

Research Article

# The New Historical Novel is a Historical Novel

Herminio Núñez Villavicencio\* 

Faculty of Humanities, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, Toluca, México

## Abstract

In these lines we expose that nowadays the beginning of a research work no longer has such clear and distinct categories as it was supposed just a few decades ago. The supposed solidity of some concepts is blurring as well as some disciplinary visions that were sure of their rigorous procedure, in fact, only widened the gap between the abstract world of concepts, theories and methodologies and the world we experience day by day. Today, genres and knowledge are interconnected in search of new notions to name and explain new realities and, in the case of the contemporary historical novel, compared to the previous one, it no longer has the characteristics of the subgenre in its origins. It is a historical novel, but with differences required by its own reality, it is characterized by a critical stance towards the first historical novel and by a marked evaluative tone of the past.

## Keywords

History, Literature, Historical Novel, New Historical Novel

## 1. Introduction

These digressions take place at the beginning of a piece of writing, moments when one is still carried away by bursts of ideas that are like loose pages carried by the playful breeze. In these circumstances we ponder about what we can undertake to facilitate the understanding of the text we have in our hands, we can initiate a study centered on the plot of the text; we can also try a consideration of the novel through formal structuring and argumentation and then we would move within certain margins (mechanicism, formalism, organicism, contextualism...); or we can proceed through ideological implication (liberal, radical, anarchism, conservatism...). But we can also start with the consideration of aspects that for some reason attract our attention when reading the novel, such as its closeness, its plainness and its topicality.

*Margarita, está linda la mar*, a novel by Sergio Ramírez, tells us about the past, but also about its formulation, in which the past is also configured by its characters. For this

and other reasons we can ask ourselves some questions and naturally we can conclude that it is a historical novel. However, this comment leads us to continue to explore the point until we reach a satisfactory vision of the object that concerns us. In the discussion on the historical novel, we will deal in these pages with some approaches concerning the subject, as well as outlining a position that allows us to study the historical novel of the last decades, especially the Latin American one that offers images of its past.

## 2. First Steps

There are few doubts as to what is and what is not a detective novel, since this type of narrative has a relevant structural fixation and through observation, analysis and logical deduction we know that this type of story seeks to unveil a

\*Corresponding author: Herminio25446@yahoo.com.mx (Herminio Núñez Villavicencio)

Received: 25 April 2025; Accepted: 7 June 2025; Published: 25 June 2025



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mystery that is often resolved in the final part of the narrative, which, throughout its development, maintains growing suspense. On the other hand, to delimit the terrain of the historical novel and to distinguish what is understood as a novel of this genre is more complicated, especially if our object of study is the recent historical novel. Some critics see it as a work of fiction that recreates a historical period, in which case it would be a work in which non-fictional characters and events are also part of the action. In other conceptions what is emphasized is the need for temporal distance of what is narrated, in them it is established that historical novels are works of fiction written some decades after the events described occurred, events that their narrators did not live and constitute the core of the work. There are also other definitions. Be that as it may, in relation to the notions we have mentioned, it seems insufficient to maintain that literary works written about events of the past are historical simply because the action referred to took place in an epoch that for us is already historical. In fact, every novel presents in some way a historical character, since it is inevitably inscribed in a historical becoming, and rare is the work of fiction that can do without the historical environment in which its characters unfold. What we have mentioned are two very general notions that do not clearly distinguish what is a historical novel. At this point of discordance, the only thing that scholars of the genre agree on is that the historical novel develops a novelistic action in the past. But then it is clearly necessary, at least, to comment on the changes that this kind of novel has undergone in the two centuries of development it has had, it is necessary to take into account for example, what characterized the historical novel of the nineteenth century, which is the intention to reconstruct the era in which the action is set. This peculiarity seems to distinguish it from the recent historical novel, which leads us to consider the variability of this genre and, also, to ponder whether there is any value in continuing to seek its purity or to focus our dedication on achieving its clear distinction from other genres. In this paper we intend to state that it is difficult to maintain a rigid, inflexible concept of the historical novel, because some of its characteristics change over time, as is the case with other notions. Consequently, in this study we do not start from fixed categories; because as it happens in other cases, in the development of the research new ideas appear about something that was thought to be well known, but it turns out that now that explanation is deficient. Therefore, it is necessary to examine concepts in the light of the present; it is an approach based on the assumption that in each era there are values that differentiate it from others, and also assuming that there is no neutrality in discourse.

It should not be forgotten that, as happens in every novel, in this specificity the protagonism is in the plot, in what happens to the characters; and it should also be noted that unlike the novel that does not pretend to be historical, even if it takes place in a historical moment prior to its writing, the historical novel seeks to make the reader take into account

the incidence of the historical period referred to in the novelistic plot; in this way the historical novel makes facts of the past and fiction influence each other, forming a single entity in the field of literature. The historical novel, then, can be considered as a way of harmonizing real and fictitious facts, its development amalgamates elements of the past and imagined components in a not easy balance that, when achieved, is of artistic relevance and also of knowledge, because, as Alejandro Manzoni said (*Los novios*, 1827), the historical novelist must contribute "not only the bare bones of history, but something richer, more complete. In a way, we ask him to restore the flesh on the skeleton that is history".

But there is something more, the historical novel in our days also responds to the desire of readers to know the history behind the scenes, seeks to answer the curiosity to know how they were, for example, the historical characters in privacy. This novel tries to fill the gaps left by history books in the vision they offer us of the past. Now, in this conceptualization we observe something new, the historical novel of recent decades distances itself from the traditional model both in terms of the formal aspects of its narrative, as well as in the position it adopts in relation to history and historiography. Nevertheless, in this kind of novel, fiction is still the main thing: the plot, the characters, the way in which these and other elements are developed throughout its pages. Thus, the historical element becomes an adjective, because the primary or substantive element is the artistic, the narrative. In Walter Scott's novels the historical characters are secondary and the historical facts only appear in the background.

### 3. Some Pitfalls

Now, it is commonly accepted that both the activity of the historian and that of the novelist are not born only of imagination or poetic impulses, they have a documented basis that is indispensable in their work - so Herder and other authors have considered it -, but we can also see that the two disciplines develop a similar activity whose distinction in our time is still unclear and distinct and, moreover, they are two activities that put into practice the same human faculties: the faculty of memory and the faculty of imagination. This has given reason to say that the novelist is the historian of the present and that, in turn, the historian is the novelist of the past. In effect, one and the other, novelist and historian shape the past or, rather, the relation of the present to the past. However, in these discussions it is common to speak of historical truth almost without objection; on the other hand, it is seen as contradictory to speak of novel truth. This difference has been maintained, to one extent or another, since antiquity and has sometimes been emphasized by saying that history is a science and the novel (like all literature), on the other hand, is part of the realm of art. We think that in the face of this unconvincing but dominant view it is necessary to point out that history can be considered a science, but it is certainly not an exact science; immediate proof of this is that there are a

variety of visions of the same event that happened in the past. And although historians try to reconstruct the past through the data and testimonies available to them, however, their work is more complex and their reconstruction of the facts is also in continuous evolution. Thus, the different ways of considering particular historical events and periods depend on who the historian is who is spinning them and who, moreover, achieves a certain approval of his or her narrative. These different ways of considering the past derive from the way of organizing the information in an account by adopting or not a restrictive point of view [1]. On the other hand, it should be remembered that in the literatures of antiquity historical accuracy was less considered, to the extent that historiography constituted a literary genre, it was considered as *narratio rerum gestarum* (narrative of events), and that in the course of time the boundaries between history and literature have changed and only from the late eighteenth century historiography struggled to be considered scientific with a capital letter [2], dealing most of the time in this aspiration with an arid compilation of dates and facts devoid of human thickness. This tendency lost strength towards the middle of the 20th century, when history returned to the sphere of everyday life, opening up or shifting to the consideration of aspects that had not been studied. In this change historians for the first time deal with questions that go beyond the field of purely political history and study aspects such as the history of mentalities, intellectual history, the history of women, of the defeated, of slaves or of children... And in relation to literature it is relevant that some historians have used technical and rhetorical procedures typical of literary narration in the exposition of past episodes, as we can see in cases such as Antony Beevor and his book *Berlin: The Fall*, which presents us with a set of narratives about the historical event, which can be read as a novel.

We can say, then, that we are dealing with a question in which we are dealing with ill-defined notions, as is the case with the central concepts of literature and history, ideas that are essential in the consideration of the historical novel. Moreover, in this case we could ask ourselves whether terms such as "reality" and "real fact" have a single meaning; the same could be asked in relation to the notions of "history" and "historical fact" or whether, on the contrary, we find that they change and are neither stable nor univocal. The concepts of history and literature have not been stable, for this reason everything indicates that we are facing a case in which the criterion of the clear and distinct does not allow us to go forward and then we have to look for other possibilities and instruments, we realize that we can continue the path with some changes.

In explaining the notion of genre, Claudio Guillén observes that we can define a series of norms, of abstractions, coming from a reduction ad unum with inductive (analytical or historical) or deductive methods (starting from aesthetic or philosophical principles) [3]. However, he points out that in the recognition of which novels are historical and which are

not, a logical examination or a process of conceptual definition is not necessarily involved, but "an experience, that of the reader who experiences the effect of certain literary works and keeps them more or less present in memory" as a "mental model, which brings together the plurality of works". This is also pointed out by María Cristina Pons [4], who, based on other authors, says that the idea of producing or experiencing an effect of certain works presupposes modes of reading that are neither casual nor fortuitous. These conventions or commonplaces would constitute what Jauss calls a "pre-understanding of the genre" or concept of the genre. But this pre-understanding of the genre (conscious or unconscious) does not only refer to conventions, formal, stylistic or thematic features, but also to a correspondence between the generic categories as general of the historical novel and the sociocultural reality. The historical novel, then, involves not only a way of writing but also a way of reading the text and the story. Thus, the historical novel genre can be seen as a horizon of meanings to be organized in a sense in the process of reception and interpretation of the literary text and, as such, the genre is eminently contractual. The historical novel, from the point of view of its belonging to a generic group, establishes a particular reading contract from which the text evokes a horizon of expectations and norms (social, ideological and literary) that are familiar to the reader from what has already been read or known, but which can then be varied, altered, corrected or simply reproduced.

#### 4. Fragile Differences in Change Accentuation

To distinguish in order to know, said Thomas Aquinas. A similar proposal would make Descartes famous. But nowadays this attempt is considered with greater complexity. Given the lack of conclusiveness of the criteria that have been used in the history/literature distinction, another of the most important guidelines is that of the author's intention. This is a kind of discernment that at first sight seems difficult to verify, however, in some way it can be observed, given that no matter how literary the form of a piece of writing may be, if it is produced as a work of history, it will omit aspects that its author does not know (he does not invent them), or else, the historian himself warns the reader that the reconstruction of some aspects is only a hypothesis. For his part, the novelist also uses historical data in the construction of his fictional world, but in this case his writing can be well articulated because it contains fictional elements, it has invented parts that allow him to weld cracks and round off his creation, although taking care to a greater or lesser extent to remain on credible grounds. It is clear, then, that respecting some limits, the writer of historical novels has greater freedom of imagination, and this advantage allows him to tell a story with characteristics that distinguish it from the historical one, his work is more emotional and enjoyable, but also

less valuable for some purposes. However, the question is not so simple and remains open.

Today, some currents of studies tend to be far from historiographic perspectives in the consideration of the literary phenomenon, and they are solitary in purely formal artifices that do not go beyond this position. If this position is shared, to attempt an exercise in extratextual perspective would seem, then, something anachronistic and rather realistic in appearance or as it was done a century ago. It is known that in the nineteenth century the historical novel had clear ideological intentions, Walter Scott's historical novel manifests one of the ideologies developed during the 19th century: conservatism, which was then a recent concept. The consequences of the French Revolution have been studied, such as the readjustment made by the bourgeoisie, or the political restructuring that followed, for example, the Latin American wars of Independence. At that time there were several observations, among them, the sense of threat posed by the masses, a danger that, to mention one case, came to fruition in Santo Domingo: the colored slaves seized power. And it was also concluded that their uprisings were undesiderably normal not exceptional, as had been thought. Once this recognition became universal (1789-1815), three ideologies emerged, those we know now as the conservative, the marxist and the liberal [5] But after two centuries the historical fiction novel is also being produced with other aims. So, if it has been assumed that history has been written for the purpose of "retaining" and "transmitting" knowledge about the past, it is worth asking to what extent this assumption is still acceptable and, we may also ask, for what purpose historical novels are now being written. It seems that the return to historical fiction is due to changes that have taken place in different orders in recent decades, in which, for example, the very concept of reality has been perceived with suspicion. In this order of ideas, the epistemological rupture in the sixties of the last century can be easily appreciated, a rupture pointed out by several authors [6], mainly encouraged by the invasion of the different spheres of the humanities by a new theoretical veil that implies approaching reality from its linguistic constitution. In this order of ideas, it can be observed that in the sixties of the twentieth century the ideas of idealist origin gain strength, according to which we can no longer speak of a real world that is independent of us, nor can we sustain the idea of a human subject capable of knowing it objectively. So that the world, as we know it -it is affirmed-, is the result of our intellectual activity; this is what authors such as Miguel Ángel Quintanilla state: "It is we, with our sensory and intellectual capacity, who organize experience into categories that make it comprehensible to us and thus we construct things and facts, the relations of causality, the regularities we observe in nature, etc" [7].

According to some of Kant's followers, in spite of what today is held as a counterweight with the so-called return to nature, the task of human reason does not consist in discovering or representing the real world, but in constructing the

concepts that allow us to understand it. This is a question that in one way or another re-emerges in current discussions in which the main positions on this epistemological problem have been the dogmatic (metaphysical realism) and the skeptical in oscillatory movement. So, at this point it is worth asking whether we can disregard the intentionality inherent in the very writing of a novel that we take to be historical. For, as we have pointed out, language is not neutral and its determined use carries an intention; as Bakhtin argues, genres have methods and means of perceiving, conceptualizing and evaluating a reality. Between these opposing positions have moved the different epistemological perspectives that have alternated or coexisted over time, without any of them achieving dominance, since it is difficult to deny what we have long assumed, that our concepts and representations correspond to some extent with the real world; but we cannot fail to admit that what we call the real world is not something we can identify apart from our concepts and representations. The consideration of the past, indeed, is a case and example of carriers of an ideological content and providers of a form and a "language" that express a certain attitude towards reality [8] We could say then that the writing of historical novels is not limited to a purely literary intention considered as a simple divertimento, nor is it an innocent production, just as the writing of history is not innocent.

## 5. By Way of Conclusion

The recent Latin American literary production on the past, which refers to the socio-historical context, is notoriously varied and extensive. Under these conditions, this kind of production is largely focused on reconsidering -as one of its possibilities- the production that precedes it, whether they are historical novels or not from the point of view of what has been accepted as historical genre. If this position is accepted, the definition of what is understood by historical novel, then, lies in taking into account the historical moment in which we are posing the question, in that we have to adjust the concept not only to the evolution of the *simpliciter* novel, but also to the tradition and literary production that followed the initial establishment of the genre, to the author's intention and to the very change of the concept of history.

María Cristina Pons is of the opinion that the historical novel as a subgenre should not be considered as labeled, in terms of hierarchy and exclusivity insofar as it can manifest traits common to various genres (literary and non-literary) and can also be considered as part of a broader generic group.

Thus, it is necessary in this matter to take into account not only the distinctive traits that the genre manifested and then changed throughout its history, but also to take into account that vision in its complexity that shows us consensus but also discrepancies that indicate the need for changes. The disagreements have been accentuated. Thus, while Lukács associates the transformations of the genre with socio-historical changes, H. Shaw suggests that the historical novel has no

history of its own insofar as it depends on the formal techniques and cultural assumptions of the main traditions of the novel [9] Whether from a socio-historical or formal perspective, we think that this genre does not escape continuous modifications and that formal perspectives, in a broad view, are not self-explanatory.

In conclusion, we consider that this specificity of the novel can be understood as a sociocultural institution that accounts for its time and has a historical trajectory; it is made up of novels whose peculiarities and conventions - as numerous studies indicate - have varied over time, according to the different sociocultural, ideological and literary movements. Thus, the recent novels that we can call historical presuppose a pre-understanding or pre-concept of the genre, as well as its history that registers its modifications.

Given the change in the ideological, cultural and socio-historical conditions in which the new historical novels are produced, as well as the change in narrative forms and strategies, there is also a change in the pre-conception of the genre that propitiates a horizon of expectations and meanings that is not the same as the one evoked by the first historical novels. In this case it is possible to identify both the conventions of the traditional historical novel and those of recent production, and it is possible to distinguish their interaction that extends to other literary, historiographical and other discursive forms.

Thus, the recent Latin American historical novel continues to be a historical novel, but in a critical and transformative relationship with the traditional historical novel and other discursive forms that have contributed to the construction and narration of our history.

Toluca, Mexico. December 2024.

## Author Contributions

Herminio Núñez Villavicencio is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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