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Claudie Bernard, *Si l'Histoire m'était contée . . . : Le roman historique de Vigny à Rosny aîné*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021. 373 pp. Notes, references, and index. €39.00 (pb). ISBN 9782406121862.

Review by Victoria Baena, University of Cambridge.

The nineteenth century, Claudie Bernard wrote almost thirty years ago in *Le Passé recomposé* (1996), is the “siècle de l’Histoire” as well as the “siècle du roman.”^[1] As she argued, in a book that swells from a monograph on the nineteenth-century French historical novel to a meditation on the relations between literature and history, both *recomposent*--reconfigure, reconstitute, even rewrite--the past.

Si l'Histoire m'était contée shares many of the concerns of *Le Passé recomposé*, and indeed is presented as “une illustration et une mise à l'épreuve” (p. 9) of the earlier book's arguments. It has actually been published alongside a revised and expanded edition of *Le Passé recomposé*, taking into account both the efflorescence of contemporary historical fiction and a renewed critical interest in the genre (true well beyond the francophone sphere: take, for instance, Alexander Manshel's recent *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon*).^[2]

If *Le Passé recomposé* began with an introduction to “Histoire et roman historique,” followed by a two-part, chiasmic structure, “l'histoire dans le roman historique” and “Le Roman historique dans son histoire,” *Si l'Histoire m'était contée* is organised narratively and chronologically rather than theoretically. A brief introduction gives way to ten case studies, with texts ranging from the familiar to the comparatively understudied: from Vigny's *Cinq-Mars* (1826), Balzac's *Sur Catherine de Médicis* (1836-41), and Dumas's *Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge* (1845-46) to Rosny aîné's *Les Xipéhuz* (1887) and *La Guerre de feu* (1909), before concluding with an “épilogue contemporain” on Jean d'Ormesson's *Histoire du Juif errant* (1990).

Each of these studies unfolds as a close reading, via retelling, of a novel (or in some cases several). Elegantly concealing its argumentative scaffolding, Bernard's version of what we might call critical paraphrase is in this sense reminiscent of a very different kind of book, Martha Nussbaum's re-reading of Plato's *Symposium* in her classic *The Fragility of Goodness*.^[3] *Si l'Histoire m'était contée*, too, is stylishly written and wears its erudition lightly. Critical debates, including Bernard's deft assimilation of anglophone and francophone literary theory, literary history, and historiography, are largely consigned to the footnotes. There Bernard offers a gloss of her narratological vocabulary, from Genette (“Récit homodiégétique,” p. 267) to Ricoeur (perhaps less essentially, “symbole,” p. 246).

Bernard's dense but concise definition of the historical novel is also borrowed from *Le Passé recomposé*: "un roman, une *histoire* (fictionnelle) qui traite d'*Histoire* (factuelle)," or more precisely "d'*Histoire* passée, par la médiation de l'*Histoire*-discours ou historiographie, dans le contexte de son *Histoire* contemporaine" (p. 9-10). This definition, both complicated and enriched by the polyvalence of the French term, unfolds further in a tripartite model of the "historique" as *passé*, *public*, and *avéré*.

The genre, in Bernard's analysis, is characterized above all by the ongoing, uneven tension between its constituent parts, "roman" and "historique"—a tension that proves creatively stimulating as well as aesthetically and, at times, politically fraught. For despite the titular allusion to a *conte de fées*, Bernard insists both at the start and close that "L'Histoire contée par ces romans ne ressemble pas à *Peau d'âne*" (p. 9). In her reading, the texts instead reflect on, interrogate, and problematize the *Histoire* of which they tell. The task of the literary critic thus emerges naturally from that of the historical novelist, who, "priviliégiant la peinture des crises, entame à l'occasion une critique, de l'historiographie, et du roman historique—sur laquelle enchaîne la critique littéraire" (p. 12).

Like many of the texts under consideration here, d'Ormesson's 1990 novel is read in part as an allegory of the genre: a "roman 'transhistorique'" that encompasses two thousand years, "[qui] met en exergue" its own methods, "[qui] engage très vite une réflexion sur l'*Histoire* à majuscule" (p. 321). In that sense it can be read as a latter-day dramatization of what, in the wake of the French Revolution, came to be understood as the problem of History. Bernard borrows from François Hartog's notion of the "régime moderne d'historicité" (in dialogue with Reinhart Koselleck's semantics of historical time) in characterizing the revolutionary era's transformation of reigning understandings of temporality and history.[4] Modern historical time would henceforth be conceived of as containing the seeds of and keys to the present age, guided and written by the ascendant bourgeoisie. In this sense it would find a useful handmaiden in the modern novel's "crédibilité, son goût du compte rendu minutieux, son souci de causalités, ses ambitions pédagogiques, éventuellement son besoin de dépaysement et d'évasion" (p. 10).

For Bernard—as for Georg Lukács—any understanding of the historical novel is inextricable from a reading of the nineteenth-century novel writ large. Bernard's analysis is explicitly indebted to Lukács's periodization, particularly regarding the classical era reigning between Walter Scott and Balzac in which, Lukács argued, the novel was still able to mediate the contradictions of a consolidating class society. Where Bernard departs paths with Lukács is in tracing the fate of the historical novel in the aftermath of 1848. For the latter, the triumph and dominance of the bourgeoisie contributed to the genre's fall from grace—from a richly textured portrayal of social totality into technicolor spectacle and the trivial deployment of local color. Bernard wields a Lukácsian vocabulary at some points more than others, such as in her references to Mérimée's use of local color in *Chronique du règne de Charles IX*, and she also explores the modalities of the historical novel in an age of literary decadence (as in Élémer Bourges's *Sous la hache* [1885], a novel of the counter-revolutionary Vendée). But *Si L'Histoire m'était contée* gives more credit to the genre's variegated aesthetic experiments across the long sweep of the century.

Bernard pays close attention, too, to the historical novelists' ideological diversity, from Nodier's conservatism and Balzacian legitimism to Barbey d'Aurevilly's reactionary politics, from Mérimée and Stendhal's "libéralisme sceptique" to Vallès's "proudhonisme anarchisant" (p. 13).

And she is particularly adept at examining how these modulations affect the novelists' formal and aesthetic divergences, especially their narrative strategies: the use of the first person; the workings of narrative irony; the deployment of a paratextual apparatus like the found manuscript; as well as experiments in narrative temporality, particularly in exploiting the gap between the time of relating and time related (in narratological terms, between *histoire* and *discours*).

In Bernard's reading, revolutionary crisis--1793 more than 1789--haunts these nineteenth-century texts, even, or perhaps especially, those that explicitly treat other eras. One chapter canvasses thinkers, novelists, and dramatists around 1830, from Guizot to Balzac, whose return to the wars of religion, as Bernard shows, was mediated by their interpretation of the Terror. In Vigny's novel of seventeenth-century conspiracy, *Cinq-Mars*, to take another example, the protagonist can be understood as an "enfant du siècle transplanté au XVII^e" (p. 31), and the narrator's comments on "L'inertie d'un peuple" are read as the "chimère d'une caste traumatisée par les débordements de 1793, et qui voudrait reléguer le 'peuple' dans la position essentielle certes mais passive du 'public'" (p. 24).

A monograph that links the nineteenth-century historical novel to nineteenth-century theories of history cannot but reflect on some of the ugliest facets of such ideologies. Another chapter tackles *L'Abbaye de Tiphaines*, a novel set on a fictional twelfth-century commune and written by Arthur de Gobineau, best known for his legitimization of modern racism in his *Essai sur l'inégalité des races* (1853-55). *L'Abbaye de Tiphaines*, published as a roman-feuilleton in 1849 and in volume twenty years later (1867), relies on Augustin Thierry's historical writing in order to characterize medieval social conflict between the Celts and Franks in terms of "race." As Bernard acknowledges, such anachronisms nevertheless contributed to Gobineau's quite modern racism, which was inextricable from his medievalism. A medievalism flourishing throughout France and Europe more broadly at the time: Scott's *Ivanhoe*, too, "exploite l'inimitié proverbiale entre deux 'races', l'oligarchie impérialiste et les indigènes saxons," as well as "la race 'dénigrée des Juifs'" (p. 198). But it was Gobineau whose *Essai* did no small part to foment the modern consolidation of race as a biological category and to justify racial hierarchies through "scientific" thinking. Here, Bernard's sensitivity to the multiplicity of meaning, including her nuanced reading of Gobineau's narrative poetics, seems somewhat less well-equipped to tackle Gobineau's white supremacist anxieties and nationalist-declivist fears.

This capacity for close textual analysis is better served elsewhere, and indeed Bernard's elegant close readings often contain far-reaching insights. Her analysis of Gautier's escapist foray into "l'archéofiction," for instance, offers a persuasive account of the historical novel's link to Romantic malaise, "la *dyschronie*, sentiment d'appartenir à un autre point du chronos que le sien" (p. 210) that can be intuited in different ways in Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Musset. While focused on nineteenth-century France, Bernard's gaze also ventures beyond national borders, not only to Rosny aîné (of Belgian heritage) but also to texts like Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and the late-Victorian writings of Jack London and H.G. Wells.

The historical novels treated here are a largely male genre, even if George Sand's *Cadio* is a recurring reference. But Bernard doesn't neglect questions of gender: one of the book's most intriguing sections includes a sustained reflection on the patriarchal politics behind three "histoires sur le billot": Nodier's *Histoire d'Hélène Gillet*, Stendhal's *Les Cenci* (part of his *Chroniques italiennes*) and Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Une page d'histoire*. Each deals with the decapitation of a young woman guillotined for flouting sexual and familial mores, and their juxtaposition invites a

thoughtful consideration of the politics of narrative closure as it intersects with gendered violence. (An even closer level of attention to the formal differences between *nouvelle*, *roman*, and *conte* might have further illuminated Bernard's structural and stylistic analysis here, especially given the novella's own peculiar temporalities and rhetorical strategies.)

Over the course of the nineteenth century, as Bernard shows, each of the features of "historique" she has identified begins to expand: *passé* extends into the prehistoric era as well as into the present and future; *public* develops from the sense of *notoire* into the commonplace and the private sphere; *avéré* begins to take on the nineteenth-century vogue for documentation, scientific verification, and research (p. 10). In that sense, the limit cases of the historical novel only heighten the stakes of the genre's capacity for meta-historical reflection. Take Bernard's reading of Rosny ainé's *La Guerre du feu* and *Les Xipéhuz*, in which the extension of the *historique* into the distant, prehistoric past allows the historical novel to brush up against other disciplines—geology, botany, zoology, anthropology, archaeology, linguistics—and to focus less on recorded events than on "des résidus, ossements, artéfacts, peintures rupestres, à partir desquelles elle inférera des usages et des croyances" (p. 296). Here Bernard helpfully articulates the similarities and contrasts between historical fiction (here the "prehistoric" novel) and the increasingly neighboring genre of science fiction as an "histoire fictionnelle qui traite d'Histoire alternative" (present or future) "dans le contexte de son histoire contemporaine" (p. 316). This is a definition close enough to that of the historical novel to explain fin-de-siècle novelists' shared interest in both genres as literary experiments in imagining different futures as well as pasts.

The affordances of Bernard's model, even at its limit cases, become perhaps most compellingly clear in her reading of Jules Vallès's Commune novel *L'Insurgé*, written barely a decade after the events it recounts. Moving through each of her terms—*passé*, *public*, and *avéré*—in sequence, Bernard reflects on how the Commune transfigured dominant notions of history insofar as it "relève d'une Histoire en train de se faire, de se forger, et non de l'Histoire surfaite" (p. 280). As she writes on the novel, as on the genre as a whole, "Quand on a affaire à une période récente, il n'y aura roman historique que dans la mesure où cette période se trouve distancée, releguée dans un statut d'ancien régime"—something like Zola's characterization of the Rougon-Macquart series as the "tableau d'un règne mort" (cited on p. 266).

Across the Channel, nineteenth-century British literature too often set its action not in a definitive or completed past but hovering at the verge between memory and history, in what the scholar Ruth Livesey has called the "just past."^[5] Bernard's focus on nineteenth-century French literature, especially given its poetics of crisis, might in this sense be productively put into dialogue with scholarship on the historical novel beyond national borders, as well as beyond the nineteenth century. Much contemporary fiction is intensely engaged in similar questions of narrative form and historical retelling, from recent literary reflections on the Sri Lankan Civil War (Shehan Karunatilaka's Booker-winning *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, 2022, or V.V. Ganeshanathan's *Brotherless Night*, 2023) to ongoing attempts to grapple with the afterlives of transatlantic slavery in anglophone fiction (in a tradition that ranges from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, 1987, to Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, 2016). *Si l'Histoire m'était contée* thus stands not only as an erudite work in its field but also a timely intervention into contemporary debates on the historical novel's politics and poetics of history.

NOTES

[1] Claudie Bernard, *Le Passé Recomposé: Le roman historique français du XIX^e siècle*, rev. ed. (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021), p. 19, p. 31.

[2] Alexander Manshel, *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

[3] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[4] François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), *passim*; Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[5] Ruth Livesey, *Writing the Stage Coach Nation: Locality on the Move in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), *passim*.

Victoria Baena
Gonville & Caius College, University of Cambridge
vb337@cam.ac.uk

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