

## Barry Unsworth's *Morality Play*: Narrative, Detection, History

There is widespread consensus amongst scholars of contemporary British fiction on a 'turn' (Keen, 2006, 167) to history, which dates from the mid-1980s and continues into the early twenty-first century. Rod Mengham and Philip Tew point to historical fiction as '[o]ne of the most important growth areas in the literature of the last few decades' (Mengham and Tew, 2006, 151). They draw a distinction between 'popular equivalents of costume drama' and 'extraordinarily interesting and challenging explorations of literary genre' (Mengham and Tew, 2006, 151). The latter group of novels, they suggest, emphasize the difficulties of retrieving a consistent picture of the past. Suzanne Keen characterizes the works that mark the historical turn in British fiction as 'tell[ing] stories about the past that point to multiple truths or the overturning of an old received Truth, mix[ing] genres, and adopt[ing] a parodic or irreverently playful attitude to history over an ostensibly normative mimesis' (Keen, 2006, 171). The emphasis, in her view, is on narrative self-referentiality and representational self-consciousness – aspects which draw historical fiction close to postmodern theory. Nick Bentley similarly notes that '[o]ne of the most important trends in contemporary British fiction is the attempt to address and rewrite narratives of the past' (Bentley, 2008, 128), with strong postmodern influences in the 'suspicion towards grand narratives' (Bentley, 2008, 128) and in the recognition of the ideological component of any representation of the past.

These critical positions borrow from Steven Connor's earlier distinction between 'historical' and 'historicised' novels (Connor, 1996, 142). 'Historical' fiction 'seems to assert in its form and language the capacity of the present to extend itself to encompass the past [...] and thus enact the translatability of past and present into each other' (Connor, 1996, 142). This type of novel, with its stress on the continuity between past and present, their relationship of cause and effect, and the unproblematic representability of the past, is

consistent with examples of the genre dating back to Sir Walter Scott. ‘Historicised’ fiction, on the contrary, displays ‘the lack of fit, or ironic incompatibility, between past and present’; it therefore ‘suggests a discontinuous history, or the potential for many different, conflicting histories’ (Connor, 1996, 142). Broadly speaking, then, recent British historical fiction is not so much ‘about history’ as ‘about its own historically relative construction of history’ (Connor, 1996, 143).

Published in 1995, at the height of the renewed preoccupation with history described above, Barry Unsworth’s *Morality Play* outlines and explores the key questions relating to the knowledge and representation of the past – namely, by what means the past might be apprehended and in what form it might best be conveyed. Like Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983), arguably the novel that marks British fiction’s turn to history, *Morality Play* uses the device of a detective plot to make comments, by analogy, on the process by which the past is known; like A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), probably the most influential among contemporary historical novels, Unsworth’s novel reflects on the role of narrative in establishing a coherent version of the past. While sharing theoretical and self-referential elements with the more obviously ‘innovative’ (Keen, 2006, 171) examples of contemporary historical fiction, *Morality Play* also engages with the origins of the historical novel as a genre, namely, Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814). As was the case with *Waverley*, Unsworth’s novel is set at the cusp of an early modern England that will mark the passing of the very characters on whom the story centres; like conventional historical novels (particularly nineteenth-century instances of the genre), *Morality Play* considers the ways in which larger historical phenomena reverberate onto characters whose understanding of – and agency in – those phenomena is limited by their social or cultural positions with respect to them.

A significant body of scholarship attaches to both *Waterland* and *Possession*. Unsworth's novel, however, remains critically neglected and, even when noticed, is largely discussed in relation to its late-medieval setting rather than its genre or narrative. Thus, María Jesús Martínez Alfaro (2001) points out the similarities between the novel and the medieval morality plays; Richard Rankin Russell (2006) suggests that the novel's structure repeats the stages of repentance eventually leading to confession and absolution; and finally, J. Cameron Moore (2012) discusses the ways in which the narrator is affected by his encounter with evil even beyond the end of the action. This paper seeks to bring *Morality Play* to the center of a discussion of contemporary historical fiction, from the peripheral position it currently occupies, by showing how the novel offers *both* a conventionally historical *and* a problematically historicised representation of the past. I argue that *Morality Play* is generically, theoretically and narratively self-aware in ways wholly consistent with the characteristics of the 'new type of historical novel' (Janik, 1995, 162) as identified by Ivan Del Janik in an influential article published in the same year as *Morality Play* – namely, 'an interest in epistemology' and a 'fascination with ontology' (Janik, 1995, 163) – but that it also retains the focus on history as process for which Georg Lukács (1937) praises nineteenth-century historical fiction.

*Morality Play* is set in the late fourteenth century and follows a small group of players travelling in the North of England towards Durham. The first-person, retrospective narrator is Nicholas Barber, a priest who has left his diocese without permission and who joins the company of actors at the start of the novel. On the way to their destination, the players reach a small town where a child has just been murdered and a young mute woman, Jane Lambert, has been found guilty of the crime. A combination of poor takings from their performance of traditional mysteries and the lure of theatrical innovation and transgression leads them to

stage the murder, for which purpose they gather evidence in the town. However, in the course of the performance the story of the killing and of the girl's guilt proves impossible to represent in a consistent narrative; at that point, the actors begin to suspect that the story may therefore be untrue. It is important for my argument as to the novel's self-referential dimension to note that doubts about the veracity of the received story of murder and guilt only emerge in the course of the staging, when the various elements of the crime (motive, opportunity, circumstance) are shown not to make sense if re-cast as a continuous narrative of cause and effect. Equally, the truth of what happened is uncovered by means of its dramatic retelling, in a reversal of the conventional relationship between reality and representation. Because of these exchanges between the world and the stage, Nicholas Barber narrates his experiences on several diegetic levels: the present of the narration (some twelve years after the action), the past of the narrated events, and the two performances of the murder play, which in their disrupting of the ontological assumptions of characters and (arguably) readers transcend the relationship between reality and representation as conventionally conceived. In other words, by having what really happened first intimated in the play, and subsequently reverberating onto the "reality" of the murder, *Morality Play* foregrounds the primacy of representation over reality, both as means of discovery and as validation of the truth. This interest in the relationship between *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum* is marked by the novel's conceptualisation of available forms of historical writing – annals, chronicles, histories – and by the fact that they correspond to the stages of the players' understanding of what led to the child's death.

Historian Hayden White has examined the characteristics, assumptions and implications of these three types of historical representation (annals, chronicles and histories), arguing that they reveal different conceptions of the world, events, and limits of human understanding of

history. According to White, annals are characteristic of ‘a society of radical scarcity, a world of human groups threatened by death, devastation, flood, and famine’ (White, 1987, 7). The only sense of stability and continuity is granted by the succession of the years of the Lord (who alone can grant meaning to human events). Consequently, ‘there is no suggestion of any necessary connection between one event and another’ (White, 1987, 6) in the annals themselves: connections are the preserve of a divine perspective denied to mere humans. This description of the relationship between events in the world and revealed meaning corresponds to the reality of the actors in *Morality Play*: from the outset Barber comments that ‘these are dangerous times’ (Unsworth, 1995, 2), where violence, hunger, and pestilence are common and where there is no safety or survival outside a defined, sanctioned group such as the players with their patron’s livery. The continued existence of the world itself is perceived as precarious, so that the players instinctively understand the sight of horses advancing up a hill as a sign of the Apocalypse: ‘I knew what Beast it was and what manner of riders these were and I crossed myself and groaned aloud in my fear, seeing that the Beast had come’ (Unsworth, 1995, 58). Barber and the rest of the company read a human sight through the prism of Scripture as a manifestation of God’s word. It is only later that they recognise the vision for what it is – a knight and his squire and horse riding to take part in a tournament.

The shift from divine to human concerns occurs when the players reach the town where they hear of Thomas Wells’s murder. This tale has the features that White attributes to the chronicle form of historical representation: it has the elements absent from the annals, such as the attempt to provide explanations for events by means of human cause and effect rather than God’s will; but the story’s meaning is precarious because it is not validated by the narrator’s retrospective understanding, shaped by subsequent events. Thus, ‘the account does not so much conclude as terminate’ (White, 1987, 17): Jane Lambert ‘is tried in the Sheriff’s court

...and she is condemned. She is condemned but not hanged yet' (Unsworth, 1995, 78). Similarly, the first version of the murder, which the players 'had meant to close with a tableau of the execution' (Unsworth, 1995, 98), ends instead with their leaving the stage, the story unfinished. The narrative and human closure Jane's death would grant by collapsing human justice and divine judgement onto one another is withheld; in the story of the murder as it is available to the players there is no conclusion consistent with the known facts.

Indeed, the second, true play of Thomas Wells (where the complicity of the local baron's, Lord Richard de Guise's, confessor in the murder and the setting-up of Jane Lambert are exposed) cannot achieve full historical representation, because it lacks the key element of retrospection. White suggests that the kind of chronological ordering common in chronicles is not sufficient to call those types of narratives of the past 'histories', which characteristically reveal 'events ...as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as mere sequence' (White, 1987, 5). The selection, ordering and bestowing of meaning on a sequence is the result of hindsight, or, in narrative terms, retrospection. Therefore, in *Morality Play* the elements surrounding the murder, the cover-up, the framing of an innocent girl, the initially unexplained presence of a King's Justice in a forsaken town, and even the timing of the jousting tournament are only placed in meaningful relation to one another in Barber's narrative – the novel itself. From his opening sentence ('It was a death that began it all and another death that led us on' [Unsworth, 1995, 1]), the narrator joins together two instances of death occurring at different times in the narrative, only one of which properly belongs at the chronological start of the events. This operation is made possible by the fact that Barber's act of narration takes place from a future after the events that form the plot of his tale, so that in the narrative he can connect occurrences that had no relation to each other in reality. Thus, the first death (that of one of the players, leaving the company a man short and therefore willing

to take Barber) is granted a meaning – partly cause, partly foreshadowing of what is to come – that could not have been apparent at the time of its happening.

White suggests that, whilst ‘the question of human law does not arise’ in annalistic accounts, narrative representations of history, whether in the form of chronicles or histories, are intertwined ‘with the subject of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, power’ (White, 1987, 13). *Morality Play* makes this connection literal in two ways: by having a murder, its investigation and solution as the central element of the plot; and by setting the murder against the background of questions about where power rests in a contested and contingent historical reality. The detective plot is indeed analogous to White’s definition of retrospectively narrated history, in that in a detective novel ‘the denouement determines the order and causality of the events narrated from the beginning’ (Porter, 1981, 24). In other words, just as the historian imposes logical and structural coherence on a sequence of individual occurrences and, by virtue their being narrated, those occurrences gain causality and meaning, so in a detective novel ‘[t]he detective encounters effects without apparent cause, events in a jumbled chronological order, significant clues hidden among the insignificant. And his role is to re-establish sequence and causality’ (Porter, 1981, 29-30). The function of retrospective narration in both historical writing and the detective genre is epistemological (it makes sense of disconnected episodes) and ontological (the completed narration is accepted as true, precisely because it meets the test of narrative coherence).

The narrative of *Morality Play* dramatizes the limitations of the annalistic recording of history and of the chronicle form vis-à-vis a fully-fledged historical narrative (as defined by White). The novel’s genre similarly recapitulates the shift in crime writing from a tale of the revelation of sin and the fulfilment of God’s retribution to a story of detection and legal rather

than divine punishment. Stephen Knight argues that up to the nineteenth century, writing about crime is informed by a combination of Christian faith in providence and belief in the power of a community to police itself. The interest of the tale is not in *how* the guilt is detected or even proven, but rather in the reaffirmation that “murder will out” and the guilty will be punished by earthly representatives that stand in for the power of God (Knight, 2004, 4). Thus, in some stories guilt and the fear of retribution make the criminal act suspiciously (and even have his/her guilt somatised), so that the rest of the community remarks on and apprehends the guilty without great effort or disruption to their sense of identity; in others, chance – Providence – reveals details that confirm guilt (Knight, 1980, 12).

*Morality Play* engages with all these aspects, but shows them to be inadequate to solving the murder of Thomas Wells. The arrest and sentencing of the mute girl Jane appear to fulfil the expectations that there should be visible manifestations of one’s guilt, but her apprehension is not the result of a community’s growing awareness of the deviant behaviour in its midst; rather, she is condemned on the word of one person only – the monk Simon Damian, Lord Richard de Guise’s confessor – in what turns out to be a mockery of the providential exposure of guilt. In fact, the friar is lying about having seen Jane in the field at the time the body of Thomas Wells was discovered, he plants the evidence in her father’s cottage and turns out to be directly implicated in the murder. Instead, it is the itinerant players (outsiders to the community) who can query the accepted version of events. They do so by asking questions about the time of the killing, the circumstances of the body’s discovery, the physical evidence surrounding it, the means and motives for the crime, the trustworthiness of the witnesses; in other words, the players fulfil the conventional role of the detective figure in crime fiction, shifting the emphasis from God and morality to human action and its material circumstances. Their progressive unveiling of what really happened dramatizes the shift from



the internal policing of crime by an organic community, as described by Knight, to the external investigation by someone who is unconnected with the events, though the fact that the “detectives” act as a group presents an interesting intermediate stage before the reliance on one investigator. The actors initially envisage the play of Thomas Wells as something that belongs to the town and ‘does honour’ to it ‘because it shows that wrongdoers are punished here with great speed of justice’ (Unsworth, 1995, 88): it is an instance of solving the murder and rooting out crime from the inside. However, as they gather material for the script from the very community whose expression of unity depends on the events passed and now resolved, the players realise that the accepted version does not make sense as a story. Far from offering the town a representation of its own cohesion and moral force, the play shows up a fractured society in need of external intervention to solve its mysteries. And the solution is, in turn, provided in the form of a causally coherent narrative.

The ontologically ambiguous space of the stage (not reality and yet also not not-reality) allows for the contestation of the seemingly complete but actually flawed version of events. The play offer the spectators the chance to reclaim the story of the murder, by actively intervening in the course of the performance to correct what the actors know, and therefore help reach the truth; more radically, it also seems to have a direct effect on reality, since the second performance is disrupted by the discovery of Simon Damian’s death by hanging at the very moment when the monk’s role in the events is articulated on stage. The actors then abandon the performance but are soon taken to Sir Richard’s palace and into the reality of what happened.

From a representational perspective, the stage provides a horizontal structure where events can and must be connected in a coherent sequence supported by internal consistency. This stands in direct contrast to what Knight helpfully identifies as the ‘vertical’ (Knight,

2004, 18) arrangement of medieval crime collections, reflecting a conception of the relationship between human and divine perspectives exemplified in the available forms of historical recording. '[L]ists, registers, chronicles, annals' (Knight, 2004, 19) presuppose that while single events can be categorised, their meaning does not inhere in their happening but in their judgement by God. Each occurrence thus 'has its resolution and ultimate guidance in heaven' (Knight, 2004, 18). This conceptual verticality is of course akin to the structural arrangement of annals as described by Hayden White, because in both instances the form reproduces the implied relationship between earthly (below) and divine (above) existence – the former epitomized by death, the latter by Judgement.

These same arguments are articulated in *Morality Play* when the players decide, for the first time in their dramatic practice, to 'play things that are done in the world' and are 'only done once' (Unsworth, 1995, 63). Their meanings are contingent insofar as they depend on human judgement, which is inherently fallible (as shown in the transition from the false play of Thomas Wells to the true one), rather than on God's revelation: human meanings 'are only for the time, they can be changed' (Unsworth, 1995, 64). In its uniqueness and singularity, the story of Thomas Wells's killing is ontologically different from the Biblical murder of Abel by Cain, which 'is completed by the wisdom of God' and 'is encompassed by the will of the Creator' (Unsworth, 1995, 64). Only the former requires its circumstances to be investigated and given a narrative coherence: detection in the modern sense occurs as a result of the impossibility of relying on universal, timeless, divinely granted meanings, just as modern drama in the novel is marked by narrative suspense and narrative jeopardy, in contrast to the Biblical stories whose endings 'people know' already (Unsworth, 1995, 47). If coherence is not granted by faith in God, it must be enacted in the form of the representation, just as Hayden White argues, the detective genre enacts, and the actors in *Morality Play* discover.

A further and final significance to the shift from a vertical to a horizontal epistemological and representational model can be found in the historical setting of the novel and the early modernity its events herald, with its consequence for matters of authority, power and the law. The earthly equivalents of an all-encompassing divine will, power, authority, and meaning (the Church, the local Lord, the theatrical practice based on Biblical stories) are progressively undermined, with individual, contingent and contestable human institutions replacing them. *Morality Play's* setting and plot explore incipient social, political and cultural change in the course of which all its main characters (the priest Nicholas 'with nothing but Latin to recommend [him]' [Unsworth, 1995, 1], the players and their stock of mystery and morality plays 'on the back of a cart' [Unsworth, 1995, 51], even Sir Richard the Guise, 'one of the strongest barons north of the Humber' [Unsworth, 1995, 173]) are revealed to be present participants in events larger than the murder and its discovery – events they are not fully aware of and do not fully understand – and eventual victims of the historical process. In this, Unsworth is revisiting Walter Scott's strategies for representing history as experienced by those who cannot affect its course. As Fleishman describes them, Scott's plotting and narrative form aim to show 'how individual lives were shaped at specific moments of history, and how this shaping reveals the character of those historical periods' (Fleishman, 1971, 10). Hamish Dalley uses *Waverley* as the epitome of classic historical fiction, where 'public history appears to move according to macro-historical forces larger than any individual', with the result that '[e]vents of the outside world can influence the protagonist, but the protagonist cannot influence the world' (Dalley, 2013, 37). Both are consistent with Lukács's insistence that the historical novel generally, and Walter Scott particularly, aim to convey the particularity of 'great monumental' history by focusing on 'the smaller ...relationships' it

affects (Lukács, 1937, 42). The relationships connecting the company of players, Nicholas Barber, Lord Richard de Guise, the King's Justice, Simon Damian, poor Thomas Wells and Jane Lambert in *Morality Play* are the result of – and exemplify – larger historical shifts.

Thus, although depicting a world where everything from market days to the stories told on the stage is envisaged in light of God's presence, the novel heralds the progressive decline of the moral authority of the Church, usurped by would-be dissenters like Jane's father, a weaver who travels to nearby towns to bear witness to God's speaking through him. Barber might see in him a heretic, but it is clear that the condemnation of the Church's representatives resonates even with the narrator, as he admits that '[m]any [priests] are unlettered and incapable of expounding a text. They live in open concubinage and charge the people for their services' (Unsworth, 1995, 35). Indeed, it is a Benedictine monk, Sir Richard's confessor and procurer of young boys for William de Guise, who turns out to be the villain of the piece, to the point of framing the heretical weaver and his daughter for the murder. The modernity intimated here consists of a challenge to the established role of organised religion in affecting personal and communal beliefs.

Similarly, Sir Richard's power, seemingly uncontested at the start of the novel (when he metes out his own justice, raises an army, pursues and retrieves bonded serfs who had left his lands for better pay), is by the end replaced by the authority of the King in the person of the Justice. The fragmented territory of the state is thus brought into official unity under one central figurehead. Just as political and military power shifts from the provincial barons to the Crown, so economic importance moves from agriculture to commerce and therefore from the country to the cities, whose growing wealth allows them to put together 'the big cycles of plays' (Unsworth, 1995, 51) against which the travelling players in the novel cannot compete. The novel signals changes in both the nature and the performance of drama, from well-known

stories enacted in conventional ways through the use of masks and ritualised gestures to technically complex staging of more naturalistic stories – even drawn from the world rather than sacred texts. As a result, those like master-player Martin, who presciently anticipates such developments and even contributes to them in the two plays of Thomas Wells's murder, will lose their place in the social and cultural structures which, as the novel shows, are already buckling under the weight of early modernity.

The changes underscoring the plot of *Morality Play* are not, however, divinely ordained nor are they the repository of an absolute concept of justice and the law. While Barber learns the truth about the murder from the Justice, there is no overt punishment for the crime; instead, that knowledge is used as blackmail to bring Sir Richard de Guise under the control of the King. There is therefore a clear divergence between the narrative and ethical resolutions – the former definite, the latter left problematically open.

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