

# Historical Stories: Arnaldo Gama and the Traditional Historical Novel

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Translated by

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**Abstract.** In this study Ana Maria Marques examines Arnaldo Gama's Romantic historical writing, by engaging examples from his works along with the author's own comments. She discusses how Gama attains a realistic diegetic universe through the inclusion of elements of local color, insistent descriptions, the reconstruction of social and cultural environments, real historical figures and events within the invented plot, yet with the author's poetic license to modernize language and other necessary elements, in this re-articulation of History through fiction.

## 1. History in the Novel.

The historical novels penned by Arnaldo Gama (1828-1869), which fall within the category of the Romantic historical novel, are intended to serve the dual purposes of educating and entertaining the reader. The Porto-based author, in a similar way to Alexandre Herculano, never tired of repeating the didactic aims behind his works:

Demais eu não o queria narrado no estilo severo e seco, em que se escreve a história; queria-o de maneira que todos o lessem, que instruisse deleitando, *utile dulci* [...]. Queria... queria uma novela, um romance histórico, que toda a gente

lesse, que toda a gente quisesse ler; porque, enfim, meu caro amigo, estou convencido que a maneira de ensinar a história àqueles que não se aplicam aos livros, àqueles cuja profissão os arreda de poder fazer estudos sérios e seguidos, é o romaneá-la, dialogando-a, e dando vida à época, dando vida aos personagens, dando vida às localidades [...]. (*Um motim há cem anos* 11-12)

These aims are rooted in an implicit respect for the truth that led nineteenth-century authors to affirm the superiority of the historical novel over the historical compendium, as Silveira da Mota reflected in 1880:

Já hoje não está em voga o romance histórico. Pozeram-n'o nas listas de proscrição os Syllas e Marios das novas escolas litterarias. E comtudo este genero de escriptos [...] tende a vulgarisar o estudo da vida social e politica, domestica e intima do passado, e contribue amiude para o derramamento da instrucção com maior importancia e proveito do que os livros de muitos historiadores. (63-64)

Arnaldo Gama also commented that: “[...] o romancista é sempre mil vezes mais verídico do que o homem historiador [...]” (*O génio do mal* Vol.1, 10).

Nineteenth-century novelists composed their historical narratives with a supposed faithfulness to the truth that echoes the Romantic trope of veracity, and Arnaldo Gama is no exception to the rule: “E não embique o leitor com o rigor cronológico, com que levo o meu conto, porque assim é preciso para enfiar com verdade a história dos acontecimentos que em breve vai ler” (*O Sargento-mor de Vilar* 92). By establishing a distinction between “history” and “the novel” he concludes that “Ambas teem de respeitar a verdade dos factos e do scenario; ambas devem acatar a fidelidade dos caracteres e dos costumes” (*O segredo do Abade* 8). Furthermore, in the introduction to *O Satanás de Coura* he declares that “Em cousas de história não costuma escrever de orelha nem ao palpite” (23). Thus Gama draws attention to the careful and rigorous research that precedes the composition of a historical novel, and which I have been able to observe at first hand by analyzing the author’s preparatory notes for the novel *O Satanás de Coura*. These notes reflect the author’s preoccupation with reproducing as closely as possible the era he had chosen to depict (early 1668) and they include a report on successful military campaigns that had taken place since 1662 (taken from *Portugal restaurado*, by D. Luís de Meneses), a list of “personagens historicos, que por qualquer forma intervem no romance,” customs, clothing, popular games and enter-

tainments, expressions and terms of address, in many cases indicating legislation in operation at the time, and even a reconstitution of the calendar of that period filled in with the historical events most significant to the narrative.<sup>1</sup> This minute attention to detail, which becomes rather “oppressive,”<sup>2</sup> because it seriously affects the progress of the narrative by interrupting it with pauses for detailed descriptions or reports of events that had even the remotest effect on the action, and endless explanatory notes, is a feature of this author’s work and has been highlighted by the critics: “Depois de Herculano, ninguém pôs mais cuidado na parte historica dos romances do que Arnaldo Gama, que os annotava e documentava como se fossem obras historicas” (Figueiredo 195). Pinheiro Chagas even went so far as to declare that *A última dona de S. Nicolau* “é mais estudo historico do que romance” (64).

This preoccupation with documentary has the effect of investing the narrator with unquestionable authority, replacing the “reality effect” with an “authority effect.”<sup>3</sup> This, according to Barbara Foley, also reinforces the text’s ability to present a persuasive interpretation of its subject matter, since the configuration of that subject matter is put forward as homologous to historical truth (146-47). It therefore ratifies and explains the construction of a realistic diegetic universe with recourse to elements of “local color,” that is, the elements that enable the author to bring the past into the present and produce an impression of reality. In the novels of Arnaldo Gama, as well as the dates and places, whose function is to situate the action and at the same time distance the reader,<sup>4</sup> there are insistent and extremely detailed descriptions of the characters’ clothing, buildings, monuments and dwellings where important scenes take place; references to customs or practices from the period and the region, such as cooking, professions, weaponry, laws and punishments, expressions of sacred and profane beliefs, the interaction between Jews, Christians and Arabs in medieval Portugal, and also the names and topography of the locations, particularly within the city of Porto. Moreover, the reader can also find numerous examples of archaic vocabulary, from the Middle Ages, in the characters’ dialogue, especially in *A última dona de São Nicolau*. In this archeological reconstruction of the social and cultural environments of the periods evoked one can clearly identify a strategy of historical verisimilitude closely connected with a poetics of mimetic-realism, as Celia Fernández Prieto has observed. Therefore, there are no obvious anachronisms in the insertion of these elements in the plot, which means that the didactic function of the traditional historical novel is strengthened and,

as a result, the objective of complementing official history is achieved (“El anacronismo: formas y funciones” 250).

As well as the elements mentioned above, and with the aim of making the story seem real, the author often uses various processes to validate the narrative, such as the manuscript which inspired the writing of *A caldeira de Pêro Botelho*, the conversation between the empirical author and an antiques dealer in *Um motim há cem anos*, and between the empirical author and the character of the abbot who witnessed the events related in *O segredo do Abade*. As well as providing motivation for the writing of the novels and supplying necessary information, these validating processes help to create the illusion of a narrative based on authentic facts, which could lead to a blurring of the distinction between truth and fiction for the unwary reader, proof that “o autor soube trabalhar habilmente a ‘verosimilhança’ da história, que a torna ‘possível,’ ‘provável,’ ou talvez ‘verdadeira,’ e de que, de um modo geral, o romance actua sem cessar na fronteira ambígua do real e da ficção” (Bourneuf and Ouellet 32).

Another indispensable element in the construction of the traditional historical novel is the inclusion of real historical figures and events in the invented plot, marking the relationship between History and diegesis and emphasising the faithfulness to the truth mentioned above. Thus, in Arnaldo Gama’s narratives, as well as the narrator’s informative digressions, the reader witnesses the dialogue between real and fictitious characters, about events, customs or cultural aspects of the age, such as, for example, the discussion between Camões and the “latins” in *A caldeira de Pêro Botelho*, about the use of Latin or common speech when writing poetry (75 passim); or the conversation between D. Gonçalo and Vasco (invented characters) in *O segredo do Abade*, about the intervention of the English army in the struggle against the French invaders and the way that the city of Porto was preparing to resist the arrival of Napoleon’s troops (129-33). The interaction between these two types of character helps to establish links between the factual and fictional parts of the novel, as note LXXIV at the end of *A última dona de São Nicolau* clearly shows:

Este capítulo e o seguinte são puramente o desenvolvimento da Sentença na querela de Rui Pereira [...]. Afora os nomes de Abuçaide e do ichacorvos, e da intervenção de Álvaro Gonçalves no arruído, com os quais prendem os pequenos incidentes necessários para ligar o enredo do romance com os factos narrados na Sentença, tudo ali é histórico [...]. (350)

Arnaldo Gama referred explicitly to his concept of the historical novel, while attempting to explain the relationship between History and fiction. In a letter dated 21 November 1863,<sup>5</sup> about the novel *O Sargento-mór de Vilar*, after mentioning that he preferred Walter Scott to Alexandre Dumas, Gama declared that it was a matter of “história dialogada”:

Eu tinha dito por mais de uma vez aos meus amigos que a historia tal qual, dialogada, dava de si um romance, sem outra necessidade mais do que umas ligeiras tintas de enredo amoroso, quando o ella o não tivesse já de si. [...] Conhece a historia da invasão do Norte? Se a conhece, há-de ver que ella está fielmente feita no sargento-mór de Vilar, de que constitue o enredo principal, o enredo saliente; porque os amores de Luiz e Camilla são evidentemente secundários. Não fis mais do que ir ás partes officiaes e aos escritos e manuscritos de alguns contemporâneos, e copia-los e dialoga-los. Um historiador pode escrever a história da segunda Invasão francesa pelos feitos do meu sargento-mór de Vilar. Não tem mais que fazer do que reduzir a dialogo a narração. (qtd. in Baião 5)

But these declarations must not be taken at face value. The author himself suggests as much in the introductory chapters of *O segredo do Abade* and *Um motim há cem anos*. In the latter novel he attributes the responsibility for the “verdade histórica” to an antiques dealer, while explaining that “a textura da novela, a pintura dos caracteres, a descrição e o colorido das cenas e das localidades, isso tudo é meu, e disso só é exclusivamente responsável a minha pobre capacidade” (33). In the letter referred to above, it is clear that Arnaldo Gama recognizes that the idea of “história dialogada” is a mistake: “Aquele é pois, quanto a mim o verdadeiro defeito do livro—porque o romance historico não é a historia dialogada, mas sim a historia ou aproveitada (ou a sabor e verdade da época) ou romantizada (no desenvolvimento dos pontos) por imaginação do romancista” (qtd. in Baião 6). In his reading of the novels, João Gaspar Simões concluded that “o reconhecimento de que a verdade é histórica, mas de que a sua organização literária depende do romancista” already shows some “progresso” in Gama’s concept of the historical novel in relation to Herculano’s notion, because of the “à-vontade com que o romancista ousava apresentar-se intérprete ou até mesmo agenciador dos factos que, embora históricos, não aspiravam a comparecer nas páginas do romance como uma indiscrição do romancista, um olhar relanceado à realidade ainda em plena actuação” (54).



## 2. Romanticizing History.

Despite their preoccupation with the faithful reconstitution of the setting of the past, novelists soon became aware that it was impossible to construct plots that were always true to fact and that they would have to use their imaginations to fill in the gaps undocumented by History. Indeed, in 1850 Alessandro Manzoni famously criticized the naïve romantic notion that the works of Scott were more authentic than History books.<sup>6</sup> In Portugal, Alexandre Herculano used irony to question a story whose status as truth is frequently repeated, as can be seen from this extract:

Ainda que algum documentinho de má morte provasse o contrário cumpria-nos pô-lo no escuro, ou contestar-lhe francamente a autenticidade, porque o conde foi o fundador da monarquia, e a monarquia desfunda-se uma vez que tal coisa se admita.

Assim é que se há-de escrever a história, e quem não o fizer por este gosto, evidente é que pode tratar de outro ofício. (*O Bobo* 228)

Besides admitting to whitewashing History when it was convenient for him, the historian/novelist allows the reader to glimpse a critical view of the absolute truth of the document and thus relativizes the credibility of historical discourse. Arnaldo Gama shows himself to be equally concerned with this aspect when he reflects on a certain implicit falseness in the discourse of History, unconsciously anticipating the conclusion that the past can only reach us in textual form:<sup>7</sup>

Ah! se aquelas pedras, e outras tão velhas como elas, falassem, que de extraordinários segredos não revelariam, que de importantes rectificações não fariam nos livros de história, escritos pelos homens!

Mas a pedra, a testemunha presencial, é muda, e o historiador só tem os factos—as aparências—para colher as informações do passado. (*A última dona de São Nicolau* 210)

With this idea in mind, it is not strange to note that the novelists eventually assume the fact that they have invented their texts, making full use of the freedom to create, especially when it was necessary to gloss over the lacunae of History, thereby confirming the thoughts of Alfred de Vigny on the role of rumor in the construction of certain historical “facts.”<sup>8</sup> Scott led the way, when

he recognised that he had taken certain liberties in *The Talisman*: “Such is the tradition concerning the Talisman, which the author has taken the liberty to vary in applying it to his own purposes. / Considerable liberties have also been taken with the truth of history, both with respect to Conrade of Montserrat’s life, as well as his death” (xiii-xiv). Alexandre Herculano also highlights the importance of “tradição,” the “verosímil” and imagination in the construction of the historical novel.<sup>9</sup> Arnaldo Gama followed these examples, for although he was scrupulous in relation to the historical information used in his novels, he did end up admitting that he had introduced some displacements:

Ao leitor instruído e zeloso pela cronologia, pede-se aqui pelo amor de Deus, que não embique na adoptada pelo autor na combinação destes factos históricos com a época em que possivelmente se imaginam estes sucessos da minha novela. Aos muito pechosos neste ponto, roga ele que se lembrem que *isto é um romance e não uma história*, e que o facto aqui aludido é um pequeno incidente [...]. (*Um motim há cem anos* 234, my emphasis);

Esta pequena deslocação histórica, que por ventura passaria despercebida por muitos que a lerem, releva-ma o leitor à conta das não poucas que tem relevado a outros melhores do que eu, em pontos de muito maior importância do que este. (*O filho do Baldaia* 75)

These displacements and inventions were best used in the “áreas obscuras”<sup>10</sup> of History, that is, concerning the feelings and thoughts of those who dwelt in the past. The authors were able to be as free as they wished in their analysis of their characters’ private worlds, particularly of the historical ones, reflecting the effect of public events upon them, since History did not record the intimate lives of these figures. Therefore, and without running the risk of contradicting the official version, or denying those figures consecrated by History the role of “ancoragem referencial,”<sup>11</sup> the novelist could present an alternative image of a historical character, making him/her interact with the invented characters and perform in a fictitious plot. A good example is the novel *Um motim há cem anos* and its two main characters: the Marquês de Pombal and Manuel da Costa.

Gama portrayed D. José’s Prime Minister as despotic, ambitious and shrewd, just as the average reader expected him to be. However, the author invented an unexpectedly intimate incident, typical of the romantic plot: an

impossible love, forbidden by the damsel's father; the maiden seduced, then abandoned, but whom Pombal refuses to marry out of pride; the birth of a son who remains unknown until he reaches adulthood and is condemned to death at his father's order for taking part in the peoples' revolt. Manuel da Costa is a fictitious character, destined for misfortune and tormented by forebodings of death, who is not aware of his true identity, a fact that makes possible an incestuous passion for his half-sister. When he discovers the truth (that his illegitimate birth is the result of a crime), Manuel throws himself into a campaign of vengeance against the person he blames for separating him from his beloved. He sees a chance to achieve his revenge during the popular uprising against the Companhia dos Vinhos do Alto Douro (1757), but ends up condemned to death for his part in the rebellion. Knowing that his father, the Marquês de Pombal, will refuse to set aside his duties as Prime Minister to save him, Manuel refuses to flee and prefers to die on the scaffold in the name of honor and revenge (avenging his mother's honor and condemning his father to lifelong remorse), hoping to achieve through death the peace that was denied him in life.<sup>12</sup>

The fates of these two characters clearly illustrate the relationship between History and fiction in the novel, but they also raise the problem of the difficulty of representing the thoughts and attitudes of people from a bygone age. The author attributes romantic characteristics to characters from the past, creating heroes who, despite being swathed in ancient forms of clothing, think and feel just like the typical romantic heroes of the novels of the time. Herculano did just the same in *O Monge de Cister* and *Eurico o Presbítero*, for example. Gama's female characters are also almost all versions of the romantic angel-woman: beautiful, of irreprehensible morals and more or less passive in their actions.<sup>13</sup> In actual fact, Walter Scott had established the model when, in the famous preface to *Ivanhoe*, he affirmed that he had been unable to achieve total exactitude in his representation of the past, neither at the level of customs nor that of language.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the reader finds him/herself faced with a cultural and psychological anachronism which affects "a la representación de los personajes, históricos o inventados, que actúan en la diégesis ficcional, a sus conductas, actitudes, y reflexiones, a la repercusión en su vida privada e íntima de los acontecimientos públicos, a su manera de interpretarlos, a su integración en el espacio diegetico, etc." (Prieto, "El anacronismo: formas y funciones" 252).

Taking as his point of departure the idea defended by Scott that between the past and the present there would be no rupture, but rather continuity in human



nature, particularly where feelings were concerned,<sup>15</sup> thus enabling the reader to empathize with the characters, Arnaldo Gama justified his choices and allowed himself to introduce anachronisms if they improved the romantic effect:

É verdade que a recordação tradicional coloca o facto bem quarenta ou cinquenta anos mais tarde do que a época que o autor empreendeu retratar. Mas que importa isso? Aqui não se pretende escrever a história de uma família; visa-se (a) reproduzir o modo de ser de uma época. Além disso que são cinquenta anos na grande vida da humanidade? Se mesmo hoje os homens e os costumes não mudam radicalmente em tão limitado espaço de tempo, muito menos mudavam há dois séculos [...]. (*O Satanás de Coura* 23)

As well as the psychology of the characters, language is another element that usually undergoes modernization. In regard to this aspect, and echoing more of Scott's ideas, once again expressed in the preface to *Ivanhoe*,<sup>16</sup> Arnaldo Gama could not have been more explicit in his defense of the inevitable changes in language to bring it up to date, in his introduction to *O Satanás de Coura*:

É história de tempos antigos, e, por ser tal, é provável que haja por aí algum antiquário, que embique com ela ser escrita em linguagem, que não cheira ao mofo das nossas velhas crónicas. Não o fez, porém, o autor por uma razão muito comezinha, mas também muito sensata e muito racional. O romance de hoje, como criação totalmente moderna, destoa de todo o ponto com o estilo da crónica de frades. O romance histórico exige, em verdade, o bom senso de arredar palavras, brotadas de costumes ou de factos intelectuais posteriores à época que ele desenha; mas também apenas tolera no diálogo o ligeiro colorido, o leve sabor antigo, que é suficiente para nos transportar pela imaginação para o meio dos nossos antepassados. (23-24)

Modernization of the characters' psychology, their relationship with the events of the past and the bringing up to date or implied "translation" of the language of the time,<sup>17</sup> which would otherwise be unintelligible to the modern reader, all constitute "necessary anachronisms," since the past portrayed is recognized as the "*pré-histoire nécessaire* du present," according to Georg Lukács.<sup>18</sup>

To conclude, Arnaldo Gama, like his contemporaries, constructed his novels on a painstakingly reconstituted historical background, against which

he narrated romantic, melodramatic plots, full of impossible love affairs, often thwarted by the difference in social position of the lovers, identities disguised and later revealed, characters destined to suffering, love triangles resolved tragically, revenge, terrible crimes that demand long and painful atonement that may lead to redemption... in sum, the most typical themes of Romanticism, sometimes played out by cursed characters in settings reminiscent of the Gothic novel, characterised by darkness, medieval towers, dungeons, labyrinths of stairways and corridors...<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These notes were studied with a view towards publishing the unfinished novel *O Satanás de Coura*. See Ana Maria Marques, "Histórias com história..."

<sup>2</sup> Passos 35.

<sup>3</sup> Hamon, "Thème et effet de réel," 502.

<sup>4</sup> Molino 215.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to João Pedro da Costa Basto, published by António Baião (Baião 4-6). See Marques, "Histórias com história..." 32-35.

<sup>6</sup> "How many times it has been said, and even written, that the novels of Walter Scott were truer than history! But those are the sort of words that get by in the first blush of enthusiasm and are not repeated upon reflection." Manzoni 126.

<sup>7</sup> Hutcheon 93.

<sup>8</sup> "Examinez de près l'origine de certaines actions, de certains cris heroïques qui s'enfantent on ne sait comment: vous les verrez sortir tout faits des ON DIT et des murmures de la foule, sans avoir en eux-mêmes autre chose qu'une ombre de vérité; et pourtant ils demeureront historiques à jamais" (27; author's emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> In "O bispo negro," *Eurico, o Presbítero* and *O Bobo*. See Maria de Fátima Marinho 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Prieto, *Historia y novela* 186.

<sup>11</sup> Hamon, "Para um estatuto semiológico da personagem," 88.

<sup>12</sup> See Marques, "Histórias com história..." 53-54 and 75-76.

<sup>13</sup> Such as, for example, Camila (*O Sargento-mor de Vilar*), Alda (*A última dona de São Nicolau*), Aldora and Marina (*O balio de Leça*), Yolanda (*O filho do Baldaia*) and Teresa (*O segredo do Abade*). But there are also female characters that do not fit this pattern, especially Dona Leonor de Baião, a satanic figure who predates the "mulheres de bronze" highlighted by novelists at the turn of the century.

<sup>14</sup> "It is true, that I neither can, nor do pretend, to the observation of complete accuracy, even in matters of outward costume, much less in the more important points of language and manners" (Scott *Ivanhoe* 17).

<sup>15</sup> "It follows, therefore, that of the materials which an author has to use in a romance, or fictitious composition, such as I have ventured to attempt, he will find that a great proportion, both in language and manners, is as proper to the present time as to those of which he has laid his time of action" (Scott *Ivanhoe* 19).

<sup>16</sup> Scott, *Ivanhoe* 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> Defended by Scott at the beginning of *Ivanhoe* (30). As Maria de Fátima Marinho observes

in *O romance histórico em Portugal* this translation is implicit in *Eurico o Presbítero* and *O Alcaide de Santarém* (24). Arnaldo Gama, in *A última dona de São Nicolau*, wrote words to the same effect: “A algaravia, usada por Abraão Cofem, não é mais que um pálido reflexo da linguagem misteriosa e quasi sempre incompreensível, de que usavam os alquimistas” (note LI, 336).

<sup>18</sup> See the comment by Georg Lukács on the anachronisms necessary in art, proposed by Hegel and put into practice by Scott (65-66).

<sup>19</sup> These characteristics are particularly visible in *O segredo do Abade* and *O balio de Leça*. See Marques, “O romance histórico de Arnaldo Gama...” 137-42.

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