Treasure Trove or Fool's Gold: To What Extent Can Literature Be Used as a Historical Source?

The development of New Historicism pioneered by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980s makes the relationship between Literature and History central to the study of both disciplines, since proponents argue that Literature has fuelled the development of ideas and Literature can only be understood through the context in which it is written. However, there is a narrower sense in which Literature may be valuable to historians: as source material. This essay will argue that it can be used as evidence by historians to a limited extent, but it is more valuable in some cases than others, it is not universally useful to all historians in all fields and, by its very nature, its use must be caveated and validated. While there are many genres of Literature, three novelists, who are predominantly naturalists, clearly demonstrate the opportunities and hazards of Literature as source material: Jane Austen, Émile Zola and Charles Dickens.

Ostensibly the task of the novelist and the historian are different. Franz Kafka, who wrote extensively about writing, described what he did as "constantly trying to communicate something incommunicable, to explain something inexplicable, to tell about something I only feel in my bones and which can only be experienced in those bones"[1]. On the other hand, US historian Henry Steele Commager described History as "a jangle of accidents, blunders, surprises and absurdities, and so is our knowledge of it, but if we are to report it at all we must impose some order upon it"[2]. Kafka looks inwards to create; Commager's perspective does not encompass the entirety of the task, but neatly expresses the core requirement of a historian to look outwards to file and to sort. However, there is commonality in the shared impulse to explain. 'Metamorphosis' (published 1915) may not be a good place to find data relating to the rejection by Prague businesses of a customs union with Germany during the First World War, but it may give the historian insight into the mindset of the Austro-Hungarian urban middle class at the outset of the conflict.

A historian might use Literature as a source to find enriching, corroborative detail, but they might also use it for its assistance in interpreting facts. Both uses are legitimate, but the historian is then immediately confronted with three problems: verifiability, bias and context. The currency of a historian is fact, whereas a novel by definition is fiction. A creative writer may legitimately make something up to suit their purposes and, where they have, they are under no obligation to disclose it. This is identified by James Smith Allen, who lays out the problems extrapolating hard data. That is perhaps self-evident, but Allen's analysis becomes more interesting as he shows that this problem is compounded by lack of clarity around an authorial voice - a literary analogue: "The problems of mistaking intentions for accomplishment and details for fact are similar to the common mistaking of a novel's narrator to the author"[3].

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[1] Franz Kafka to Milena Jesenská, November 1920, in 'Letters to Milena', Boehm, P., Vintage (1999), p202
[2] Steele Commager, H., 'The Nature and the Study of History', Charles E. Merrill (1965), p86
[3] Smith Allen, J., 'History and the Novel: Mentalité in Modern Popular Fiction', History and Theory, 22 (1983), p233

This additional issue identified by Smith concerning the perspective of the writer relates to the second problem, the author's views and intentions. It is present even when assessing the historic value of the work of a naturalist writer such as Balzac, who explicitly considered himself to be a historian as he wrote La Comédie Humaine. This problem is compounded by the task of creating Literature. Balzac may be ordering in the sense understood by Commager, but even if his primary objective genuinely is not literary, which would be surprising given his medium, the need to create a powerful piece of work that is effective in novelistic terms must affect his selection and representation of fact; while actions may have consequences for a historian, for the novelist stories have arcs and outcomes. Balzac's work cannot be understood to be a complete overview, analysis, filtering and presentation of his subject (nineteenth century France), because necessarily his protagonists are also his subjects.

The final problem is context, which has been particularly illuminated by New Historicist thinking. A novelist has no obligation to be explicit about their agenda or to extricate themselves from the culture in which they live. Indeed that world may actually enrich their work and extrapolation of the work from the context may not be possible or even desirable. The implied circularity of New Historicism is made explicit in the second of the five defining principles identified by Harold Aram Veeser in his introduction to a collection of New Historicist essays, where he suggests that the act of criticism as a cultural act risks being a product of the practice it assesses[4]. However, context may be the least serious of the problems facing the historian who simply wishes to use a novel as a source, because in this respect it is no different from using a diary or an autobiography. Yet it does mean that the author cannot be understood as a cipher of fact. Some critics are more comfortable with this than others; it is particularly a feature of Marxist criticism, a precursor of New Historicism, which shares some but not all of its features. Terry Eagleton identifies "realist" and "pragmatist" ways of grappling with this problem: "Literature is deeply conditioned by its social context and any account of it which omits this fact is automatically deficient", a position refined in pragmatist readings which are more selective about which aspects of context are applied to which texts[5].

None of this entirely invalidates Literature as a source for historians looking for evidence. It may inform the way that a historian assesses the value of Literature as source material. Taking an example from Medieval England and Alfred the Great, there is a scale of credibility with different weight given to different kinds of evidence: it runs from fortifications (where visible) around key towns through coinage, Alfred's own annotations to texts, the Anglo Saxon Chronicle and the equivocal account left by Asser. This argues for a case by case assessment of the value of a piece of literary work as a source with the historian alive to pitfalls but also clear about their own purpose.

Furthermore, there are multiple genres of Literature: modernist poetry would need to be considered differently from biography. For these purposes, establishing how different writers might be approached differently by different kinds of historians looking for sources, the nineteenth century provides a convenient landscape. This is a result of the prominence not only of naturalism as a style but also a shared belief of many writers from that period that a great novel is derived from personal choices made in a time of great change. This view is explicit in Chapter 104 of 'Moby Dick', where Herman Melville wrote "To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme". Jane Austen, Émile Zola and Charles Dickens highlight the challenges a historian might face extremely well.

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[4]Aram Veeser, H., 'The New Historicism', Routledge (1989), p11
[5]Eagleton, T., 'Two Approaches in the Sociology of Literature', Critical Inquiry, 14 (1988), p469

Jane Austen did not believe that it was her task to chronicle her age. However, she may have done just that, but there are multiple other dimensions to her work. With Austen the relationship between author and subject is a persistent feature; it is the driving force of her ironic style. This remains true when she discusses her own writing: "I am very much flattered by your commendation of my last letter, for I write only for fame, and without any view to pecuniary emolument."[6]. Austen hides herself and her financial motives for writing with self-deprecation. Professor Louis Menand believes that Austen has had two audiences since the publication of her work: a general audience who appreciate the social and romantic aspects of her writing and a sophisticated audience who understand the relationship between the world she describes and the world beyond[7]. There is material for historians interested in both these aspects of her work.

For historians who believe that History can only be properly understood through an examination not of the great men, but the lives of the more ordinary people who lived it, Jane Austen provides plentiful material. In 'Persuasion', her final completed novel, the plot hangs on whether Anne Elliot, who is slightly beyond conventional marriageable age, will marry Captain Wentworth. It works dramatically because it has jeopardy at its centre and uncertainty is the ideal context for Austen to deploy her stylistic genius. However, it also is a window for any social historian looking to understand the motivation and behaviours of middle class women in early nineteenth century England. The gift of a piano by Frank Churchill to Jane Fairfax in 'Emma' is freighted with both literary and historical significance. A piano is not just an opportunity for Jane to indulge her love of music, she plays much better than Emma, but because it is a prime means for young women to showcase themselves to potential suitors. As the interest of historians becomes more particular, Jane Austen's work becomes more valuable. Appropriate dress for a ball or a walk in the country are woven into the plots so that fashion historian, Hilary Davidson, Associate Professor of Fashion at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology writes "Jane Austen's famously observant fictional writing, as well as her letters, provide the entry point for examining the Regency age's rich complexity of fashion, dress, and textiles for men and women in their contemporary contexts"[8]. This perspective is borne out by Austen's texts multiple times but it underplays the fact that dress also exemplifies the way individuals are expected to conform to social norms in certain ritualised contexts, so that a fashion historian might legitimately consider larger questions than simply those concerning what people wore.

Charlotte Brontë described Austen's work as a "carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden"[9]. But this somewhat disparaging view misses the point. Right the way through Austen's work there are glimpses of a world beyond the life she describes; That world often defines the garden. The references can be tangential. In 'Emma', Harriet Smith is saved from "gypsies", but the references can be even less direct than that. There is discussion also in Emma about hedges and ditches and the relocation of a public path; it is a dog whistle to contemporaries signalling that Mr Knightley is enclosing his land. The references can also be central to understanding plot and character. In the British Navy entry and progression was based on merit. In the army, you could buy a commission until 1871. Meritocracy signals not only Captain Wentworth's virtue, in contrast to an army officer like Wickham in 'Pride and

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[6] Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, January 16, 1796, in 'Letters of Jane Austen', Knatchbull-Hugessen, E.H., Cambridge University Press (2009), p131
[7] Menard, L., (2020), 'How to misread Jane Austen', Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/05/how-to-misread-jane-austen (Accessed: July 16, 2024)
[8] Davidson, H., (2023), 'Dress in the Age of Jane Austen: Regency Fashion', Available at: https://www.hilarydavidson.net/dress-age-austen (Accessed: July 16, 2024)

[9] Charlotte Brontë to G.H. Lewes, January 12, 1848, in 'The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: 1848-1851', Smith, M., Oxford University Press (2000), p10

Prejudice', but also social disruption: the ruddy features of Admiral Croft are deprecated by Sir Walter Elliot because the Admiral has the cash to rent the house of the hard up minor nobleman. It's a joke, naturally, but it is also an insight into the discomfort caused by social mobility. To extend Davidson's metaphor of the entry point, Austen's work is also a portal reflecting the stresses on (what was to become) Tory England, prior to the foundation of the Conservative Party in 1834. Professor Tom Keymer, of the University of Toronto, writes that Austen was a novelist "in whom an implicitly Tory world view is frequently interrogated or disrupted by destabilizing ironies and irruptions of satirical anger that are no less real for the elegance and wit of their expression."[10]

Austen's work is not an inventory of fact, but a stepping stone for the historian, facilitating understanding. Austen is, of course, writing about her own world. A question remains whether a contemporary writer can illuminate the past for a historian in the same way. An example of this might be Hilary Mantel's treatment of Thomas Cromwell in the 'Wolf Hall' trilogy. It is a portrait meticulously sourced from sixteenth century material, including much fine detail. Mantel's act of imagination is impressive in literary terms, but her information is derived from sources also available to a historian, who can access it without having to navigate the hurdles of bias, selection and context that come from a writer of fiction. It is actually the novelist who is benefitting from the historian. Historical fiction, even the highest quality novel, has limited historical value. Nevertheless Shakespeare's depiction of Richard III, which is probably derived from Tudor propaganda, has influenced perceptions of this monarch for centuries[11]. A New Historicist would say that this is not without historical value, though not in the sense Shakespeare may have intended, as it tells us more about the Tudors than Richard III.

The fine grain detail present in Austen can also be found in nineteenth century French Literature. Balzac's 'La Comédie Humaine' reveals nuggets of what life was like. We know primarily from Balzac that in nineteenth century Paris a tailor would accept credit but a hatter would not and we also discover the size of the tip a gravedigger might expect to receive[12]. It is plausible historians could find no other source for this level of detail. Émile Zola is a particularly interesting case in point when considering the intersection between Literature and History. Zola was especially ambitious as through the medium of the novel he looked not only to chronicle the age of Napoleon III, but also to explore a scientific theory that character traits are genetic and handed down through generations. In a letter to his publisher he wrote that he planned to "1: study in a family the questions of blood and environment. 2: study the whole second empire from the coup d'état to nowadays"[13]. He had mapped the whole complex family tree before he started work on the first novel in the Rougon Macquart cycle, plotting how inherited personality traits play out in the context of different historical episodes.

Zola's work is studded with reference to actual people and events, which have been picked over and verified by historians. However, despite the plethora of verifiable detail (Zola had begun his career as a journalist), his ambitious goals have many limitations for the historian and the scientist, if not the literary critic. The subject of 'La Débâcle' is the French defeat at Sedan on 1st September 1870,

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[10] Keymer, T., 'Jane Austen: Writing, Society, Politics', Oxford University Press (2020), p16
[11] Kewes,P., Archer, I.W. and Heal,F., 'The Oxford Handbook of Holinshed's Chronicles', Oxford University Press (2012), p213

[12] Robb, G. Introduction (2011) in Balzac, H., 'Old Man Goriot', Penguin Classics pxix
[13] Leuilliot, V., (2004) 'Zola Plan des Rougon Macquart,1860', Available at: http://emilezola.free.fr/d_genese.htm (Accessed: July 15, 2024)

where 90,000 French soldiers, including the emperor, were taken prisoner. Zola is motivated in part by recounting the horror of war with graphic passages describing the wounded, but he puts defeat down to malaise that characterised the French state filtering into the military – essentially a potent mix of corruption, idleness and incompetence. There is an alternative account of the battle that ascribes the German victory to superior technology and a consequent ability to maintain precise sustained artillery bombardment coupled with superior battleground tactics, including a manoeuvre from the Bavarian Fourth Corps that cut the French army in two between Sedan and Bazeilles[14]. Whether or not this account is more or less plausible to historians, it has no place in 'La Débâcle', because it doesn't fit the narrative.

There are other examples throughout Zola's work, where detail appears to support a historical thesis but is actually used to prop up historical and psychological theories that have subsequently come under sustained challenge. The subject of 'L'Argent' is the development of the Bourse in Paris and how speculation led to fortunes being made and lost. Zola does not take a moral position concerning money. He sees it as a kind of elemental force but his account of how the central protagonist Saccard uses funds in his Banque Universelle to buy its own stock and bump the share price resonates as an early account of a financial practice that is now illegal. What 'L'Argent' does not do is give any account to or for the rapid increase of GDP in the Second Republic. Jean Marczewski in the Histoire Quantitative makes decade by decade estimates of French GDP growth in the nineteenth century of between 2.03% per annum and 2.84%[15]. The drama of bank runs and financial collapse in 'L'Argent' obscures the greater truth that France was getting richer. Similarly, Zola's decision to make a department store the central feature of 'Au Bonheur des Dames', describes a business model that is still used by big retailers like Tesco and Sainsbury's; low margins are enabled by rapid turnover. This reflects an economic phenomenon but does not account for why consumerism developed and flourished in France and succeeded in this economic form.

In some ways Zola is the opposite of Austen. Zola has done his research but as History, the Rougon Macquart cycle is hamstrung by the breadth of its landscape and the requirement of a novel to work according to the demands of naturalistic fiction: a good story; strong characters; jeopardy. This is compounded by partiality: this is one person's view, there has been no forensic sifting of evidence, no presentation or assessment of counter positions and there is no obligation to source claims. At a minimum, a historian needs to find evidence to support the detail provided by Zola. Often this detail is validated, as seen in modern editions of Zola's work with their copious footnotes, but that misses the bigger purpose of Zola's provision of detail: to support a view of History which essentially is asserted – unlike in Austen where it is lived. Karlheinz Stierle writes "far from being the great novelist of an epoch of triumphant experimental science, Zola never entirely frees himself from a visionary and rhetorical romanticism"[16]. Romanticism is a necessary end point of Zola's choice of medium, the novel, where narrative logic must trump analysis.

Charles Dickens goes one step further than Zola. He is looking not just to chronicle society but to effect changes to it. This view of Dickens' role in British social reform is compellingly laid out in

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[14]O'Connor Morris, W., ' The Campaign of Sedan', The English Historical Review, 3 (1888), p228
[15] Marczewski, J., 'le produit physique de l'économie française de 1789 à 1913', Histoire quantitative de l'économie française, 4 (1965), p xcii-xciii
[16] Stierle, K., 'The Paris of Zola: Real Presence and Mythic Horizon', Anglophonia French Journal of English Studies, 25 (2009), p259

multiple studies, including Hugh Cunningham's "Dickens as a Reformer"[17]. In many ways Dickens was a polemicist and can be seen not just as a novelist but as a historical figure in his own right.

Dickens was not the only individual working for reform in nineteenth century Britain. His model adds drama and urgency to the reformist case by representing a version of Britain where hardship sits alongside injustice and the victims are often undeserving. He was looking to provoke public outrage, his work entertaining and engaging its readers, who were also voters, through humour and pathos exemplified in plotting and characterisation. His literary success can be measured in the way in which his characters still have resonance in modern Britain: Miss Havisham, Mr Micawber and Fagin are recognisable and well understood in the twenty first century. This remains the case even when some are now derided. Dickens wrote of the death of Little Nell in 'The Old Curiosity Shop': "She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death". This inspired Oscar Wilde to write "One would need to have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without bursting into tears... of laughter". This presents another problem for the historian assessing literary sources: they cannot look at source material from the past with a modern perspective. Nor is their role to act as a literary critic. For the historian it does not have to matter if a work is successful or not in literary terms.

Unlike Zola, Dickens is not really a naturalistic writer. In order to effect change, he wanted to represent a reality which people could identify as plausible. However, to engage emotionally with the reader his writing had to do more than that. The two literary tools Dickens frequently resorts to are symbolism and theatricality, indeed live performances of his work were an important money spinner and their impact was akin to that of political speeches. These creative features reveal truths more powerfully for Dickens than a statement of fact might do for a contemporary reader or for that matter, a historian. For instance, the relationship between trash and money that we see in Mr Boffin's dust heaps and the purifying force of the Thames are highly resonant in 'Our Mutual Friend', but a student of Joseph Bazalgette's construction of eighty three miles of interconnecting London sewers following the Great Stink of 1858 is unlikely to use it as source material.

Theatricality and symbolism are therefore not necessarily useful to the historian as an account of life in urban Britain in the nineteenth century. Symbolism obscures fact and presumably most historians would be aware before starting a programme of study that there were gangs of pickpockets in London or that the instrumentalism of Gradgrind informed the nation's education system. However, it is useful to understand why social reform was enacted in Britain during the course of the nineteenth century. Dickens believed that crime was a result of poverty, not a product of wickedness, and hardened criminals can be reformed; this is at the heart of his work, the archetype being Magwitch in 'Great Expectations'. There are multiple examples of social change following the focus on injustice in Dickens' work. They include reform of Workhouses, Debtors Prisons and the education system. Dickens was not the only individual arguing for reform, but in some cases he was very influential, including prompting change to the working of the law itself with his focus on Chancery and the infamous prolonged Jarndyce versus Jarndyce case in 'Bleak House'[18]. His role is recognised by lawyers to this day. Dickens' work should not properly be understood as recounting History for a

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[17] Cunningham, H., 'Dickens as a Reformer' (2008) in Paroissien, D., 'A companion to Charles Dickens', Blackwell Publishing, p159

[18]Carson,H.L., 'The Work of Charles Dickens in Aiding Chancery Reforms', American Bar Association Journal, 9 (1923), p790

historian. In a sense he has become History and his work can properly be understood as a source for its galvanising effect on British public opinion. His fiction could be seen in the same way as Russell's reporting from the Crimean War or Wilberforce's polemical speeches.

In conclusion, Literature can be used as source material by a historian, but only under specific conditions and with certain caveats. However, this question is illuminating not just for what it tells us about the practice of History, but also for what it can tell us about the purpose of History itself. The method of historians and creative writers is necessarily different. A historian must spend hours in the library, examining the evidence and arriving at a judgement. Credible History is rooted in fact, it is balanced and well argued. Creative writing is concerned with living an experience, whether that experience is internalised, as in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, or externalised, as for writers like Ernest Hemingway who wrote because he lived his subject matter. The historian Anthony Beevor has written extensively about the practice of History. For him, History is also about narrative, the author must take a stance and the best historians are also great writers. Tellingly he believes that History is ultimately unprovable and therefore cannot be treated as a science. Beevor believes "History can only be a branch of Literature…it can never be tested in a laboratory"[19]. At the highest level the task of the historian and novelist merge; their job is to explain humanity to itself. Literature can be a source for historians, but it is more than that. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two disciplines.

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