

Taking the Historical Novel Seriously

by [Samuel Hux](#) (September 2018)



Interior with a Book, Richard Diebenkorn, 1959

Was Charlie Schuyler really Aaron Burr's illegitimate son? No . . . I mean was "the obscure novelist Charles Burdett"?—since

Gore Vidal tells us in his afterword to *Burr: A Novel* (1973) that his narrator Schuyler was “based roughly on Burdett.” Or, rather, were there rumors that Burdett was Burr’s offspring? I don’t think this inquiry is as consequential as “Was there really a Kunta Kinte?” from Alex Haley’s *Roots*, published near the same time, 1976. No useful, or misleading, public myth hangs upon it; so I beg a certain indulgence in asking this apparently pointless question. I do philosophy rather than formal history, and I’m not going to “look it up.” (So little the formal historian am I that it was not historical curiosity that drove me to return to Vidal’s novel now several decades later, but rather that I had always enjoyed Vidal’s wit while rejecting his politics and recently came upon his dismissal of a novelist whose books I’ve never been able to finish: “The dreariest three words in the English language are ‘Joyce Carol Oates.’” So, back I came to Gore Vidal’s best novel.) I assume, of course, that the connection is pure fiction; but I reread the book recently and I cannot swear to what I’ll assume a few years from now, about the same time that Kunta Kinte will have lodged in my memory as an *historical* predecessor of Nat Turner who might have made it into open insurrection but for an amputation.

Inane as the question may seem, maybe, it’s the sort that insinuates itself into a reader’s mind—although it’s seldom asked aloud because the reader “knows better”: fact is one thing, fiction something else. And it’s the kind of question, so obviously naïve, that the historical novelist tries to avoid, assuring the reader that although he’s tried to remain faithful to the spirit of the depicted times, he has sometimes made unhistorical connections for the sake of narrative consistency and interest, often confiding in obligatory preface, as William Styron did before *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), that he’s produced “a work that is less an ‘historical novel’ in conventional terms than a meditation on

history.” The historical novel has long been something of an embarrassment to the conventionally educated intellect, the kind of book which, if it’s good, must really be something else: disguised commentary on the present, speculative essay-in-fiction-form on the nature of history, and so on. Otherwise . . . not quite fit subject for serious critical attention. An odd prejudice when you think of it, given the fact of, say, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*!

Nor quite an acceptable diversion, as the mystery novel, for instance, is for many intellectuals. There may be those who swear by Georges Bernanos or whoever as casual moralist or whatever, but most know and accept that they are relaxing with a kind of mental stylishness. I am one who never became addicted to mysteries and who shook for a time the habit of the historical novel. The first reading I can remember, school work aside, was juvenile history: Lincoln splitting rails and Patrick Henry declaiming. Then, because an aunt was member of a book club and adored “old-timey” things, I graduated to historical novels—drums and Mohawks, nubile slaves on Caribbean islands, fortresses to be scaled, housing ladies lusting for the innocent adventurer, and yummy etceteras. But, I learned when I entered college that in the historical novel which did not transcend its poor nature Important Things were being messed about with—and that was bad for you since the person who does not understand the past *as it was* is doomed to repeat it. And, if you were not so impressionable as to allow your sense of where we came from to be distorted, reading such popularizations was a waste of time anyway: there were no redeeming intellectual values as in the whodunit, which was, after all, good mental exercise, like mathematics. If, in the whodunit, unlikely methods of detection were employed, what was lost?—who the hell cared about the police force anyway, or the self-employed Pinkertons? History was quite another thing altogether: one might be crippled for life if he thought an

American mistress of a French planter was behind, to some small degree, Toussaint L'Ouverture's revolution in Haiti.

I think the attitude of consciously-educated people toward HISTORY is entirely too *reverential*. Historical investigation is a kind of science of human events, we assume: discover what events occurred and we know *what happened*. (I ascribe that reverence to a generation now of, approaching, or past middle age; a younger generation has—no credit to itself—no such attitude toward history, rarely having allowed itself to hear of it.) But, we are more priestly than the priests. For historians of some mental accomplishment and philosophical sophistication know there is a frailty at the heart of the historical enterprise. “Frailty”—the word was used by the great English historian R.W. Southern, author of *The Making of the Middle Ages*, more than half a century ago.

[W]e seek simply to extend the vividness and variety of the areas of intelligibility in the past . . . We seek congruity between the various bits of experience; we seek congruity also with our own experience of the possible. It must not be beyond our powers to conceive that we might ourselves have thought or behaved thus under the pressures which our observations of the past have brought to light. There is no further certainty in history than this combination of coherence and intelligibility. And it must be confessed that in the end there is a frailty at the basis of history, a lack of logical robustness and systematic doctrine.

Coherence and intelligibility: a very modest prescription, and a difficult one, for the past one is to make coherent and intelligible is, by nature, problematic, in a sense existing

only by virtue of the mind seeking coherence and intelligibility.

One knows he had a childhood, that his childhood once *was*; he knows that his childhood (itself, not its lasting effects) exists now only by virtue of his recollection, that that's the only way his childhood now *is*. Similarly, with events one didn't actually experience or witness. Something happened long ago, sure. But, *that something happened* and *the past* are not quite the same. I don't think there is a "past" which is separable from our thinking about "it" now. I don't know how one can think about something which doesn't really exist without one's thinking about it and making a distinction, with certainty, between the something-in-itself and thoughts about it.

There's nothing very original or striking about this generalization; it's only put in a quirky way. We know, or ought to, that the past is part present creation (coherence and intelligibility), although we sometimes kid ourselves that we can tell which parts are which. The distinction is normally between *events* (the "facts") and *motives* (the "suppositions"); but often enough to make that distinction juvenile we know more about *why* someone did something than we know about *what* precisely he did—just as one can often recall why one behaved in a general way several years ago without being able to recall the particulars of behavior in which easily recalled moods and feelings manifested themselves.

Unless one takes a superficial view of the past—that things just happened and that's all there is to it!—it is obviously difficult to write history. I doubt that's subject to quarrel. But—a problem: While we realize the difficulty in one part of

the mind, we dispense with in another: we insist that we know what is "real" in written history and what is "supposition" or "necessary surmise" or "useful possibility" a minute after we have agreed that—epistemologically speaking, harrumph—such distinctions are often too facile for adult consideration. Once we have dispensed with that difficulty we were considering the moment before, we embrace an attitude whereby "suppositions" are to be held in check in "*real*" *history*, they being the soft side of the discipline when compared to the real stuff, the hard facts . . . while extremes of "supposition" are tolerated, so long as not taken too seriously, in the *historical novel*—an attitude revealing as much ignorance of the nature of historical fiction as of history.

We suppose that, when it does anything worth doing, the historical novel gives us some impressionistic insight beyond documented fact, so that we're able to imagine possible-to-probable particularities within the scope of large events, within the impersonal patterns of salient historical change; we're reminded thereby that there were people then who behaved like people instead of like "figures." "So-and-So evinces a remarkable feeling for the style and intricacies of manner of the period," we say; "his Such-and-Such is, in fact, a conceivable Such-and-Such, and his control of small events is a worthy reminder to the professional scholar of the virtues of the narrative art." But more often: "So-and-So's theme, ultimately, is not so much Such-and-Such as it is unchanging human nature. His book transcends the genre of the historical novel; it's not really about back then but about today." But, actually, both compliments are left-handed; they excuse the historical novel for not being, after all, "real" history, or excuse it for appearing to be a historical novel by suggesting it's really something else, meditation on history, disguised commentary on the present, whatever.

Excluded from even so much critical seriousness as this is the "period-" or "costume-romance," the story which is simply set in the past without that fact contributing much beyond antique speech, colorful dress, quaint manners, and such; we know the story could be set in exotic contemporary surroundings with some sartorial alterations. I don't suggest we take such romances seriously, critically, but perhaps we should reconsider then our praise of a respectable historical fiction on the grounds that it's not really about Then but about Today. It's easier to take seriously some historical fiction of obvious, transcendent, literary merit—Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, for example, Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma*; but that's too easy, the serious consideration proving nothing beyond one's good taste. A better measure: James Fenimore Cooper's novels, and Sir Walter Scott's.

Natty Bumppo or Ivanhoe occupy a *space-between*, conceived temporally, geographically, culturally, or all—a placed moment somewhat like one of those *Gaps Between Past and Future* that Hannah Arendt wrote about (great book!), when a past has run its course and a future is powerless yet to be born; between Paleface behind and Redskin ahead, between Saxon past and Norman ascendancy. The space-between shifts, it contracts; for neither Paleface nor Norman is content to rest where he is and with what he has, and neither Redskin nor Saxon will willingly yield and relent. But, in any case, Time moves, across the calendar or past yesterday's frontiers, and the fictional protagonist (*Man!*) must choose Who he is and Where he belongs. Such (pause) is History! But . . . one senses, I think, that the above is slightly ingenious. One wonders if the books will support, or need, such a critique, and suspects that the authors would have been surprised at the whole enterprise, never suspecting the critical urgency of it. Just the point. What's being taken seriously is the critical exercise (schemes

arranged, connections proudly made), not the historical novel itself.

To take the historical novel seriously one has to be, paradoxically, a good deal more naïve and somewhat more patient with the sort of question I characterized earlier as “inane.”

What’s at stake is “belief.” One is meant to *believe* history; even the historian who recognizes the “frailty” of the enterprise wants us to say of his reconstruction, “Yes, that’s the way it must have been.” But the historical novel?—things get more complicated. Is one meant, for instance, to believe that Nat Turner was compelled to insurrection by unresolved sexual complexities? Were we talking about a work of professional history the answer would be a qualified “yes,” providing it made his actions coherent and intelligible. What about Styron’s historical novel? We are meant to believe it, for the same reasons. But, in either case, we deal with a supposition about motive, not with the assertion that a particular physical event did or did not occur.

So—are we meant to *believe* that on a certain day in a certain tavern at a certain table Aaron Burr met with a young journalist and discussed an editorial proposition with a tone of voice and a quality of interest in the young man not absolutely consonant with a normal business deal? Well, no; we’re not *meant* to believe it, or probably not, or possibly not. But, in truth, the author’s intention at this point ceases to matter. Whether it’s history or historical fiction, there’s a reader as well as a writer, and I think the reader does believe. Or will in good time. And a recognition of this fact is the only way truly to take historical fiction

seriously. I confess that I will seldom think of that minor figure of American social history, Evelyn Nesbit the pin-up queen, without thinking of Red Emma Goldman, and I'll not think of the anarchist without recalling her as a practical nurse and a vigorous masseuse.

I refer here to E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (two years after Vidal's novel) to take note, by way of specific and demanding example, of some facts of reading. The very evident preposterousness of its propositions, when viewed coolly, serves as a test of the premises I'm trying to set forth.

Strolling in and out of *Ragtime* with greater or lesser involvement but on equal terms with the three fictional families—Anglo-Saxon middle-class, Jewish immigrant, African-American—are the historical figures: Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, J.P. Morgan, Emma Goldman, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, Harry K. Thaw (jealous murderer of architect Stanford White), Evelyn Nesbit (Thaw's wife, White's mistress and the most beautiful woman in the world), Admiral Peary, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Sarajevo fame, Booker T. Washington, John J. McGraw of the New York Giants, and Hitler's vice-chancellor-to-be the young Franz von Papen—among others. As the historical figures enter the narrative, Doctorow takes outrageous liberties with historical fact and probability, surrounding the fictional realm with images of a world growing insane, silly, banal, and vicious. The Archduke congratulating Houdini on the invention of the airplane; Freud having to relieve himself and no public convenience available, he, Jung, Sandor Ferenczi, A.A. Brill, and Ernest Jones entering a dairy restaurant on Manhattan's lower east side to "order sour cream and vegetables so that Freud can go the bathroom;" Thaw, in prison, shaking his dingus at Houdini, who's escaping from a cell across the corridor (Thaw later makes a "miraculous"

escape—as in fact he did); J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford discussing reincarnation, dividing the world between themselves, and founding “the most secret and exclusive club in America, The Pyramid, of which they were the only members. It endowed certain researches which persist to this day;” and so on—plausible improbabilities multiplying.

Ragtime is, with a comic vengeance, an historical novel. In the formulaic historical novel—whether Walter Scott or Kenneth Roberts—the major protagonists are pure fictions—Quentin Durward or Lydia Bailey—who move through a time and atmosphere we sense as an authentic reconstruction, observe or participate in historical events of significant moment, and sometimes meet, talk to, figures both we and the novelist know from history books; but the story is of the fictional characters, not of the history-book figures. Imagine a hypothetical novel in which a young fictional colonial adventurer serves with British troops in the Seven Years War. Distinguishing himself in battle through Yankee ingenuity he becomes a favorite of the commander, the historical Marquis of Granby, who keeps him at his side as improvisational tactical advisor the remainder of the campaign. On the eve of the battle of Minden, our hero hears Granby confide to a mysterious emissary, “Consider, sir. If we can succeed to effect this flanking movement tomorrow, it is not impossible that Frederick the Great should appreciate his allies doubly; his co-operation in the Canadian venture would not then be beyond conceivable expectation. Mark this well.” You know the sort of thing. We feel that something like this *might* have been said; and—I’m guessing royally here—we *might* find in some text that “previous to the victory at Minden, John Manners, Marquis of Granby, was interred for hours with an ambassador from William Pitt the Elder; historians can only guess at the particulars but assume their gravity.”

But . . . even if it's "observed" by one of the fictional protagonists (Younger brother of the middle-class family) it's a different order of things to have Emma Goldman disrobe Evelyn Nesbit and massage her flesh until Nesbit's "pelvis rose free from the bed as if seeking something in the air" and until she "began to ripple on the bed like a wave on the sea," inspiring Younger Brother to fall into the room from his closet hiding place, "his face twisted in a paroxysm of saintly mortification . . . clutching in his hands, as if trying to choke it, a rampant penis which, scornful of his intentions, whipped him about on the floor, launching to his cries of ecstasy or despair, great filamented spurts of jism that traced the air like bullets and then settled slowly over Evelyn in her bed like falling ticker tape." Wow! Different to have Morgan spending the night alone in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid waiting to see "small red birds with human heads" as a sign of his apostolic lineage from the Pharaohs; or previous to this journey to have Morgan closeted in his library with Ford, the older and younger capitalist chieftains sharing their assurances of immortality, Ford's homespun vulgarity of mind grating against Morgan's elegant philosophizing and Rosicrucian nonsense until Morgan concludes, "Mr. Ford . . . if my ideas can survive their attachment to you, they will have met their ultimate test."

Until I know better I'll assume, in public, we're privy to confrontations, conversations, that never took place—liberties even broader than the several chronological rearrangements in the novel. So, what is the point? It is not enough to say, although true, that any true work of art enters one's consciousness and subtly alters one's view of human reality. For it's not merely the case, as Doctorow clearly intends, that I'll think from now on of Morgan and Ford as, metaphorically, would-be Pharaohs awaiting the main chance. Although Doctorow probably does not intend *this*, a part of

me-defying my educated and sophisticated parts-will continue to "believe" that Morgan and Ford did huddle together on 36th and Madison over a Montrachet (Ford abstaining) with a mummified Seti the First resembling Ford in the next room. And, in time, when the sources of "information" become a little vague in my memory, the quotation marks will evaporate from about that word *believe*