Possible narratives: re-telling the Norman Conquest

Summary. William of Malmesbury (1125) casts the Norman Conquest as an ‘ancipitous narrative’ – equally possible courses of events leading to the same outcome. The Bayeux Tapestry (1070s) is such a narrative. And three modern novels on the Conquest (Bulwer Lytton 1848, Muntz 1949, Rathbone 1997) are here seen as narrations of alternative possibilities with an invariant outcome and an invariant theme: Harold as the expression of English civil society.

1. The ancipitous narrative

When, in 1125, William of Malmesbury sets about narrating the reign of Edward the Confessor (ch. 197), he warns the reader that

hic quasi ancipitem viam narrationis video, quia veritas factorum pendet in dubio.

And he reports in juxtaposition the English and the Norman versions of the great crisis of 1051-1052, a crucial step in the course of events leading to the Norman conquest of 1066. The situation remains unchanged for the modern historian of the period: in his biography of Edward the Confessor Frank Barlow (1970: xxvii) writes that

the historian meets uncertainty at every point […]. Sometimes the only course that he can honestly follow is to offer several equally plausible possibilities, between which he cannot decide.

William’s “ancipitous way” can be equated with Borges’ “forking paths” – of the type that might be called ‘forking in’ as opposed to ‘forking out’.

‘Forking out’ is when a course of events leads to several possible outcomes, or when an event branches out into alternative courses – the battle of Hastings won by Harold, or fought by William of Normandy and Harald Hardrada of Norway, if the latter had won the battle of Stamford Bridge
against Harold of England. Modern historiography and fiction make much use of this narratology of possible worlds. In three recent volumes a number of historians have revisited crucial events in history and imagined alternative outcomes and their consequences. The novelist Philip Roth has imagined the United States under the presidency of Charles Lindbergh, the aviator, who wins the 1940 election against Roosevelt and starts a policy of isolationism, pro-Nazism and anti-Semitism. This is the counterfactual type; a fictional variation is the alternative story-lines developed in parallel by films.

‘Forking in’, on the other hand, is when different possible courses of events have the same outcome, as in Borges’s example (1944: 113-4):

[…] dos redacciones de un mismo capítulo épico. En la primera, un ejército marcha hacia una batalla a través de una montaña desierta; el horror de las piedras y de la sombra le hace menopreciar la vida y logra con facilidad la victoria; en la segunda, el mismo ejército atraviesa un palacio en el que hay una fiesta; la resplandeciente batalla les parece una continuación de la fiesta y logran la victoria.

A fictional realization of the type is a famous short story by O. Henry, Roads of Destiny (1909), where three alternative courses of events starting at a crossroads have the same tragic conclusion. Judicial narratives are well-known examples of this type: Robert Browning’s The Ring and the Book (1868-1869) and Akira Kurosawa’s Rashomon (1950). And Ruth Prawer Jhabvala has attempted an autobiographical variation in this mode, with character as invariant. But the type is institutional in the historiographical
POSSIBLE NARRATIVES: RE-TELLING THE NORMAN CONQUEST

discourse, which has often the task of narrating the event as the invariant outcome of different possibilities. The paucity of narrative sources, their silence or reticence, and their bias and stereotypes engage the historian in the integration of the little real that is known with the configurations of the possible. Aristotle had drawn a dividing line between historiography and fiction, between ‘what happens’ and ‘what might happen’ (tà genómena and oía án génoito, Poetics 1451a-b); but the narratology based on the logic of possible worlds⁴ should bring us to see the actual and the virtual as meshed in the fine texture of any narrative, and the real as embedded in the possible – or the possible as the porosity of the real.

2. Master narratives

Contemporary and near-contemporary narratives of the Conquest turn around the figure of Harold, the powerful earl of Wessex and successor of the Confessor: a king, as The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle puts it (ms C 1065, ms A 1066), who enjoyed “little quiet” in his reign of “forty weeks and one day”. The Norman narrative (Guillaume de Poitiers, 1071-1077) tells of Edward promising the succession to William of Normandy and then sending Harold to Normandy to confirm the promise with an oath. The earliest English version (The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) is silent on the promise and the voyage and the oath, and tells instead of Harold being nominated to the succession by Edward and being elected king by the Council. Later English versions accept Harold’s Norman voyage but motivate it differently: for Eadmer of Canterbury (1109-1115), Harold goes to Normandy to free his relatives held hostage there, and having got into trouble he is extorted an oath; for William of Malmesbury (1125), Harold goes fishing (yachting, we would say) in the Channel, is driven by a storm on the French coast, then to extricate himself from a difficult situation he pretends to be on a mission on Edward’s behalf, and the Norman duke takes care to make that pretension good.

It is becoming increasingly accepted that incompatible versions of these events find their confluence, and possibly their source, in The Bayeux Tapestry (1070s), an outstanding example of ancipitous storytelling. Its two parts are devoted to the two protagonists of the events of 1064-1066: Harold’s voyage, oath and succession, William’s invasion and victory. The Tapestry same way: as though character were fate.” Kierkegaard’s four alternative motivations of the Abraham story in Fear and Trembling belong to this type.

is diffuse in its embroidered images, but elliptic in the inscriptions that go with them: which are silent on the motivation of the first part of the story – the reason for Harold’s journey to Normandy and the object of his oath to William. One might call the Tapestry a pictured scenario for a narrating voice: its images are not self-sufficient and require the integration of a verbal narrator – and the integration can take a number of different paths.

In the first panel King Edward is talking to a personage later identified as Harold – the talking is done by the hands. The Norman script would say that here Edward sends Harold to Normandy in order to confirm with an oath his previous pledge to make William his successor. An English narrator would say instead that here Harold asks leave of Edward to go to Normandy to set free his brother and nephew held hostage there, and the king admonishes him not to go, not trusting the wily William – thus Eadmer of Canterbury. And to this “ancipitem viam” William of Malmesbury adds a third way of his own – Harold taking leave of Edward to go fishing, or yachting, in the Channel.

The images can do double and triple service, and accommodate different versions of the story, and might have even suggested them, one would suspect. If we were to launch a competition for the best script of the panel of Harold’s return to England, no doubt we would choose Eadmer’s reading of Harold’s bending head facing Edward’s scolding finger:

‘Nonne dixi tibi […] me Willhelmum nosse, et in illo itinere tuo plurima mala huic regno contingere posse?’

3. A classically-modelled epic romance

The Norman and English narratives converge not only on the outcome of the events, but also on a theology of history that sees defeat as God’s judgment of guilt: “the French remained masters of the battlefield as God granted them because of the sins of the people, for folces synnon”, is the penitential comment of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ms D 1066) on the battle of Hastings. The Norman version is a sycophantic glorification of William and vilification of Harold ‘the perjurer’, and a legitimation of the Conquest as the reinstatement of right by the force of arms – it is a master narrative, we would say. The English versions cannot delegitimize it: they simply downgrade Norman pretensions and seek extenuation for Harold.

The challenge of full vindication – that is the scripting of a radically alternative master narrative – was taken up by the English in the nineteenth century.
The agenda is set in 1848 by Bulwer Lytton, who rehabilitates Harold by making him the expression of the country (1848: 223b):

In the character of Harold […] I have attempted […] to shadow out the ideal of the pure Saxon character, such as it was then, with its large qualities undeveloped, but marked already by patient endurance, love of justice, and freedom – the manly sense of duty rather than the chivalric sentiment of honor – and that indestructible element of practical purpose and courageous will, which, defying all conquest, and steadfast in all peril, was ordained to achieve so vast an influence over the destinies of the world.

And the agenda is accompanied by an alternative conception of the historical romance (1848: 225b):

There are two ways of employing the materials of History in the service of Romance: the one consists in lending to ideal personages, and to an imaginary fable, the additional interest to be derived from historical groupings: the other, in extracting the main interest of romantic narrative from History itself.

The first way is that of Walter Scott, with its grouping of fictitious characters and events with historical ones. The second way is also defined by Bulwer Lytton (1848: 222b) as that of extracting its natural romance from the actual history.

‘Romance’ here stands for the idealized possibilities of the invariant events of history.

Bulwer Lytton’s romance is not simply historical, it is also epic in its classical modelling: 12 books, noble sentiments, oratorial postures – Harold has “the bravery of Hector, not Achilles”, “he would have died the Roman’s death rather than live the traitor’s life” because of his “stern philosophy and stoic ethics” [Bulwer Lytton (1848: 285a, 396b, 397a)].

Harold is made into the expression of the country, and his ambition is a national call to duty. He says (1848: 329a):

‘I look round in England for the coming king, and all England reflects but my own image.’

The Conqueror himself recognizes that “in the breast of Harold beats the heart of England” [Bulwer Lytton (1848: 261b)].
His voyage to Normandy is an act of family duty (to free hostages), but it is also motivated by his desire to ensure William’s friendship, which a Norman emissary makes him believe William is ready to bestow: a snare which leads to the forced oath [Bulwer Lytton (1848: 365b, 360a, 375a)].

And, finally, his burial in unhallowed ground on the seashore, which the Norman narratives see as a supreme insult (“posthumae generationi tam Anglorum quam Normannorum abominabilis eris,” Guillaume de Poitiers, II,25), is turned into the supreme honour of identification with the country’s soil, “Harold could have chosen no burial spot so worthy his English spirit and his Roman end,” [Bulwer Lytton (1848: 481b)]. The final words of the novel celebrate Harold as the champion of Freedom and Justice vindicated in the tribunal of history:

the tombless shade of the kingly freeman still guards the coasts, and rests upon the sea.

4. An epic saga

Harold’s “intense nationality” [Bulwer Lytton (1848: 380a)] is the invariant theme of the very different narrative projects of Muntz and Rathbone.

Muntz’s novel is a saga narrative, simple, direct, quick-paced, with no elaboration of explanation or motivation: all implicitness. It is the story of two men, Harold and William, their friendship and their rivalry, and their ambition to rule – in William subjectively recognised and self-sanctioned [“God set me in this world to be a ruler. I would rule,” Muntz (1949: 97)], in Harold induced by the whole nation and legitimised by the Great Council, who makes him vice-king of England [Muntz (1949: 102)]. The voyage to Normandy is motivated by friendship: after his election to vice-king Harold goes to Normandy to offer and seek personal friendship. And the friendship is accepted and reciprocated, but William does not renounce his ambition [“I shall have Harold’s friendship, and England too,” Muntz (1949: 135)].

When he asks leave of king Edward, Harold adduces a desire to sail and go fishing (“I have a sea-longing on me”), but Edward guesses the real reason and warns him [Muntz (1949: 110-1)]:

‘Madness, madness […]. You do not know the man. Never trust yourself in his hands […]. If you go […] I can foresee you will be ruined and all England also.’
The novel closes on a heroic note which is introduced, again saga-like, through a piece of embedded poetry. After Harold’s death his retainers strengthen themselves for the last stand by singing the final lines of *The Battle of Maldon*, “Soul shall be stronger, spirit be keener […]” [Muntz (1949: 337)]. As is well-known, William of Malmesbury has the Normans chant the *Song of Roland* before the battle of Hastings, both as incitement to valour and affirmation of divine legitimation. *The Battle of Maldon* celebrates valour in defeat – and defeat due to the fortunes of war, not to God’s judgment (or at least the fragmentary nature of the poem leaves this out of the frame).

The novel has a dedication to Winston Churchill, “in remembrance of 1940”.

5. *A heritage of family grudges*

Muntz is no less epic than Bulwer Lytton: both novels explicate what they see as the intrinsic nobility of the past they narrate – political, ethical and religious. The legend of Edward’s sanctity is part of that nobility, and the two novelists accept it in the past’s own terms. They have no use for that disbelief which we would see as the mark of the modern. They take no hint from William of Malmesbury, who is obviously bound to that legend but does not close his eyes to more earthly motivations of character or behaviour.

From the reticence of his sources William infers a heritage of family grudges in the behaviour of Edward the Confessor, whose mother, Emma, had remarried another conqueror of the English, Cnut. William describes Emma as swollen with grudge against her first husband (“In maritum tumebat,” ch. 166; in the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, certainly commissioned by her, Emma’s first husband, and Edward’s father, Æthelred, is not even mentioned). And he later completes the characterization by adding that she had passed down her hatred of the father to the child, “hereditario [...] odio parentis in prolem” (ch. 196). The victim of this grudge, Edward, manages to conceive one of his own against another relative, his wife’s father, the powerful Godwine, Edward’s own king-maker; and William advances an outrageous possibility about Edward’s chastity, one of the foundations of the legend of his sanctity and, of course, one of the causes of the Norman conquest: Edward had not known his wife “virili more” either out of hatred for her family or from a love of chastity. A Freudian could not have done better.5

Notice the formulation (ch. 197):

5 Muntz (1949: 7) glosses over the outrageous possibilities by having Edward say: “Edith is not as her father and the rest. She too was overborne. We made a vow together, she and I, to keep our maidenhood in his despite.”
quod an familiae illius odio […] an amore castitatis fecerit, pro certo comper-tum non habeo.

The statement comes just before the warning about the “ancipitous way of narration”, and its very phrasing is a model of ancipity.

6. *Debunking all traditional pieties, except one*

The hint is taken by Rathbone, and is developed into a thoroughgoing de-bunking of traditional pieties. Edward’s sainthood is simply a form of reli-gious aestheticism [Rathbone (1997: 127)], and he dies farting, after having plotted to leave England in Norman hands in exchange of a promise of can-onization [Rathbone (1997: 256, 247-8)]. Harold’s voyage to Normandy is a calculated snare laid by Edward and his Norman councillor to put Harold in William’s hands: it is Edward’s retaliation against the Godwins [Rathbone (1997: 131, 122-3)]. Edward has been the lover of Harold’s brother, Tostig, who was prostituted to him in order to advance the Godwin family. Godwin himself has raped his daughter Edith, who is the lover of her brother Harold.

Sex – utriusque Veneris – is used in the novel as a form of desecration. But also as genuine eros: eros of the landscape [“all so rich, so teeming, so crowded with life […], the fecundity of it all,” Rathbone (1997: 140)], and eros of the narration itself as repossession of the past.

And the thing repossessed is the England of mutual responsibilities as against the Normandy of oppression and ideology: England as “a self-regulating system”, “an intricate web of interconnections and interdependencies” in which “all were entitled to have their say” [Rathbone (1997: 98-9)]. The desecration stops short of this England, of which Harold is the true ex-pression.

Rathbone’s novel reverts to Walter Scott’s formula of having a fictitious char-acter in the foreground, Walt, a housecarl of Harold’s, who has survived his lord and is traumatised by guilt and bitterness for an unrealised existence: a Wanderer after Maldon, as it were – a retainer who did not manage to die with his lord. The narration proceeds through analepses, both Walt’s and the extern-al narrator’s. Walt is given an interlocutor, Quint, a rationalistic, sceptical ex-monk who represents the intrusion of the modern point of view into the world of the eleventh century. He psychoanalyses Walt; and the juggler Taillefer does the same for William of Normandy, seen as “anally obsessed” [Rathbone (1997: 316)]; and the Conquest acquires a mock-heroic, farcical side.
The final perspective of the novel is not that of hero-celebration or political history. Hastings is seen as a turning point of English civilisation, from the ethos of war to hedonistic self-fulfilment [Rathbone (1997: 378)]:

the civilisation of the English reached its zenith – it turned its back on the savagery of war and embraced hedonistic willingness to live as well as one can and help others to do the same. And – at that moment its decline began.

7. The invariant theme

The three novels form a strange trio, in which a strong family likeness emerges through the most disparate differences of genre. Bulwer Lytton gives to the events and characters of eleventh century England the enhancement and amplification of his classical models: in a way his is the belated answer to the Norman panegyric of Guillaume de Poitiers, who magnified the Conqueror above the heroes of classical history and fiction – and made out Harold as Hector and Turnus against William’s Achilles and Aeneas (II.22). Muntz chooses the sobriety and equanimity of saga narrative, and a parallel-life format that might have been inspired by the bipartite structure of The Bayeux Tapestry. The classical and the northern models are both close to the cultural world of the eleventh century; Rathbone, on the other hand, is a postmodernist deconstruction of that world through the cultural tenets of the twentieth century (scepticism, psychoanalysis, complexity…). But he, too, shares with the other two novelists a common Harold, whom all three portray as the embodiment of the values of English civil society. Their collectively ancipitous narrations fork in on the same social portrait – and national identity.