basic levels, it often appears to be more suitable to abandon the traditional singular "history" for the plural "histories".

The fact that historiography is at odds with itself, discovering ever new methods of fulfilling its tasks, and forming ever new, separate histories, is not necessarily a bad symptom. A discipline which explores its own alternative forms is able to gain more insight into its own functioning. This self-reflexivity, not unlike that introduced into science by philosophers such as Popper, Kuhn or Feyerabend, is now more and more present in historical studies. Thus, it is the plural, and not the singular which constitutes the most important feature of contemporary historiography.

The plurality of the kinds of narratives included in contemporary historiography finds its counterpart in multiple formulae of describing history in twentieth-century literature. Drama becomes a particularly interesting example. As Hans-Thies Lehmann notices, the traditional, logical structure of Aristotelian drama has been frequently employed in referring to the structure of historical events (Lehmann 50). The intelligible dialectics of a play (be it a tragedy or a comedy) can be viewed as a model for an intelligible vision of the past. The crisis in modern drama, leading to the appearance of postdramatic forms, can be also viewed as a crisis of the idea of intelligibility, leading to the rejection of the rigid forms of plot and character construction in favour of a multiplicity of loose structures. Traditional historical drama reinforces a teleological approach to the past, in which all history has a meaning and a point of arrival. In post-war drama, the disruption of the traditional dramatic forms and the downfall of history viewed as a uniform narrative also go hand in hand, exploring very similar territories and showing similar kinds of self-reflexivity.

Brian Friel's play *Making History* may serve as an excellent example of the parallelism between the interests of the historical playwright and those of the theoretician of historiography. One of the characters is Peter Lombard, the early seventeenth-century bishop of Armagh, the author of *De Regno Hibernise Sanctorum insula commentarius*, a history of Ireland supporting the attack of Hugh O'Neill, the earl of Tyrone, on Elizabeth I's England (McCormack 1999: 357). In a dialogue with O'Neill, he expresses (anachronically) some of the principal preoccupations of twentieth-century post-structuralist reflection on historiography:

> If you're asking me will my story be as accurate as possible – of course it will. But are truth and falsity the proper criteria? I don't know. Maybe when the time comes my first responsibility will be to tell the best possible story. Isn't that what history is, a kind of story-telling? […] Imposing a pattern on events that were mostly casual and haphazard and shaping them into a narrative that is logical and interesting. (Friel 1999: 8)

As Francis McGrath (1999: 224) notices, the opinions presented here can easily be related to the theories on the functioning of history offered by Hayden White or Michel Foucault, as well as the views of the linguist George Steiner. At the same time, O'Neill refers to the rules of logical plot building, characteristic of the Aristotelian model of drama.

Like in the case of historiography, the differences between the various approaches are not only the question of the literary form chosen, or the interpretation of certain events within an established external framework of historical facts. The conflict very often takes place on the level of the very idea of history underlying the play. What differs from play to play may be the notion of historical fact (e.g. the question as to which events or states of things precisely should be classified as facts) or the opinion on the nature of the historical process (including stances in which such processes – conceived as organised, comprehensible changes – are viewed as non-existent). The aim of the book is precisely this – examining diverse instances of historical drama as exemplifications of the particular models of historiography influencing their construction. The methods used are derived from contemporary methodology of history, in particular Hayden White's tropology of historical narratives. The whole research, therefore, rests on the assumption that methodological tools created in connection with historiography are also applicable to historical drama.

While even the above passage on Friel's *Making History* suggests a close affinity between the crucial problems of historical drama and theory of history, the immediate association between the plays and historical texts is not accepted by all scholars. Most notably, Franklin R. Ankersmit, a crucial figure in contemporary thought on historiography, explicitly states that drama is not a narrative form, a feature which he considers to be the most important one in any characterisation of historiography. As a non-narrative text, it cannot be analysed in the same way as the work of a historian (Ankersmit 1983: 6-7).

I will proceed towards overcoming this objection by acknowledging the differences, but also showing the numerous similarities between historical drama and historical narratives, which ultimately allow to use some of the methodology connected with history to the analysis of drama. I shall begin with presenting the state of research on the notion of historical drama, proceed by offering a slightly modified definition of the genre, more suited to its most recent development, and then examine the sources of theory of historiography and theory of drama in the work of Thucydides and Aristotle to determine the common ground between these two forms of writing.

1.2. The Definition of Historical Drama

At the opening of her book *Twentieth-Century English History Plays*, Niloufer Harben (1988: 1) remarks that "critics have generally tended to shirk any attempt to define the scope and limits of the genre [of historical drama]." While she appreciates the research done in the field by scholars of Elizabethan drama, she also notices a serious lack in attempting to describe the contemporary forms of the genre (Harben 1988: 1). There are relatively few monographs devoted to this problem. The most authoritative description of the genre itself is Herbert Lindenberger's *Historical Drama. The Relation of Literature and Reality*, first published in 1975. It was followed by two books dealing specifically with twentieth-century historical drama.

Niloufer Harben's *Twentieth-Century English History Plays. From Shaw to Bond* is a selective survey of several most representative examples of the genre, starting with Shaw's *Saint Joan* and ending with Edward Bond's *Early Morning*. David Keith Peacock's *Radical Stages. Alternative History in Modern British Drama* concentrates only on the post-war period, and explores the different, often unorthodox ways in which historical subjects are treated in the drama of the time. Significantly, out of the three only Harben makes an attempt at strictly defining the boundaries of the genre, with the other two authors adopting loose, intuitive definitions allowing for varied interpretations.

The reasons of the avoidance of the subject may have to do with the ambiguity in the genre's attitude towards historical material. The traditional approach to the question is very well illustrated by Irving Ribner (2005: 12; Cf. also Harben 1998: 3-4), a researcher of Elizabethan history plays, who claims that the playwright who "goes to history for his subject matter, […] assumes the functions of the historian as well." A play created according to this principle becomes a supplement to the historians' writing, and a faithful representation of past events. The playwright Robert Bolt makes a similar observation on the nature of historical drama, and even though his point of departure is in disagreement with Ribner's opinion, the final conclusion is, in fact, very close to it:

> The writer of a historical play is a kind of playwright, not a kind of historian. But I think he is obliged to be as accurate historically, as he can. He has borrowed not only his story but some of his emotions from actual people who actually lived. He is in debt to them for their virtues and vices, imaginatively energized by the actual energy they expended. He owes them the truth and us a kind of crook if he doesn't pay up. (Bolt 1974: vi)

However, the use of historical fidelity as the criterion of classifying a given play as a representative of historical drama poses serious problems. Herbert Lindenberger (1975: 3) claims that "if the reality of a historical figure or context [in historical drama] is defined according to the standards of contemporary academic historical writing, all but a few historical plays of the past would seem scandalously inaccurate." The contradiction between Ribner's and Lindenberger's statements lies at the core of the problem of historical drama. On the one hand, the playwright is obliged to stay faithful to the historical material, and on the other, practice shows that most playwrights largely ignore this rule, Shakespeare being one of the most celebrated examples of modifying historical data to achieve a better dramatic effect.

In *Twentieth-Century English History Plays*, Harben defends the criterion mentioned by Ribner. At the beginning of her reasoning, she refers to the works two eminent historians, E. H. Carr and Geoffrey Elton, whose stances still represent the two poles between which a large number of contemporary British historians oscillate (Evans 2000:1). In his book *What is History*, Carr argues that historical discourse to a certain extent constructs the past 'reality' it describes. Postulating a distinction between the event as such, being a fragment of reality, and the historical fact, which is an element of discourse, Carr (1986: 11-13) claims that an event only becomes a historical fact when it has been accepted by a number of historians

(cf. also Hughes-Warrington 2000: 26-27). In order for an event to be used as a fact proper, i.e. an argument in a historical work, it has to be absorbed into the historical discourse by having been confirmed by other historians independent of the author originally mentioning it, having the evidence proving it made public etc. This stance suggests a certain dose of relativism in historical studies – the notion of the fact, as well as the set of acknowledged facts, is dependent on the conventions governing the historical discourse at a given moment and therefore could potentially change in time and vary from historian to historian.

On the other hand, Geoffrey Elton (2001: 50), known for his extremely staunch and conservative views (notably attacked by both postmodernist historians, like Alun Munslow (1997: 21), who criticises his "bellicosity", and the more traditional ones, such as Richard J. Evans (2000: 75), who comments sarcastically that "there were indeed few things about which he had doubts"), rejects Carr's distinction as an example of "an extraordinarily arrogant attitude both to the past and to the historian in studying it", in particular attacking the thesis that an event has to go through a particular procedure before being accepted as a historical fact. In Elton's thought, the fact (in practice equated with the past event as such) becomes an objective entity, and the set of facts is permanent and unchanging (except for constantly growing as new events take place in time). Thus, the order of discourse about the past becomes very much identified with the past itself.

Having accepted Elton's statement, which forms a basis for the conviction about the completely objective character of the historical fact, a touchstone for testing the fidelity of historical drama, Harben (1988: 5) proceeds to name the basic duty of the historical playwright, which is to "respect and not wantonly abuse" the "area of generally accepted [historical] fact"[1], as a result of which "major distortions which violently affect the nature of character and events portrayed" are not acceptable in historical drama. Even though the methods of the historian and the playwright are clearly demarcated – the former basing his work on research, and the latter using his imagination, the required respect towards the knowledge about the past remains the same. Any play that does not show this respect, cannot be properly called historical – which, in Harben's opinion, is the case with, for example, Peter Shaffer's *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, concentrating on the drama and the characters more than on contemporary historical knowledge concerning the conquest of South America, with the author significantly ignoring the more recent publications on the matter in favour of an older and less accurate – but also more dramatic – book, *The Conquest of Peru* by W. H. Prescott, published in 1847 (Harben 1988: 176-177). The boundaries which Harben sets to historical drama can be regarded as largely compatible with Ribner's statement – where the dramatist forgets about his duty to be a historian as well as a writer, his play loses its historical character.

1 It is worth noting that, even though siding with Elton, in this fragment Harben actually thinks along the lines of Carr's reasoning, speaking about the "generally accepted historical fact", rather than merely "historical fact".

However, right after specifying the writer's duty to respect the historical data, Harben (1988: 5) indicates a number of deviations from the truth permissible in a historical play: "minor alterations such as transpositions of time and place, the telescoping of events and imposing of artistic form and movement." The possible differences go even further – Harben gives the example of G. B. Shaw's *Saint Joan*, which features encounters between people who never actually met, but with "dialogues […] based on relevant historical facts." Finally, she moves on to Edward Bond's *Early Morning*, an ironic vision of the Victorian era, showing, among other things, Queen Victoria plotting to assassinate Prince Albert, whom she sees as an obstacle in her lesbian relationship with Florence Nightingale. Despite its totally counterfactual plot, this play is also classified as historical, because it shows a "deeper historical truth" - an image of Victorian hypocrisy covering the cruelty of the colonial Empire. Thus, it remains faithful to the facts, though not in the literal sense.

Harben attempts to overcome the contradiction between the dramatic imagination and historical accuracy. While the movement from literal fidelity to the data of history to a broader understanding of adherence to the facts is an interesting notion, it is also quite problematic when the strictness of the definition is to be taken into account. Some of Harben's decisions, like including *Early Morning* into the category of historical drama while, at the same time, excluding *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, appear slightly arbitrary. The level of generality of the ideas of respect for the facts and deeper historical truth is such that it is, in fact, impossible to draw strict boundaries. Such a solution leaves room for precisely that which Harben, basing her work on the sharp objectivism of Geoffrey Elton, wanted to avoid – relativism and subjectivity concerning the criteria of historicality in drama. Thus, even her own choices made according to her theory may be attacked as subjective, as there is no way of proving that the historical truths conveyed by the parodic *Early Morning* are significantly deeper or more important than those present in the only slightly inaccurate and archaic *Royal Hunt of the Sun*.

Both Lindenberger and Peacock take a much milder stance on the question of the objectivity of the historical fact and its influence on drama. The former, more cautious in making strong distinctions concerning which plays should be considered "historical" and which not, takes an approach in some respects similar to Carr's as he points out the relativism in these matters connected with the development of the genre in time. Describing history as a subject under the category of "publicly known matters" (adopted from Horace), he claims that "In publicly known matters, the reality or plausibility exists essentially within the consciousness of the audience" (Lindenberger 1975: 2). He gives the example of the treatment of Joan of Arc by Shakespeare and Schiller, which were accepted as truthful by the Elizabethan and nineteenth-century audiences, but would never be acknowledged as such by the twentieth-century public, whose knowledge of Joan would be incompatible with both her image as a malevolent witch and the scene of her death in battle. Peacock takes a similar stance, making his point of departure out of Carr's statement that "History means interpretation", "which has gained so much credence amongst contemporary historians since the late 1950s that it may now be regarded

as a truism"(Peacock 1991: 9). The interpretative nature of history in turn leads to the relativity of the notion of historical truth.

Acknowledging the fluidity of the genre, neither Lindenberger nor Peacock offer a formal definition of it but, instead, describe several characteristics usually common to its representatives. The first is the relationship between the play and a historical source (Limdenberger 1975: 3). The nature of the genre consists in referring to material provided by historiography. Contrary to Harben, Lindenberger does not treat the fidelity to the source (which in itself is only one of the possible *uses* of the source) as a *conditio sine qua non* of the genre, and strongly emphasises the fact that even though the audience usually expect the play to agree with its sources, full agreement is very rare. Touching upon this issue, Peacock echoes Harben in discussing Peter Shaffer's choice of basing *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* on W. H. Prescott's *The Conquest of Peru*, and adding the example of David Hare, Trevor Griffiths, Howard Brenton and Ian McEwan as basing their texts on Angus Calder's *The People's War*. The examples, however, do not serve to divide playwrights into those using more and less trustworthy sources but show the diversity which the application of different sources brings to historical drama (Peacock 1991: 13-14).

The second important feature of historical drama is the function of the conventions it uses. They can be regarded as a detraction from the historical truth, but the "discrepancy between source and contemporary poetic treatment" is to be regarded only as a "seeming" one (Lindenberger 1975: 5). Referring to the apparent anachronisms in the language and behaviour of Shakespeare's characters, Lindenberger (1975: 5) writes:

> Rather, instead of saying […] [that] a medieval English lord [has been turned into] an Elizabethan courtier, one should speak of the translation of a historical source into a contemporary dramatic convention, one which, by its very nature, implies its own system of character relationships, poetic language, and dramatic progression in time.

Pecock also acknowledges the importance of dramatic convention, and writes that the modifications to the source materials made by the playwrights are "not only in consequence of their personal ideologies, but also a result of the peculiar aesthetic demands of the medium of drama" (Peacock 1991: 11).

The third crucial issue concerning historical drama according to Lindenberger is the fact that "The continuity between past and present is a central assertion in history plays of all times and styles" (Lindeberger 1975: 6). While he moves on to discuss the relevance of the contemporary context to the interpretation of the play's vision of history and the implied suggestions present in many plays that the past shown in them should be regarded as a mirror for the present (problems also discussed by Peacock 1991: 11), it is worth noting that this statement deserves much attention even on the most elementary level. The continuity between the past and present is the defining feature of historical thinking, as opposed to, for example, mythological thinking, which presupposes a rupture between the described sacred past and the ordinary present time. Therefore, the building of connections between